ANITA BRENNER’S VISION: A TRANSNATIONAL SEARCH FOR MEXICAN JEWISH IDENTITY

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University of Massachusetts Amherst
ANITA BRENNER’S VISION: A TRANSNATIONAL SEARCH FOR MEXICAN JEWISH IDENTITY

A Dissertation Presented

by

GINA DANIELLE MALAGOLD

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DEDICATION

For my little brother Dylan.
The grief that remains is unexpressed love.
I decided, at last, to write this for you.

09/16/1992-07/18/2020

Each that we lose takes part of us;
A crescent still abides,
Which like the moon, some turbid night,
Is summoned by the tides.

Emily Dickinson
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In researching and writing about a transnational Jewish woman who searched for her identity across borders, I have simultaneously refashioned myself, negotiating multiple identities of my own. This dissertation was a long and complex process that took over nine years of graduate school. This project and journey of self-discovery would not have been possible without the support, encouragement, curiosity, patience, and compassion of individuals from all over the world, from Uruguay to Israel, from Chile to Spain, from Texas to Mexico, and from New York City to Los Angeles. There are too many places and individuals to list exhaustively here, but each one deeply appreciated.

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the archive. I aspire to mentor, support, and be a constant for my students as Luis has exemplified for me over the past eight years. Since leaving his classroom in Herter Hall, I often remind myself to channel my inner Luis, question the information I receive, and think critically. I aim to ignite my students’ inner curiosity and inspire critical thinking as he has done. I am thankful to Luis for opening my eyes to the world of Anita Brenner in his seminar on the Mexican Revolution and setting me off on a journey that opened more doors for me than I could have ever have imagined. Thank you for broadening my intellectual horizons, helping me gain confidence in my ideas, and for lots of laughter over these years.

In 2014 Barbara Zecchi was the first to open her doors to me as a young aspiring Ph.D. student. As I walked off the elevator on the fourth floor of Herter Hall, Barbara was watering the plants in the hallway, and her infectious smile greeted me. I was affected by her kindness and felt joy sitting in her office, decorated beautifully in red. I had bold ideas and felt the world at my fingertips—Barbara cheered me on and made me feel like anything was possible! Thanks to her mentorship and friendship, I had opportunities that otherwise would have been unreachable. Barbara inspired me to enhance my language skills as an interpreter with the Translation Center, encouraged my dream to travel to Buenos Aires on a semester-long research sojourn to define my professional goals further, live and teach in Granada, Spain as a visiting faculty member, and present film analysis in front of Western Massachusetts intellectuals as part of the Catalan and Latin American Film Festivals. All these opportunities led me to where I am today, helped me gain confidence, and find my voice. I cherish the moment we shared churros at Café Fútbol in Granada. Under Southern Spain’s blazing sun, Barbara re-ignited a fire within me, and left me hopeful for all the incredible opportunities ahead. Barbara’s generosity, enthusiasm, openness, and massive heart are part of my never giving up on my dream of completing this degree.
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a college degree, my mentors’ unwavering encouragement was essential for me to continue on this path towards higher education. I strongly believe that first-generation low-income students will never be running the same race as everyone else, and therefore it is that much more important to find mentors and supporters like Luis, Barbara and Aviva. I do not have adequate words to express my deep gratitude toward each of you. It has been an honor and a privilege to learn from you.

My interest in Latin American Jewish Studies began during the years I spent at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, crystalizing into a master’s thesis on modern Argentine Jewish history under the mentorship of Steve Stern, Tony Michels, and Alberto Vargas. Steve’s graduate history seminar inspired me to pursue a doctoral degree, and the proximity of the Yiddish Book Center to University of Massachusetts Amherst made this university my top choice. Before relocating to the Valley, I spent my coming-of-age years moving between the United States, Uruguay, and Argentina, often with a suitcase full of library books, taking photographs on my disposable camera of Jewish cemeteries, synagogues, and religious objects lying around my uncle Rubén’s home in Montevideo. My last name caught my eye at the Cementerio Israelita in Montevideo, carved in various tombstones next to a Star of David. In an instant, I realized I had insider access to a world of Latin American Jewry. I reflect on childhood memories sitting at a large wooden table in Montevideo, Uruguay, during Pesach, where my dad David’s kippah, in my eyes, was a foreign object that marked us as different. I was surrounded by cousins and family friends, speaking Spanish and singing in Hebrew, a language I understood even less. I was mesmerized. Later that year, I invited my dad to speak to my Madison, Wisconsin fourth-grade classroom on “Parent’s Day.” Suddenly in front of my peers, his accent grew thicker, and his dark skin stood out compared to the other dads in the room. Later at recess, the boys sneered, “that’s
why you are so weird. You’re a MEXICAN!” Not until the writing of this dissertation was I able to appreciate the larger significance of those childhood experiences.

Once I moved across the country to Western Massachusetts, I found home in a tree house studio apartment, sharing a backyard with the Montague Bookmill. This place served as a quiet refuge, where I sketched outlines for class papers and prepared anxiously for meetings with mentors across the five college campuses. I am thankful to a large and generous community of scholars in Western Massachusetts who offered their mentorship from the beginning: Angélica Bernal, Sonia Alvarez, Roberto Márquez, Luiz Amaral, Carole Cloutier, Regina Galasso, Albert Lloret, Guillem Molla, Margara Russotto, Frank Fagundes, Meghan Armstrong-Abrami, David Rodríguez-Solás and many more. I am indebted to the Yiddish Book Center and Christa Whitney for entrusting me with Mexican and Cuban Yiddish Oral Histories. Many believed in my research, funded it, and invited me to share my work. Thanks to the University of Massachusetts Graduate School, University of Wisconsin-Madison Center for Jewish Studies, Latin American Jewish Studies Association, Association for Jewish Studies, University of Washington Center for Jewish Studies, Brandeis University Hadassah Brandeis Institute, Georgetown University, Fulbright Scholarship Program, University College London, Brown University, University of Pennsylvania, Columbia University Institute for Israel and Jewish Studies, University of California, Los Angeles Alan D. Leve Center for Jewish Studies, Princeton University Program in Latin American Studies, Tel Aviv University, and Cornell University. Thank you to my Latin American Jewish Studies Association mentors and friends. I found my forever home within academia thanks to the welcoming and support of Adriana Brodsky, Darrel Lockhart, Yitzhak Lewis, and Naomi Lindstrom. The Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin offered their support during my archival visits in 2018 and 2019 and the generous staff and students of Universidad
Anáhuac-Puebla allowed me the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of *Mexicanidad* firsthand and generously opened their homes to me.

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ABSTRACT

ANITA BRENNER’S VISION:
A TRANSNATIONAL SEARCH FOR MEXICAN JEWISH IDENTITY

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My dissertation traces U.S.-Mexico cross-border networks during the cultural Renaissance of early 20th century influenced by artistic and intellectual encounters in post-revolutionary Mexico. I explore from a transnational perspective the representation of Mexican-Jewish identity in post-revolutionary Mexico through the lens of Mexican-American Jewish anthropologist, artist, and journalist Anita Brenner (1905-1974). In my dissertation, *Anita Brenner’s Vision: A Transnational Search for Mexican Jewish Identity*, I expand on the notion of *mexicanidad* and reframe the cosmopolitanism of the time and its manifestation in the United States, arguing that Brenner’s contributions were instrumental in linking Mexico to the larger map of international modernism. Grounded in theoretical frameworks overlapping Cultural Studies, Literary Studies, Latin American Jewish Studies, History, Women and Gender Studies, U.S. Latinx Studies, and Transatlantic Studies, this project advocates the use of archival material to uncover plural visions of Mexican Jewish identity and thus contributes to the understanding of a more inclusive and diverse social and cultural history. I analyze Brenner’s life and work in Mexico and the United States, the conditions that drew her north and south, and her interactions and exchanges with
transnational artists, intellectuals, and Jewish immigrants. This project reconstructs how Brenner promoted the emerging Jewish community in Mexico to the United States Jewish press, impacted notions of Jewishness in the Americas, and how the Mexican Renaissance circulated abroad. I contend that Brenner contributed to developing a more comprehensive Jewish identity on both sides of the border. Brenner’s promotion of Mexico as a place for Jews proves a productive site to analyze the tensions between competing notions of belonging, race, religion, gender, sexuality and the reshaping of borders.
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CHAPTER I: ANITA BRENNER’S VISION: TRANSLATING MEXICAN JEWISH IDENTITY

The Jew is everywhere, but astoundingly unperceived. He is never known as a Judío to Mexicans, and often he is incognito to his own people. Because he likes Mexico and its people, he very rapidly identifies himself with it. Nearly all the immigrants succeed eventually in reaching their Mecca-America. And yet each one returns. He comes back to Mexico from gefullte fish and synagogues, bringing perhaps a Jewish wife, perhaps a new stock of merchandise, a sprinkling of English, and an agglomeration of American ideas. But he makes his home Mexican, and he speaks Spanish, dropping his comfortable Yiddish even within the family. And in a startlingly short time, he has become part of the country he has adopted.

Anita Brenner
“The Jew in Mexico”
The Nation, August 27, 1924

1.1 The Brenner Family: Border Crossings

Anita Brenner (1905-1974) was born in Aguascalientes, Mexico, to Eastern European Jews who arrived in Chicago in the 1880s. Brenner’s father and mother, Isidore and Paula Duchan, natives of Goldingen, a small town near Riga, Latvia, met in a boarding house in Chicago, where Paula worked in a sweatshop. Isidore had recently arrived in Chicago after spending time in El Paso, Texas, and Iowa. After a week’s courtship, the couple married, and Isidore planned to return to El Paso, where the newlyweds lived for a year before settling in Mexico (Mart 194). The couple travelled to Aguascalientes, where Porfirio Díaz, the President of Mexico, promoted foreign investment and converted the town into the headquarters of U.S. companies like the Smelting and Refining Company, owned by the Guggenheim brothers (Grabinsky 1). Isidore hoped to prosper in the cosmopolitan town, booming with foreign capital. An increasing number of European immigrants and U.S. expatriates arrived in Aguascalientes, including Jewish families like the Brenner family (Villela 19).
Registered as Hana Brenner, Brenner was born on her family’s ranch on August 13, 1905 (Mart 194). Her parents worked at the Baños de aguas termales de Ojocaliente, an elegant spa known for its hot springs. Isidore worked as a waiter at the spa, and Paula worked as a cook. Eventually, Don Isidoro, as he was known in Aguascalientes, became manager of the spa, and Paula raised their five children (Glusker, *Anita Brenner* 21). Brenner and her siblings attended Colegio Morelos, the first Protestant missionary institute in Aguascalientes. Classes were taught in English to children of foreigners enrolled there (21). The Spanish spoken in the Brenner’s home in Mexico and English language education in Texas resulted in Brenner’s familiarity with both languages. Her bilingualism led to her role as a translator and interpreter for English speaking artists and intellectuals in Mexico.²

Like most Jews who immigrated to Mexico in the late nineteenth century, the Brenner family did not form part of a formal Jewish community. They remained isolated and silent about their religion. When the revolutionaries arrived in Aguascalientes, the Brenner family was forced to leave on three occasions: in 1912, 1914, and for the last time in 1916. On the last journey to San Antonio, Texas in 1916, when Brenner was eleven, she and her family were stopped by Mexican troops who boarded the train, but were identified as Germans and allowed to continue on across the border (26). Brenner resided in Texas until she returned to her native land in 1923 at eighteen. Brenner’s frequent movement between Mexico and the United States as a young girl significantly impacted her life, work, and

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² At the time of writing no scholar has closely examined Brenner’s Spanish language abilities and the role language played on her identity. Scholars have taken for granted the fact that Brenner may have not have had fluency speaking or writing in Spanish. In the archive, Brenner saved one typescript titled “Un Precursor del actual movimiento de arte” written by Jean Charlot, various Spanish language articles from the Mexican press and a handful of Spanish language typescripts she authored. There is no evidence of a Spanish language article written by Brenner that was published. Several of her own English publications were translated to Spanish by others. On the other hand, there is no doubt Brenner was comfortable with Spanish and likely more proficient in the language than her fellow transnational cultural and political diplomats.
thinking. Her experience as a displaced person led to her sense of geographic mobility and status as a transnational Jewish woman moving in and out of distinct and often contradicting social circles.

1.2 Brenner’s Transformation into Cultural Interpreter

Upon her return to Mexico in 1923, Brenner became immersed in Mexico City’s post-revolutionary cultural scene, where she transformed into an insider and representative in the country of her birth. Her published and unpublished manuscripts, diaries, newspaper articles and artistic productions demonstrate her commitment to defending and interpreting the Jewish immigrant experience in Mexico City and the community they formed there. Through a close study of Brenner’s cultural productions throughout the 1920s, a period in Mexico when artists and intellectuals began to explore their identity and embrace otherness, scholars can access the moment when Brenner first examined her Jewish identity as a self-trained journalist. Precisely, Brenner’s earliest writing and artistic productions convey an understanding of the Jewish community in Mexico, at the beginning of the twentieth century, from the perspective of a transnational woman and her development into a cultural interpreter for Jews and non-Jews on both sides of the border. In Mexico in the 1920s, artists and intellectuals searched to find what was paradigmatically Mexican, and concrete and symbolic ways to represent this, despite the fact that Mexican society was far from unitary. Brenner experienced a transformation from a problematic relationship with her Jewish identity to embracing her roots in this context.
Throughout her life, Brenner served as a transnational cultural diplomat across the Mexican-United States border. The increase in Jewish migration to Mexico coincided with the political and cultural upheaval in the country. Brenner thrived among avant-garde artists and politically active intellectuals who defined the era. Brenner helped coin the term Mexican Renaissance in 1925, referring to the ongoing artistic revolutionary process of the time, which she preferred to spell Mexican Renascence, “in the sense of constant rebirth” (Glusker, Anita Brenner 89). This dissertation emphasizes the complexities Brenner faced as a transnational Jewish woman during the early twentieth century and how she promoted Jewish belonging in Mexico, illuminating the plurality within the country’s era of cultural reinvention—its “renaissance.”
1.3 Sources

Studies of Jewish writing by immigrants in Mexico have predominantly focused on male writers. Jacobo Glantz, Moisés Rubinstein, Isaac Berliner, and Moisés Glikovsky are a few of the best-known Jewish writers contributing to Jewish intellectual life in Mexico during the early twentieth century. These writers explored Mexican culture through their Yiddish publications and experimented with their new identity as both Mexicans and Jews.³

Brenner’s impact and influence as a Jewish woman and producer of culture have been overlooked until recently. The 2017 Skirball exhibition, Another Promised Land: Anita Brenner’s Mexico, has contributed to the increased public interest in her life and work. This exhibition was cataloged in the bilingual volume with the same title (2017). In 2019 the Museo Nacional de Arte in Mexico City presented the exhibition Anita Brenner: Luz de la modernidad, showcasing over four hundred works that belonged to Brenner including photography, paintings, documents, and artistic objects. The director of the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura, Lucina Jiménez, stated that Brenner had the vision and capacity to understand that art could construct a new narrative. Through Brenner, Jiménez emphasized, it is possible to “strengthen all possible routes of cultural diplomacy that allow us to clearly establish the dignity of a nation that is narrated and built


4 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Spanish to English are my own.
by Latin Americanists. An analysis of Brenner’s life and work is more relevant than ever. Brenner dedicated her life to building bridges between the two countries. Her work promoted Mexican culture to the United States as well as defended Mexico as a destination for displaced migrants. Scholars are increasingly attuned to the significance of Brenner’s work and only recently have valued her ability to do so from a marginal place as a young transnational Mexican Jewish woman.

Marcela López Arellano, the primary Brenner expert in Mexico, researching and writing from Brenner’s hometown Aguascalientes, published Anita Brenner: Una escritora judía con México en el corazón (2016), a comprehensive biographical overview of Brenner’s life and impact on Mexico, emphasizing her role and contributions as a journalist. Recent analysis centered on Brenner is enriched by interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks that overlap Latin American Jewish Studies, History, Women and Gender Studies, Transnationalism, U.S. Latinx Studies, and Border Studies. Monica Bravo’s Greater American Camera (2021) characterizes Brenner as “emblematic of the cosmopolitanism that characterized Weston’s circle in Mexico City.” Bravo highlights Brenner and her vital influence on Edward Weston’s photographic style. In Continental Divides, Remapping the Cultures of North America (2009), Rachel Adams centers Brenner in the chapter “Women of the South Bank: The Mexican Routes of American Modernism” and considers how studying Brenner in the context of Mexico’s post-revolutionary project will open unrecognized circuits of modernist contact and allow scholars to reconsider commonly accepted geographies of modernism. In “The Transnational Mexican Renaissance: Mexican–American Jewish Women Crafting National Authenticity,” Dalia Wassner considers Brenner as a mirror to the U.S.-Mexican Jewish photographer Mariana
Yampolsky (Franz Boas’ niece) and how their work illustrates a gendered and Jewish manifestation of the transnational legacy of American anthropology.

Brenner was a prolific writer and this dissertation relied on over 900 pages of her original journals, letters, and articles, published and unpublished, housed at the University of Texas Harry Ransom Research Center. In addition to hundreds of articles, Brenner published three books, *Idols Behind Altars* (1929); *Your Mexican Holiday: A Modern Guide* (1932); and *The Wind that Swept Mexico: The History of the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1942* (1943). She also wrote books for children and founded, directed and edited the English-language magazine *Mexico/This Month* from 1955 to 1971. Building on these sources and relying heavily on archival research completed in 2017 and 2018, this dissertation positions Brenner within the particular context she wrote, among transnational artists and intellectuals that embraced broader state efforts to *Mexicanize* the nation, who thus embraced Jewishness as a desirable identity, simultaneously with the production of a modernity project taking place both locally and globally. To analyze and understand how Brenner was instrumental in the making of Mexican modernism and helped put modernist Mexico City on the larger cultural and geographical map of international modernism is one of the fundamental commitments of this dissertation. By closely examining Brenner’s earliest writings and artistic productions, this dissertation offers a critical reinterpretation of the interwoven artistic, cultural and political phenomena taking place at the turn of the century.

1.4 Latin American Jewish Studies

Since 1982 Latin American Jewish Studies has been an active field of study and formalized organization. The Latin American Jewish Studies Association (LAJSA)
originated from an ad hoc group of scholars who met in Washington, D.C. during intervals of the national conference of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA). In October 1982, LAJSA held its first research conference (Lindstrom 24). The association grew quickly, a reflection of the desperate need by scholars for an intellectual community to share research, advocate for institutional support, and create a formalized platform to present Latin American Jewish Studies scholarship. As the field progressed, Jews have been increasingly studied as a foundational part of Latin America's political, social, and cultural networks. Often, Jewish immigrants are explored in a paradigm that considers their experiences in parallel to other migrant groups (Mays 26). In Crossing Borders, Claiming a Nation: A History of Argentine Jewish Women, 1880-1955, Sandra McGee Deutsch considers how Jewish women negotiated multiple identities as Argentines, migrants, Jews, and Zionists in Argentina’s formation of nationhood. Adriana Brodsky traces the history of Sephardim as they arrived in Argentina and built ties with co-religionists around the country. Her research demonstrates that despite fragmentation of Jewish identity resulting in a fixed Sephardic identity in the Argentine context, this identity was strategic. Identity construction occurred from within and from outside and the Sephardim linked this to a broader objective of claiming an Argentine nationality. Scholars of Latin American Jewish Studies widely accept that Jews are not unique, and that in their Diasporic condition, they are much “like everyone else” (Lesser and Rein). In a different volume Lesser emphasizes that Jewish migrants often had to negotiate their ethnicization in order to fit national definitions of a “desirable foreigner.” Scholars of Latin American Jewish Studies grapple with whether to consider the identities of Jews in the region as Jewish Latin Americans or Latin American Jews. This dissertation centers on Brenner as a Mexican Jewish woman.
and Jewish Mexican woman to demonstrate that her self-definition and performance of her identity varied greatly depending on the context in which she found herself. By examining Brenner’s role as a producer and interpreter of Mexican Jewish identity and a protagonist of the Mexican Renaissance, this research will contribute to scholarship that reveals that Mexican Jews, like other minority groups, are part of the national fabric. Furthermore, this dissertation reveals how Brenner’s Jewish identity inspired Mexican artists and intellectuals to embrace a Jewish identity, such as the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, and how a secular Jewish woman influenced the definition of *Mexicanidad*.

A significant gap in Jewish Latin American scholarship, particularly in the Mexican context, is an over-emphasis on the Ashkenazi community, leading to the erasure of the uniqueness of other subethnic Jewish groups. By overemphasizing histories of Ashkenazi Jews in Latin America, scholars underappreciate the diversity of the Jewish community in the region. Identifying literature on non-Ashkenazi Mexican Jews can be challenging. At first this dissertation relied heavily on Adina Cimet’s analysis of the Mexican Jewish community in *Ashkenazi Jews in Mexico: Ideologies in the Structuring of a Community* and Alicia Gojman de Backal’s *Generaciones Judías en México: La Kehila Ashkenazi*. After reading *Kugel and Frijoles* (Limonic), *Sephardic Jews in America* (Ben-Ur), and *Forging Ties, Forging Passports Migration and the Modern Sephardi Diaspora* (Mays) the scope of the project expanded to the development of the multi-faceted Jewish community in the Mexican context in order to grasp the implications of a study on a transnational secular Jewish woman such as Brenner.

Mays’ research brought my attention to Corinne Krause’s dissertation, a critical study of the Mexican Jewish experience under Porfirio Díaz. Her research reveals that the
Jewish community in Mexico is one of the only communities in Latin America that have had a non-Ashkenazi majority since its inception. The first signs of a developing Jewish community in Mexico began during the late nineteenth century and into the early twentieth centuries when Jews from the Ottoman Empire and its successor states arrived in Mexico. These new arrivals formed communities according to their place of origin. Researcher Harriet S. Lesser identified seven distinct and relatively isolated ethnic groups in early twentieth-century Mexico’s small Jewish colony: Arabic-speaking Sephardim from Aleppo and Damascus; Ladino-speaking Sephardim from Turkey, the Balkans, and Italy; German-speaking Ashkenazim from Central Europe; and Yiddish speakers from Eastern Europe (Harriet-Lesser 10-22). Mexico is one of the few examples in the Americas where ethno-geographical differences among non-Ashkenazim have been preserved and institutionalized. Though they were all Jewish, these groups had distinct religious and linguistic heritage, their own synagogues, and particular areas of the country where they settled.

In Mexico at the beginning of the twentieth century, the lack of recognition of Jews of Middle Eastern origin by Ashkenazim reflects a broader pattern experienced throughout the modern period. Ottoman Jews who immigrated to the Americas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries found that many of their new neighbors did not believe them to be Jewish because of their places of origin, the languages they spoke, or the way they looked and dressed (Phillips Cohen, Labson and Mays 84-6). Aviva Ben-Ur describes the skeptical responses Ottoman Sephardim received after announcing their Jewishness to Ashkenazic Jews in the early twentieth-century United States as “co-ethnic recognition

5 “It is important to recognize that these are labels of institutional affiliation as much as, and sometimes more than, ethnic heritage per se” (Dean-Olmsted 133).
failure” (*Sephardic Jews* 108). In chapter three we see this in the context of Brenner’s descriptions of the Sephardim and her perception of their “assimilability” to Mexican culture in her article “The Sephardim—Our ‘Latin’ Brothers” (1925). Brenner described the Sephardim as people who “in appearance and custom can hardly be told apart from the Mexicans” (Brenner, “The Sephardim” 4). Ben-Ur places this phenomenon in a broader context of Jewish history as a consequence of the Jewish diaspora throughout the world that resulted in cultural, religious and (perceived) physiognomic gaps (*Sephardic Jews* 108). Adriana Brodsky describes a similar pattern in Argentina during the same period: “Sephardim were invisible as Jews to Argentines” because “they were linguistically different from Ashkenazim, lived in different … neighborhoods, wore different styles of clothing, and had cultural and political practices … acquired in … lands … not associated with Jewishness in Argentina” (2). Furthermore, identity construction for Jewish immigrants in a Latin American context must be understood as both fluid and situational. For example, as Jewish identity was developed in a new context, at times a Jewish ethnic identity was elevated, while at other times a religious identity and other times a national origin identity intensified (Limonic 139).

As synagogues began to appear across the country, these represented distinct Jewish national origins: Sephardim, the Ashkenazi of Eastern Europe, Halebi (Jews originally from Aleppo), and Shami (originating from Damascus). Eventually, religious Jewish immigrants in Mexico identified on a pan-ethnic level (Sephardim and Ashkenazim) rather than by national origin (Syrian, Greek, Russian) (138). The Halebi, Shami, and *turcos* can be considered the pioneers of contemporary Jewish immigration and institutions in Mexico. The Halebi community’s key to integration in Mexico was based
on the strong religious and traditional elements of their identity. Their religious organizations, such as *Alianza Monte Sinaí* (1912), served as the community foundation for early European immigrants. In 1912 the creation of a Jewish cemetery in Mexico City was made possible by Isaac Capon’s initiative. Born in Turkey, he was aware of the need to have a Jewish cemetery since his mother had to be buried in a Catholic cemetery in Mexico (Hamui-Halabe 125-145).

A critical difference between this dissertation and the approaches to Latin American Jewish Studies referenced earlier is that this project centers on the unique identity formation of a young Jewish transnational secular woman in 1920s Mexico to reveal the evolving nature of the Jewish community she claimed to represent. I consider how Brenner became influenced to self-fashion her Jewishness in response to the post-revolutionary national project, which led to her positive interpretation of the Mexican Jewish experience. By magnifying the experience of a particular transnational secular Jewish woman’s identity formation and artistic production in post-revolutionary Mexico, this dissertation will contribute to scholarship emphasizing the heterogeneity of Jewish identities in Mexico and the Americas as a whole.

Brenner’s trajectory often complicates characterizations that could otherwise locate her easily within Latin American Jewish Studies. In comparison to other Jewish migrants arriving in Mexico in the 1920s, Brenner was born in Aguascalientes and claimed Mexican nationality by birth. But she also returned to Mexico after living in Texas as a teenager. Brenner was awarded the Aztec Eagle Award to recognize her writing about Mexico for an English-speaking audience for fifty years, the highest award granted by the Mexican government to foreigners. Brenner rejected the award because she was Mexican by birth.
and responded, “Well, of all the nerve. Awarding an Aztec Eagle to a Mexican!” (Glusker, *Anita Brenner* 11). Furthermore, López considers her rejection of the award out of her concern that “her acceptance of an honor reserved for foreigners might reinforce the presumption that the Jewish experience was separate from authentic *mexicanidad* (López, “Anita Brenner and the Jewish Roots” 129). Brenner did not practice Judaism nor have consistent access to or interactions with a formal Jewish community until her return to Mexico in 1923. She self-identified as a secular Jewish woman who embraced Jewishness among Jews and non-Jews, among a unique transnational and cosmopolitan circuit of intellectuals. Meanwhile, Brenner attempted to claim Jews as indigenous to Mexico, tying Jews to the national fabric and advocating for their acceptance by claiming their ease of assimilability and acculturation. Brenner relied on non-Jews to establish her credibility and sought approval for her discourses on Jewish identity in Mexico. In other words, her Jewishness served as her entry ticket into the cultural Renaissance in Mexico City and resulted in her role as a central protagonist in its development. The multidisciplinary approach of Latin American Jewish Studies allows me to take full advantage of the productive area of overlap between the study of literature, history, and culture to contribute to scholarship by centering a Jewish woman’s productions and performance. This dissertation highlights the necessity of interdisciplinary methods and analysis in researching the development of a transnational Jewish identity in post-revolutionary Mexico.

1.5 National to Transnational

Rather than interpreting the Nation as an entity that is constrained by rigid borders, both metaphorical and literal, this dissertation situates nation building within a
comparative, transnational context and broader global fabric. Border studies has proven to be a rich source of methodological insight in this dissertation. The “borderlands” allows for a notion of subjectivity and “in-betweenness” that expands beyond the constraints of national identity (Ashcroft 20). This in-between space challenges hybridity and contains no singular group. This dissertation does not only center on the two-thousand-mile-long border where the United States and Mexico meet, and where Brenner and her circles crossed frequently by train. Rather, I view the region as part of a broader global nexus. Gloria Anzaldúa described the borderlands as “una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds”(25). The stock-figure of the borderland is mestizo, multiracial, multilingual, unclassifiable, and challenges hegemonic discourse. Savannah Carroll’s dissertation, *Creating the Ideal Mexican: 20th and 21st Century Racial and National Identity Discourses in Oaxaca* and Claudio Lomnitz’s *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico* help position the notion that Latin American nationalism did not produce a sense of horizontal comradery. Rather it resulted in “a community that is imagined as fraternal among full citizens who function as mediators between those who are not recognized as full citizens and the state” (Lomnitz 13). This definition correlates well with Brenner’s role as a mediator in promoting and interpreting national identity and modernity projects in Mexico. It acknowledges the hierarchies and inherent oppression that existed in the post-revolutionary climate and the cultural elite’s role as protagonists in the national project. Furthermore, Lomnitz’s definition highlights marginalization and othering as inherent in defining the Nation, alluding to how those who wanted to contribute to defining the new nation may have centered on specific cultural productions while marginalizing others to promote a desired national identity both locally and abroad. This dissertation will
emphasize constructions of the modern nation not just of Mexicans, but also the emergence of new cosmopolitanism identities of Jews, North Americans, and others, and how their collaborations reshaped the post-revolutionary national project.

The transnational approach at the center of this dissertation echoes López’ use of transnationalism in *Crafting Mexico: Intellectuals, Artisans, and the State after Revolution*. As López underlines, while membership in a nation-state is critical in terms of access to resources and point of view, national identities emerge through intimate interactions that “continually constitute (even as they confound) definitions of what is ‘foreign’ and what is ‘national’” (17). Theorists of nationalism Gellner and Smith stress the importance transnational intellectuals played in creating and reproducing national ideologies, especially those representing the oppressed. In Mexico, this dissertation emphasizes, transnational artists and intellectuals who “rediscovered” a national identity, transformed popular traditions and worked to define the Nation under a particular agenda.

This dissertation builds upon analysis that examines particular ways diverse cultural identities emerged, were articulated, or interlinked in post-revolutionary Mexico. Brenner’s productions preserve cultural memories of the process of defining a modern Mexican nation, one that was enriched by transnational contacts and frequent border crossings. Furthermore, Brenner’s productions preserve cultural memories of the process of defining a modern cosmopolitan, transnational Jewish identity and network and evokes how occupying the in-between space served as a form of strength for herself and those in her circles. Within this space, Brenner went beyond any singular definition of her identity, she crafted her own, unique modern self. Rather than a diluted cultural identity, my research suggests that Brenner’s linguistic flexibility and smooth transition across borders
allowed her to re-claim her hybrid identity. Brenner took full advantage of the mood of the era in order to self-fashion an identity beyond any singular definition of an ethnic, gender, sexual or religious identity. Transnational networks have increasingly been examined by experts of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, however, by paying attention to the ways a Jewish transnational woman orchestrated the translation and interpretation of the modern Mexican nation through Jewish influences, arts and interests, and herself as a Jewish Mexican American chica modern, this project will reveal overlooked productions, influences and circuits.

1.6 Mexican Renaissance: The Post-revolutionary Cultural Project

The trajectory of Mexican intellectual discourse in Mexico’s post-revolutionary cultural project manifested as a progression toward modernity, patriotism, and cultural and national uniformity. One approach to analyze Mexican national identity, explicitly concerning cultural and national unification, is through the adaptation of a homogenous national mestizo identity. Mestizo, referring to a person of mixed race of Spanish and indigenous descent, defined Mexico’s twentieth-century racial, national and cultural identity. Claiming the cultural inheritance of both Spain and Mexico, mestizaje represented the “ideal” modern Mexico, as developed in the later part of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth. It was a means to achieve national unity and also helped to identify a new political elite. Mestizaje imposed barriers to belonging, as it reinforced particular kinds of racial hierarchies that privileged “mixture” over the indigenous and excluded non-Latin American immigrants. As a resource for identity building and national integration, mestizaje became a central criterion for evaluating the full incorporation of minorities to the Mexican ethnic religious cultural model (Bokser Liwerant 4). Mexican
artists and intellectuals assigned symbolic value to Mexico’s indigenous heritage. Manuel Gamio—“the father of Mexican anthropology,” as Brenner referred to him, emphasized the integration of indigenous culture in his 1916 book *Forjando Patria* (Azuela 76). Gamio’s vision extended from an earlier tradition of racial construction and national identity centering on the *mestizo*. Gamio promoted qualitative and quantitative methods to gather data on Mexico’s indigenous population. This data would be essential to contribute to the Mexican government’s national project of cultural unification. In the chapter “Prejuicios sobre la raza indígena y su historia”, Gamio emphasized the equality of the Indian and the need for Mexicans to adapt an “indigenous soul”: “el indio tiene iguales aptitudes…hay que forjarse - ya sea temporalmente - un alma indígena. Entonces, ya podremos laborar por el adelanto de la clase indígena [the Indian has the same aptitude … we must forge for ourselves-even if temporarily-an indigenous soul. Then we may work for the advancement of the indigenous class]” (40). Thus, indigenous culture was the link for modern Mexicans to an ancient heritage on Mexican land. Gamio lamented Mexican indifference towards Mexico’s pre-Hispanic past: “deplorable nuestro descuido por la historia prehispánica…la historia prehispánica debería constituir la base de la colonial y la contemporánea [deplorable our neglect of pre-Hispanic history…pre-Hispanic history should constitute the basis of colonial and contemporary [history]]” (42). What Mexico needed, Gamio believed, was revolutionary action that would focus on integrating the masses by transforming them and the nation from the inside out (López, *Crafting Mexico* 8).

Gamio studied under Franz Boas at Columbia University and became his protégé. His time in New York coincided with a period of enthusiasm for Mexican archaeology and anthropology on the part of Boas (Delpar 97). Boas’ belief in the unity of indigenous New
World cultures was a driving force behind his interest in Mexico. This led to the establishment of the short-lived International School of American Archaeology and Ethnology in 1911. Gamio stood at the forefront of this effort and created the Bureau of Anthropology (Dirección de Antropología) in 1917. As Chief of the Bureau of Anthropology, he declared the state’s ignorance about Mexico’s population as a crisis (López, Crafting Mexico 130). Gamio set off to deliver an ambitious plan that would study every population in Mexico—for which his own study of Teotihuacan, funded by the same agency, would serve as a model. He wanted the investigation to not just center on language and demographics but on other sociocultural aspects, such as food, habits and local forms of governance. This information, Gamio hoped, would inspire the government to integrate the population and direct Mexico towards its own distinctive modernization.

Brenner admired Gamio and his research at the archaeological site of Teotihuacan (1917) (Azuela 14). In 1924, Brenner began anthropological research under Gamio’s guidance, while also translating and editing his work. Gamio’s synthesis of indigenous cultural survival under social oppression is incarnated in the phrase he coined to describe this phenomenon, “Idols Behind Altars,” which inspired Brenner’s book title (157). The title of the book, Idols Behind Altars refers literally to the idols from indigenous culture that were built upon or added on to after the conquest. The thesis of the book is embedded in the title. The “idols” are the indigenous culture rich with pre-Conquest symbolism and beliefs while the “altars” are the overlay of European Christian-derived art. Brenner wrote that “in the span of one generation Mexico has come to herself…has discovered the suffering and hopes of its own people.” She described to readers the Mexican countryside as distinct from western civilization and as “scenic and racial beauties…still largely
unmapped, unexploited” (Brenner, *Idols Behind Altars* 314). At only 24 years old, Brenner’s book was an international success and received praise from international writers such as the Spanish writer Miguel de Unamuno and British writer Richard Hughes (Grabinsky).

López points out that scholars misunderstand Gamio’s vision as “homogenization” and as a call for the elimination of cultural heterogeneity, especially of indigenous cultures. As a result of this misinterpretation, López argues that scholars then exaggerate the extent to which the post-revolutionary state “quashed difference in favor of a supposedly single-minded project of uniform *mestizaje*” (*Crafting Mexico* 131). In other words, an alternative way to interpret Gamio is that he was not calling for destruction of pluralism and regional differences. Rather, in the 1920s Gamio was advocating for “shared cultural bonds” to be analyzed through an anthropological and archeological lens (131). The notion of shared cultures and prioritization of an anthropological lens inspired Brenner and would shape much of her work on Mexico’s indigenous cultures and her own internal search for a Mexican Jewish identity.

Early twentieth-century revolutionary insurgents were concerned with ending the oppressive thirty-year Porfirio Díaz regime (1876-1911). Once Díaz was exiled, numerous insurgents emerged as leaders in the country. Venustiano Carranza, Pancho Villa, Emiliano Zapata, and Álvaro Obregón battled over issues that would shape the country, such as separation of church and state, agrarian reform, and labor rights. Following the Mexican Revolution, Mexicans turned to reevaluate their indigenous roots, art, and customs under the presidencies of General Álvaro Obregón (1920-1924) and Plutarco Elías Calles (1924-1928). President Obregón was interested in the political and cultural reconstruction of
Mexico. Calles assumed the presidency in 1924 when the economy was recovering from recession and entering into a period of sustained economic growth. As a result, Mexico in the 1920s experienced a cultural blossoming where the arts were inseparable from a modern notion of nationalism. After an era of revolutionary disorder, the return of stability to Mexico intensified cultural nationalism. Artists who returned from post-war Europe to Mexico participated with post-revolutionary passion in rebuilding Mexico through their artistic expressions. These artists established a visual interpretation of Mexican history and indigenous culture that became emblematic of the new revolutionary social order. For example, in 1922, the Mexican muralist Fernando Leal painted *Los Danzantes de Chalma* at the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria. The mural depicts a ritual performed in the sanctuary town of Chalma, an image of religious syncretism in Mexico. While Leal did not gain as much fame as the “big three” (*los tres grandes*) Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros, he was one of the first painters to pioneer the muralist movement (Indych-López 287).

José Vasconcelos, Minister of Public Education (1921–1924), strengthened the national project through commissioning works by Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco, among other transnational artists. Vasconcelos’ *La Raza Cósmica*, published in 1925, underlined how mestizaje ideology promoted the process of Ibero-American unity. Vasconcelos envisioned a Latin America where all races joined as a “fifth race” that would emerge from the Americas; a mixture of all of the existing races on earth, that would elevate the region to a position of racial, cultural, and economic superiority. The inherent Eurocentric and racist tone of the text contradicted the “progressive” racial utopia that Vasconcelos sought to promote. Consequently “Cosmic race theory” further elevated white superiority and marginalized the indigenous (López,
For Vasconcelos, the racial mixing of Latin America resulted in the potential for rebirth into a great civilization, rivaling the Egyptians, Greeks or Romans. He wrote, “Fortunately, such a gift, necessary to the fifth race, is possessed in a great degree by the mestizo people of the Ibero-American continent, people for whom the beauty is the main reason for everything” (38).

*Indigenismo* and *mestizaje* as nationalist ideologies were steeped in contradiction, both implicating the desire of the political elite to eliminate the perceived “destabilizing” diversity of Mexico’s indigenous population (Zavala 19). The pervasive poverty, illiteracy, and lack of education among the indigenous population challenged efforts toward national unity because it forced Indians to remain in enclave communities (Carroll 50). Thus began the dual process of integrating the Mexican Indian, and of “ethnicizing” the nation, referring to the process of incorporating and transforming the nation into homogenously national *mestizos*. Gamio coined this “Indianizing” Mexico, and historian Mary Kay Vaughan coined “the browning of the nation.” In other words, to achieve the mission of the post-revolutionary national project, a unified nation would depend on the cultural assimilation of Indians.

Historian Alan Knight challenges Gamio’s ideology by illuminating the inherent racism and paternalism within post-revolutionary *indigenismo* ideology. While *Indigenismo* sought state action by intentionally distributing land and education to integrate indigenous people, it glorified the pre-Conquest past and considered the Indian in the abstract. The artistic focus on the indigenous figure by *mestizo* artists could also be marginalizing as they depicted indigenous people as inferior and primitive in comparison to the new modern Mexico. *Mestizaje* muralists and writers reinforced this phenomenon.
by depicting the indigenous this way in their art vis-à-vis the celebration of indigenous imagery as a part of Mexican identity. In the best-case scenario, as Knight describes “thoughtful indigenistas” were able “to mestizo-ize the Indians and, at the same time, to Indianize the mestizos, to create a national synthesis on the basis of reciprocal contributions” (82). Knight emphasizes that racism endured, disguised in nationalist discourse, in a way that appropriated Indian culture to exalt the mestizo as a national hero. The Indian remained objectified and required an intervention from the mestizo population to advance toward unified national identity (Knight 86).

López explores the transformation of attitudes among Mexican officials and intellectuals regarding popular culture that depended on popular aesthetics for the transformation of the masses (Crafting Mexico 15). As López observes, “nationalists agreed that by intervening in the production and marketing of popular art, they could induce changes that went beyond the works of art themselves...to set Mexico down the path towards genuine cultural integration and modernization” (16). In The Eagle and the Virgin: Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940 historian Mary Kay Vaughan showcases how the state utilized symbols of mestizo and indigenous culture in nation building. The formation of a “postrevolutionary nationalist aesthetics” relied on the emergence of modern artistic expressions “that abandoned elite models of classical composition to discover authenticity, beauty, and energy in the primordial and primitive” (5). Mexicans sought to articulate a uniquely Mexican identity i.e.: “authentic” mexicanidad. Throughout this dissertation, I use the term mexicanidad (literally, Mexicanness) as the process that involved defining a unified national cultural identity that reinvigorated the long-standing effort to “ethnicize” the nation.
1.7 La Mestiza

Gloria Anzaldúa *mestiza*, a torn woman who straddles multiple cultures and negotiates contradictory identities, serves as an ideal archetype for Brenner (100). *La Mestiza* is constantly receiving and reconciling opposing messages and is located in the borderlands, an in-between space, and home to the marginalized. This theoretical model applies to Brenner for two reasons. First, Brenner’s self-definition appears to be situational: constantly shifting and contradicting itself in response to the geographic location she found herself due to influences she encountered in the spaces she inhabited. Second, Brenner held fast to a decolonizing methodology through her promotion of *indigenismo*. She managed to empathize with the indigenous because of her outsider status she experienced as a Jew, a woman and a transnational. Through her anthropological pursuits and observations of Mexico’s indigenous culture, Brenner positioned herself as a mediator in the national project through her participation as an observer, interpreter, and promoter of *indigenismo*. At the same time, Brenner included Jewishness at the center of *Mexicanidad* and national identity by advocating for Jewish migration to Mexico and exaggerating an indigenous Jewish presence in Mexico. For Brenner, Revolution meant “casting off the inner degradation brought by alien rulers. It meant releasing creative energy to give birth to a new people…developing a sense of pride and self-confidence, an assurance that Mexicans could solve their own problems” (Glusker 99).

This background sets the stage for the artistic and cultural productions Brenner orchestrated. The very origins of her endeavors revolved around the redefinition of self and creation of a popular character that served the broader definition of a unified national identity. Furthermore, Brenner’s transnational identity allowed her a vision of Mexico
unlike anyone else. For Brenner, vernacular art offered a genuine expression of the indigenous mindset and the “aesthetic foundation for the creation of something cohesive and truly national” (López, Crafting Mexico 108). Brenner’s influence on cultural, social, linguistic, gender, and religious diversity in Mexico and the United States represents a radical re-evaluation of prevailing notions of identity.

1.8 Brenner Imagining and Inventing the Nation

This dissertation began by way of a quest to understand if and how Brenner challenged Jewish invisibility or if she intended to assimilate herself and advocate the same for the Jews she believed herself to represent. Various questions guided this research in order to understand Brenner’s intentions: What conditions led Brenner to reclaim her Jewish identity in Mexico City? Did Brenner’s Jewish identity lead to her exaltation of indigenismo? How did Brenner’s interpretations of Mexicanidad influence the ethnicization of Mexico’s post-revolutionary national identity? At the same time, how did the notion of Mexico as a unified nation of mestizos and a society without racial discrimination implicate the exclusion of Jews? Did Brenner’s performances, productions, publications, and self-fashioning attempt to resist this exclusivity? To complicate this further, were Jews even identified as Jews in the process of defining national identity?

Bokser Liwerant affirms that the Mexican context reinforced the ethnic national character of Jewish identity, “consequently, Jews, like other minorities, developed their communal life without the corresponding visibility in the public sphere, lacking their recognition as a legitimate collective component of the national chorus” (6). Krause expands on this phenomenon: “the scattered Jewish immigrants…who penetrated into the interior of the country either as itinerant peddlers or as agents of foreign businesses, instinctively kept
silent about their religion. Unlike the Jew who settled in southwestern United States who carried on his business over the Mexican border, but lived openly as a Jew in Texas or New Mexico, the Jew who made his home in Mexico kept his religion a strictly private affair” (328). A close examination of Brenner’s earliest productions offers insight into the complex status of Jews in the Americas at the turn of the twentieth century and how one young transnational Jewish woman sought to reshape and influence Jewish belonging and desirability in Mexico.

1.9 Many México

What exactly made Mexico modern? What is the meaning behind Mexicanidad? These questions have been at the center of this research project from the very beginning, the same questions that have been at the center of U.S.-Mexico scholarly debate for most of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Scholars of the 1940s through the 1960s more or less agreed that no single Mexican national culture existed. Most scholars agree on a Mexico with deep roots in the past. However, one Mexico projected itself as urban and modern, and the other as rural and traditional. Regionalist scholars interpret Mexico as a conglomerate of near-independent regions, each requiring a study on its own terms. As such, the notion of “national culture” was actually an imposition from outside (Rubenstein, Bad Language, Naked Ladies 42). Knight suggests that a cohesive definition of Mexico did not arise from the post-revolutionary attempt at creating a national culture. Rather, he believes that national culture emerged from the subsequent rise of industrialization that led to a wave of consumerism as another prominent feature of Mexican life after 1920.

In the early 1920s a peculiar kind of foreign immigration trickled into Mexico City, transforming the city into a major point in the modernist metropolitan circuit. The
increasing traffic of Mexican intellectuals to the United States and vice versa grew significant in this period. These transnational modernists, referred to in this dissertation as cultural and political pilgrims, played a key role in Mexico as cultural translators and diplomats. This dissertation does not lean on any specific definition of modernity or nation. An explicit project emerged in Mexico that sought to define a modern national culture and society after the Mexican Revolution. Brenner appeared to have strategically chosen particular projects that fit well with the objectives of her fellow Mexican cultural elites. Therefore, this dissertation ponders how Mexicans and transnationals collaborated in building a national epistemology and negotiated their collective definition of modernity through the lens of Brenner. What is difficult to disentangle in Mexico’s modernity project are two very distinct influences. One was based on fixed ideas related to modernity, leaning on European and North American notions of progress, rapid industrialization, and urbanity. The other revolved around a discourse of tradition, conservatism, rural life, and the preservation of Catholicism.

A clarifying presentation of these discourses can be found in Anne Rubenstein’s research. In *Bad Language, Naked Ladies, and Other Threats to the Nation: A Political History of Comic Books in Mexico*, Rubenstein unpacks these influences as “equally rooted in the past, both were equally new, and both of them changed over time. Both were deployed by representations of the government, and their opponents, at various times and for various purposes” (42). As I outline in the next chapters, these discourses developed in dialogue with each other over gender, religious, sexual, and cultural identity. I have no

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doubt that an opportunity for cultural renovation emerged out of the Mexican Revolution. Unfortunately, the modernity championed resulted in discourses that emphasized sameness and promoted the marginalization of groups and individuals in the process. Intentional or not, newly arrived migrants and other marginalized groups in Mexico became influenced by cultural elites of the period, such as Brenner, whose transnational identity empowered them to modify appropriate public behavior, rebuild or invent the cultural environment, produce public art, and demonstrated desirable behaviors. Parallel to the import of definitions of modernity arriving from abroad, government sponsored projects flooded the Mexican national consciousness and resulted in the national project.

1.10 Methodology

This dissertation required a detailed analysis of primary sources, some of which have never been published, located in the Anita Brenner Archive. Brenner’s earliest publications in the Jewish press in the United States captured the avant-garde atmosphere among artists and intellectuals with whom she collaborated and the realities of the developing Jewish community. I relied on a rich variety of primary sources to shed light on cultural transformations of the period and, historically, to contextualize the developing Jewish community in Mexico, with Brenner as a central protagonist in these developments. The abundant material available at the Anita Brenner Archive remains unexplored and inaccessible to scholars worldwide. I aim to bring these overlooked historical documents to the awareness of a broader public. This project involves an interdisciplinary study of Brenner’s archival records and lesser studied cultural experimentations, bridging history, literary, and cultural analysis to determine the methods Brenner used to invent, influence, and interpret.
First, I researched the historical context and transnational networks that Brenner and other intellectuals, artists, immigrants and political pilgrims formed in 1920s Mexico. Then, I examined how this led to a shared enthusiasm for avant-garde ideals and an appreciation for indigenous cultures. I assessed the political, cultural, and racial underpinnings of the Mexican Renaissance with a particular emphasis on connections to and impact on the developing Mexican Jewish community. After that, I conducted close readings of Brenner’s narrative strategies and stylistic elements that related to specific cultural agendas of the era and considered how Brenner opened spaces for other women to define and redefine their identity. That led me to explore how Brenner sought to collaborate with and influence the artists and intellectuals with whom she worked to create bridges and build understanding between Mexico and the United States. I considered if Brenner intended to change consciousness and promote political action. In addition to employing both literary and historiographical analyses of primary sources, I rely primarily on an interdisciplinary Jewish Latin American Studies approach, taking advantage of the productive area of overlap and intellectual creativity this field promotes. I will return to this question throughout the project: In Mexico, how did a young secular Jewish Mexican American transnational woman invent, influence, and interpret boundaries of nation, race, religion, gender, and ethnicity as she self-fashioned a Mexican Jewish identity locally and internationally?

1.11 Chapter Overview

The subsequent chapters of this dissertation weave Brenner’s productions in and out of the post-revolutionary project. Chapter two, following an introduction to Brenner, begins by tracing her movement across the border during the Mexican Revolution and how
the anti-Semitism Brenner experienced in Texas fueled her return to Mexico. I outline the transnational circles Brenner joined that led to artistic collaborations and inspired her reclaiming of her Jewish identity. This chapter emphasizes the transnational nature of the Mexican Renaissance and sets the scene by introducing modern Mexico projects such as *Fantasía mexicana* and *Mexican Folkways*. This chapter lays out the landscape of the foreign-Mexican collaborations at the core of the Renaissance and what led Brenner to become caught up in the process of defining a national identity that included Jews. Chapter three centers Brenner in terms of what her transnational identity provided her: a transformation into a Mexican Jewish woman entering the United States’ Ivy League world, earning a Ph.D. from Columbia University (without a Bachelor’s or Master’s degree) under the guidance of famed anthropologist Franz Boas, and coming of age in the grand metropolis of New York and Mexico Cities during their most revolutionary decades. Through a close reading of Brenner’s personal journals and earliest publications located in the Anita Brenner Archive, one observes how Brenner used writing to articulate Jewish belonging, invisibility, assimilation, and exotification. Chapter three and four demonstrate how Brenner utilized artistic expressions to benefit her self-identification as an intellectual Jewess while self-fashioning as a representative of *Mexicanidad* and defined Mexico as modern and an appropriate place for Jews to settle. The fourth chapter expands on the thematic of a national modern identity entangled in Brenner’s artistic productions: posing nude, cross-dressing, drinking in public, cutting her hair, and generally emerging as a Jewish *chica moderna* in this sociopolitical context. This chapter demonstrates how visual culture played an important part in the Mexican Renaissance and was among the key features that captured Brenner’s imagination. I situate the *chica moderna* as a transnational
phenomenon to demonstrate first that Brenner represents a transnational modern figure and second that the Mexican cultural project influenced and was influenced by modernity projects happening across the border.
CHAPTER II: TRANSNATIONAL CIRCUITS: BRENNER AS PRODUCER AND PROMOTER OF CULTURE

For this is possibly the only place in the world where he finds no intolerance, no prejudice. The hate he has fled from elsewhere is, in Mexico, directed against a purely legendary figure. No one dreams of connecting an actual living being with Judas stories.

Anita Brenner
“Assimilation in Mexico”
Jewish Morning Journal, December 1925

2.1 From Judas to Jewess

Anita Brenner was first introduced to Judas as a children’s toy when she was a young girl in Mexico. The Jew, to Brenner’s early understanding, was an evil spirit and Easter firecracker. Serapia, her Catholic nanny in Aguascalientes, described a Jew to Brenner as a devil with horns and a tail. Nana Serapia would tell Brenner bedtime stories embedded with such Mexican folklore and myth (Glusker, Anita Brenner 20). When Brenner started school at Colegio Morelos in Aguascalientes, she was excused from religion class. From that point forward, Brenner realized she differed from the other children enrolled there (27). In Texas, where she relocated in 1916 at the age of eleven, she repeatedly faced anti-Semitism and developed a deep resentment towards her Jewish background. Brenner graduated from Main Avenue High School in San Antonio. Her parents enrolled her in religion lessons at a synagogue. Even there, because of her limited access to her Jewish background and the challenge of balancing multiple identities simultaneously, she felt like a social outcast, rejected by her Jewish peers. Glusker described Brenner’s first experiences in school in Texas as follows: “The teacher asked her ‘what are you?’ Anita was taken aback; she hesitated and then answered proudly, ‘I am an

7 An example of one of Serapia’s stories is when Halley’s Comet appeared in 1910 in Mexico, Serapia told Brenner that terrible things would happen. The Mexican revolution broke out shortly after. Brenner writes about the appearance of Halley’s comet as a warning sign in The Wind That Swept Mexico.
Israelite.’ The repercussions were swift and devastating. Up to that point, she had been identified as ‘the little Mexican girl’ and had one friend. She lost that friend as soon as she became ‘the little Jew girl’” (28). This pattern of isolation continued into her first semester at the University of Texas. Any sense of a Jewish identity that she had formed as a young girl as part of a formal community in San Antonio was diminished. “University knocked the religion out of me,” she wrote. “It was like high school, with added torment, mental and emotional…I wondered how I could change my hooked nose. I had no friends. The Jews were to me intolerable” (Brenner, “A Jewish Girl”).

Brenner studied at Our Lady of the Lake College for one semester. While enrolled there, the Catholic atmosphere prompted Brenner’s preliminary search for her spiritual identity, which she explored through Jewish literature and mysticism (Mart 194). She transferred to the University of Texas for two semesters, where she took an English course taught by the American writer and folklorist James Frank Dobie who studied at Columbia University in 1913 (Villela 19). During her year there, the Mexican and Jewish aspects of her background created for her a complex social experience. When her landlord discovered her Jewish background, she was moved from one rooming house to another at the university (Glusker, Anita Brenner 30). During the period she moved between colleges, Brenner began to write an autobiographical novel to build up her fragile self-esteem. This unpublished novel included a mystical and symbolic scene where she arrived alone at a séance and encountered a group of people communicating with spirits. One spirit saw Brenner’s pain and whispered to her: “You do not believe, and your pain is greater because you have no faith. Your heart is rebellious, and you set your own spirit as the only reality…But you shall go to a strange land, and there many men will want you, and you
shall see many things that only lofty spirits know…Through your hand you will tell to the world many radiant things, for you have the gift and need only your faith” (Glusker 31). This period marked the climax of Brenner’s search for her spirituality identity and writing became her tool to navigate her complex relationship with her Jewish background. This scene in the autobiographical novel likely represented for Brenner what she experienced during her frequent movement across the border. Brenner was not successful in integrating with her co-religionists in primary, secondary, preparatory school, nor at the University. This led Brenner to Mexico City, where she learned to embrace her Jewish identity and explore her faith. There she re-invented herself as an expert and reporter on Jews and positioned herself at the center of a circle of transnational bohemian artists, intellectuals, and cultural and political pilgrims.

Brenner insisted on returning to Mexico in 1923, and her father, Isidore, consulted with Rabbi Ephraim Frish, spiritual leader of Temple Beth El in San Antonio, Texas. The latter assured him that she would be safe there (Glusker 33). A letter from Rabbi Ephraim Frish introduced Brenner to Rabbi J.L. Weinberger, a North American expatriate who directed the newly established Mexican chapter of the B’nai B’rith, who confirmed he would meet Brenner upon arrival. That September, Isidor e allowed Brenner to leave Texas, and she traveled to Mexico City, intending to study and work there. When eighteen-year-old Brenner traveled from San Antonio, Texas to Mexico City by train with her American citizenship documents, foreigners only needed a “Tourist Card” given by the Mexican Consulates. The card specified “women traveling alone are supposed to carry written permissions to do so issued by their fathers, husbands, or guardians. Immigration officers
do not always call for these documents, but young women especially should be prepared to present them” (Brenner, Your Mexican Holiday 20).  

Through her connection to Rabbi J. L. Weinberger, who was married to Frances Toor, a Jewish American editor and anthropologist, Brenner joined the growing community of writers, artists, and intellectuals living in Mexico City. Though Toor and Brenner would later become rivals (Brenner listed Toor’s name under the category “enemies” in her diary and frequently described frustrations with their professional and personal relationship), Toor was the first to introduce Brenner to other foreigners and intellectuals in Mexico City, for instance the journalist Carleton Beals and muralist Diego Rivera (López, Crafting Mexico 108). Brenner moved to her apartment on Calle Roma 39. Toor took Brenner to the Young Men’s Hebrew Association for tea and dancing and she began to date Jewish and non-Jewish men. Through her new connections, Brenner proudly joined the expatriate milieu of artists, activists, and intellectuals as they interpreted and promoted the Mexican Renaissance for foreign audiences.

Prior to relocating to Mexico, Toor studied with historian Herbert E. Bolton at the University of California at Berkeley, where she absorbed his understanding of a “Greater America” as an integrated history of the Americas. Toor lived in an apartment on Calle Abraham González that overlooked a shared courtyard with neighbors such as Beals and Ella Wolfe, who became Brenner’s mentors and friends (Glusker, Anita Brenner 33).

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8 Although Brenner was born in Mexico, it is not clear if she ever officially obtained Mexican citizenship. Although she self-claimed Mexican citizenship by birth, there is no evidence of a Mexican birth certificate or a resident visa in the archive nor referenced by scholars confirming or denying Brenner’s dual-citizenship status.

9 According to López, information on Toor’s personal life is limited and unreliable (Crafting Mexico 101).


11 Ella Goldberg Wolfe (1896-2000) was a Russian-born American political activist and educator who lived in Mexico City in the 1920s. Her husband, Bertram David Wolfe, co-founded the Communist Party of America (CPA) in 1919. Both Ella and Bertram Wolfe earned degrees from Columbia University.
Toor introduced Brenner to Jean Charlot, an avant-garde French-born painter and illustrator of Mexican heritage who arrived in Mexico in the 1920s. He created some of the earliest murals in Mexico City during the 1920s at the Escuela Nacional Preparatoria and the Secretariat of Public Education.

Charlot spent three seasons working as an archaeological illustrator at the ancient Maya ruins of Chichén Itzá, where he first visited as Rivera’s assistant in 1921 (Villela 20). Brenner collaborated on projects with Charlot and entered into a romantic relationship with him that tormented her during her time between Mexico and New York. Charlot, who identified as Catholic, had a significant impact on Brenner’s desire to resist or embrace Jewishness. Her self-definition as a Jew was influenced by Charlot’s efforts to convert her to Catholicism. Frustrated, Brenner almost converted to Catholicism so as to marry Charlot and pondered the benefits to marry and no longer feel like an outsider (López, Crafting Mexico 128). Brenner’s journals reveal the significant impact her relationship with Charlot had on her thinking, intellectual pursuits, and self-definition as a Jew throughout most of the 1920s. In the end, she concluded in her journals that she would not be able to convert because she felt she did not know enough about Judaism to continue into Catholicism. Brenner was not confident that she could preserve her Jewish identity behind a Christian façade. As a result, Brenner ended their relationship.¹² In 1929, she mailed a poem she wrote to her new fiancé David Glusker, a Jewish American physician she met in New York. Reflecting on her relationship with Charlot, Brenner reminisced:

There was a man who loved me  
And he was not a Jew  
But this was nineteen hundred and twenty-four

¹² For a detailed discussion of Brenner’s complex relationship with Charlot see chapters one and two in Yolanda Padilla Rangel, México y la revolución mexicana bajo la mirada de Anita Brenner.
Not fourteen ninety-two.
Come to Communion, this lover said
Your soul will find a place.
But the Aleph Beth on my flank and brow
Sniggered in my face.
My feet they have no resting place
My head it has no home
My house is bare of family trees
And no roots bind my bones.
Daughter of two countries, citizen of none
A Zion star your only firmament
Get to your Synagogue.

(Letter from Anita Brenner to her fiancé, David Glusker, 1929)

Brenner described the period she wrote in her journals, when she studied, lived, and worked between Mexico City and New York City, as her “romantic” period (1923-1927). As reflected in her journals and observed by Brenner scholars, her three great loves of the 1920s were Jean, the Jews, and the Indians (Villela 20).

Between August 1923 and September 1927, Brenner spent most of her time in Mexico City. Her first job was as an English teacher at the Presbyterian Missionary School for Girls called Escuela Normal de San Ángel, which she obtained with help from her teachers from Colegio Morelos. Her wages included room and board. She eventually resigned from her position at the school to protest the firing of an American teacher for dating a Mexican (Glusker, Anita Brenner 34). Brenner was living in Mexico City in 1924 when a large group of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe began to arrive in the country. Through her connections with Toor, Brenner began to work directly with these immigrants fleeing political persecution, war, and anti-Semitism, who could not enter the United States because of the immigration quota laws introduced in 1921, the first law in United States history that quantifiably limited immigration. The Quota Law of 1921 drastically limited the number of Eastern and Southern European foreigners who were
permitted to enter the United States (Daniels 365). The Emergency Quota Act of 1921 halted the flow of immigration by limiting immigration of any given nationality to 3% of their number in the 1910 U.S. census (Ben-Ur, Where Diasporas Met 1). On July 1, 1924, *The New York Times* published an article titled “Coolidge Proclaims Immigration Quotas.” In response, in August 1924 President-elect Calles issued a statement which was published by the New York *Daily News* “Mexico’s Invitation to the Jews” that invited Jewish immigrants to establish themselves in the country because of his interest in economic revitalization. Rabbi Zielonka of El Paso, Texas who helped establish the B’nai B’rith in Mexico, and Rabbi JL Weinberger who served as the director, commissioned Brenner to travel to the Port of Veracruz to oversee the Jewish agents who were supposed to help immigrants on arrival. Brenner accepted the assignment, and her proficiency in Spanish and English as well as her previous experience traveling alone in Mexico made her the ideal candidate for the job. She began meeting Jewish immigrant arrivals in Veracruz, where she would register their names, occupations, and individual needs. Brenner’s partnership with the Mexican B’nai B’rith provided her a unique opportunity to engage with the developing Mexican Jewish community. Brenner began writing and publishing dozens of articles on the Jewish community in Mexico for the North American Jewish press, a responsibility that no other Jewish woman in Mexico had taken on before her. It was an exciting moment in Mexico and Brenner found herself at the pulse: a diverse and growing number of Jewish immigrants set foot on Mexican soil simultaneous to Mexico’s move towards a “collective” national identity following a revolution that unmasked to citizens the inequalities at the surface of the Mexican nation.
2.2 Post-Revolutionary Mexico: Searching for **Mexicanidad**

*Mexicanidad is: mariachi, mestizo, the Revolution, social movements, and even tequila.*

Monsiváis in Martínez Limón, 11

Manuel Gamio, a Mexican anthropologist influenced by Franz Boas, received his Ph.D. in Anthropology in 1922 from Columbia University. In the fall of 1923, Gamio worked with Brenner as her teacher at the Escuela de Altos Estudios, part of the National University (today known as the School of Philosophy and Letters). Gamio articulated Mexico’s challenges in defining a national identity. Boas encouraged Gamio to use his government post as inspector general to promote the study of archaeological monuments as a lens on Mexican folklore (Lindsay 58).

Under President Obregón, José Vasconcelos, the first to occupy the newly created position of the Minister of Education, sent teachers to remote rural areas, paid artists, and commissioned murals. He played a critical role in developing the idea of *mestizaje* and how it influenced notions of belonging and the social construction of identity. In addition to overseeing the country’s expansion of rural education and promoting the muralists’ art to the public, Vasconcelos distributed classic works of literature and promoted music and dance so Mexicans would “cultivate their ‘love of beauty’ through thriving, regional modes of expression” (Herr 26). Robert Herr’s dissertation *Puppets and Proselytizing: Politics and Nation-Building in Post-Revolutionary Mexico’s Didactic Theater*, examines the Ministry of Education’s construction of open-air stages throughout rural Mexico as a

13 For another example of understudied artistic production see: Laura G. Gutierrez, *Performing Mexicanidad: Vendidas y Cabareteras on the Transnational Stage.*
means to elevate the standards of national culture and to “nurture” the folkloric artistry that was foundational to the manifestation of the “cosmic race.” According to Vasconcelos “The Mexican pueblo would recognize itself in the festive character of those songs and regional dances, thus contributing to state building and cultural growth” (Herr 26). Visions for a unified nation among revolutionary intellectuals are examined in Luis Marentes’ study *Jose Vasconcelos and the Writing of the Mexican Revolution*. Marentes defines the minister’s vision as based primarily on Eurocentric views. The glorification of the Indian, and the elevation of culture through assimilation to western culture led to an artificial integration. Marentes observes that “this modern life, however, would attempt to turn these Indians into westernized citizens, turning to their traditions only for picturesque folkloric coloring” (18). Brenner’s published articles, examined closely in the subsequent chapter, provide another example of an understudied cultural production of the period. Through a close reading, we see how her writing aimed to elevate Mexican culture in contrast to foreign critiques and increasing anti-Mexican rhetoric circling abroad.

**2.3 Fantasía Mexicana**

Another example of this “coloring” is examined in the work of Manuel R. Cuellar in *Choreographing Mexico: Festive Performances and Dancing Histories of a Nation*. Cuellar considers how dancing emerged as a key arena of contesting notions of an “authentic” Mexican cultural identity. He posits bodies in motion as a means of performing and critiquing nationhood. Cuellar’s analysis outlines the integration of Indigenous and regional dance styles into the mainstream, arguing that this was a top-down process imposed as cultural elites sought to legitimatize a hegemonic national character by incorporating traces of indigeneity (10). Cuellar explored how dancers used their bodies to
challenge the mainstream definitions of *Mexicanidad* at home and abroad, making nuanced articulations of female, Black, Indigenous, and queer renditions of the nation. Cuellar expanded on the Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova’s role in Mexico’s production of an embodied *mestizo* modernity that resonated with efforts of the post-revolutionary project. Pavlova, of the Ballet Russes, extrapolated upon *jarabe tapatio*, a dance traced back to colonial-era Jalisco. Until 1920, it was a regional dance and an entertainment act (López, *Crafting Mexico* 69). Pavlova traveled to Mexico City in 1921 and danced for an audience of more than 16,000 people. Her performances from her Europeanized ballet repertoires and her “balleticized” rendition of Mexican folk dances contributed to Mexican elites reaffirming their identity in connection to the transnational cosmopolitan while claiming Mexican indigeneity.

Pavlova’s performance in Mexico City evokes the interconnectedness of the transnational networks that weaved in and out of Mexico. Productions such as Pavlova’s were constructed abroad and among transnational protagonists of the Mexican Renaissance. In 1921 the Centennial Committee, a group charged with organizing a popular-oriented centennial celebration in 1921, contracted Adolfo Best Mauguard to plan a garden party. The party would showcase Mexico’s technological modernity vis-à-vis improvements to Chapultepec Park. Best, a cosmopolitan Mexican artist from an elite family, worked for Franz Boas. While traveling with European avant-garde circles, he became inspired by German and Russian neo-romantic nationalism and developed an interest in popular traditions (López, *Crafting Mexico* 69). Best created “La Noche Mexicana” and transformed the garden party into an elaborate *feria* (regional fair) to contribute to the production of a new aesthetic vocabulary of *Mexicanidad* (70). The event
was free to the public and reporters recounted the thousands of people, including President Obregón, government officials, artists, and members of prominent Mexican families, who strolled through the production that evening. There were three stages and at each street corner viewers encountered Yucatecan troubadours, dancing charros and chinas poblanas. A fundraiser for the Cruz Blanca sold working-class and peasant food served on ceramics from Guadalajara and Texcoco. Yaqui performers mesmerized the audience with “exotic” performances and elite women dressed in regional folkloric costumes (69). The event was an outpouring of post-revolutionary nationalism.

*Fantasía Mexicana*, the mainstage of the event, was created the year prior as a small avant-garde performance in New York City. Best recruited the Texan-American Katherine Anne Porter to script the storyline for the performance while in New York. Best met Porter in 1920 in New York City, where she worked as a publicity agent. While in New York, Best saw Sergei Diaghilev’s famous *Ballet Russes* and recruited Porter to sketch the storyline with the only request that it be a romance set in Xochimilco (98). While there, Best recruited Pavlova as the star ballerina. Porter was born into poverty and obscurity in central Texas in a humble and broken family. She re-fashioned herself into the great writer Katherine Anne Porter, “an aristocratic daughter of the Old South and the descendant of a long line of distinguished statesmen” (Givner 167). She traveled across the United States, where she settled in New York’s Greenwich Village, and discovered a passion for fiction and a bohemian lifestyle. Best introduced Porter to the Mexican artists and intellectuals living in New York which led her to travel to Mexico where she worked as a self-taught journalist and taught English at a girl’s school. There is an undeniable similarity in Porter and Brenner’s biographies, showing that Brenner was part of a transnational cosmopolitan
network of others like her. Furthermore, the production of *Fantasía Mexicana*, written outside of Mexico by a North American writer and imported to Mexico as the mainstage of the “La Noche Mexicana”, exemplifies the transnational qualities of the Mexican Renaissance. The various transnational artistic and cultural influences imported to Mexico from abroad further illuminate the transnational nature of the Mexican Renaissance. The next section considers the unintended outcomes, both positive and negative, of the transnational intellectuals, journalists, and artists influence on Mexico’s Renaissance, such as the significance of the newly formed bilingual magazine *Mexican Folkways*. After, we refocus on Brenner and how the growing visibility of Jews in Mexico influenced Jewish and non-Jewish cultural and political diplomats’ interpretations and productions.

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14 For more on the intersections of Porter and Brenner’s biographies see: Rachel Adams, *Continental Divides: Remapping the Cultures of North America*. 

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2.4 Political Pilgrims: Foreign-Mexican Collaboration

The essence of the Mexican Renaissance takes place in the capital of the country, The only space where heterodoxies, in unexpected and somewhat primordial social gatherings, are allowed.


The cultural and political pilgrims who arrived from the U.S. to Mexico included Edward Weston, Tina Modotti, Carleton Beals, Frances Toor, Ella Wolfe, Ernest Gruening, and Frank Tannenbaum. Brenner formed part of the first class of transnational students that
arrived during the second half of 1921 to participate in the summer school held at la Universidad Nacional de México (Padilla 147). The school served as a gathering place for intellectuals to learn about and discuss post-revolutionary cultural transformation (López, Crafting Mexico 102). The Escuela de Verano at the National University was created by the Dominican Pedro Henríquez Ureña, who was accepted by Mexicans as one of their own. A transnational intellectual from an elite family, Henríquez Ureña would go on to become a Pan-American intellectual and friend to leading artists and thinkers across the Americas. He was a university professor in Argentina, Mexico, and the United States. The school grew beyond a place where U.S. Spanish teachers could brush up on their language skills or Mexican students learn pedagogical methods. Those involved with the school sought to change perceptions among both foreigners and Mexicans. Courses and fieldtrips centered on social transformation and cultural rediscovery of Mexico, with particular emphasis on folkloric songs, dances, and art (102). Along with Mexicans of the left, those enrolled shared the idea that a necessary social change was taking place that benefited indigenous people. Participants grew motivated by what they believed to be an “authentic” social revolution and viewed socialism as the means of escaping materialism, inequality, and conflict they associated with capitalism (Delpar 97). These changes in Mexico attracted cultural diplomats and Mexican expatriates along with Brenner, to participate in building a society that valued indigenous peoples and promoted a better life for the less fortunate. Brenner wrote, “it was a great moment in national life…a time when the world was beginning…we were making it in terms of ‘Here at last, something can be done, and we can do it’…you believed that you could do something. Revolution was still real in the world” (qtd. in Glusker, Anita Brenner 36).
The individuals who arrived in Mexico from abroad helped shape how Mexico was perceived internationally, joining Mexican artists and intellectuals to define *Mexicanidad*. The reconstruction of this ethnic past resulted in the development of a local history that included visions of transnational collaborators, who helped define the movement as it evolved in Mexico. Brenner worked closely with these artists and intellectuals and thrived on their expertise. Beals, an independent liberal journalist living in Mexico City and Columbia University alumnus, mentored Brenner throughout her early career and was the first writer to read and help publish her work. Beals reinforced Brenner’s decision to attend Columbia University for one semester in 1925. During her brief first sojourn in New York, Brenner sent articles to the New York Jewish press. In July 1925 she returned to Mexico to reunite with her bohemian friends, began writing for *Folkways* and continued her work with new immigrant arrivals and writing reports for the Mexican B’nai B’rith. Brenner
returned to New York City in 1927, registered in the Anthropology Ph.D. program and completed the degree three years later.


Some transnational journalists, such as Gruening, received economic support from the Mexican government in exchange for publishing a positive vision of the revolution and the Mexican government in the United States. This collaboration with the Mexican government was often not accepted by the United States. The North American State Department called Gruening, Tannenbaum, and Haberman the “Jewish Trinity” and believed that, along with Beals, they had ties with the Mexican government and could not be trusted (Padilla Rangel 148). Despite the ambiguous status of Jews in the world at the
time, Brenner’s ability to take part in the formation of *Mexicanidad*, navigating two distinct worlds, demonstrates her transnational status.

2.5 Transnational Bohemians in Mexico City

As Brenner’s time in Mexico passed, she appeared more often in cafes and parties with artists including Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, and José Clemente Orozco. She established herself as a journalist, anthropologist, and cultural promoter. Brenner was thrilled when her bohemian friends took an interest in her Jewish heritage. Her inability to answer their questions about Judaism motivated her to learn more about her religion and history, study Hebrew, and self-fashion a Jewish identity. Brenner set off on this exploration mostly on her own, with little indication in her journals or articles that she worked with a particular mentor on Jewish topics, nor did she regularly attend synagogue or a Jewish religious school in Mexico City. Rather, through her assignments working directly with the newly established Mexican B’nai B’rith and investigative journalism, she positioned herself as an expert on the subject of Jews in Mexico. Brenner’s published and unpublished articles reveal a young self-trained journalist emerging in the field as an expert on the subject of Jews. One unpublished article titled “The Very Young Jew in Mexico” written as a special for the *Jewish Morning Journal* in September 1925 described the Talmud Torah day school in Mexico City and the conflicts the school faced:

Curiously enough, the only time I felt of a Jewish group here in Mexico, that it was strange in a strange land, was upon a visit to the Talmud Torah, where a number of second and third generation Mexican Jews learn in Hebrew….this Talmud Torah was established a few months ago, with the financial support of the B’nai B’rith,
whose support has now been withdrawn. This is because the school is attended by less than half of the Ashkenazim.

Brenner described the “strangeness” she observed while visiting the school and the reasons why the school’s funding was revoked. Support was withdrawn from the school because of low inscription rates, only half of the Ashkenazi community living in Mexico City actually attended the school that was designed for them. The school functioned as an all-day Jewish parochial school, with classes also taught in Spanish. Those in attendance received a substandard education, as Brenner described it, compared to the already established Mexican public schools. The Ashkenazi community members, according to Brenner, preferred to send their children to Mexican public schools in the morning and Jewish religious school in the afternoon, rather than having religious training scattered throughout the day. The day-long religious training and separation of the Jewish children from the public schools would have marked these children as different from non-Jewish Mexican children. Brenner entered the school as an investigative reporter and hurriedly documented her observations with the intent to share this knowledge with Jewish readers across the border.

Brenner’s role as a self-trained journalist impacted her personally as her journal entries written during the same period demonstrate. A journal entry on Saturday, November 21, 1925 captures her desire to explore her Jewish identity and the pressure she felt regarding her religion:

I shall be forced to make a decision about religion…. I need to study much. I shall try Hebrew also, I hope. Also, I need discipline. I am weak again as regards to
candy & once today I thought of the sensation of the deeply felt kiss and this thought has been away for a long time.

This entry captures simultaneous forces that impacted Brenner in 1925. As she sought to self-fashion a Jewish identity, transform herself into an expert and leading investigative journalist on Jewish topics in Mexico City, she also felt pressure to “make a decision” regarding a religious Jewish identity because of her relationship with Jean Charlot, who identified as Christian. At the same time, Brenner recognized her need to study to become an expert, to learn about the history of Jews in Mexico and study Hebrew in order to re-invent herself as a modern Jewish intellectual. Meanwhile, her desire to eat candy and kiss creates a visual of a young eighteen-year-old. In a letter written on April 12, 1929 to Elliot Cohen, co-editor of the *Menorah Journal*, Brenner described how she gained a newfound pride in her Jewishness:

Fortunately, Mexicans are splendidly indifferent to “Jewishness” as a class distinction; I recovered some of the feeling of romance and glamour from them, and when genial little clumps of peddlers began filtering through Mexican streets, I became vastly and actively interested in them, and through them, in other things openly and interestingly Jewish.

Brenner referred to the increasingly visible Jewish presence in Mexico and how the interest towards these Jews, as she perceived from the Mexican intellectuals in her circles, led to Brenner’s “recovery” of her Jewish identity. It was within these transnational circles in Mexico City where Brenner, as a secular Jew, found comfort in the bohemian circles she formed part of, where her otherness was embraced and considered exotic and “romantic”, and she could explore what it meant to be Mexican and Jewish.
Grasping the uniqueness and implications of these political pilgrims’ presence in post-revolutionary Mexico is no simple task. *La familia*, as Jean Charlot called them, consisted of Mexican writers, musicians, and intellectuals that included Rivera, Kahlo, Orozco, Siqueiros, as well as many foreigners, among them Jean Charlot, Edward Weston, Tina Modotti, and Lowell Houser. This group is not easy to classify given that they were not particularly influential regarding politics nor in the broader nation (except for the muralists’ impact on popular culture). The varying and competing cultural productions, as this dissertation highlights in the case of Brenner, illuminates the uniqueness of this group and contradictions that are entangled in Mexico’s post-revolutionary cultural project. Monsiváis characterized the accomplishments of this group into distinct and markable impressions that I emphasize here: This group established the images of the Revolution through narrative writing and films that were made accessible to a mass audience; created a path forward to afford artists a position of exception; anticipated collective freedoms by demanding respect or recognition of a small group; modified through selected (and self-selected) examples the view of that which is feminine; turned ideological debates into proactive theater or even epic melodrama; enriched the urban experience with personalities of the cutting edge; gave members of minorities the right to exist “because they have talent” (Monsiváis xiii). While this list may be limiting in what these avant-garde artists and intellectuals achieved in Mexico City, there is no doubt their efforts led intellectual renewal and cultural experimentation of the Mexican Renaissance.

Members of this unique group served as models for one another as to how to re-fashion the self and opened new vistas into circuits of modernist contact. On December 2, 1925 Brenner noted their peculiarities in her journal:
Last night I went out. Was carried rather. Occasion farewell Tina’s sister. Hodgepodge. Diego was there and being congratulated on account of the Pan-American prize. In connection with gathering, Charlot remarks that we, “the familia” had become so accustomed to certain things and certain attitudes-simplicity and naïveté, a certain infantile directness, that we can hardly conceive of how strange we must look to outsiders. We even have our own language and certainly an etiquette that is original and unmatched. One does what one wants but who wants to promenade in fashion...Scorn for sentimentalists, humanitarians, reformers, moralists, and authorities, or not exactly scorn but surprise at their stupidity. It is indeed comfortable in spite of the undeniable family atmosphere.

While members of la familia all claimed Mexico City as their canvas, each member had a unique story that led them to Mexico. Modotti traveled to Mexico with Weston on account of their burgeoning romantic relationship and her plans to work as his studio assistant and learn photography. An entry in Weston’s journal reveals a negative response from locals to the increasing foreign and expatriate presence in Mexico. Weston observed: “The Mexicans have such contempt for Americans as they know them that I have begun to think that God Almighty sent me here to bring about more amicable relations between the two nations” (qtd. In Bravo 31). These individuals did not identify as North American tourists nor as Mexicans. The circles of Weston and Modotti were not entirely Mexican, yet they avoided the insular expatriate communities. They gravitated towards cosmopolitan individuals such as Brenner, Charlot and Toor, as well as Mexican transnational artists such as Rivera and Orozco. Therefore, cosmopolitan artists and cultural promoters in Mexico selected alternate identifications depending on the context. In their art, Weston and
those in his circle strategically associated character elements with regional or ethnic categories “in order to foreground similarity or difference, in shifting patterns of allegiance” (Bravo 32).

The experimental climate at the time reinforced creative endeavors and risk taking. While in 1919 the United States passed a nationwide constitutional law that prohibited the production, importation, transportation and sale of alcoholic beverages, Brenner’s journals often depicted alcohol flowing freely in Mexico City. During her first year back in Mexico City it is not uncommon to read a description in her journal of the alcohol contributing to Brenner’s euphoria or stupor, capturing the “drunk and in love” mood of the moment. Her journals comment on the familia particular language, likely Spanglish, and their unique vantage point of the Renaissance in the metaphorical sense. Brenner’s own language in the diaries is often non-sensical, and her prose is often difficult to understand. As expanded in the next chapter, this may reflect Brenner’s extreme high and low moods that resulted from contradictory impulses she experienced during the period she wrote in her journals and frequent cases of sexual harassment (1924-1930). However, the journal content during her time at Columbia University transformed. Over time, Brenner’s entries reflected her intellectual maturity as she focused more on philosophical issues. She scribbled detailed descriptions of her academic and professional pursuits, demonstrating how Brenner’s education at Columbia University, as well as her increased interactions with transnational artists and intellectuals transformed her into a scholar. Brenner’s membership in la familia was essential for her ability to re-fashion herself as a Mexican Jewish intellectual, an identity that at once afforded her “insider status” to orchestrate the Mexican cultural
Renaissance and at the same time allowed her to grow comfortable in her own skin surrounded by “outsiders” similar to her.

2.6 *Mexican Folkways: The “Vogue of Things Mexican”*

Brenner’s encounters with immigrants in Veracruz and her interactions with Toor and other intellectuals in Mexico City inspired her to aid in exporting the “Mexican Renaissance” to the United States. Brenner began submitting articles for the newly formed bilingual magazine *Mexican Folkways* (1925-1937), directed and edited by Toor. *Folkways*, as Latin American historian and leading expert on the magazine’s history Claire Lindsay describes it, transformed into “an advertising house for individual modernists, as well as modernism itself” (62). In addition to reproductions of photographs, the magazine featured individual Mexican artists, centerfolds, and collectable front covers illustrated by Rivera (62). The first publication of its kind in Mexico in terms of subject matter and language, it was published simultaneously in English and Spanish. *Folkways* presented Mexico as rural and indigenous but extended this vision to emphasize variations in indigenous traditions, languages, and cultures. In the introduction to the inaugural issue, Toor characterized herself as a “trailblazing frontierswoman, who had gone among the Indians of Mexico under circumstances that even my cultured Mexican friends considered dangerous” (qtd. in Lindsay 56). The magazine was inspired from intellectual and cultural conversations that Toor took part in during her time at the National University’s summer school three years earlier. Toor had originally intended to publish exclusively in Spanish, however Boas advised Toor to publish primarily in English (Lindsay 58). In a later, 1932, issue Toor described her project in retrospect and explained her decision to publish a bilingual journal:
As I wanted *Mexican Folkways* to express the Mexico that interested me so keenly, it has not only described customs, but has touched upon art, music, archaeology, and the Indian himself as part of the new social trends, thus presenting him as a complete human being. And in order that the magazine might mean something to the Mexicans as well as to outsiders, everything has been published in both English and Spanish.... Because of my own joy in the discovery of an art and civilization different from any I had previously known, I thought it would interest others as well. Thus I conceived the idea of the magazine. (qtd. in Schuessler).

*Folkways* captures the intrinsic ways that Mexicans and foreigners collaborated and “worked hand in hand to advance the ethnicization of Mexico’s postrevolutionary national identity” (López, *Crafting Mexico* 105). Alongside its directing international interpretations of Mexican folklore, *Folkways* placed an emphasis on contemporary visual culture. For example, the magazine published images captured by numerous transnational photographers such as Tina Modotti and Edward Weston. It included advertisements for handicraft art shops, book stores, Buen Tono cigarettes and in various issues included announcements for the Escuela de Verano at the National University (figure 4). During the late 1920s and early 1930s no other magazine encouraged an appreciation for the arts and culture of the Mexican countryside as *Folkways*. 
The magazine’s production was also influenced by the work of Gamio, who led the excavation of Teotihuacan, and Boas, who proposed studying indigenous traditions and local productions “with the aim of encouraging racial integration and affiliation to a modernizing program that sought the assimilation of ‘artistic’ elements into a new cultural system” (58). Toor herself claimed not to be a scholar but to be interested above all in contributing to a greater understanding of Mexico by the rest of the world. Toor relied on both Gamio and Boas as mentors for the magazine’s first issue. She noted Gamio’s support for the magazine “Gamio says that this is the first publication which will present the masses of the Mexicans to the American people” (qtd. in Lindsay 58). *Folkways* was thus another
social experiment and collaboration to transform perceptions about Mexico among foreigners and Mexicans.  

Figure 5: “Mexican Ballads”, by Anita Brenner 1: 5, 1926

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15 Folkways was the first cross-disciplinary journal to promote indigenismo as part of the nation’s proud heritage rather than an ashamed backwardness. Other magazines that were short lived in comparison are Forma, México Moderno, Nuestro México, Ethnos, and Música (López, Crafting Mexico 142).
Brenner’s contributions to *Folkways* allowed her to explore *Mexicanidad* firsthand through her role as a writer and translator. Her contribution to the first issue titled “The Petate, a National Symbol” (1925) described to readers her perception of this object, a bedroll, that she first encountered while wandering Mexico’s countryside. In the same issue the article
Brenner described the petate as the oldest, cheapest and most common Mexican household possession. She wrote: “It is pictured in Aztec codices used exactly as it is today, as a throne, a seat of honour, and as a humble object of versatile and universal service. A reed mat, of course weaves pleasant to the bare sole, of a sincere yellow colour agreeable to the eye” (14). Brenner’s description of the petate established her as an insider to Mexican culture. Brenner succeeded in leaving the reader with no doubt in her authority on all things Mexican and her Mexican national origin—likely one of Brenner’s main objectives in writing this article along with the promotion of indigenismo.

In the third issue that same year the magazine published Brenner’s “Mexican Ballads” where she defined the corrido as “literally, event of the time” and described its origins from Spanish colonialism and “is itself the romance imported from Spain at the time of the conquest” (11). She described the corrido to readers as a mestizo cultural product where “structure and concept have been kneaded into a unique characteristic product of native mood tragedy, impersonally, and often sardonically, recorded.” Brenner claimed that a collection of corridos is “a truer record of Mexico, a truer mirror of its people, than any text yet written. Faith, love, laughter, war and death placed upon planes peculiar to the native consciousness, and startling to foreign mentality.” Brenner’s

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16 It is curious that Brenner’s English publications were translated into Spanish by others. There is little evidence in the archive that Brenner published in Spanish. There are few typescripts written by Brenner in Spanish such as the undated twelve-page essay titled “Apuntes sobre los actuales indios nahuas del estado de Morelos y otros puntos cercanos a la capital en México [Notes about the actual Nahua Indians from the Morelos State and other notes about the Mexican capital].” Another revealing journal entry from November 1929, Brenner described “racing through the Argentine material [translation of Tales from the Argentine, edited by Waldo Frank].” She wrote, “a little while ago finished up in fine shape the first and perhaps the most beautiful of the stories….I was sent a young lady who says she can translate, and I hope that she can, at least well enough to do the first rough literal draft. She didn’t impress me very favorably, however, a Puerto Rican, pretty, large…to a Mexican a fresh young thing. Cheeky.” Brenner had interviewed a Puerto Rican Spanish speaker to aid in the translation of the project although Brenner is listed as the person who translated the book.
language and exaltation of the *corrido* in “Mexican Ballads” echoes Vasconcelos’ promotion of regional modes of music and dance as gateways to defining an amalgamated Mexican national identity.

Brenner’s participation in the magazine as a writer and translator positioned her to make material available from Mexico’s national folk repository to a *mestizo*, metropolitan, and international audience. Brenner’s inspiration by her new assignment with *Folkways* led her to contribute more articles for *The Nation* (a United States liberal weekly journal), *Jewish Morning Journal* (a Yiddish language publication based in New York), and the *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* (an international Jewish periodical with headquarters in New York), and sent fiction to *The Menorah Journal* (a leading Anglophone Jewish journal) (Glusker 34). In a short time, Brenner’s passion for *Mexicanidad* and *indigenismo* would surpass her interests in exploring Jews in Mexico. She began to travel beyond Mexico City to Guadalajara, Guanajuato, and Veracruz for research and social purposes, expanding her networks beyond the capital. Her diaries demonstrate that *Folkways* would be the first vehicle that led her to explore beyond Mexico City and inspired her career as an anthropologist.

While scholars have acknowledged the significance of the magazine in post-revolutionary Mexico, there is insufficient analysis of the magazine’s content and its reception and transformation as the cultural project evolved. The editors and contributors to *Folkways* played a critical role as modern “discoverers” and went beyond showcasing archival collections of Mexico’s art, legends, and folklore as Toor had initially envisioned. *Folkways* functioned as a catalog of those traditions and the country’s indigenous people, but also advertised goods and services as influences from abroad continued to transform
the nation (Lindsay 59). At first glance, *Folkways* may be viewed as a production that purposefully engaged indigenous communities across Mexico and aimed to publicize an ethnic Mexican national identity across the border. Zooming in, the modernity conflict at the center of the Mexican Renaissance flourished within the magazine. *Folkways* was trapped in a contradiction in how it presented Mexico as indigenous, while also promoting the “new science” of advertising and visual productions. This duality grounded the magazine as modern. This modernist aesthetic re-appropriated indigenous tradition and ideologies and reshaped it with a new technique. Perhaps critics could consider the magazine as a form of neo-primitivism, equated with imperialism, colonialism, and the exploitation of the Other by the West. Yet *Folkways* and its contributors did not intend to simply mimic and reproduce art in unthinking primitivism. Rather, it functioned as another tool for transnational artists and intellectuals to deliver a “colorful” national representation of Mexico locally and helped shape perceptions of Mexico by Anglo-readers north of the border. The magazine grew in quality and gained prominence throughout the 1920s. President Calles celebrated the magazine and wrote “making known to our people and to foreigners the real spirit of our aboriginal races and the expressive feeling of our people in general, rich beautiful traditions” (qtd. in López, *Crafting Mexico* 104).

The next section examines the complex relations that developed between U.S. Jewish and Mexican organizations. As the Jewish population steadily grew in both countries, relationships and tensions among Jewish and Mexican cultural elites increased. Examining these relationships reveals overlooked networks of foreign-Mexican

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17 Primitivism refers to the belief that non-Western cultures were, by definition, “primal” “uncivilized” and in need of the civilizing influences of European powers. Primitive images “generally focus on what their creators perceive as their subject’s savage nature. Emphasizing, for instance, disheveled appearances or wild behavior, like the practice of cannibalism, these pictorial constructions imply native irrationality, aggression, and mystery—characterizations that generally succeed in coaxing fear and loathing” (Consetino 41).
collaborations at the core of the Renaissance. Brenner transformed herself into a trailblazer and advocated for the formation of a modern national Mexican identity that included Jews. Brenner’s Jewish identity (and other Jewish artists and intellectuals such as Isaac Berliner) influenced Mexican artists and intellectuals to claim a Jewish identity.

2.7 Jews in Mexico

In 1918 there were an estimated 3,300,000 Jews in the United States, with an estimated 30,839 in Texas. In New York in 1920 an estimated 1,701,260 Jews were living there (Linfield 575). Interestingly, the *American Jewish Year Book* recorded estimates did not update the census of the Jewish population in Mexico from 1911 until 1927 and only registered 800 Jews. While other countries in Latin America, such as Argentina, reflected an increase in the Jewish population documented by the *American Jewish Year Book*, Mexico’s estimates remained the same from this resource during that period. Gleizer estimates in 1921, the population of Jews in Mexico was estimated at 2,000 people, and by 1930 the number of registered Jews had increased to 9,500 (*El Exilio Incómodo* 57).

The rate of immigration of Jews to the United States remined higher than ten thousand each year, regardless of the restrictive Johnson Act of 1924 (Krause 325). In spite of greater enforcement of immigration quotas into the United States, a number of Jews continued to seek illegal entry to the United States through its southern border. The United States Jewish community feared that the arrests of illegal Jewish immigrants at the U.S.-Mexico border could be used to cast disparagements on American Jews. Thus, the B’nai B’rith sought to facilitate the integration of Jewish immigrants in Mexico by creating Spanish language classes and offering small no-interest loans to recent immigrants (Mays 211). Rabbi Martin Zielonka’s report on arrested illegal Jewish immigrants in 1921
revealed that all immigrants detained were of Ashkenazi origins. While U.S. immigration officials were cautioned to be on the lookout for Jews in general, because “the Jews and other oriental races can easily pass as Spaniards, i.e., Cubans, because of their oriental faces and dark skin,” the Ladino language and Sephardic Jews’ often ambiguous national origins also facilitated their attempts to disguise themselves as Mexicans or Cubans (211). This provided Sephardic Jews with the ability to avoid American immigration quotas to which Ashkenazi Jews would not have access (Mays 211).

In a similar vein, some Sephardic migrants who had originally intended to migrate from Mexico to the United States, upon arrival in Veracruz noted similarities between the Caribbean port city and their Aegean port cities of origin, and therefore decided to remain in Mexico (212). Another wave of approximately 200 Jewish youth immigrated to Mexico from the United States to evade inscription in the United States military during the first World War (Gleizer, *De la Apertura* 1190). Once the War ended, Jews who sought refuge in Mexico attempted to re-enter the United States illegally. When apprehended by authorities, they were threatened to be sent back to their place of birth. These were Jews who had immigrated from war zones and hoped to reunite with their families in the United States. The quota law of 1921 provoked the illegal crossing of the United States by Jewish immigrants who arrived in Mexico. The United States Jewish community involved itself in the question of immigration across the border in an attempt to maintain good relations with the United States Government.

There are strong ties between the Mexican Jewish immigrant community and the United States, where Mexican Jews at times relied on the financial, institutional and political support of Jews. Mexican Jews, who understood the local reality of Mexico better
than their co-religionists across the border attempted to be independent but at times needed support due to the size of the community and instability in the country (Gleizer, De la Apertura 1190). These migration conflicts led U.S. Jewish authorities to examine the conditions in Mexico so that Jewish immigrants could make it their new home. While various commissions visited Mexico to analyze the situation there, none of these recommended a large mass of immigration. The commissions painted Mexico as a country without laws, justice and political stability. As Jews increasingly arrived in Mexico despite Jewish leadership efforts to dissuade them from doing so, two Jewish leaders set off to improve the conditions for Jews in Mexico in order to reinforce these new immigrant arrivals desire to remain in the country. Archibald A. Marx and the Rabbi Martin Zielonka began to organize the B’nai B’rith office in Mexico, that functioned below J. L. Weinberger in 1924. Zielonka tried to convince Jewish immigrants not to enter the United States and instead choose Mexico as their final destination.

One approach of the B’nai B’rith to encourage Jewish immigrants to settle in Mexico was through the “Mexicanization” of the Jewish immigrants. This included teaching Spanish and preparing Jewish immigrants for Mexican citizenship. Despite these efforts, the new arrivals quickly demonstrated their intent to form their own institutions that would guarantee the reproduction of their Jewish cultural origins. The lack of material resources, the diversity of traditions, customs, and cultural practices strengthened internal differentiation. Organizational life pivoted around ethnic-communal origins that defined the main groups within the Mexican Jewish community. While Mexico never witnessed any formalized governmental or institutionalized project for Jewish migration to Mexico, Calles invitations published in the international Jewish press and the New York press
encouraged the immigration of some nine thousand eastern European Jews. Calles wrote
“el gobierno Mexicano hará todo lo necesario para ayudar a estas personas para que se
adapten y tengan éxito, como ciudadanos mexicanos [the Mexican government will do
whatever necessary to help these people adapt and have success as Mexican citizens].” This
statement, published in the European press, proved attractive to many solo immigrants who
chose Mexico as their new home.\textsuperscript{18}

\begin{table}[h]
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\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Year} & \textbf{1920} & \textbf{1921} & \textbf{1922} & \textbf{1923} & \textbf{1924} & \textbf{1925} & \textbf{1926} & \textbf{1927} & \textbf{1928} & \textbf{1929} & \textbf{1930} & \textbf{1931} \\
\hline
\textbf{1920} & 107* & 195 & 211 & 397 & 503 & 748 & 537 & 507 & 985 & 662 & 648 & 150 \\
\hline
\textbf{1925} & 195** & 661 & 934 & 383 & 456 & \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Cuadro 1 \hfill \textbf{ENTRADA INDIVIDUAL DE EXTRANJEROS JUDÍOS A MÉXICO POR AÑO}}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{*} Esta fila corresponde a los datos ofrecidos por el \textit{Estudio histórico demográfico de la migración judía a México 1900-1950}.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{**} Esta fila registra los datos incluidos en la \textit{General Encyclopedia in Yiddish}, 1957, p. 407.

Figure 7: “Individual Entry of Jewish Foreigners to Mexico Per Year”\textsuperscript{19}


\textsuperscript{19} Figure 7-8. Daniela Gleizer, “De la Apertura al Cierre de Puertas: La Inmigración Judía en México durante las Primeras Décadas del Siglo XX.” Historia Mexicana 60, no. 2 (Oct.-Dec., 2010): 1175-1227.
2.8 Mexican-Jewish Collaborations

In 1925, Brenner began to draft the manuscript that would become *Idols Behind Altars*. Meanwhile, she worked on the manuscript for an unpublished book titled *The Jew in Mexico: Another Promised Land*. It would trace the presence of New Christians in the New World through the era of modern Jewish immigration to Mexico to showcase origin myths about Jews that had circulated from colonial times. As Jews worked to define their new identity, Brenner crafted an identity that linked the indigenous experience to the Jewish experience and included both groups in the definition of a Mexican national identity. In her unpublished manuscript, *The Carvajal Story*, Brenner attempted to reveal a Mexican Jewish past by researching the Carvajal family. *The Carvajal Story* was based on

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* The outline for the proposed book includes section titles to include the following: “legendary existence of Jews in Mexico and South America, especially Yucatán…Conquest of Mexico, and arrival of many thousand Jews, refugees from Spain in 1500. Settle in Mexico under name of ‘New Christians.’ Agitation of Church against them shortly after. Stories and pamphlets. Ritual murder, accusation…. People are brought to think of Jews as monsters, and are therefore ready to persecute them.”
a famous seventeenth-century New Christian family of the viceroyalty of New Spain, one of the most famous cases of the Inquisition in the New World. 21

Brenner, and the growing visibility of Jews in Mexico, impacted Rivera and other Christians native to Mexico. Rivera, who never practiced Judaism or officially affiliated with Mexico’s Jewish community, developed close friendships with Brenner and other prominent Jews that led to his self-understanding that he was a descendant of crypto-Jews. Rivera proclaimed that “all Mexicans are Jews, and if they are not…they will be, the way these immigrants are coming in. They will save Mexico, and Mexico will save them…” (Brenner A Jewish Girl 3). Rivera admired and collaborated with Jewish intellectuals in Mexico City who shared his leftist political leanings. On different occasions Rivera claimed he had converso heritage or self-identified as a Jewish person.

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21 Luis de Carvajal y de la Cueva (1539-1591) served as a controller of the Cape Verde Islands and Spanish fleet admiral prior to arriving in New Spain in 1586. When he was appointed governor of the new kingdom of Nuevo León, later called Monterrey, he was allowed to bring relatives and employees with him, without documents declaring their Catholic orthodoxy. The Inquisition arrested Carvajal in 1589, for not denouncing his niece Isabel and other members of his family as judaizers. He later died in incarceration. Other members of the Carvajal family were burned at the stake on December 8th, 1596. For more on Carvajal and cases of the Inquisition in the New World see Allan Metz, “The Sephardi Experience in Colonial Latin America” Sephardim in the Americas: Studies in Culture and History; Seymour Liebman, The Jews in New Spain; Faith, Flame, and the Inquisition, 141-147; Judith Laïkin Elkin, The Jews of Latin America, 6-12.
One example of a Mexican-Jewish collaboration is the Modernist Yiddish poet Isaac (Yitskhok) Berliner’s *Shtot Fun Palatsn* (The City of Palaces) (1936) illustrated by Diego Rivera. Little attention has been paid by scholars to Rivera’s artistic collaboration with Berliner, whose work has largely been forgotten. Berliner was born in Lodz, Poland, in 1899. He immigrated to Mexico in 1923, where he sold images of saints for a living. Berliner’s best-known poetic subjects are of the destitute and marginalized people of Mexico City. *Shtot Fun Palatsn* features over seventy poems in Yiddish about secular, non-Jewish subject matters. The project was inspired by Berliner’s sympathy, as a persecuted Jew, for the plight of the oppressed Mexicans. The detailed, ethnographic language of Mexico City’s opulent residential estates inspired the German geographer Alexander von Humboldt to name the city “city of palaces” in the early 1800s (“Mexico City,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*).
Berliner’s expressionist poems reveal an individual in spiritual crisis, “a tormented, simple Jew who having become European exactly as he departed the continent for Mexico reluctantly improvised a persona sensitive to the severe social disparities of his new home” (Rosenblatt). Berliner portrays how a Jewish immigrant in Mexico self-fashioned a Mexican Jewish identity. Similarly, as an outcome of migration to a new country Berliner transformed from a “simple Jew” to a European, illustrating how a Mexican Jew embraced an identity based on national origin rather than religion. Through Berliner’s use of indigenous sites, he attempted to write Jews into Mexican nationalist narratives by adopting aspects of indigenismo in his own poetry. In his poem “Teotihuacán,” for example, Berliner writes about the ancient Mesoamerican city known for its famous pyramids:

And maybe my great-great-grandfather stepped on you here
And left a faraway secret to inherit in my blood, — —
And maybe my genesis is covered under your stones
in eternal silence over unending times? — — —
...
Maybe your builders came from Egypt,
From Phonecia,
Or were they Jews? — — —

(Un efsher hot mayn elter-elter-zayde do af aykh getrotn
un hot gelozn beyerushe in mayn blut a sod a vaytn, — —
un efsher ligt mayn urshrpung unter shteyner ayere fartrotn
in shvaygn aybikn durkh loyfn fun unendlekhe tsaytn? — — —
...
Efsher shtamen dayne boyer fun egiptn,
Fun fenitsie,
Tsi fun yidn? — — — )

23 I first encountered Berliner’s poetry and collaboration with Rivera at the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, MA where I translated interviews from Spanish to English of Mexican Yiddish intellectuals who had lived experience or had worked directly with the Yiddish speaking community during their lifetime. A digitalized version of Berliner’s poetry is available through the Yiddish Book Center. Also see: Yitzkhok Berliner, Shot fun palatsn (Mexico City: Der Veg, 1936); Eli Rosenblatt, “It Smokes a Man: New Translations of Works by Modernist Poet Yitskhok Berliner.” Tablet Magazine, 2015.

24 For this translation from English to Yiddish and more of Berliner’s poetry see Rachelle Grossman, “Mexican Yiddish and Secular Jewish Identity in Mexico.” ReVista.
Berliner attempted to weave two ancient stories together and emphasized a shared experience of suffering for both the *indígena* and the Jew, as historical victims of Spanish colonialism. With a shared oppressor, Berliner blends the violence of the Inquisition and the Conquest, exaggerating a historical intersection between the Mexican indigenous and Jews.

Scholars have emphasized how Rivera’s socialist murals influenced artists and intellectuals in Mexico and abroad, but few have considered how Brenner’s Jewish identity (and other Jewish artists and intellectuals such as Berliner) influenced Mexican artists and intellectuals to claim a Jewish identity. For instance, Frida Kahlo maintained that she had Hungarian-Jewish heritage on her father’s side, a claim that has since been disproven. This aspect of Kahlo’s Jewish identity was so accepted that the Jewish Museum of New York staged an exhibition that explored her Jewish identity titled *Frida Kahlo’s Intimate Family Portrait* (2003). Similarly, rabbi and art historian Edward van Voolen’s selected Kahlo’s painting *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I (Family Tree)* (1936) as the title and cover for his book that analyzes Jewish aspects of works by nineteenth and twentieth century artists. In 2005 two German historians Rainer Huhle and Gaby Franger traced Kahlo’s lineage to the sixteenth century and discovered that Kahlo’s German-born father, Guillermo (Wilhelm) Kahlo (1871-1941), had no Jewish lineage. Rather, they claim he descended from German Lutheran Protestants from the town of Pforzheim.

The purpose of mentioning Kahlo and Rivera’s claiming of a Jewish identity is not to approve or disapprove their alleged origins. However, it would be a mistake to omit the fact that Mexican artists and intellectuals were influenced by expatriate Jews (such as Berliner and the Revolutionary Leon Trotsky) and transnational Jews, such as Toor and
Brenner. At the same time, scholars have overlooked how a transnational group of Jewish artists and intellectuals, such as the Russian-French artist Marc Chagall, had an underlying influence on the radical modern art scene that Kahlo and Rivera inhabited. On the other hand, other artists and intellectuals (such as Orozco and Dr. Atl) were anti-Semitic. Orozco teased Brenner about her Jewishness (Glusker, *Anita Brenner* 49). He passed anti-Semitic cartoons under her door. Furthermore, Brenner’s journals reveal intimate discussions about religion among her fellow transnational cultural elites. In March 1927, Brenner wrote an entry after a romantic evening spent with Siqueiros: “I did not know he was part Jew. He said that his grandmother was a Jewess by the name of Felman. He is very Russian in many ways, and altogether dynamic.” This entry suggests that Siqueiros too claimed Jewish origins. Therefore, further research is needed to consider how Jews (and those who invented Jewish origins) and non-Jews in the Mexican Renaissance collaborated to reveal synergistic outcomes of these collaborations as well as tensions.
Figure 10: “An Interview with Diego Rivera: He Calls His Art 100% Mexican; But He’s Proud of His Jewish Ancestry” *The Compass*, March 9, 1952
Figure 11: Book cover: *My Grandparents, My Parents and I, Jewish Art and Culture*, by Edward van Voolen, 2006

Berliner inserted himself into the national conversation about what it means to be Mexican. Despite being an Ashkenazi Jewish immigrant, his partnership with Rivera marked him as a legitimate Mexican. The Rivera-Berliner collaboration demonstrates Jewish integration into Mexico’s cultural fabric by the co-creation of culture between a nationally recognized Mexican cultural elite and a Jewish immigrant. In what ways do Brenner and Berliner represent Jewish intellectuals, who commonly functioned in an in-between space, collaborating with Mexicans to facilitate their belonging? Both Brenner and Berliner were at once insiders and outsiders, attempting to be objective while interpreting culture from within. They managed to position themselves as protagonists in the defining of Mexican national identity through their writing and artistic abilities and sought legitimacy through their collaborations with Mexican cultural elites.
2.10 Jewish Idols Behind Altars?

Rick López was the first to observe that scholars only noted in passing Brenner’s Jewish identity in “Anita Brenner and the Jewish Roots of Mexico’s Postrevolutionary National Identity.” He emphasizes that “her complex relationship to her Jewish heritage attuned her to Mexico’s denigrated indigenous traditions” (124). As previously mentioned, Brenner’s role as an outsider and insider to Mexico inspired her promotion of indigenismo as the foundation for Mexico’s post-revolutionary culture. Brenner’s internal search for a Jewish identity and reporting on the Jewish community in Mexico led to her thesis in *Idols behind Altars*, published as a result of her doctoral work under the direction of Franz Boas at Columbia University. Brenner’s dissertation, completed in 1930, was 93 printed pages. Her doctoral research was based on examining artistic patterns on a collection of potsherds that Boas had brought from Mexico and stored at the University of Pennsylvania library (Glusker, *Anita Brenner* 120). Brenner applied for and received the Guggenheim Fellowship that same year to study Aztec art, inspired by her dissertation and *Idols*. *Idols* was a critical study of modern Mexican art and the Mexican mind. Written for foreign readers, in particular English readers across the border, Brenner presented Mexico’s customs, traditions, peoples, and politics through a multidisciplinary approach. Initially, Brenner intended to publish two separate texts, one titled *Mexican Decorative Arts*, a catalogue of Mexican decorative arts, and the other *The Mexican Renascence*, the story of the Mexican Renaissance. Dr. Alfonso Pruneda, named director of The National University of Mexico by President Calles in 1924, had commissioned Brenner to work on *Mexican Decorative Arts*. Meanwhile, *Mexican Renascence* was inspired during her time working with Gruening. As Brenner explored publishing the books, she realized how expensive the
endeavor would have been and ultimately combined both books into one, *Idols Behind Altars* (Glusker 35). She included drawings and sculptures by modern Mexican artists and used her funding to hire Edward Weston and Tina Modotti to curate photographs for the book (Azuela 87). She conducted fieldwork in multiple Mexican cities, including Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, Ciudad Oaxaca, Puebla, and Querétaro. *Idols Behind Altars* was one of the first post-revolutionary books on the subject of Mexican culture published in the United States. Aside from *The Plumed Serpent*, written by D. H. Lawrence and published in 1926, the United States cultural knowledge of Mexico mainly came from journalism (Minjares 15). As a reverberation of the Revolution, journalists often depicted Mexico as an underdeveloped, dangerous, and violent country. Mexico had gained a bad reputation from the bloody revolution that killed hundreds of thousands of Mexicans, and foreigners living in Mexico.

Figure 12: “Anita Brenner, Texan Maintains That Every Mexican Is an Artist”, January 1929, source unknown
Brenner described Mexican art as having an overtly Catholic façade, but behind this there were abounding indigenous influences. Brenner aimed to provoke a transnational cultural conversation that established Mexico within the narrative of the Eurocentric tradition of the art world circling abroad. In *Idols* Brenner wrote that Mexico is inseparably tied to its indigenous population, and in particular the *mestizo*. Brenner wrote: “*Mestizo* Mexico keeps this integrity. Passionately attached to beauty, the Indian repudiates ugliness by disregarding it. The mestizo turns upon it violently…. Both are heroic, the mestizo in tone, the Indian in history and daily life” (Brenner 28). Brenner defined the Mexican artist’s passion and uniqueness of expressions of *Mexicanidad* and claimed all Mexicans’ inherent nature as artists: “the need to live, creating with materials; the need to set in spiritual order, the physical world; the sense of fitness…That is why Mexico cannot be measured by standards other than its own, which are like those of a picture; and why only as artists can Mexico be intelligible” (31).

Now we arrive to the question that began this project: Can scholars connect Brenner’s thesis in *Idols* that behind a veneer of acculturation, an “authentic” hidden, indigenous identity endured, and stood ready to be taken up as the basis for Mexico’s regeneration directly to Brenner’s complex relationship with her Jewish identity? Put simply, was it Brenner’s transnational Jewish identity that attuned her to Mexico’s formally denigrated but now celebrated indigenous traditions (idols behind altars)? Or was it the transnational artists and intellectuals who were also outsiders who inspired Brenner to elevate Mexican indigenous culture to international prominence? Upon reflection, it is clear that Brenner’s thesis resulted from multiple influences acting simultaneously. As Brenner grew comfortable in her own skin as a transnational Jewish intellectual woman
following her return to the capital, the newfound pride Brenner experienced in Mexico allowed her a new perspective of her previous experiences of anti-Semitism across the border. Brenner’s own internal search for her Jewish identity, I argue, was only one influence that led to her thesis that, behind Christian altars, a group may have preserved their non-Christian faith and practices. In most cases, in Idols Behind Altars, there is no direct reference to Judaism in the literal sense. López’s analysis contributes a new dimension. Brenner not only embraced her Jewishness in the context of the post-revolutionary metropolis, she also became influenced by Boas’ anthropological approach during her time at Columbia University and Gamio’s ideology during her time in Mexico. Thus, she attempted to produce beyond any culturally or socially imposed hierarchies, aligning with the objectives of transnational artists and intellectuals she admired and reinforced post-revolutionary definitions of Mexicanidad. Brenner’s interest in Mexican art complimented her explorations of Jewish identity and her own search for her place in Mexican society as a Jew. However, her negotiation of multiple identities was “not a simple-minded endeavor, nor can it be traced to any literal manifestation in the art she promoted” (Indych 151). Brenner, like some of her co-creators of the “Mexican Renaissance”, was distinctively drawn towards prophecies and spiritual narratives, likely influenced by her search for a religious and spiritual identity. Brenner’s synthesis of popular indigenous aesthetic and religious motives must be tied to Brenner’s predisposition to religious questions and philosophical trends. Therefore, it can be argued that multiple impulses led her to Gamio’s original hypothesis, Idols Behind Altars, on the persistence of religious popular practices: her Jewish, spiritual, Mexican, transnational identities all led to her awakening.
Early in the project, it appeared as if the bohemians in Mexico City promoted ideologies and artistic productions that further promoted the *mestizo* and a Europeanized/Americanized interpretation of the nation and modernity. This would lead to an interpretation of Brenner as fetishizing Jewishness as “exotic” as part of her larger aim to perform a “modern” identity. This hypothesis, however, is challenged by an interpretation of these transnationals as essential protagonists of culture that promoted Mexico and valued the indigenous with whom they self-identified, producing a significant part of the very content that made Mexico’s cultural Renaissance and modernity agendas so unique. Scholars may assume that the Mexican intelligentsia were only privileged to access or understand Mexico while foreigners interpreted and reproduced only what they wanted to see. However, as outlined in this chapter, in the Mexican context, the boundaries between foreign and national interpretation of culture were neither as absolute nor as mutually exclusive as one might initially think. Mexican cultural elites were not necessarily any closer to the Mexican Renaissance or to the popular classes than were resident foreigners. The cultural and political pilgrims and transnational artists sympathized and worked in close collaboration with Mexican colleagues. So much so that Mexican artists, such as those mentioned in this chapter, began to claim and invent religious identities. In a joint effort, these cultural elites synthesized, interpreted, and reinforced particular aspects of the post-revolutionary nationalist discourse. At the same time, Mexican protagonists sought legitimization through affiliation with foreign (especially U.S.) academic and research institutions. Therefore, these relationships were often mutually beneficial. Brenner, and the cultural diplomats in her circle, leaned on one another for reassurance in
the accuracy of their respective claims about Mexico and sought approval among themselves for their findings and articulations of Mexico’s Renaissance.

In the next chapter, through a close examination of Brenner’s journal entries, we will see how Brenner often fell into fits of depression stemming from a variety of impacts: the anti-Semitism she experienced, her struggle to re-claim her Jewish identity, frequent movement across the border, non-traditional entry to the United States Ivy League world, the exhausting work she took on with Jewish immigrants, risk taking and sexual harassment, heavy drinking, and an increasing pressure to maintain herself financially. Through a close reading of a selected series of articles, we observe how Brenner simultaneously pieced together Jewish Mexican history and patched together an understanding of herself as a transnational Jew. This exploration will demonstrate how Brenner’s Jewishness became one of the prisms through which her transnational search for a Mexican national identity refracted.
CHAPTER III: CONTACTS and CONTRACTS: BECOMING A TRANSNATIONAL JEWISH CULTURAL DIPLOMAT

3.1 A Transnational Woman’s Journals from the Roaring Twenties

A woman writes to reinvent herself, to discover herself, to define herself. Words become instruments to delve into the flesh, into reality, into the subconscious, as a way of finding one’s own identity. Words can break clichés, demystify, subdued the false metaphors, and demasculinize the image of woman.—Brianda Domecq, Broken Bars: New Perspectives from Mexican Women Writers

Before publishing Idols Behind Altars, what would become an iconic cultural bridge for readers in the United States to Mexico, Brenner’s publications in the North American Jewish press were her first vehicle to make Mexico visible to the United States. Brenner continued to receive some level of financial support from her father. However, her journal entries reveal that she was forced to cover an increasing proportion of her expenses and this need for financial independence advanced her entry into journalism. Her articles focused on Jewish refugees emigrating from Europe to Mexico, anti-Semitism, the B’nai B’rith as well as Mexican art, culture, and politics. Brenner became an active participant in global social movements happening across multiple borders. The Jewish press, specifically, The Menorah Journal, the Jewish Morning Journal, The Jewish Daily Forward, and the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (a wire service) was Brenner’s main source of income. Many of these Jewish newspapers began in New York at the end of the nineteenth century and were popular among the literate Jewish population.

Brenner wrote to counter the bad press Mexico received from American Jewish leadership, as examined in the next section. In all of Brenner’s articles on Mexico’s Jewish community, she presented the country enthusiastically, describing the lifestyle, social and cultural events and economic activities. Brenner was one of two journalists who
consistently depicted Mexico positively in *The New York Times* (the other being Paul Kennedy) (Glusker 13).

Figure 13: “Disappointed Jewish Refugees In Mexico City Hold Hostile Street Demonstration Against Delegation of Emergency Committee On Jewish Refugees,” Jewish Daily Bulletin, June 1925

3.2 Mexico—Another Promised Land?

Scholars have overlooked the fact that Brenner’s publications in the Jewish press contradict Maurice Hexter’s, head of the Federation of Jewish Charities of Boston, reporting and heavy critiques of Mexico. His article “The Jew in Mexico” (1926), written after a two-year sojourn in the country, offered readers a detailed evaluation that Mexico was an unsafe country for Jews. The United States B’nai B’rith had envisioned potential projects for colonization in Mexico and contacted President Obregón without being in contact with local Mexican Jews. In response, a group of about sixty Jews in Mexico wrote
an open letter to the Jewish American press requesting the B’nai B’rith stop further immigration campaigns, because the local economy and situation in Mexico was ambiguous and unstable (Cimet 30).

The *Jewish Daily Bulletin* printed an article in 1925 titled “Disappointed Jewish Refugees In Mexico City hold hostile street demonstration against delegation of emergency committee on Jewish refugees. Dr. Hexter and Oscar Leonard Investigate Possibilities in Mexico, It Is Revealed.” Members of a group called the Jewish Agricultural Society of Mexico organized the demonstration, with the permission of the governor, outside the Hotel Geneva, where the representatives of the Emergency Committee on Jewish Refugees were staying. The protestors held signs in English that read “Manifestation of protest of the Jewish agriculturalists against members of the delegation of the United States.” The protesters demanded that Jewish leaders “furnish them with material assistance to settle on the land.” Hexter and Oscar Leonard of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, arrived in Mexico on behalf of the Emergency Committee on Jewish Refugees to investigate the possibilities for the admission of Jewish refugees stranded in various ports in Europe. According to the leaders of the demonstration approximately four hundred Jewish immigrants had already arrived in Mexico from Europe because of alleged promises that they would be given land for colonization purposes. The article quotes one unidentified Jewish migrant as follows: “We came here filled with enthusiasm, some from Germany, some from Russia, some from Poland and some from the northern states, for the purpose of settling on the land, and nothing tangible has come out of all the promises.”

The Mexican B’nai B’rith had just recently begun to organize its resources. In October 1924, Brenner, who was already working for the organization, typed a report from
the director, which explained: “We opened on the first of October, although not really prepared to do so, it was necessary to open as quickly as possible on account of the heavy increase of immigrants. Since the 16th, we have had an agent in Veracruz to meet all boats.” (qtd. in López Arrelano Anita Brenner 183). The Mexican B’nai B’rith began to work in Mexico with money gathered by its members across the border. The organization understood the immigrants arriving in Veracruz had a vague idea of Mexico and without speaking more than two words in Spanish “salían a vender como buhoneros en las calles. [Went out to sell like peddlers in the streets]” (qtd. in López Arrelano Anita Brenner 189).

Brenner excitedly set off on her new role as a journalist and eagerly wrote to make Mexico more familiar to foreigners as well as promoted Mexico as a safe and welcoming place for Jews.

3.3 “Los Judas”

Jewish leaders in the late nineteenth century were apparently wary of sending refugees to a Catholic country. In the late 1880s, one writer in the liberal newspaper El Monitor Republicano warned its Jewish readers “to abstain from showing their noses” on the morning of the Saturday of Glory, for “a disaster could happen to them” on this festive day “when Judas would be burned in effigy” (qtd. in Krause 327). This warning, heavy with internalized anti-Semitism, captures the complex environment for Jews at the time, and how they managed their anxieties. Similarly, La Voz de México published an article about the proposed Jewish colony changing the title from “Los Judíos en México” to “Los Judas en México” (ibid 327). The critique and arguments against Jewish belonging and Jewish immigration to Mexico continued in the press thirty years later, although for other reasons. North American Jewish leaders, such as Hexter, traveled to Mexico to observe the
situation there. After spending time over a period of two years in Mexico, Hexter declared the country as unfit for Jews to settle. In Hexter’s report he recommended that Jews avoid Mexico “because of the low wages there” (281). Similarly, Rabbi Martin Zielonka of El Paso, Texas did not favor colonization in Mexico. In his report to the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1923 he summarized arguments against Jewish agricultural colonies in Mexico: “The establishing of a colony in this desert territory would be the same as exile…and I question very much whether the Jews of Europe could readily adapt themselves to the agricultural conditions of the eastern lowlands.” In 1925 Hexter mentioned other obstacles in Mexico such as the impossibility and danger of competing with peon labor and the danger of banditry in the countryside. Although Mexico had offered many legitimate opportunities for Jewish colonization between 1881 and 1925, the feeling prevailed among Jews, at least, that the countryside of Mexico was no place for Jews.

On the other hand, Francisco Rivas Puigcerver, a Mexican writer, whose library served for the historical foundation of Brenner’s writing, identified as a descendant of a crypto-Jew and was engaged in his own private campaign to encourage Jewish immigration (Zielonka 219). Rivas, a classical language professor at Mexico’s National Preparatory School, propagandized the advantages and benefits of the Mexican nation. Rivas distributed his periodicals in Turkey in an attempt to encourage the Sephardic Jews of that country to immigrate to Mexico. He published *El Sábado Secreto* (also called *La Luz del Sábado*). In each issue of *El Sábado Secreto* there is at least one article exalting the riches, opportunities, and liberalism of Mexico. Although Rivas ended the publication of his

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25 Six issues (nos. 2-7) of *El Sábado* are found in the library of the American Jewish Historical Society, quoted in Mays, 38.
periodical in August 1889, he continued his efforts to bring immigration to Mexico. In 1892, when passing through New York City, he was interviewed by a reporter from The Menorah in New York and announced that Mexico would welcome the immigration of a number of industrious and enterprising Jews. The country “with its natural wealth, salubrious climate, and liberality of laws, offered opportunities for all those who would be willing to devote themselves to a life of industrial and mercantile occupations.” The whole truth about Rivas will probably never be known.\(^{26}\) Apparently at his death he left his valuable library and papers to a servant who sold them to a Mexico City book dealer, who in turn sold the collection piecemeal (Zielonka 225). This is the same “Rivas Library” that Brenner referred to often in her journals and is the only evidence of Brenner’s archival work on Jews in Mexico where she learned legends and facts about Jews and the Mexican Inquisition.

In 1922, the New York-based Ladino periodical La Luz published a front-page article by Albert Avigdor titled, “Porke los Sefaradim Deven Pensar en Meksiko” (Avigdor, La Luz 1 qtd. in Mays, The Migrations of Sephardic Jews 206).\(^{27}\) Avigdor was an active member of the B’nai B’rith lodge and arrived in New York in 1917. He dedicated himself to Spanish publications and the progress of Sephardim in New York (Mays 204). He decided to leave the United States and chose Mexico as his destination. He described his reasoning as follows: “in all the countries which I have traveled, there is no other that

\[^{26}\text{Rabbi Zielonka wrote “He taught Greek and French in the National Normal School at the University of Mexico. He was fond of saying ‘half of Mexico was taught by a Jew and they don’t know it.’ ...He knew intimately most of the leaders of Mexican life and was highly honored by them. He was called by them “El Maestro,” and affectionally “Papa Rivas.” He owned a splendid library of books pertaining to Jewish subjects, in Hebrew, Latin, Ladino, Arabic and Greek, and many manuscripts of the Mexican Inquisition. He told me that his library would be willed to the projected Hebrew University in Jerusalem, but at his death it was left to two faithful servants. What became of it I do not know” (225).}\]

\[^{27}\text{For more on La Luz, see Ben-Ur, “In Search of the American Ladino Press: A Bibliographical Survey,” Studies in Bibliography and Booklore 21 (2001), 30-31.}\]
has left me with such a good impression as Mexico, in regard to the favorable conditions that this country offers to Sephardic Jews…” (Avigdor 1). Avigdor listed economic motivations, such as potential wealth in agriculture, oil wells, and mines but placed most of his emphasis on perceived social and cultural similarities between Mexico and Sephardic immigrants’ place of origin. These commonalities, according to Avigdor, manifested behaviorally and linguistically. Avigdor described the language spoken in Mexico as follows, “although it contains some Indian words, it possibly resembles our Ladino more than the modern Spanish that is spoken in Spain, because it should not be forgotten that the Mexican people of today began to be formed almost at the same time that the Jews were expelled from Spain.” He claimed that Sephardic Jews, with three months of study, would be able to speak Spanish “better than some of the Mexicans of the interior regions.” This implied that Sephardic linguistic skills could enable Sephardim to distinguish themselves from the indigenous in Mexico (Mays 206). Thus, while Sephardic immigrants in the United States occupied lower rungs of society, those who went to Mexico, by way of their linguistic proficiency and their understanding of social and cultural norms, had greater opportunity for upward mobility. Avigdor also described behavioral characteristics that Mexicans and Sephardim supposedly shared. He claimed Mexican social life was “more active than in the United States,” and the people “much more pleasant, more hospitable, and also with a courtesy that at times seems exaggerated” these qualities “were already part of the Sephardic character.” Avigdor’s target audience seemed to be Sephardic readers in the New York metropolitan area who were unsatisfied with their lives as immigrants in the United States. As Avigdor’s article indicates, not all Sephardim wanted to enter the United
States. A number who had previously gained access to U.S. territory and documentation chose to migrate south to Mexico (Mays 212).

These debates and disagreements among a diverse Jewish population continued throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s. The perception of Jewish belonging and acceptance in Mexico varied among Jews and non-Jews. Interestingly, one of the transnational cultural diplomats and journalist Carleton Beals, who worked closely with Brenner as her mentor, painted a vivid picture for readers of an anti-Semitic Mexico. In 1932, Beals wrote an article titled “Prospect in Mexico,” where he boldly claimed that for the mass of the Mexican people the Jew “is a terrible monster”:

...not even human; he is a devil with horns, hoofs, and tail. He is the image of the papier mâché effigies of Judas burned every Saturday of Glory annually on every street corner the length and breadth of Mexico. These Judases are always made to look as horrible as possible, with ferocious teeth projecting faces, with scarlet horns and big cloven hoofs, and black barbed tails. To the average Mexican, this is the Jew who killed Christ, and the Jew who still survives (Menorah Journal, 58).

Similarly, Rabbi Zielonka described “the hand of the Inquisition still hangs heavy over Mexico and the word Jew is only whispered here and there” (Zielonka 430). Determining whether or to what extent this inherited ignorance or hate of the Jew was accurately depicted by United States Jewish leadership and transnationals is not the objective of this dissertation. However, the fact that Brenner’s predecessors and some Jews in her circles believed these facts about Jews to be true or directly experienced anti-Semitism to this extent is significant. While no formalized attempt was made on behalf of the United States
nor Mexican government to bring Jews to Mexico, Brenner boldly responded and countered Jewish leadership claims of Mexico as an unsafe place for Jews.

3.4 Library of “Old Rivas”

Few resources reveal how Brenner’s articles were received by the Jewish press and by her readership across the border. However, Brenner’s journals written during the same period offer insight and shed light on how editors conducted their business at the beginning of the twentieth century. In an entry on August 25, 1926 Brenner wrote about a New York editor who visited her. She described how her articles caught the interest of this editor who had then traveled to Mexico to observe the situation. She also described how the research for her articles came from the “library of old Rivas” but was now “scattered,” echoing the claims made by Rabbi Zielonka regarding the Rivas library in the previous section. Brenner appeared surprised that her work was taken seriously by the journal:

Yesterday, while busy engaged in finding work for the steno, was interrupted by a Dr. Margoshes, New York, editor of the Day. Wears a black, black suit and carries a silver-headed cane; general air of rustiness and hay fever. Said he came down to look at the general situation, told him it would surely prove interesting if he could find it. He had read all of my stuff in the Morgen Journal and came down here to see what he could do. I told him much of my material came from the library of old Rivas, which is now scattered etc. etc. He was impressed and awfully polite and I was quite serious…They take it seriously! It was the ghost of my articles come slinking back, marking its slinks with a silver-headed cane. In the evening, I hunted more work for the steno [stenograph typewriter].
Brenner’s entry reveals the imposter syndrome she experienced as a blossoming self-trained journalist, still learning to take herself and her work seriously. Brenner had begun to earn the reputation as an expert on Jewish matters in Mexico by editors across the border, receiving a special home visit from Dr. Margoshes. Brenner confirmed, once again, that Jewish life in Mexico was far less visible to those outside of the community. However, her rapid success in her journalistic career would not come without its challenges. In the next section, I examine how Brenner’s journals reveal the unintended consequences, both positive and negative, of her new profession leading to her process of critical self-examination and vulnerability. While Brenner searched to find a confident and incisive voice in her writing, she was confronted with questions of womanhood. Her diaries reveal how she attempted to resist a homogenized model, adapting to her new role in her own fashion, yet struggled to maintain objective while drawing on her own experience as a young Jewish transnational woman living in Mexico City. Meanwhile, she interacted with various men, and her diaries reveal a young woman who struggled to maintain her independence and confronted sexual assault and a complex negotiation of her sexuality.

3.5 “Pobre Diablo”

As previously mentioned, the connections and guidance of Brenner’s mentors, in particular Ernest Gruening, led Brenner to send telegrams to Jewish news agencies in the United States in 1924, communicating her desire to publish articles about the community in Mexico. These petitions were often accepted with great enthusiasm by the journals’ editors. However, Brenner’s journals revealed that she often struggled to write or experienced disillusionment as a self-trained journalist as demonstrated in an entry on November 9, 1925:
Find difficulty in working these days. Lack of sustained effort. Have to form the habit again. Household bothers, also irritations. Progress only in diminishing my vanity. This mostly outward. Lose first place in “Wanderer’s Field” [story submitted to a contest]. Out of a job. Disinherited. Friends seem helpful but I don’t expect anything and shall therefore have nothing to cry about. Must now assume the position of working so I can begin to work.

This entry suggests that Brenner was cut off financially from her father, and thus felt an enormous pressure to support herself financially. Late December 1925 proved to be a difficult period for Brenner. Her entries reveal how her interests transitioned towards topics on Mexican art and culture rather than on the Jew in Mexico specifically. This happened as Brenner spent more time with non-Jewish artists and intellectuals in the capital and grew interested in their projects and artistic endeavors. Her interests may have also shifted because of the tense atmosphere of Jewish immigrants in Mexico, many working as peddlers in the countryside, the increased arrival of young Jewish girls who came to marry the young settlers who had preceded them, and the very question of whether Mexico was an appropriate place for Jews to settle (Kahan 255). The exhausting work Brenner had done meeting new arrivals in Veracruz began to take a toll on Brenner and her diaries reflect her exhaustion. On December 5, 1925 Brenner wrote:

Sent off two articles to the Morgen Journal. Received four already in print. Have three more projected and fertig [ready to go] with the Jew in Mexico, unless it be the historical end. But sixteen on one subject is enough! Imagination runs out. Worked with Jean on outline for the art book. Makes my mouth water but it is hard to keep to the idea-modern, living, major and result of tradition. Idea: Mexican
Renaissance in the sense of constant rebirth. Heard from Goitia. Favorable. Galván in. Made me furious, unreasonably. But I can’t bear to be touched. Makes me feel that is all I am—a piece of meat.

In this entry Brenner expressed how she grew weary of being touched by men, she felt as if she was nothing more than “a piece of meat”—she felt these interactions reduced her merely to a sex object. The following day Brenner indicated that writing repeatedly on Jewish topics had begun to make her feel sick. She wrote that “makes me feel like a professional Jew…put your tallos [Jewish prayer shawl] away or wear it but don’t drag it in the mud.” Brenner entangled the frustrations stemming from her journey of self-discovery with the pressure to produce meaningful and impactful journalism, all while confronting her vulnerabilities working in a male dominated space that exposed her to sexual harassment. The entry also alludes to Brenner’s sense of over-reporting on the topic of Jews in Mexico. Various entries written hurriedly in the evenings, after she mailed articles to the Jewish press, reflect Brenner’s internalized anti-Semitism, insecurities and imposter syndrome.

Brenner sprinkled her journal entries with Spanish and Yiddish expressions, although as mentioned in the previous chapters, her primary language appears to have been English. Brenner’s language preference reflects her identity as a North American, as observed in her journals, publications and personal documents, and there is little indication that she chose Spanish as her first language nor that she was able to speak or write fluently in Spanish. The entries reveal Brenner’s self-doubt of her ability to effectively write on the topic of Jews. On December 9, 1925 she wrote “Revolution & the Jews. Sick of the masticated subject. Will never tackle it again con gusto…!” Her role defending the Jewish
community of Mexico was her bridge from her past to her future. Yet at the same time, at the beginning, she struggled to find content for her articles and her hybrid identity as a secular Jewish Mexican woman limited her ability to gain an “insider status” of the Jewish community that she so desired. Her identification with the Jewish people was directly tied to her struggles as an independent radical.

She was at once an independent Jew and an independent radical, two identities that took their toll on her mental and physical health. Her entries, like one on January 5, 1926, also reflect the financial instability she experienced as a journalist:

Letter from Jewish Tribune. Want a series [of] about ten articles—Don’t know whether I can. Have so much to do. Worked like a horse all day and like a mule all night & feel rather pobre diablo. Worried about Folkways…Jean here & not all on his knees, which made me furious. Forgot to mention that Galvan proposed matrimony. Refused on the ground of not being a Jew.

As her journals progress, Brenner documented requests she received from Jewish journals in New York. As she balanced writing for both *Folkways* and the Jewish periodicals, Brenner grew increasingly weary by the pressures to publish and maintain her growing reputation as a Jewish insider and transnational scholar. At the same time, Brenner peppered her entries with references to her continued search for her own Jewish identity. In the previous entry, one man identified as “Galvan” appeared to have proposed matrimony. Brenner claimed this individual was not Jewish, and rejected the proposal, reflecting her transition towards a stricter Jewish identity. At the same time, this entry reveals how Brenner’s Jewish identity may have provided her an alternative from what
appeared to be at times an overwhelmingly progressive environment for Brenner. On January 6, 1926 she wrote:

Last night Ren article shaped out. Have yet to finish it—indeed sweated blood over it—due to length (very short), unfamiliarity with audience & lack of knowledge of Mexico. Today, wrote letters, clipped & filed newspaper for Gruening, Charlot & his mother to lunch—Worked P.M. on clippings, from seven to nine on *Folkways*.  
Been feeling rather old these days & much more pobre diablo. Still of the opinion that sex is not la gran cosa it is reputed to be. Feel as I did at fifteen—rather disdainful.

Brenner appeared to be self-motivated. She depended entirely on herself to finish and submit her articles and find the drive to do the work. While the cultural climate and circles she joined may have inspired or influenced her willingness to write, Brenner’s journals emphasize that in the end the action of writing and publishing was a solo endeavor. The entry also demonstrates that Brenner continued to date multiple men in a short period. Brenner referred to herself as “pobre diablo” in several entries in this same period. She began to feel excessively sorry for herself, likely an outcome of repeated cases of groping by the men she encountered and the vulnerabilities and exposure she navigated on a recurring basis as a young woman navigating male-dominated spaces. A striking undated journal entry reflects her vulnerability and sheds light on her relationships with men:

I know full well it is impossible for a Latin to have a friendship with a woman—as a matter of fact I am not sure it is possible to any man—and yet there was F. We the best of comrades, laughing, sneering, and analyzing and judging the rest sharing
everything joyously. Suddenly, because of a couple of glasses of wine and dim lights, he is someone I don’t know at all.

The identity of the friend Brenner referred to as “F” is unknown. At first, Brenner described a friendly and flirtatious environment filled with alcohol and laughter. Yet her entry leaves the reader with a lingering sensation of fear with her chilling description of how after the individual “F” had several glasses of wine he became “someone I don’t know at all.” While Brenner ended the entry without further comment, it is not difficult to imagine the type of man “F” became in that moment. The encounter may have been so ruthless that Brenner did not even dare to spell out the name of the man in her private journal. In the same entry it is not clear what men exactly Brenner refers to as a “Latin.” She may be referring to the transnational men from her circles who were residing in Latin America, such as Charlot, with whom she had the most contact during this period. Or, she could be referring to men specifically from Mexico, such as the Mexican artist Diego Rivera. She also reflected on being unimpressed by sex, not “la gran cosa” people made it to be. Her journals hint that she was sexually active with various partners during her time in Mexico City, reflecting the experimental climate of the Mexican Renaissance and her reactions to sexual explorations. On October 24 she wrote:

After a good night’s sleep, the world certainly looks brighter. I dreamt I was a prostitute, and that Jean’s mother ordered me out of her sight and Jean’s...Another reason for my continuous irritation is Jean’s habit of reminding me to do things which, given my own sense and inclinations and experience, I would be expected to be attending.
At times, Brenner’s sexual encounters appeared to be done by free-will. However, her journals reveal her self-consciousness and internal conflict as a result of this exposure and likely being taken advantage of because of her young age. She dreamed she was a prostitute on several occasions and frequently pondered the meaning of sex and its implication in her life.

As Brenner’s time in Mexico passed, her journals reflect a woman who grew more comfortable surrounded by men and even, at times, appeared to accept the sexual harassment as “part of the game” and a price she was willing to pay for her newfound place in the spotlight. In response to being told by Charlot that Orozco was in love with her, Brenner responded, “since these gentlemen are very important and I feel that everything I can do or give I should, I am public property and should be thankful for the privilege.” Brenner, therefore, appeared to consider her place in the spotlight and surrounded by these powerful cultural elites as a privilege. On March 24, 1927 Brenner wrote:

Took lunch a French lesson, tried on some clothes, walked in the Paseo awhile with the passionate youth from the dance, who, curiously, is really in love with me, and I don’t know what to do with him. I surely have no time to waste like that, and there is nothing about him to warrant it….he heaves profound sighs…. He took me up to Xavier Guerrero’s about nine o’clock, there found Clemente and Siqueros…Clemente left furious because I was pleasant to Xavier and asked him for drawings for Gruening. Xavier and Siq. came home with me, we got terribly drunk and I woke up sick, the room in a mess, and other undescriptive and indiscreet conditions of a situation result of a night with that streak of strange craziness.
On the one hand, Brenner appeared to have willingly invited Clemente and Siqueros into her home after a night of drinking. She described an atmosphere where these men were jealous for her attention and she appeared comfortable and familiar with spending an evening alone with multiple men. On the other hand, a young man she described as a “passionate youth” she considered a waste of her time in comparison to spending time with the cultural elites that occupied most of her time and interest. Brenner’s journal entries reflect a transformation in Brenner—a woman who was forced to accept the sexual harassment she experienced as part of her role as a woman surrounded by powerful men and the price to pay in order to participate in a patriarchal environment. On July 8, 1927 Brenner described an intense love affair with an individual she called “Vidas.” She wrote:

Came over on Wednesday night and made violent and romantic love to me. Jean, in a conversation today, said that I am so surrounded by people of big size that a normal man would strike me as strange and original, and this is exactly the case with Vidas. I have that delighted curiously about him because I have not known anybody like him at all.

Brenner grew increasingly aware of her uniqueness, surrounded by individuals that were considered great. The presence of these men and receiving their attention appeared to delight Brenner. The next day Vidas returned to Brenner’s home and she described in her journal their time together. Their conversation that evening appeared to fall on the fine line between flirtation and teasing, initiated by Brenner, and femicide.

We had a rather silly time of it, because I did not want to be kissed or embraced, and it made him angry. Also, I told him that possibly some people might come and
he wanted to know who, and I said painters. And he said all right if they were my friends, just so none of them were anything more. Inquiring what would happen if one of them were anything more he said he would probably kill me. That delighted me and I told him so, so to be contrary he said he would not kill me at all.

That evening Brenner did not want to be touched or kissed and this angered Vidas. At the same time, Brenner teased Vidas about the possibility of her having intimate relationships with “the painters.” Brenner claimed to be “delighted” by the fact that Vidas would “kill her” if she had any relationship with other men beyond a friendship. This entry captures yet another instance of the complex contradictions that Brenner faced as a young woman in Mexico City during the Renaissance. Brenner struggled as she navigated this experimental climate, at times she appeared to push herself far beyond her comfort zone and she may not have understood the implications of her actions. Meanwhile, she appeared to delight in the risk taking, rebellious mood of the era and grew egotistical as the attention of men increased.

Few scholars have elaborated on the volatile emotional and sexual dynamics that Brenner often encountered with her male colleagues. The art historian Karen Cordero Reiman notes Brenner’s relationships often shifted “suddenly between an egalitarian relationship and conventional patriarchal behavior to harassment…were balanced throughout her life by a warm circle of intense female friendships” (Cordero Reiman 59). Brenner lived, traveled and explored with her friend Lucy Knox, a Texan whom she met during her time in Mexico and with whom she shared an apartment in both Mexico City
and New York City. Brenner appeared to have formed a community with other women, who were likely experiencing similar encounters with the opposite sex and cases of sexual harassment and sexual assault. In the presence of other women, Brenner attempted to find empowerment in her vulnerability. Brenner, and the other women in her circle, may have been seen as legitimate spaces of sexual violence and her journals reveal how prevailing notions about gender and sexuality contributed to the perpetuation of rape culture during this period.

Brenner often contradicted herself in the journals, reflecting her unpredictability and self-consciousness even further. Brenner categorized friends in an entry on April 3, 1927 under three headings: “Actively Friends,” “Actively Enemies,” and “Actively Both.” The enemy list included three American women who also wrote about Mexican art: Ernestine Evans, Emily Edwards, and Frances Toor. “Actively Both” included Diego Rivera and his second-wife Guadalupe, Tina Modotti and Carleton Beals.

Another contradiction appears in an entry from July 1926 where she sexualized women and endorsed women’s need to be “pure”: “Lunch here with Concha Michel and the López family. We have the same philosophy which recognizes sex as the key to things, and the plane upon which woman’s position is placed-and should be. Since it is creative

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28 Brenner mentioned Knox frequently in her journal, in particular as her “going out partner” and the person she would most often binge drink with. Entries confirm they were roommates in Mexico City and New York City. I found very little biographical information on Knox. However, I located an obituary for Lucy Perry Knox published in The Monitor on July 17, 1940 titled “Texas Traveler Dies at Denver.” The obituary reads: “The body of Miss Lucy Perry Knox, 37, who had traveled and worked in many parts of the Orient, returned to her native home here today for funeral services tomorrow. She died Tuesday at Denver while serving as secretary of the president of the University of Colorado at Boulder. In the Far East Miss Knox had been a secretary to Lord Lytton, British statesman, and wrote the report of his investigations for the League of Nations. She also worked for newspapers in Russia, China and Japan.” This obituary proves that Knox, like Brenner, was another transnational journalist and avant-garde woman.  
29 For more on sexual harassment in Mexico at the turn of the century see: Susie Porter, “Towards a History of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace, Mexico City (1920-1925),” and Susana Sosenski “Sexual Abuse of Girls in Post-Revolutionary Mexico: Between Legitimation and Punishment.”
energy, it is for her to direct it. To be able to do so, she herself must be physically pure.”

With regard to sexuality, she contradicted herself entirely. In January 1926, she had referred to sex as not “la gran cosa,” while six months later, sex had become fundamental to her and up to women to direct. Brenner grappled with the double-standard placed on women—she openly wrote about the decision to take birth-control and experiment freely or to remain “pure.” Brenner’s mother’s example as well as other Jewish women role models, such as Toor, may have led Brenner to not question her own need to earn a living or to build a career outside of the home.

Brenner’s journals were often mixed with passion and hate in her detailed descriptions and dialogue with others. Much of Brenner’s entries revolve around Rivera, which exemplifies his control and dominance of the avant-garde circle in the Mexican context, as the group’s protagonist and local authority. Brenner’s journals reveal how she collaborated with Rivera and Orozco in their artistic productions, but struggled financially. Brenner alluded to the fact that Rivera was painting her. The reader can sense Brenner’s excitement when a collaboration with the cultural elites was on the horizon. In the February 8, 1926 entry below, Rivera recommended a medicated soap for Brenner to combat the acne she was experiencing, reflecting how the artists would comment on her appearance and influenced how Brenner perceived herself. Brenner continued to struggle financially as the years progressed and often described her exhaustion working on multiple projects.

While there is little correspondence between Brenner and her manager and mentor Toor,

30 Concha Michel, the Mexican activist and folksinger, has fascinated scholars of the Mexican Renaissance. Michel appeared at high-profile events in women’s activist and leftist cultural gatherings. She provided the soundtrack for Communist Party meetings, singing and playing a guitar while accompanying Rivera and Kahlo to protest the overthrow of Guatemalan president Jacobo Arbenz. See Jocelyn Olcott.
Brenner often expressed frustrations with Toor, referring to Toor’s unwillingness to promote Brenner to co-editor of *Folkways* or complaining about lack of payments received. Brenner’s journals reveal a young girl who was likely taken advantage of by the cultural elites. The artists and intellectuals had more experience than Brenner but did not hesitate to benefit from her work. Brenner grew increasingly frustrated as she realized she was not given the compensation nor recognition she felt she deserved.

Saw Diego about stuff…Saw Orozco. Went over prep with him about photos. He begins to paint tomorrow. Lunch at Diego’s. Saw Weston. Wants me to pose again. Took some *retablos* to Museum for photos…*Folkways*. Frances is a fool... Loitered into Sanborns for some medicated soap. Diego said to take for the several pimples that have made unexpected & unwelcome appearance upon my lovely countenance.

Home. Tired as hell. Have to finish up Pal if I want to go to Guadalajara…No word from Jean. Wrote a poem about a horsefly that just fell out of the window. Feel forlorn, but as if-this sometimes happens-I had been unexpectedly freed from something impending. No money.

Despite her excitement to have rediscovered her Jewish identity in Mexico City, Brenner may not have been as enlightened or inspired as most scholars portray her. In fact, Brenner explicitly writes in an entry from January 1926 that she feels similar to how she felt at fifteen, a time in her life that she felt especially disdainful. Another entry describes the internal tension she experienced. She felt pressured to conform to social expectations professionally and personally. At the same time, she desired independence and an
unconventional lifestyle. At this point, Brenner was attempting to define herself, always within predetermined parameters as to what was acceptable:

I feel often as if I had been trapped. Somebody’s treachery obliges me to stand in a web of people, and dress, talk, like the proper things and act in the necessary fashion. The worst of it is that something inside of me becomes absolutely slave of those rules and bothers me to death by an uncomfortable feeling that too many eyes are upon me and the result is worse. I have to dress, and talk and act, and do the things they do. I have to want to publish things, and if I don’t I feel guilty…I feel as if I must break away and go somewhere, but I am too practical to do so, and if it did it would be the same. Also, I should be very lonesome... I am uncomfortable and bewildered.

This entry depicts the loneliness and challenges that Brenner experienced and internal contradictions of someone at once thriving in bohemian circles and struggling as a young Mexican-American Jewish woman in Mexico. The reader can sense the various pulls that Brenner felt, expected to perform, “dress, talk and act” like those in her circle. She felt a pressure to publish and perform as an intellectual Jewess and experienced frustration and discomfort. This was likely due to her coming of age and the difficulties of being a young woman, as demonstrated in the previous entries that reveal sexual harassment, and because of her Jewish identity and direct and indirect anti-Semitism she experienced in both the United States and Mexico. As previously mentioned, Mexican artists, such as Orozco, and likely others, teased Brenner about her Jewish identity. Brenner’s friendship with the Mexican poet, model and painter Nahui Olin was strained due to anti-Semitism. Dr. Atl became a vocal anti-Semite and fascist (López Crafting Mexico 128). In her journal
Brenner sketched herself in a way that reflected her internalized anti-Semitism, often exaggerating her nose and criticizing her appearance. Brenner saved an article published on September 12, 1925 among her belongings titled “¿Los Judíos Tienen La Culpa?” [Jews Are At Fault?] written by Alejandro Sux. While the content of the article is missing, the fact that Brenner saved this article for her entire life demonstrates the significant impact anti-Semitism had on her and shaped her thinking.

3.6 Habanero, rum, and cognac

On October 28, 1926 Brenner described another night of drinking with her friends Lucy Knox and Katherine Anne Porter. She and her friends wandered through Mexico City and partied the night away:

We wandered all over−went to the circus, to a wonderful noisy cabaret where they were very kind to us−to a taquería for policemen way over on Santo Domingo, and to the Villa de Guadalupe. Anne was not with us on the travels because several rum punches left her giggling and chattering and unable to move. But we progressed−*en todos sentidos* [in all senses]−*habanero*, rum punch, rum straight, beer, cognac and chatos [small glasses of wine], badly mixed gin and vermouth. It was all very fraternal and affectionate.

The historian John Britton underlines that alcohol flowed freely in Mexico City in bohemian parties in the 1920s (20). Brenner often described the environment where she and her bohemian friends drank heavily and would wander the streets of Mexico City under the influence of substances. Brenner also described being hungover in various entries, which likely reinforced her depressive moods given the depressant effects of alcohol. As mentioned in the previous section and her experience with “F”, alcohol played an important
role in her experiences with sexual assault and in the context of inebriation, these encounters appeared to occur more frequently.

The contradictions in her writing cause the writer to lose confidence in the veracity of her statements. One moment Brenner appreciated the support of those around her and the next she would call them names or change her views entirely. Brenner’s journals reveal that she often experienced deep depressive states that would prevent her from writing or working. At the same time, the reader can sense her euphoria when she received recognition for her work, got a manicure or a new piece of clothing, was dating a new man, or was simply enjoying exploring Mexico and feeling pure freedom to create and experiment with friends.

Brenner’s journals offer perspective into her decision to study anthropology at Columbia. Brenner realized the importance of knowledge and education. The November 22, 1925 entry below confirms that Brenner relied on her intuition and “native intelligence” for her journalism, given the fact that Brenner struggled to find available data on the Jewish community in Mexico, as demonstrated by her research in the Rivas library. Rather, Brenner’s journalism was based on her lived experience and first-hand encounters with the Jewish community in Mexico. Her identity as a Mexican positioned her as a native informant. This clarifies why Brenner’s entries at times contradict themselves or are written primarily from an auto-biographical perspective. Meanwhile, Brenner wrote that her father would pay for her education at Columbia, yet her journals during her time in New York City reveal the opposite, and describe her as being “cut off” from her father’s financial support:
I am interested in doing a book on Mexican art and for that as well as for my anthro work I need more documentation. Impossible to do anything on this precarious system—been doing article to article. Get a regular job means giving up my time—all of this makes me think I have no definite way of earning a living except journalism. Which in Mexico is null and void. Question: Shall I put in a few “time” learning steno [steno machine]? Useful for emergencies. Then also: Shall I get a degree in anthro? I am interested enough but no compensation, veiled consolation for Father, who would pay for it because it is not a very lucrative profession. However, I do need to go to school. Short on art history, biology—all kinds of things. Don’t want to be a journalist and while I have all the intuition and native intelligence I need for basic stuff; I am short on datum which are convincing backdrops. Have to do as soon as possible an article commission for La Renaissance [sic]—one for Folkways and the stuff for the Morning Journal and the Nation but am too weak to give a damn. I shall talk to Jean…

While Brenner’s journal entries demonstrate that she depended to a great extent on the support of men (father, partners, mentors, friends), Brenner navigated questions of independence in her journal: how to achieve success without the financial support of her father? How to have free sexual relations without the fear and stigma of prostitution? How to pursue love within the confinement of religious expectations? How to exercise autonomy and independence while also experiencing a sense of belonging? Brenner’s journals reveal her internal self-love and self-loathing. The reader senses that she is clearly preoccupied with identity issues, vacillating between taking pleasure in expressing herself freely and feeling pressured to conform to social norms and expectations. When read chronologically,
the reader may reconstruct her development into a Jewish *chica moderna*: young, educated, and emotionally and financially independent. Her earliest entries reveal a deep self-consciousness and sexual awareness and these questions would continue in her entries written from her apartment in New York City.

3.7 A Backdoor Entry to Anthropology at Columbia University

On November 20, 1925 Brenner sent a letter to Franz Boas, Director of the Ph.D. program in Anthropology at Columbia University, the first such program in the United States. In the letter, Brenner wrote that she was following Boas’ advice from their previous correspondence “to collect stories and learn *Mexicano*.” Brenner was likely referring to her research on indigenous Mexico and “all things Mexican” to which she now had firsthand access through her artistic collaborations in Mexico City, such as publishing in *Folkways* and her articles for the Jewish press. She mentioned Toor’s mentorship but does not refer to her by name, but rather as “an unusually intelligent and well-informed person.” Brenner claimed that she aimed to enroll in the Bachelor of Arts program and requested information. She wrote that she was not concerned with her qualifications for the B.A. program given her “Junior standing at the University of Texas” and her “several certificates from the University of Mexico.” She wrote: “I am at present through force of circumstances dependent upon my father and unless he is convinced that this plan is of real value, I may perhaps be forced to abandon it, a thing which I would regret deeply.” Brenner mentioned that she was aware that Boas and Gamio knew one another and described the lack of options to continue studying anthropology in Mexico. She wrote that the Mexican Department of

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31It is important to distinguish the Modern Girl from the Modern Woman, two overlapping concepts of the era. In some cases, the “Modern Woman” was identified with social and political advocacy for women, whereas the Modern Girl “chica moderna” was associated with consumption, romance, and fashion (Weinbaum 194). See Alys Eve, Weinbaum et al., editors. *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization*. 

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Anthropology had become “almost a myth” but she still intended to study anthropology and more specifically, ethnology. She wanted to ensure that Boas understood this was not possible for her to do so if she remained in Mexico.

Figure 14: Anita Brenner to Franz Boas, 1925

Not only was Brenner’s appeal to Boas effective, two years later she set off to officially enroll in Columbia University and shortly after would find herself pursuing a Ph.D. in Anthropology. On September 20 1927, Brenner described her journey by train from Mexico to New York City. When the train stopped for three hours in New Orleans, Brenner wrote “had an excellent dinner at a place called Galatoire’s…a French taxi drive
took us sightseeing. He spoke bad English but very good French and was enchanted to do so. He even cut rates for us and gave us his address.”

On September 27, 1927 Brenner described buying furniture at Goodwill Industries of Brooklyn, “where things are incredibly cheap.” Brenner settled in her apartment throughout the fall and began to make friends and settled into her new home in the Village:

Furniture fixed, lots of bookshelves built (which Lucy did just furiously yesterday) and things unpacked and in their permanent places. Anne G. and her sister and another girl came to see us this afternoon and talked about the ins and outs of a job and bosses. How to get a raise, how not to let them put one over on you, how not to go to lunch with them etc. Lucy and I listened aghast… the friend (Bee something or other) is a marvelous-looking Russian or Spanish type. She has a sweet voice and “refined” ways and gets a raise when she wants it. She is a private secretary.

Brenner quickly learned the dos and don’ts of being a woman in the male dominated spaces in Manhattan of both journalism and academia. She quickly made new female friends in the city and, through their experiences, learned how to navigate the social and professional environment of Manhattan. Brenner paid $78 dollars a month for her Manhattan apartment which became a hub for artists, musicians, and writers, and Latin American expatriates such as Orozco and Siqueiros, whose work Brenner helped to sell and exhibit (Villela 20). Brenner was hopeful to skip the bachelor’s degree at Barnard College, a women’s college included in the educational system of Columbia University, despite not finishing her undergraduate degree before relocating to Mexico from Texas.32

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32 According to Marcela Arellano López there is no registration evidence of Brenner’s attempt to enroll through Barnard College’s Registrar.
Brenner brought with her credentials that would support her intention to pursue graduate studies including transcripts from universities in which she had previously enrolled: Our Lady of the Lake in San Antonio, University of Texas, and the Universidad Nacional de México. According to the Columbia University Bulletin of Information, a student was allowed entry to the Master of Arts program if they had completed one year of residence at Columbia University, passed written admissions exams, were fluent in German or French, and had completed their admissions form. Boas guided Brenner so that she could qualify for graduate studies without formally completing the undergraduate coursework required by Barnard College.

Brenner’s journals describe the social and academic environment at Columbia. She observed a drop in the student body during Jewish High Holidays, which made the administrative processes easier for her with less people around, since Jews accounted for a significant part of the student population. Boas advised Brenner on what undergraduate courses to enroll in order to acquire undergraduate standing and qualify for the M.A. program. On September 27, 1927 Brenner described in her journal how Boas guided her through the admission process. She reflected on the oral examination she had to complete and the ease with which she answered the questions related to the topics covered by the Spanish department:

It being Rosh Hashanah, I was able to get through a lot of red tape at school because so few Jews were around, and they are such a mass of the student body. It invariably makes administrators and clerks angry to have to handle my record. Foxy ‘Papa Franz’ is trying to accumulate me enough undergrad credits for me to get graduate standing immediately. ‘Con ese motivo’ I had an informal exam from the Spanish
department. That is, a talk with Onís, at the written request with [sic] Boas, and Onís pronounced me as knowing the undergraduate work and whatever they teach of Spanish and Pan-American literature. It was very simple; I just gave him my opinions of the poets and passed judgement lackadaisically on Prieto [Pradillo], Gutiérrez Nájera, etc. etc. Also I said I preferred Unamuno and Ortega y Gasset to Spanish modern poets…and voilà, the exam was over. Oh façade, façade, how New Yorkese you are! (Glusker, Avant Garde Art 520)

In a later entry Brenner described the Columbia academic obstacles she faced, in her words “academic channels pry open with great creaking.” At the same time her informal entrance exam to gain undergraduate standing was not academically rigorous. In fact, the exam consisted of Brenner expressing her opinion on Spanish modern poets as sufficient evidence to gain graduate standing. The ease with which Brenner entered Columbia University, without having formally completed an undergraduate degree, made possible by Boas’ endorsement demonstrates the significant influence Boas had on Brenner and the other women he mentored during his tenure.

3.8 “School of Rebellious Women”

The Jewish-German anthropologist Franz Boas was leading a group of scholars, in particular women, including Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Zora Neale Hurston, and Ella Cara Deloria, in the nation’s first department of anthropology, since 1899. Boas, born in 1858, was interested in studying societies outside of his own German-Jewish heritage. His first study took place on the Canadian territory of Baffin Island. After his immigration to the United States, he researched Native Americans in the Pacific Northwest. Boas’ work coincided with the widespread approach that divided the world into barbaric and civilized
cultures based on race. Boas promoted the idea of cultural relativism, based on the idea that the obstacles human beings face are universal. Boas rejected prevailing Darwinist thought regarding “racial types” and hierarchies. He challenged the minimizing binaries of barbarism and civilization and proposed that cultures did not exist within a hierarchy, from primitive to superior. He saw problems faced by societies as generally the same across cultures. Through his apprenticeship, Boas sought to use cultural anthropology to develop a practice-based social theory that was intentionally anti-racist and challenged conventional political, cultural, social, and sexual ideologies. Many of Boas’ students were themselves outsiders in some way, such as the Jewish women mentioned here.

In the interwar period, Columbia University became an academic institution that was less hostile towards Jews in comparison to other universities in the United States. As the United States entered the First World War in 1917, fewer men enrolled in universities, opening up opportunities for women who were not required to enlist in the military to pursue higher education. According to Barnard history professor Robert McCaughey, Columbia at the beginning of the twentieth century was a place where individuals could become someone, intellectually, socially, and culturally. \(^{33}\) During this period, the percentage of Jewish students enrolled rose to twenty percent (Arellano 310). As Columbia’s administration witnessed a significant increase in Jewish student enrollment throughout the 1920s, they discovered a loophole to decrease enrollment of Jews at Columbia College undergraduate campus. Jewish applicants were sent to Seth Low Junior College (SLJC), a community college established in 1928 in Brooklyn Heights connected to Columbia through a shared administration. This approach proved effective as following

SLJC opening, the enrollment of Jewish students at Columbia College dropped from 40 to 25 percent. There were various drawbacks to SLJC: the college did not provide a degree, there was no guaranteed pathway to Columbia professional schools, yet the tuition costs were just as expensive as Columbia College (Gohn 1). Boas’ role in opening doors for Brenner to pursue a Ph.D. at Columbia University during this period of increased tension for the Jewish student body was essential.

Boas wrote to a friend in 1920 “all of my best students are women” (King 119). Each woman in Boas’ circle was somewhat an outsider, much like Boas himself. Margaret Mead transferred to Barnard in 1920, where she found herself in a new group of “freethinking, adventurous women,” some of them lesbian (such as Mead and Benedict), and half of them Jewish (King 129). King describes Boas circles and how he sought to promote women, although he could not protect them from the discrimination they faced in employment. While Boas mentorship and advisor approach was undoubtedly patriarchal, most Boas scholars agree that he did not have love affairs with his students however his students did have romantic liaisons with each other (Bashkow). Boas had a reputation for favoring his female Ph.D. students and mentored these young women with a particular patriarchal treatment. Papa Franz hesitated to allow his female students to travel anywhere too exotic for their fieldwork (Coffman). King describes Boas’ circle “as an appealing archetype for our time” that included African-American, lesbians, various Jews, and immigrants.

Another anthropologist mentored by Boas and who mentored Brenner, Ruth Benedict, attempted to intervene politically with her study *Chrysanthemum and Sword: Forms of Japanese Culture* (1946). She sought to define Japanese culture as different but
not in the sense of inferiority. Benedict researched at a time when Japanese Americans were regarded as enemies of the state and were held captive in World War II internment camps. Mead, arguably the most famous of Boas’ students through her research based on travel to Polynesia, studied indigenous culture among young girls and wrote the 1928 bestseller, *Coming of Age in Samoa*. Boas and his students developed methods for explaining cultural differences based on participants’ observations and self-reflection.

Boas’ ideological opponent at Columbia University included white supremacist heteronormative nationalist Madison Grant, author of *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916). The book suggested that America had once been racially homogeneous but was becoming degraded by immigration.34 Boas mocked Grant’s racial theories as “Nordic nonsense,” Grant’s allies at Columbia University attempted to get Boas fired which succeeded in part as they cut his salary, downsized the faculty to Boas alone, and restricted Boas from teaching undergraduates (Bashkow). He subsequently found work at Barnard College, Columbia’s women’s college. Boas was known for his harsh treatment of his male students in comparison to his gentle manner with his female students. Some women described him as a doting father. In a journal entry on September 22, 1927, Brenner referred to Boas as “an old darling” and alluded to his sense of humor, and “buena voluntad” [goodwill]. She wrote that “something may come of it…everybody is very nice and it is all most encouraging, except some supercilious people at the U. who are annoyed when one doesn’t fit into the proper channels.” Brenner began to feel at home surrounded by women like her with a male mentor who treated her as an equal, yet her journals reveal that she still experienced marginalization.

34 Grant’s thesis that racial mixing was a threat to white vitality was embraced by Adolf Hitler who wrote Grant a letter praising the German transnational of his work as “my Bible” (King 11, 306).
3.9 Men Negotiating Brenner’s Future

Correspondence between Boas, Brenner, and Brenner’s father Isadore provide invaluable insight into Brenner’s academic formation and how she, as a Jewish woman, was able to enter Columbia University at the time. This correspondence also sheds light on the essential role that Boas had on Brenner’s ability to take part in intellectual pursuits. In the first letter written on December 6, 1928, Boas addressed Brenner’s father in San Antonio, Texas. In it, Boas indicates that after working with Brenner for two years, he wanted her to take on fieldwork, and advises her to return to Mexico, specifically to work with the “Michoacán tribe.” In the same letter, he suggested Brenner should travel to Europe to familiarize herself with the work being done there after she completed her fieldwork in Mexico. The tone of the letter reads as a request for permission from Brenner’s father for his daughter to work on various intellectual pursuits. It seems that Boas was soliciting both financial and moral support. Despite Brenner’s independence, living alone and studying in New York, Boas’ letter suggests that it was appropriate at the time for a professor to reach out to a female student’s father. The letter also indicates that Brenner relied on her father financially, which confirms the financial struggles she described in her journal during the same period. Boas concluded the letter as follows: “allow me to say that I think a good deal of the interest and of the work of Miss Brenner and I feel reasonably certain that she will do good work.” This correspondence further demonstrates Boas’ investment in Brenner’s intellectual and professional potential.
On December 20, 1928, Isadore responded to Boas’ letter, writing from San Antonio, Texas. Isadore wrote: “I am quite certain that your advice is for her best, but I don’t see my way clear why she should discontinue college before getting her final degree that she is reaching out for.” Isadore expressed his concerns that Brenner years before had dropped out of college in order to pursue journalism. While he recognized that Brenner had gained a considerable amount of practical experience which she would not have gained in college, he believed that having a degree “will serve as a recommendation to any position that she may apply for.” The letter also demonstrates Isadore’s confusion, rightfully so, as to how Brenner would manage to take on fieldwork before formally completing her first degree (a bachelor’s degree), suggesting that he was not fully informed of Brenner’s professional plans.
What is most interesting is how Isadore saw the value in college. He indicated that “attending college is a business the same as any undertaking, and whenever you shift from one thing to another without accomplishing what you have reached out for, you are always taking chances in making a failure instead of success.” Isadore concluded by thanking Boas for his letter and recommending a meeting in New York City at the beginning of the next year to discuss the matter further.

These letters are valuable in three distinct ways. First, they demonstrate that Brenner’s father may not have understood the significance of Boas’ request in the initial
letter. Despite Isadore supporting Brenner’s academic pursuits, he was likely detached from academic procedures such as Boas’ financial request for Brenner to take on fieldwork that would enable Brenner to complete her dissertation. Second, the correspondence between the two men demonstrates that while Brenner managed to enroll in Columbia University and live independently in New York City after living alone in Mexico City, her future still lied very much in the hands of the men in her life. Third, Brenner’s father revealed that he had no objection to Brenner’s academic pursuits. In fact, the letter’s tone suggests that Isadore would have expected nothing less, an unusual case of a father’s hopes for his daughter’s professional aspirations at the beginning of the twentieth century. Finally, it was highly unusual for women at this time to pursue a Ph.D. In her 1985 study *In The Company of Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America,* Barbara Solomon explains that between 1860 and 1920 going to college became an accepted part of growing up for women in certain social groups. However, during the same period women received little active, direct institutional encouragement to embark on graduate studies (134). Women’s colleges at the time were less prepared to offer advanced study and with few exceptions, investing in female scholars was thought to be a risky endeavor for the academic establishment. Women’s academic training, it was assumed, despite their intellect or dedication, would be lost upon marriage and few women objected to the notion that matrimony would and should abrogate academic commitment (138).

### 3.10 “Ruths”

Near the conclusion of Brenner’s graduate studies, on May 18, 1929, Brenner expressed her excitement about nearing the completion of her Ph.D. degree, barely two years after her enrollment in September 1927:
I had a conference with him [Boas]. The result of it was elation. For I do not need to go on a field trip for my dissertation work. This means that I may about do as I please with more or less the material I please and sometime next year whenever I am ready to present my papers and take my exams; no traveling back and forth and no uncertainty about the “finds.” If it works out as apparently acceptedly planned, I shall have my degree at about this time next year. Ph.D. At twenty-four! I shall feel somewhat ridiculous. I am most proud of Boas’ confidence. He never asks me what I am doing and never tries to make me change my course. Can I expand the subject, he asks? Expand, then. Do I want to select only portions of it? Select, then. And all he does is offer little additional suggestions. I just about weep with emotion. Ruth and Boas…we’re all of us Ruths.

In the last sentence, Brenner referred to the biblical Ruth. In the Book of Ruth, one of the few books in the Bible named after a woman, Ruth was a Moabite and unlikely hero. Ruth traveled to Bethlehem as a widow with her Hebrew mother-in-law. When Ruth goes to look for food, she encounters a prosperous Hebrew man named Boaz, a relative of Naomi (2:1-3). Moved by Ruth’s selflessness and loyalty, Boaz invites Ruth to glean grain from his field. Ruth is a symbol of abiding loyalty and devotion and Boaz symbolizes Ruth’s redeemer, the culmination of God’s providence. Brenner refers to the women in Boas’ circle as Ruths, evoking their loyalty and devotion to Boas, and Boas (referring to Boaz) as a symbol of generosity, who put the “Ruths” needs before his own. Brenner’s doctoral dissertation, submitted in 1930, when she was 25 years old, analyzed the images on various ceramics brought to the United States by Boas from Culhuacán,
a Nahuatl-speaking pre-Columbian city-state in the Valley of Mexico. If it had not been for Boas’ support, Brenner would not have even entered the Ph.D. program at Columbia University.

3.11 A Page for Women

In 1927, Brenner moved to Greenwich Avenue, near the Lower East Side of Manhattan, a predominantly Jewish neighborhood, and home to the dozens of offices of Yiddish, Ladino and English newspapers. In the United States at the end of the nineteenth century, newspapers in French, German, Yiddish and Italian began to appear as bulletins reporting on nationalist movements, transportation, banking, and political parties. As metropolitan papers grew in number in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, seeking new readers and hoping to satisfy advertisers’ demands for more customers, they opened a space for women outside of the domestic space. As elaborated in chapter four, women during this era began to increasingly appear in the public sphere as social caricatures, specifically as urban characters. The “chica moderna” was educated, working and professional, and “was to remain a spectral presence for the aesthetic self-consciousness of urban based writers” (Parsons 83). Some of the newspapers not only gave women an opportunity to write in their journals, it also opened a space to promote a new “chica moderna”. It would be worthwhile to conduct an in-depth study of the various Jewish journals approach at the time and their decision to include or not women’s voices and presentations of women as modern, depending on how conservative the journal’s stance was. “New Women Writers,” a term coined by Elaine Showalter, were independent women who defined themselves as professional writers and who challenged conventional subjects and literary forms. While private journals of women writers reveal participation
in the city and increasing movement outside of the home, this lived experience was not always reflected in their public writing, suggesting continued social restraints in the public realm. Brenner, on the other hand, reported on Mexico City in her Jewish publications in the North American press, and also depicted other cities such as Veracruz, elaborating on her lived-experience moving and living across multiple borders. In the next section, I examine how Brenner’s contributions to Jewish journals during her time in Mexico and continued throughout her time studying at Columbia University led to her development as a Jewish “chica moderna.”

3.12 The North American Jewish Press

The second half of this chapter moves backward in time, to Brenner’s first published articles that explored Jewishness in Mexico, written for the Jewish press in New York. Yiddish newspapers first appeared in New York City in 1885. The arrival of thousands of Jewish immigrants fleeing persecution in late nineteenth-century Eastern Europe boosted the growth of Yiddish culture in the United States. *The New York Forward* (or simply, *The Forward*) started off as a Socialist publication established by the Jewish Socialist Press in 1897. Abraham Cahan, a Lithuanian immigrant, worked as the editor and introduced an English language section in the Sunday paper in order to remain competitive among other Jewish newspapers that published in both English and Yiddish. Cahan led the newspaper towards a less rigid ideology, and published letters in which immigrants exchanged complaints, requests, and sought advice. The “Woman’s Page” in *The Forward* reinforced acceptance for women in spaces outside of the home. The column went beyond addressing women in the context of fashion and the home. It also helped form a modern
vision of “Jewish femininity” by including women as writers on issues related to politics, work, and feminist movements.

The creation of women’s pages and features allowed women’s entry into newspaper work, as many editors assumed that women would be best at covering topics within binary definitions of gender. Many editors believed that these articles were all that women were capable of effectively reporting (Fahs 25). More scholarly attention should be paid to newspapers’ “Woman’s Pages,” which include a rich collection of women’s observations about transformations around the world at the turn of the twentieth century.35 These stories offered insight into a lost world of women’s writing during the development of a new public life. The Forward placed emphasis on the new model of femininity offered to young Jewish women as it allowed women to write stories, relate their experiences, and be included in the construction of Jewish identity in the United States (Arrelano 10). Brenner published frequently in these women’s sections and the next section will examine how Brenner sought to transform herself into an expert and “who’s who” on Jewish women’s topics on both sides of the border.

Through a textual analysis of Brenner’s writings, scholars may identify explicit and implicit messages, paying close attention to overlapping and colliding projects as well as narrative strategies and stylistic elements that related to cultural agendas by Brenner and

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35 In Out on Assignment: Newspaper Women and the Making of Modern Public Space, Alice Fahs offers further context on women’s ability to seek work in newspapers. Middle class and bohemian women moved in and out of newspaper work in the late 19th and early 20th century. However, working-class women had less of a possibility at finding jobs at a major metropolitan newspaper. Before Brenner, Rose Pastor Stokes began working for the New York Jewish Daily News in 1903. Stokes was a working-class newspaper woman who produced urban sketches and an advice column. Dubbed the “Ghetto Girl,” Stokes became a press sensation across the country after she became engaged to millionaire James Graham Phelps Stokes in 1905 (24).
those who influenced her. Brenner defended Mexico’s image abroad, determinedly submitting entries in periodicals on Mexico’s history, politics, anthropology, and art. The process of writing and publishing in Jewish journals was not always a self-motivated or inspiring process of self-discovery as the reader might imagine. It is therefore worthwhile to trace her observations, such as her commentary on the young Jewish girls who arrived to Mexico alone, as her subject matter often reflected the interests of the officials associated with B’nai B’rith.

While Brenner would eventually prefer her research at Columbia University on Mexican art over her journalism and historical research on the Jewish community in Mexico, a close reading of Brenner’s earliest publications emphasizes the importance of not overlooking the influence of Brenner’s Jewishness and her self-discovery as a Jew on her development into a transnational intellectual. This chapter will now transition to a close-reading of four of Brenner’s articles, “The Jew in Mexico” (1924), “Jewish Brides to Mexico: Mexican Jew Still Imports His Bride” (1925), “Assimilation in Mexico” (1925), and “The Sephardim---Our ‘Latin’ Brothers” (1925). Brenner wrote to build a bridge between cultures, sharing knowledge, observations, and reflections of her internal and external transformations. Brenner worked to form networks and alliances among the international Jewish community during a peak moment of immigration, cultural transformations, and the emergence of a Jewish community in Mexico.

3.13 “The Jew in Mexico”
Brenner’s first published article that explored Jewishness in Mexico appeared in *The Nation* in August of 1924 as “The Jew in Mexico.” The article has two principal arguments. First, Brenner interpreted the process of assimilation as a positive outcome of Jewish immigration to Mexico. She reflected on the existing Jewish colony in Mexico and attested that the Jews literally gave themselves to Mexico, shedding themselves of their Jewish identity. Brenner highlighted the inevitability of assimilation and intermarriage: “He is giving and will give, to the Mexico of the future, not only his work, his money, or his brain, but literally himself.” Second, she wrote to affirm that Jews are part of *Mexicanidad*. The loss of Jewish identity “into the fiber of the coming Mexico” results in the Jew “becoming as Mexican a Mexican as the descendant of the conquistador or the son of the native Indian.” The article alludes to the fact that Brenner advocated Mexico as an environment conducive for assimilation and acculturation. This supposed tolerance towards Jews in Mexico, Brenner reflected, represented part of a profound phenomenon occurring in Mexico that coincided with social reorganization. She wrote: “here, as in several other Latin-American countries, there is no Jewish problem because ostensibly there is no Jew. To the average Mexican, the Judío (Jew) is purely a Biblical demon.” She described the aftermath of the arrival of Jewish immigrants and the growing Jewish presence in Mexico City: “The Jew is everywhere, but astoundingly unperceived.” She reflected how this integration of Jews into Mexican society occurred naturally, perhaps a

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36 Brenner originally wrote this piece as an autobiographical manuscript titled, “A Race of Princes,” an excerpt of which won a $50 essay prize contest and was published as “A Jewish Girl of Mexico” in the *Jewish Daily Forward* that same year. This article includes Brenner’s personal reflections and demonstrates how she perceived herself as a Jew in Texas versus her transformation and acceptance of her identity in Mexico. The earlier self-hatred she experienced, that she began to overcome, reflects the internalization of a negative perception of herself and a supposed Jewish phenotype that she reflects upon here.
direct reflection of how she herself experienced this adaptation upon her return to Mexico. Brenner observed: “even did the Jews not wish themselves acclimatized, adapted, and molded into the future Mexico, they would be powerless to prevent it…in spite of rabbis, Jewish homes, papers, and clubs, the Jew will be forced into the fiber of the coming Mexico.” In contrast to her past negative experiences as a Jewish girl in Texas, she thrived in Mexico in the 1920s, in an atmosphere of “indifference” towards Jews, which Brenner interpreted as a synonym for tolerance.

Nevertheless, her writing does not consider these immigrants as coming from diverse communities and thus experiencing Mexico in very different ways. Some guarded their religion more than others. Others sought to build a Jewish life to sustain their cultural identity. However, the unifying representation she envisioned served to support her argument of Mexico as a place for Jews, emphasizing intimate relations between Mexicans and Jews. Except for cultured Mexicans and intellectuals, she wrote, Mexicans still believed biblical myths regarding Jews as being damned or as living only in Jerusalem. These concepts, Brenner emphasized, did not interfere with daily interactions or with coexistence. Brenner was alluding to the immigrant who had not been joined by larger numbers of their group, choosing to merge with the larger population, and not thinking of themselves collectively. At the time, the number of Jews in Mexico was approximately 3,000 which may not have been significant enough to have evoked negative conceptions among the broader population. More likely, however, Brenner’s intimate circle offered her a perspective that differed from the average Mexican’s perception of Jews. Brenner wrote, “Mexico faces in her work of reconstruction, the untangling of an amazing number of racial problems…And yet, curiously enough, Mexico lacks the universal ‘Jewish question.’” This
unfamiliarity with and indifference towards Jews by Mexicans meant that Mexicans labeled Jews not by their religion or Jewish ethnicity but rather by their geographic origin or simply as *extranjeros*.

Brenner proclaimed that even the most orthodox Jews from Europe were unconcerned with the lack of rabbi and synagogue in Mexico. She observed: “gradually, unconsciously, because, by the outsiders they are not considered primarily as Jews, they forget the all-embracing character of their religion.” Brenner’s internalized understanding of acceptance may be interpreted as primarily autobiographical, given that she arrived in Mexico as a secular Jew. Brenner did not experience an erasure of a Jewish religious identity because she did not claim one to begin with.

Brenner’s first published article demonstrates how she dealt with these internal uncertainties. She took to writing in an attempt to interpret and present Mexico in a positive way to readership in the United States. Brenner was caught between advocating for acculturation and praising the role of Jewish women in maintaining Jewish religious culture. As she observed: “he comes back to Mexico from gefullte fish and synagogues, bringing perhaps a Jewish wife, perhaps a new stock of merchandise, a sprinkling of English, and an agglomeration of American ideas. But he makes his home Mexican, and he speaks Spanish, dropping his comfortable Yiddish even within the family.”

Brenner’s publication reflects not only her lived experience as a Mexican Jewish woman who moved with seemingly little effort in and out of international Jewish and non-Jewish spaces. Her entry also reflects the influences of her mentors, such as Gamio, and integrated the cultural elites’ philosophies in her writing to promote cultural anthropology. Brenner took it upon

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37 Gefullte fisch is a fish appetizer, commonly associated with the first dish of the Sabbath evening meal.
herself to broadcast a view of Mexico’s developing Jewish community to international readers that was intentionally anti-racist and challenged anti-Semitic views—the Jew would easily acculturate and assimilate to Mexico. The environment there, Brenner claimed, was especially conducive to Jewish belonging.

3.14 Jewish Brides to Mexico: “Mexican Jew Still Imports His Bride”

In January 1925, Brenner published in the International Jewish Press Bureau an article titled “Jewish Brides to Mexico: Mexican Jew Still Imports His Bride.” She detailed for international audiences the experiences of Jewish women arriving as brides from New York to Mexico. She emphasized the already established customs, traditions, and values these women brought with them from the North and how these arrivals transformed Jewish life in Mexico. She wrote, “For in the trail of the Kallahs [brides]…have come the Kallah’s mothers and Kallah’s sisters, and where their feet have trod there has sprung the kosher butcher shop and kosher bakery …and the restaurant, and even the coffee shop whose main wares are strudel, tea, and ‘shmoos’ [Hispanic Jewish pronunciation of the Yiddish word, which would have been inflected as “schmooze”, relaxed conversation]…A world of sidders [Jewish prayer books] and seders [Jewish ritual feasts marking the beginning of the Jewish holiday of Passover], of shule [synagogue] and sheitel [a wig or half-wig worn by Orthodox Jewish married women following the mandate of Jewish law to cover their hair], huppah and mikvah [a canopy under which a Jewish couple stands during their wedding ceremony; a ritual bath].” Brenner’s descriptions leave the reader with the perception of a prospering and bustling Jewish life in the Mexican capital. Furthermore, the entry leaves the reader with no doubt of Brenner’s expertise on Jewish women’s topics and her ability to interpret these rituals and customs for Jewish and non-Jewish readers. She liberally
applied Yiddish and Hebrew terms in order to present herself as a spokeswoman for the emerging community in Mexico City. Brenner introduced terms in Yiddish and Hebrew, referring to Jewish ceremonies and rituals, the same ones that she herself had confessed to not having access or familiarity prior to 1923, before relocating to Mexico City.

In December 1925, Brenner sent a seven-page article to the women’s section of the Jewish Morning Journal titled “Nisht [not] Kosher. The Jewish Women Transplant Tradition.” A slightly modified version from the aforementioned article, she described to international readers the experience of Jewish women arriving from New York to Mexico, traveling as brides. This same article was republished in the December 1925 issue of the Jewish Woman: National Council of Jewish Women as “After Succeeding Economically He Proceeds to New York to Choose a ‘Kalah.’” Brenner appears to have intentionally emphasized “succeeding economically” in the title of her piece to promote Mexico as a place where there was economic growth, and thus an appropriate place for Jewish migration. Brenner described to readers how Mexicans perceived a Jewish wedding: “a wedding is a bright topic of interest not only to the Jewish community but even to the Mexican press, which is inquisitive and voluble about the ceremony it calls ‘Arabian’.” She emphasized the word Arabian here and the wedding itself as cultural spectacle in Mexico. This quote echoes her insistence, as she wrote in other publications in the same period, the exoticness of the Jew in Mexico. According to Brenner, the Jew stood out in the foreign environment but not necessarily negatively. Rather, the Jew was as an “exotic” character celebrated by Mexicans, echoing the same celebration of the indigenous by cultural elites. According to Brenner for the Jewish man in Mexico, “he still has a warm spot in his heart for the ‘Kallah’…The sober glamor of the ‘Kallah,’ becomes accentuated
by its exotic quality. The tradition of the ‘Kallah’ is cherished.” Brenner suggested that the Jewish bride was considered more exotic in Mexico by the Jewish grooms, and the Jewish tradition and rituals that the Jewish bride brought with her to Mexico was even more cherished in the foreign land.

In this same article, Brenner shared with international audiences differences between the married relationships of Mexican men and women and Jewish men who settled in Mexico and immigrant women arriving from New York. She claimed the reason for the limited personal freedom of Mexican married women, who, still in the majority of middle-class families, did not go out alone nor were allowed friends of the opposite sex, were bound by strict patriarchal rules. She believed this was due to fact that the Mexican husband
was “traditionally jealous.” But the Jewish husband, if jealous, Brenner claimed, respected the personal dignity of his wife, and remained open to non-traditional customs. Brenner observed, “I have never heard one sneer, like many Mexicans do, at the rapid adoption of American customs.” Thus, she promoted Mexico as a place that allowed for Jewish women’s autonomy. Brenner observed a tension with what she viewed as patriarchal jealousy among the Mexicans and a marked difference in comparison to the treatment of women by the Jewish man in Mexico. Brenner remained consistent in her argument that secularization would not impact a Jewish man’s desire for an “exotic” Jewish bride. She observed that some of the Jewish brides who had arrived from New York imported to Mexico independent habits and progressive ways of thinking. Brenner referred to the rapid adaptation of American customs and found herself caught in another contradiction: despite her insistence of the Jewish bride’s exoticism and traditionalism, she also presented these women as already affected by American customs. She went even further and claimed that the Jewish women arrivals influenced the Jewish women already living in Mexico. Here she contradicted herself again, since earlier she had alluded to the fact that Jewish women living in the United States had more freedom within the marriage, and thus painted the Mexican marriage context as more traditional. Despite her earlier admission in her journal of cultural ignorance, in this article Brenner attempted to present herself as an expert and insider on Jewishness. Brenner’s writing alludes to her awareness of a Jewish experience in the United States, beyond Mexico City where she wrote the article. Thus, her own negative encounters and experiences as a Jew in Texas led to her advocacy efforts to improve the situation in Mexico and serve as an interpreter for new Jewish women arrivals to Mexico.
3.15 Jewish Women Migrants in Mexico

In the same article, Brenner acknowledged that Jewish women immigrants had their troubles. First, they encountered customs officials who often doubted the legality of their marriages, despite having families waiting, and papers to demonstrate their ability to earn a living. Their moral standing was put into question and since no official organization (such as the Jewish Women’s Council in the United States) maintained agents at the port of Veracruz, where most of the immigrants entered, “women who cannot comply with the regulations to the satisfaction of the customs officials find themselves in a sad situation.”

Fear of white slavery, the sexual trafficking of immigrant Jewish refugee women, often conducted by Jewish men, was a topic that preoccupied Jewish communities in Europe and immigrant communities in North and South America at the beginning of the twentieth century. The B’nai B’rith in the U.S. was the first Jewish organization to tackle the issue.

Brenner’s article echoes the anxieties of the B’nai B’rith, which recounted sordid tales of young Jewish girls abducted for prostitution from major ports in Mexico and throughout the world (López Arellano, “Anita Brenner, correspondent” 258). Stories circulated of young girls deceived upon landing and sold to white slavers. Brenner’s reporting on this issue underscores the mission of the B’nai B’rith to protect Jewish girls from white slavery and further confirms the hypothesis that much of Brenner’s reporting not only relied on her own observations and experiences but also resulted from investigative journalism.

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38 The National Council for Jewish Women formed in Chicago in 1893. Established originally by German women, it sought to modernize Jewish practices for women without losing their religious identity. This group instituted a “domestic feminism” and created a charity. See Faith Rogow “Gone to Another Meeting. The National Council of Jewish Women, 1893-1993”, 69.

39 For a discussion of Jewish prostitution see Edward J. Bristow; Nora Glickman, The Jewish White Slave Trade and the Untold Story of Raquel Liberman.
Brenner’s diligent observations illuminate not only the objectives of B’nai B’rith but also the international movement against the white slave trade. However, the recognition of these troubles appears to be a contradiction to the otherwise favorable picture that Brenner presented of Jewish life in Mexico. Brenner went on to describe the difficulty women arrivals encountered once in Mexico City. She wrote: “it is more difficult for women to find work, given the notoriously limited fields open.” Brenner specifically commented on the working landscape for Jewish women, emphasizing professions that two Jewish women migrants familiar to Brenner had found: one with a medical background found work as a nurse at the B’nai B’rith clinic, and another as a dentist. She referred to the profession of a teacher, the same job she accepted upon her return to Mexico in 1923, but pointed out, “it’s practically a closed field, since they do not know Spanish and Mexico anyway is overcrowded with people competent for such positions.”

Brenner observed gendered notions of motherhood in the domestic space. She wrote that married Jewish women did not have a place to leave their children if they desired to work. She wrote that women were the ones to maintain Jewish religious tradition, placing particular importance on Jewish women’s roles in Mexico. Brenner claimed men had a tendency to slip into “nisht kosher” (not kosher) paths, “an almost fatal one until the Jews in Mexico began to form a community with the arrival of women.” Brenner emphasized the important role Jewish women had in the survival of Jewish tradition in Mexico and childbearing. These observations reflect Brenner’s internalized perception of the role of a Jewish woman, likely reflecting her own sense of responsibility to preserve Jewishness and, at some point in her future, become a mother. Moreover, Brenner again contradicted herself. On the one hand, she desired to be modern and participate as a
journalist and intelligent reporter on culture, producing knowledge freely and without hesitation, experimenting with her sexuality with multiple partners. On the other hand, Brenner fell back on traditional gender norms, defining Jewish woman in Mexico as the holders of tradition, therefore placing an enormous burden on these women to maintain their traditional gender roles as daughters, mothers and wives.

Defining and differentiating between culture, religious identity, and ethnicity in Mexico anticipates debates on “authenticity.” Authenticity assumes fixed, essential, and unitary definitions of cultures, identities, and groupings. Authenticity thus became a political and economic resource in specific cultural projects and gave rise to what Kubena Mercer (1990) called “the burden of representation” (Yuval-Davis 45). Women are often required to carry the “burden of representation” as they are constructed as the symbolic carriers of identity and honor, personally and collectively. Brenner described the Jewish bride as the producers and transporters of religious identity and culture and as persons who “not only transplant tradition but forge ahead and make it.” Brenner may have unwittingly burdened Jewish women as the carriers of Jewish religious and cultural identity. Through the lens of Brenner’s writing on Jewish women in the Mexican context, the reader observes contradictory impulses that complicated women’s ability to craft a stable identity.
Brenner concluded her entry for the *Jewish Morning Journal* with a tip of her hat to Frances Toor. She identified Toor as “a Jewish teacher from California who has amalgamated herself to the country which she loves. It has been through her efforts that *Mexican Folkways*, a small magazine which represents the best intellectual and artistic elements of Mexico, has been published.” She makes an intentional distinction between Toor and the traditional Jewish bride. Brenner wrote: “to speak of Frances Toor, unprejudiced and independent, in the same breath with a tradition bound Kaleh [bride], does not seem to me paradoxical.” By presenting Toor and the Jewish bride side by side, Brenner held the Jewish woman migrant in the same regard that she held the Jewish intellectual woman who formed part of her inner circle. She saw herself as part of a broader
Jewish Mexican identity, and proudly claimed that these women, “not only transplant tradition but forge ahead and make it.” Brenner sought to define through writing a balance between tradition and modernity, and that Kaleh [bride] and Toor both represented an important part of Brenner’s own journey to reclaim her Jewish identity in the context of Mexico City. Brenner’s submission to the Orthodox-leaning *Jewish Morning Journal* celebrated Jewish women’s transmission of culture and rituals, and their critical role in the survival of a Jewish religious identity. Upon reading this article, women readers in New York might have anticipated an atmosphere of belonging where Jewishness was embraced and modernity would flourish.

3.16 “Assimilation in Mexico”

Brenner wrote “Assimilation in Mexico” as a special for the *Jewish Morning Journal* in December 1925. Here she narrated a positive Jewish immigrant story in Mexico and showcased examples of Jewish belonging. She emphasized the smooth adaptation of Jews to Mexico, from learning Spanish to personality similarities between the Mexican and Jew. Brenner declared that intermarriage would eventually happen in the Mexican community, but that there would always be those who remained endogamous. Brenner traced similarities between the Mexican and the Jew, both physical and emotional, to declare the Jew as part of the fabric of Mexico. She wrote, “In Mexico, the Jewish immigrant acclimatizes quickly. He has much in common with the people. He does not stand apart, as in an Anglo-Saxon environment, by those things stamped as ‘Jewish’—love of gesture and exteriorization of emotion, many children, noise, spicy cooking—even ‘Semitic’ profile and swarthy skin, or plumpness—for those things are Mexican also.” She described how adaptation was swift and echoed the views of the artists and intellectuals
with whom she associated, who claimed Jewish identity as synonymous with Mexican identity.

Despite the hardships these Jewish immigrants faced, Brenner claimed they experienced a transformation and embraced Mexican identity. She observed: “arriving often without a cent and with no knowledge of Spanish or of Mexico, it is a matter sometimes only of weeks before the immigrant, in spite of hunger, sickness, and friendlessness, comparatively sleek, and, even with his fair skin and blue eyes, is exceedingly Mexican.” She reflected on the Jew in Mexico’s linguistic abilities: “his Spanish builds itself up quickly, though from the bottom up, as it were. The first few phrases he learns are apt to be vulgar, and he’ll utter street Spanish at you in a friendliest, guileless way.” Brenner claimed Jews in Mexico did not encounter prejudices and intolerance that they experienced elsewhere. She wrote: “The hate he has fled from elsewhere is, in Mexico, directed against a purely legendary figure. No one dreams of connecting an actual living being with Judas stories.” Again, Brenner referenced the Mexican inability to identify a person as Jewish and thus the resulting “tolerance.” This article presented assimilation as a progressive process, rather than as a problem. Religious intermarriage would eventually happen for some, but this did not concern Brenner, as there would always be those who would stay within the fold.

In 1925 Brenner promoted assimilation as a positive thing. She defined assimilation as a progressive process and as such “it has a triple aspect: spiritual, physical, and cultural. In its first and most universal phase, it is loss of religious, indifference to mosaic authority. But no matter how many Jews renounce the faith of their fathers, there are always some who have been able to make it their own. Always.” At first glance, it is possible to conclude
that Brenner intended to prove that the cultural climate in Mexico was simply easier for a Jewish immigrant to assimilate than in other contexts. On closer examination, however, it is clear that Brenner’s article included a deeper political message. Brenner appeared to promote the Jew as an ideal immigrant, one that represented the very “desirable” characteristic of an immigrant to Mexico, shedding himself of his Jewishness, and assimilating into the Mexican context. Brenner appeared to promote a loss of religious identity in the Mexican context, and this appeared to be non-negotiable. This article was written before Milton Gordon (1964) theorized about the “structural” processes of assimilation. According to Gordon, structural assimilation takes place when immigrant groups enter fully into the societal network of groups and institutions of the host society (70). Brenner suggested the same process for the Mexican Jew: “And the same rhythmic law parallels in cultural assimilation, that identification with the country in which he remains on the sufferance of which the Jew is an international example. No one is more fervently American than an American Jew; no one more fervently French than a French Jew; no more chauvinistic Russian than a Russian Jew…Yet he remains a Jew, and he can’t tell you what makes him one.” Therefore, Brenner claimed that national origin would precede Jewish identity. The Mexican Jews would be easily assimilable as they would claim their Mexican identity first and their Jewish identity second. Brenner’s article concludes that when structural assimilation takes place, race, ethnicity, religion, and immigration status decline in their importance for determining full identification with the host country. Thus, the Jew will remain a Jew but will also assimilate easily to the country, just as easily as other “desirable foreigners,” such as the French or Russian.
3.17 "The Sephardim---Our 'Latin' Brothers"

Brenner’s "The Sephardim---Our 'Latin' Brothers,” also written in December 1925, strategically presented Jews to readers across the border in a way that fit Mexico’s post-revolutionary national project. Brenner described a Sephardic identity that emphasized connections to an Iberian past and shared histories with Mexicans to justify and legitimate the presence of Jews in Mexico. Brenner wrote “Unlike the occidentals, who are all comparatively recent immigrants, the Sephardim have been in Mexico for a long time--since the beginning, one might say. For they were Spanish and Portuguese Jews--Sephardim--who accompanied and followed the conquistadores (1500) into the Spanish colonies.” The Sephardic Iberian backgrounds and their expulsion from Spain the same year that Columbus sailed for the Caribbean, produced an origin myth for Sephardim that was shared by Mexico, with “both peoples irreversibly transformed by their encounters with Spain” (Mays). The Sephardim outnumbered their Ashkenazi counterparts in Mexico in the early 1920s. Given the Sephardim’s understanding of Hispanic social, linguistic, and cultural norms, the Sephardim had greater opportunity in Mexico for upward mobility compared to their religious counterparts of Yiddish-and Arabic-speaking origins. Sephardic Jews spoke Ladino as their mother tongue, a Hispanic language not significantly different from Mexican Spanish. Their multilingual roots in the Ottoman Empire allowed this group to publicly perform nationalities that did not correspond to their Middle Eastern origins (Mays). Brenner's historical exaggerations demonstrate her writing as a self-trained journalist who appeared to have lacked historical training or awareness of Sephardic Jews’ Ottoman origins. At the same time, her observations open a window into the ways in which Ashkenazi Jews interacted with the Sephardim and with new immigrant arrivals to Mexico.
The article, heretofore overlooked by scholars, demonstrates Brenner’s intention to research and identify a historical Jewish presence in Mexico in support of her claim of Mexico as an appropriate place for Jews to settle. *The Jewish Morning Journal* may not have published the article (it apparently only exists in typescript) perhaps revealing tensions within the community at the beginning of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{40} Jewish ethnic groups, in particular the Sephardim and Ashkenazim, have historically encountered “ranked stratification,” where issues of superiority and inferiority inform their interactions, and "co-ethnic recognition failure," where Ashkenazi Jews denied the ethnic belonging of Sephardim as Jews (Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews* 108). In Mexico City, Brenner acknowledges the existence of both. Nevertheless, Jewish immigrants experienced different Mexicos, and Brenner used her writing to encourage Jewish immigration while easing concerns about assimilation among Jewish leaders across the border. She wrote: “Yet it is curious to note that, even though the occidentals are the most recent comers, there is on the whole more intermarriage among them than among the Sephardim, who in appearance and custom can hardly be told apart from the Mexicans.” While Brenner had not made a sociological study to demonstrate comparative intermarriage rates, her writing was impressionistic, a feature of journalism at that time. Brenner presented herself as an expert and reported to her readers her firsthand knowledge of the developing community: “There is only one synagogue, and that is an old Sephardic congregation, established long before the immigration of western Jews. I do not know why there is no Ashkenazim synagogue. There is no Mexican reason why there should not be.”

\textsuperscript{40} The typescript of this article is located in the Harry Ransom Center. Because the article was not found in the digital archive of the *Jewish Morning Journal* from the National Library of Israel nor the Historical Jewish Press, it is not certain if this article was actually published.
Another vivid example of Brenner’s attempt to leave an impression on her readers is her description of a scene from Yom Kippur in a Sephardic Synagogue in Mexico City: “rows of swarthy, red-lipped men, and above, women, gorgeously attired. Silks, velvets, metal laces, bare shoulders, heavy chains, large jewels; brilliant colors; nowhere the forbidden black. Oriental women, seeming to lack the face-veil; languid eyes, and a fritter of brightness in all the assembly.” Brenner emphasized the aesthetic in her description and
built on the fixation with the exotic foreigner that the artists and intellectuals in her group valued. The colorful descriptions would have left readers of the perhaps-unpublished entry with a lingering impression of wealth, luxury, and orientalism. Brenner highlighted the dress, laces from Spain and ostrich feathers imported from other lands, exotic ornaments worn among fashionable women in the metropole. When reading the passage, abundance and wealth come to mind, inspiring migration to Mexico. Brenner wrote: “The women fan themselves with costly ostrich feathers and rustle their Spanish laces. Suddenly--a pause, a stillness, and breaks forth from them one single, piercing wail, concentration of long sorrow into one unbearable, eternal instant--ebbing back into that stillness, and then again, the brightness and the joyous fans.” Brenner aimed to emphasize these women as having Spanish origins by exaggerating the origins of their dress. While it is unlikely these women would have worn Spanish laces imported from Spain, the garments worn by these women would have originated from Ottoman lands, the article leaves an impression on readers, a feature of journalism and the sensationalist style of reporting of the era.

Brenner’s fluency in English as well as her North American citizenship afforded her the opportunity to transmit the Jewish experience in Mexico through the United States Jewish press to Anglo readers across the border. Her articles demonstrate how she attempted to embrace her Jewishness within the context of a circle of artists, intellectuals, and bohemians, who were also Jewish or found Brenner’s Jewishness as exotic or desirable. Her presence and influence in these circles stimulated some Christian Mexicans to embrace a Jewish identity.

Just over one year after Brenner arrived in Mexico, she wrote: “After all, I am glad I am a Jewess. And I do not say this with the defensive aggressiveness that the phrase ‘and
proud of it’ usually carries. Devils, rebels or angels, poets or peddlers, princes or pawnbrokers, we are not so bad, after all. At least we are interesting” (“A Jewish Girl of Mexico”). Brenner proudly shared her self-love to Jewish readers across the border. One can imagine Brenner’s aim to inspire and stimulate immigration to Mexico by young girls like herself. At the same time, the B’nai B’rith and the Jewish journals in the United States employed Brenner as their influencer: young, fresh, with a transnational perspective—a striking counterpoint to the United States Jewish leadership negative reporting on Mexico and the illegal border crossings to the United States by young Jewish men. Brenner wrote provocative headlines and produced journalism that entertained and provoked her audience, reflecting the new cosmopolitan culture and challenging traditional and conservative ideals. Brenner’s journals and publications provide scholars insight into how the community developed. By examining Brenner’s earliest writing and her non-traditional entry into Columbia University, much of which has not been analyzed until now, this chapter offers a preliminary look into the multiple strategies that Brenner relied on to contribute to emerging definitions of Jewishness in Mexico and developed her modern identity as a Jewish “chica moderna”. Without a doubt, the 1920s in Mexico City was a period of intense sexual exploration among the intelligentsia, which Brenner surely experimented and fell victim to, but which she also captured and aestheticized through her artistic productions, examined in detail in the subsequent chapter.

Brenner’s independence and assertiveness surpassed any typical woman’s identity considered acceptable by established patriarchal norms for a woman in the 1920s. Brenner’s journals and articles reveal her bravery and forwardness: she often traveled alone, tried to rescue women from a possible entanglement in prostitution in Veracruz, and
wrote openly on controversial topics such as sex and assimilation. Brenner’s actions go far beyond the most progressive understanding of a young woman’s capability.
CHAPTER IV: THE INVENTION OF THE MEXICAN JEWISH CHICA MODERNA

Each day is an occasion to reinvent ourselves.
Ralph Lauren

4.1 Unfiltered Productions

In the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution (1910-20), expatriate photographers flocked to the blossoming art scene in Mexico City. Photography emerged as a new art and pastime of the industrial period. Photographs enhanced both the mystery and suggestiveness of the subject being shot. However, photographers faced a dilemma in portraying Mexico: whether to opt for the temptation of reproducing the beautiful exotic façade, or instead searching for more complex ways to represent the country (Mraz 8). Conversations regarding how to best visually portray mexicanidad were commonly embodied in the aesthetics adopted by transnational, cosmopolitan figures such as Brenner, Edward Weston, and Tina Modotti.

U.S.-born Weston and Italian-born Modotti traveled on a ship from California to Mexico in 1923. They formed part of the exodus of transnational intellectuals and artists who fled their countries' materialism, puritanism, and conservatism, attracted by the possibility of participating in a revolutionary society. Weston and Modotti were cultural experimenters who sought to establish photography as a medium in its own right. Their relationship was a public scandal- they were not married to each other, had a polyamorous relationship, and spent their time experimenting, either with their cameras, with each other, or with other people. Anita Brenner became a primary subject of both photographer’s lenses.
Weston, who later on collaborated with images for Brenner’s *Idols Behind Altars*, arrived in Mexico City from Los Angeles, California in 1923 with the Italian born actress and artist Tina Modotti. Weston’s work generated initial excitement when it was exhibited in October 1923 at the Aztec Land Gallery in Mexico City, where he sold eight prints (Lehtinen 141). Weston’s reputation quickly grew in Mexico and a headline printed on September 5, 1925 in the Guadalajara newspaper *El Sol* described him as “Weston, the Emperor of Photography, Notwithstanding His Birth in North America, Has a Latin Soul” (141).

Twenty-year-old Brenner appears nude in a series of photographs shot by Weston in Mexico City. Brenner’s curvaceous figure is positioned in a way that—as she herself would later note—resembles a pear. Her face is shadowed, and her gaze is turned downward, leading the image to appear more like a painted portrait than a photograph. Weston, discussing what he later called “his finest set of nudes,” photographed Brenner with an emphasis on form, reducing her body to a series of geometric shapes. In two photographs in the *Nude* series her head is cropped out of the composition with the central focal point her bareback and behind. On February 12, 1926, reflecting in her journal on these photographs, Brenner wrote: “what I like about his work is the quality of transmutation. The nude he did of me looks like a pear…..”
The picture alludes to the tension between the objectification and appreciation of the female form. In these photographs, Weston's framing challenges the norms of classic portraiture by manipulating the female body and the impersonal nature of the shots—these transmutations would help lead him to fame. Weston's reflections on the shoot in *The Daybooks* reveal that Brenner was the propelling force behind the photoshoot:

I was shaving when Anita came, hardly expecting her on such a gloomy, drizzling day. I made excuses, having no desire, no ‘inspiration’ to work … but she took no hints, undressing while I reluctantly prepared my camera…. And then appeared to me the most exquisite lines, forms, volumes – and I accepted – working efficiently, rapidly, indeed…Reviewing the new prints, I am seldom as happy as I am with the pear-like nude of Anita. I turn to it again and again. I could hug the print in sheer joy. It is one of my most perfect photographs (21).
While it is not clear from Brenner or Weston’s journal who was the first to observe the resemblance of the body positioning to the fruit, Brenner’s comments demonstrate her conscious choice to participate in the production. Weston produced fifteen negatives of Brenner’s body arranged in various positions that echoed realist and abstract forms and manipulated the female body as a form of modernist experimentation.

Weston targeted the women in his circle as his earliest subjects, including Modotti, photographed in July 1923, and Lupe Marín and Nahui Olin, photographed in 1924. The slippage between a woman as a critical participant in artistic and cultural productions within a predominantly male social order is centered in Brenner’s nude. Weston operated within the framework of patriarchal culture. It was acceptable and even mandatory for male artists to paint or photograph nude women, but the opposite would have unlikely occurred. It was almost mandatory in the art field for women sitters to pose nude. Brenner appeared to have participated eagerly in the nude sitting as a means to contribute to artistic productions, a great concern for her at the time. At the same time, this nude demonstrates how Brenner frequently blurred a fine line between critically analyzing the conventional vision of women of the time but also how she dealt personally with her situation as a modern woman. Brenner described herself as inanimate in her nudes, as “a pear,” and her orchestrating the production places her in dialogue with modernist photography and art. Thus, she centered herself as a collaborator and producer in these artistic productions rather than simply a subject to be gazed upon.
Figure 21: Edward Weston, Untitled (Nude), 1925

Figure 22: Edward Weston, Untitled (Nude), 1925
The collaboration between Brenner and Weston began with Brenner modeling for portraits and nudes. This connection led Brenner to commission Weston to take photographs for her forthcoming volume on Mexican decorative art, *Idols Behind Altars*. This is another example of the relationship being two-way. Brenner was not a submissive subject in this case, passively posing nude, nor was her participation limited to her role as a model. Brenner hired Weston, and he depended on her funding for his contributions to *Idols*. Brenner documented her reflections following the shoot in her diary in September 1926. She wrote: “marked an era by cutting my hair completely short, which changed my face and was quite a relief. Besides that, admitted myself enamored [with Charlot]. The two boldest acts of my life” (Brenner, Anita Brenner Archive). Brenner’s reflections suggest her acute awareness of the power behind her actions, from cutting her hair short to posing nude while simultaneously feeling deeply self-conscious. Nevertheless, Brenner managed to take full advantage of the cosmopolitan mood of the era and experimented openly and unapologetically.

4.2 De Facto Feministas

In 1926, the Italian-born photographer Tina Modotti photographed Brenner in a series of portraits titled *Anita Brenner in Profile* (1926). This work accentuates Modotti’s stylistic differences from Weston's. Whereas Weston emphasized the natural surfaces of Brenner's naked body, Modotti concentrated on her face. In Modotti's photographs, Brenner dressed in a man’s suit, her eyes mysteriously shadowed by the brim of a large hat and her hair cut short and shaved on the sides. Brenner’s supposed Jewish phenotype (as emphasized frequently by Brenner in her journals and articles) is centered in Modotti’s photographs. This positioning likely reflected the vital role that Brenner’s nose played in
her identity and her desire for her Jewish identity to be centered in the photograph. At the same time Modotti concentrated on Brenner’s face, emphasizing Brenner’s “masculine” appearance: shaved sideburns, dark make-up, and a man’s suit all exemplify Brenner and Modotti’s reflections on gender and sexual identity. As revealed in journal entries and publications written for the Jewish press in previous chapters, Brenner entangled her Jewish identity in her productions to ethnic otherness and sexual deviance. Through her photography, Modotti emphasized these distinctive facets of Brenner's evolving identity.

Figure 23: Tina Modotti, Anita Brenner in Profile, Circa 1926.
Figure 24: Tina Modotti, Anita Brenner in Profile, Circa 1926.
Figure 25: Tina Modotti, Anita Brenner in Profile, Circa 1926

Modotti began contributing to the emerging Mexican aesthetic as soon as she touched Mexican soil. The unique cultural climate provided the ideal conditions for Modotti to make a name for herself as a photographer. The modern urban space of Mexico City allowed her to reproduce images of women that depended on her feminine identity and perceptiveness to create a feminist aesthetic. This aesthetic advocated for women’s rights based on the equality of the sexes, and Modotti transformed herself into an active modern woman rather than a stereotypical sexualized interpretation of femininity. One example of this reinterpretation of femininity is through Modotti’s photographs of Brenner crossdressing. She captured Brenner exactly as who she was and how she wanted to be “seen” in that moment. Without hesitation, the two women collaborated to create art that challenged the *machismo* and patriarchal culture. Modotti’s art and Brenner’s eagerness to
participate resulted in a fusion of influences that both women brought from the United States and expanded on in Mexico City.

Both Modotti and Brenner’s artistic productions were reflections of their transnational identities, unveiled in the unique cultural climate of Mexico City. The distinctive interpretation of modernity, a blend of formal rigor with social awareness, captured through Modotti’s photographs, quickly aligned with Mexican national projects and indigenismo. Modotti captured Mexico’s people and landscape, through the lens of the camera, and viewers access an intimate view of her social concerns. Later on, in her 1929 essay “Sobre la fotografía,” she reflected, “Always when the words “art” and “artistic” are applied to my photographic work, I am disagreeably affected…I consider myself a photographer, nothing more. If my photographs differ from what is usually done in this field, it is precisely because I try to produce honest photographs, without distortions or manipulations” (Modotti 196). This reflection reveals how for Modotti, just as for Brenner and other women artists in their circle, artistic productions became a natural outgrowth of their cosmopolitan identity. Their work became an intimate portrayal of how they perceived themselves and their place in Mexico’s experimental climate. At the same time, Modotti’s reflection reveals a sense of her insecurity in her attempt to diminish the definition of herself as an artist. Rather she boxed herself as “just a photographer.” In contrast to Weston’s aforementioned reflection from his journal, where he proudly boasted about the art he created in the positioning of Brenner as a pear, there is a marked difference in tone from Modotti’s reflections of her work and whether or not her photography could be defined as “art.” Brenner and these women artists produced art in a way that provided a space to release their creative energy. These women articulated their views of the
progressive climate through their art, without being held against any predetermined notion of what was considered acceptable behavior for women.

Figure 26: Tina Modotti, Woman with Flag, 1928
4.3 Movement of the Cosmos

Another example of a transnational woman using her body to create art is the overlooked poet, painter, and model Nahui Olin (Carmen Mondragón). Olin, a native of Mexico from a wealthy family, her father Manuel Mondragón, a Mexican military officer who played a prominent role in the Mexican Revolution, spent her adolescence in exile in France and Spain and returned to her homeland in 1921. Olin’s exposure to cosmopolitan cities as a young girl led to her participation in the art scene in Mexico City and she did so through artistic experimentation with her feminine physique. Olin’s transnational identity, like Brenner and Modotti, attuned her to her uniqueness and paved her way into the Mexican cosmopolitan art scene.
Olin’s lover, Dr. Atl (Gerardo Murillo), was a highly respected Mexican artist, writer, and political activist. He renamed her Nahui Olin, a Nahuatl name that translates to “the movement of the cosmos” and a name that is both nationalist and exotic. Her beauty was described as “exotic” by artists such as Rivera. Her eyes and dark features caught the attention of Mexican artists and intellectuals and in the majority of her paintings, Olin intentionally exaggerated her large green eyes. By focusing on her eyes, just as Brenner’s nose was centered and particular clothing was selected to alter her appearance in Modotti’s photographs, Olin executed control over how the viewer perceived her image. By emphasizing certain physical features in their art, through Olin’s self-portraits and Brenner’s modeling, these women liberated themselves and their bodies, taking control of their bodies as active participants in the creative process. Olin’s active role in creating art, in addition to her self-portraits, is underscored by the fact that she cosigned the portraits created of her by Charlot. While Brenner may not have ensured that her ink signature was included in the photographs she collaborated on, she appeared to have been the leading creative energy behind the shots. Similar to Brenner’s photographs, Olin’s self-portraits reflect the complex tensions between the objectification and appreciation of the female form and an active negotiation taking place of how and to what extent women could participate openly and freely in Mexico’s Renaissance. At the same time, Olin subjected herself to the masculine gaze, posing and painting herself nude, focusing on her physical beauty and female body, as if that was the only way she viewed herself as worthy of being in the spotlight. Yet, despite the sexualization of her body, Olin centered herself as the central protagonist in these artistic productions. By closely examining these women’s
productions, the viewer may witness various tensions these women faced while being used as models and gazed upon, at the same time taking agency either in the pose or the art itself.

Figure 28: Nahui Olin, “Autorretrato”, Circa 1927

4.4 Cosmopolitan Identity Construction

Brenner, Modotti, and Olin were not the only cosmopolitan artists who intentionally emphasized distinct features of their identity in their placement of themselves at the center of their art. One of the lesser-known photographs from this period is of the trio of friends: Federico Marin, Tina Modotti, and Jean Charlot. Some of the most well-known photographs of the Mexican Renaissance were taken on Weston’s azotea [rooftop]. In this photograph shot on Weston’s azotea, only the backs and profiles are visible of the three friends. Federico Marin, the younger brother of Lupe Marin, Diego Rivera’s first wife, plays the role of a curious observer and Jean Charlot plays the role of an intrigued artist as he draws with a pencil on Modotti’s back. Modotti’s back and shoulders are
exposed and her hair is tied up to expose her skin. She is dressed femininely in a floral
dress and large earrings and both men are dressed in suits. Modotti appears willing to
participate in the production with the two men, her face is relaxed and she is leaning
towards Charlot so he can easily trace his pencil across her back. Charlot’s coat falls from
his shoulder as he focuses intensely on his drawing. The three photographed together in
this erotic scene leave the viewer with lingering thoughts of polyamory, perhaps intentional
by Weston in the positioning of his subjects. Meanwhile, Charlot’s use of Modotti’s body
to produce art objectifies Modotti as a human canvas. But this objectification appeared to
be approved by Modotti, as she gazes to the side, a proud collaborator in this modern visual
production.

Figure 29: Edward Weston, Marín, Charlot, and Modotti on the azotea, Circa 1924
This image leaves the viewer to reflect on the production and performativity at the center of the renaissance. All four artists involved in the photograph have taken an active role in the artistic performance as producers, collaborators, and posers. While Modotti’s primary purpose in this shot may have been to serve as a beautiful model and an object to be used and gazed upon by the male artists, she challenges this role by her confident positioning, recognizing her place as the primary focus of the shot. An analysis of Brenner’s nudes together with these images of Olin and Modotti requires attention to “the gaze” and “the look.” These women managed to turn their gaze back towards the viewer and discovered a loophole in their place of marginality. Rather than participating passively in the social environment they found themselves, these women took an active role and co-created as a form of empowerment.

How do female nudes in Mexico serve as a site to challenge hegemonic structures and engage in an alternative form of Mexico’s modernity project? The frequency of Mexico City’s avant-garde women posing nude is no coincidence. Brenner’s return to Mexico coincided with a period when new social spaces and freer moral codes were opening up for women, particularly in intellectual and artistic circles, as a result of the social upheaval of the revolutionary process. As a result of Brenner’s sense of displacement, she, and fellow transnational artists like her, searched for their identity and art served as another mode of expression to examine the self. How does the nude challenge or collide with the nationalistic understanding of Mexican identity? For example, Olin’s autorretrato challenges any consideration of the female nude as an object of a “male gaze” as she produces the painting herself and her green eyes gaze back at the observer. The tensions between social constructions and self-determination that Brenner internalized, as well as
her visual and verbal representation by others, have much to do with the conception of the *chica moderna* that she incarnated in her lifestyle, dress, and professional activity and its implications for her personal interactions, expectations, and desires related to gender.

As exemplified in these photographs, the Mexican nation was rebuilt upon an aesthetic that was embodied by the artists of the period. As Brenner wrote in *Idols*: “Nowhere as in Mexico has art been so organically a part of life, at one with national ends and national longings, fully the possession of each human” (32). The women artists therefore used their productions as a mode to center their bodies in the definition of the Mexican aesthetic. In other words, by placing themselves and their bodies at the center of their art, cosmopolitan women artists managed to include their unique identities in the definition of *Mexicanidad*. Drawing from and expanding on Judith Butler's work on gendered “performativity,” Conor expands on the term “appearing.” Appearances could refer to a performance, but modern Mexico also took on a new orientation concerning the visual. Butler's theories on spectacle are helpful in the context of rapid industrialization and what transformed the power of seeing and being seen, propelled by media, radio, advertising, modern magazines, photography, and film. These mediums facilitated the new modern construction, especially the newly gendered subject. In the photograph of the trio, Modotti performed the role of the passive feminine subject, her body being drawn on and receiving the gaze of the two men in the photograph and the photographer taking the shot. Butler’s understanding of gendered performativity as an everyday practice that went far beyond the stage reflects how these artists in Mexico integrated gender into their art and how this integration was often an intentional performance and social commentary. In contrast to the above photograph, where Modotti appeared to be willingly feminized,
sexualized, and objectified, Modotti’s photographs of Brenner centered on a masculinized empowered woman. Butler refers to performance as a metaphor to understand that “nature” does not exist and that biologically equivalent bodies may “perform” different genders and forms of embodiment. Brenner attempted to perform an alternative gender in the photographs taken by Modotti and inspire mystery in her viewers.

Equally valuable to contextualize Brenner and the cosmopolitan artists’ participation and productions in the transnational modernist movement are John Mraz’s reflections in *Looking for Mexico*. Mraz, a leading historian of visual culture, understands identity as constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed endlessly. As Stuart Hall and others remind us, instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished historical fact, scholars should think of identity as a “production,” which is “never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation”(68). The fluidity behind this definition, coupled with Mraz’s deconstruction and reconstruction, reflects precisely how Brenner constructed and deconstructed her Jewishness and feminine identity. At the same time, it reflects the two-way relationship between the cosmopolitan artists and intellectuals who produced art that evolved parallel to the Mexican cultural climate that the artists simultaneously sought to define through their art. By closely examining the cosmopolitan artists’ productions and performances, scholars may observe overlooked cultural commentary, intentions, and contradictions at the center of the Mexican Renaissance.

For Brenner, Mexico City was “a place that gave her the combination of intellectual camaraderie and independence required to develop her career as an acknowledged expert on its arts and politics” (Adams 124). Mexico City attracted transnational women from
around the world. Texan Katherine Anne Porter traveled by train to Mexico City in 1920 to participate in the production of Fantasía Mexicana, as elaborated in chapter one. As a Texan, she “considered Mexico her ‘familiar country’” (Delpar 34). Modotti sailed from California to Mexico in July 1923, convinced that Mexico offered an exciting artistic environment. Toor arrived from California in 1922, and the North American Alma Reed arrived from San Francisco in 1922. Lola Alvarez Bravo and Lupe Marin also came to Mexico City in their early twenties after spending time in New York City, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Brenner’s other friends were anthropologist Lucy Parry Knox, painter and poet Nahui Olin, composer Concha Michel, and Ella Goldberg. Although these women were drawn to Mexico City for various motives and under different circumstances, they were brought together precisely because of their identities as cosmopolitans, outsiders, cultural pilgrims, and “chicas modernas.” They pursued projects from unique approaches and operated in an in-between space that permitted levels of independence and productions unfamiliar to most women at the time.

The Mexican state's cultural projects aligned with emerging consumer culture. This emergence allowed for the creation of new models for "appropriate" female behavior. Women experimented with new identities. As one scholar notes: "As soldaderas, as industrial workers, as teachers, and athletes, they marched in parades. As famous or infamous artists-painters and patrons, actresses and hootchy-kootchy dancers" (Rubenstein, Bad Language 84). Among these new identities appeared the chica moderna: young, educated, and emotionally and financially independent. The spectacle driving these new cultural industries taught women to perform modern identities through makeup,

41 For more on Porter see Janis Stout, Katherine Anne Porter A Sense of the Times.
clothes, posture, mannerisms, and attitude (Sluis 16). Brenner’s gender provides an additional layer of diversity which sheds further light on her productions and negotiations of her transnational Jewish identity. Brenner navigated transnational spaces that were traditionally patriarchal, both from the perspective of Mexican machismo and Jewish orthodoxy. Brenner’s posing nude suggests a desire to expand the definitions of her Mexican, feminine, and Jewish identity. At the same time, Brenner confronted sexual exploitation, a norm for women at the time, and frequently encountered sexual aggression. One could interpret Brenner’s participation and posing sensually as her form of rebellion.

Brenner recognized the power of visual images to communicate the excitement of Mexico's cultural Renaissance to foreign audiences. While challenging the boundaries of traditional womanhood and exploring a new model of feminine conduct was undoubtedly a bold move on Brenner’s part, perhaps more daring was her endeavor to redefine the limits of acceptable behavior as a representative for Jewish women in Mexico and the United States. Thus, Brenner strategically embodied and performed artistic pursuits as a Jewish "chica moderna," expressing her unique gender identity, Jewish identity, and sexual identity, often reinventing herself as she saw fit within the bohemian circles of Mexico City. By emphasizing Brenner’s output and performance of Jewishness, scholars may define elements that made her at once representative and atypical of the Mexican avant-garde. As Brenner asserted her cosmopolitan identity, she adapted an identity that included Jewishness. These productions led to her transformation in Mexico City. In 1925 she wrote: “After a time, I strutted with my hooked nose again…For what Mexico has given me, I love my country. I re-introduced myself to myself, and even with a certain respect” (A Jewish Girl). This next section examines closer the strut that Brenner proudly assumed and
emphasizes the cultural and social climate in Mexico City that provided the ideal conditions for this identity to emerge.

4.5 Production of the Beautiful Jewess in Mexico City

Brenner’s reclaiming of a Jewish identity occurred parallel to her development into a *chica moderna*. She displayed both publicly and, for Brenner, both performative aspects of her personality represented a curiosity to be explored, experimented with, and examined.

In *Transatlantic Spectacles of Race*, Kimberly Snyder Manganelli unpacks the literary trope of the beautiful Jewess. This image grew out of a long tradition of the *belle juive* that dominated perceptions of the “dark” woman in Britain, Europe, and the United States. In 1838 the Jewish actress Rachel Felix debuted at the Théâtre-François as the “Tragic Muse.” France’s Tragic Muse was “first a great Jewess, second a great actress, and third a great lover.” In Felix, ideas of nationalism, ethnicity, and sexuality were united in one body, allowing her to achieve “iconic status as both a French actress and a spectacle of Judaism” (94). As Felix toured Europe, England, and the United States, her image circulated in the nineteenth-century cultural imagination as a figure of power and sexual autonomy (94). Inspired by the noble Jewesses in scripture, the dramatists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries transformed the biblical Jewess into a tragic heroine.42 In the works of Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Racine, the *belle juive* was constructed in much the same way as the Tragic Mulatta would be represented centuries later (95). The beautiful Jewess embodied

42These unlikely biblical heroines include Ruth (mentioned in chapter three) Rachel and Esther. Rachel, wife of Jacob, died giving birth to her second son and represents an image of tragic womanhood (Frymer-Kensky). Esther, a young Jewish woman who becomes a Persian queen transformed from a docile girl into a leader. She followed the instruction of Mordecai, hiding her Jewish identity, and formed part of King Ahaseurus’ harem. When Mordecai informed her of a plot against the Jews, she refused to collaborate. She revealed her true identity as both a Jew and a woman of action who takes charge in Mordecai’s effort to stop Haman. See Jewish Women’s Archive. “JWA - Queen Esther: A Purim Heroine.”
virtue and sensuality, thus representing a sanitized and palatable Jew for the middle-class Christian audience.

This literary trope highlights an interconnectedness between the Beautiful Jewess, the *chica moderna*, and Anita Brenner. Like the Tragic Mulatta, the Beautiful Jewess, and the Tragic Muse, the *chica moderna* was a spectacle upon which the nation mapped their anxieties regarding how and in what way they belonged to ambiguous notions of national identity (Manganelli 161). Connecting these figures to Brenner proves particularly useful when considering Jewishness as a spectacle and Brenner’s experiences as a Jewish woman. As discussed in the previous chapters, the private space of Brenner’s journals reveals the intimacy of her romantic relationships and internal search for her spirituality and sexuality. Brenner's production of her Jewishness in Mexico City through explorations involving writing, research, and the arts, distanced her from her original perception of Jewishness in Texas. Therefore, I interpret Brenner as a version of Rachel Felix, the embodiment of an “othered” Jewish *chica moderna* that achieved status and acceptance among transnational intellectuals and transformed as she defined her identity through performative expression. How did Brenner’s embodiment of her Jewish identity challenge social norms and engage her in the debate about national identity, modernity, Jewishness, and sexuality?

4.6 En México como en París: Fashioning the Chica Moderna

In post-revolutionary Mexico, arguments flourished over cultural productions such as recorded music and popular song, burlesque theater, tabloid journalism, film, television, and imported Broadway musicals (Rubenstein, *Bad Language* 5). Public space and public behavior became matters for contention in the growing cities, with confrontations over the
naming and renaming streets after revolutionary heroes or Catholic saints. The key protagonists in these activities benefited from the fall of traditionalism and expressed themselves through activities defined as “modern.” The “Jazz Age” was characterized by changing sexual mores, film, transformations in the fashion world, advertising, and music. On the one hand, the era was marked by prosperity, consumerism, and growth in entertainment industries, the arts, and transportation (Montserrat 193). On the other, the rise of a consumer-oriented society brought about deep cultural conflicts. Modern cosmopolitan consumption and leisure habits sometimes clashed with the rhetoric of indigenismo, which glorified Mexico’s precolonial past in an attempt to shape its postcolonial cultural identity. The discourses of modernity and tradition formed primarily around the representation of women. The contrast between the (invented) past and the (imagined) future was played out in productions that valorized either traditional women or chicas modernas.

A transnational discourse that aided in the rise of the chica moderna in Mexico was that of fashion. Magazines and newspapers in the 1920s emphasized the modern idea that appearance was central to women’s identity and that identity could transform through consuming commodities. This “revolution” in fashion’s function can be connected to significant social and economic changes, including the rise of a consumer culture across an emerging middle class, resulting in the accelerated movement of women into the workforce and public spaces. In 1920s Mexico, drawings and photographs circulated of women dressed in the latest fashion styles from Paris and New York. To date, no scholar has considered Brenner's fashion in the context of her development as a Jewish chica moderna in Mexico City. Brenner often doodled images of fashion designs next to
lamentations about her frustrations as a self-trained journalist, aspiring artist, and intellectually developing Jewish scholar. On January 12, 1926, Brenner wrote a Spanglish entry in her journal, “Discontented. If I do not work, I am unsatisfied. If I work, I am unsatisfied-vida de pendeja-[life of an idiot] buscando estadísticas [looking for statistics], ¡discutiendo arte [discussing art]-Qué diablos me importa! [why the hell do I care]…” When read chronologically, readers can glimpse Brenner’s development of a personal aesthetic that transformed over the years, dependent on where she was located and who surrounded her. What did remain consistent over the six years of journal entries were clothing, shopping, sex, and candy, often the only remedy to Brenner’s anguishes. Fashion became another mode for Brenner to define her identity as a young sexually active journalist, artist, anthropologist, intellectual, cosmopolitan, model, Jew, Texan, Mexican, and New Yorker.

In a journal entry dated Tuesday, February 2, 1926, she wrote, “Translated ‘La maquinita,’ …Been dreaming most of the day about clothes. Hiking outfit, brown corduroy skirt & jacket, beige or cream skirts. Scarlet tie. Traveling outfit, light brown, with an orange skirt, long blouse, embroidery Cretonne scarf, hat, morning dress, shoes, Georgette Ship outfit, White flannel ship coat, not exactly like this. Far more simple, Black skirt? Accordion pleats, crepe de chine? -no.”
Figure 30: Anita Brenner’s Journal, 1926

Brenner experimented with “bourgeois” dress and, at the same time, indulged her passion for Mexican indigenous and popular customs and traditions. A month prior, Brenner described her excitement regarding a new boyfriend and after purchasing a new hat that looked more expensive than what it cost: “Jobs, clothes & a new young man-the years start gloriously. Day: Started translation…Met Dr. Morley-Interview with Gruening acerca [about] work starts Monday…Will now tackle Ren thing. Crazy about my hat” …

43 Dr. Morley used his archaeological fieldwork as a cover for the espionage he conducted in Mexico on behalf of the United States during World War I with the Office of Naval Intelligence investigating German activities and anti-American activity. Brenner referred to Dr. Morley frequently in her journals. See Charles H Harris and Louis R. Sadler “Archaeologist Turns Spy.”
Brenner contrasted the indigenous dress worn by her friends Concha Michel and Frida Kahlo and favored contemporary cosmopolitan fashion. Nonetheless, appearance and being “seen” transformed into a major preoccupation for Brenner. The more success she felt, the more her journals filled with reflections on how she looked or the importance of the clothing she chose to wear. Guadalupe (Lupe) Marin, known for her skills as a seamstress, shared with Brenner an enthusiasm for contemporary cosmopolitan fashion as a mode of self-definition. The clothes Brenner wore transformed into another mode for her to articulate her identity and self-worth. As fashion grew significantly more important in Brenner’s life, purchasing beautiful clothing to wear surpassed the importance of having enough money to pay her rent. In an entry written from Manhattan on June 28, 1929 she reflected:

I am still dissipating on clothes. And, of course, I buy with the thought of David [her future husband] in my mind. Hence I buy recklessly…I shall barely stretch my translation money to cover my bills for the summer…And it may be that the dress will outlast David. I have others that have outlasted others, all except Jean. And as I think back, or glance through my diary notes, I think what an amorous creature I am, a female Don Juan, well, not precisely, not yet Casanova.

Brenner revealed that she would often spend more than she could afford on clothing, expenses that income from her several jobs, including her role as a translator, did not cover. Enamored by David, she wondered if the relationship would last as she had various unsuccessful relationships before. She referred to herself as “a female Don Juan,” demonstrating her role in initiating sex over the past decade and an attempt to empower herself as she fell victim to various men’s sexual advances. Brenner described her money
“dissipating” and the “dissipation has consisted in buying clothes.” She vividly described how the clothing had an important meaning to her: “one or two have that rare quality of wrapping themselves lovingly and closely about one. Not exactly clinging, however. The book finished, me thin, having clothes…I am contented to numbness.” New clothing, thinness, and being seen as an intellectual defined Brenner’s happiness in the period. These topics remained consistent in her journals, whether she found herself in Mexico City or New York.

Brenner did not style herself as “exotic” in the sense of the clothes she wore, as one might initially suspect. Instead, Brenner used her body as a model and her literary voice as a writer, which she claimed as exotic in and of itself. Brenner not only attempted to present herself as a *chica moderna* in her photographs by dressing as a man, posing nude, cutting her hair short, and hiding her eyes behind a large hat. In her day-to-day dress she attempted to portray herself externally as a sophisticated inspired cosmopolitan Jewish *chica moderna*- who internally struggled to find a balance between embracing her femininity and Jewish identity while exercising her independence, experimenting freely with her appearance, sexuality, and gender identity.

There is a complex relationship between Brenner’s self-fashioning of her identity as a *chica moderna* and her Jewishness. Jewishness itself was worn and displayed by Brenner through her open and public productions as a Jew. As emphasized in previous chapters, there is an overlooked contribution by Jews in Mexico to the creativity produced during the Mexican Renaissance. There is little room for doubt that Jews in Mexico influenced Mexican artists’ and intellectuals’ productions. But then what, if anything, was Jewish about Brenner’s interpretation of a *chica moderna* and fashion in Mexico City?
While it is not clear if the popularity of Jewishness among the cosmopolitans had a direct impact on the styles worn by Brenner, her journals reveal how she increasingly shopped for fashionable and luxury goods as she evolved into a Jewish *chica moderna*. One trace of Jewishness is reflected in Brenner’s frequent purchasing of new clothes and the excitement she felt around the concept of shopping. The custom of wearing new clothes on Jewish holidays inspired Jewish fashion in a cyclical manner. Jewish styles often took the form of special new outfit purchased to wear to synagogue on the Jewish New Year, for Passover, or to balls held on festive occasions such as Purim and Hanukkah (Wallach 123). The purchase of luxury goods in advance of upcoming holidays, parties, and other public occasions is reflected in Brenner’s journals and she placed emphasis on wearing something new. Even more significant than any overtly Jewish trait in Brenner’s interpretation of a *chica moderna* or the clothing she wore is that through Brenner, scholars may witness how Jewishness was considered fashionable in and of itself. While signifiers of Jewishness may have been subtle in Brenner’s selection of clothing, it can be argued that Brenner attempted to visibly display her Jewishness by being a public representative of a modern Jewish identity. As Brenner transformed herself into an expert on the subject of Jews in Mexico for Jewish readers in the United States, Brenner appeared to display an increased self-awareness of her ability to usher in modern concepts. In her pursuit of her individuality that led to her embrace of Jewishness, Brenner managed to fall upon her unique sense of Jewish artistry and this gave her confidence to perform this identity through the arts. At the same time, the fact that Brenner boldly stepped out to the public visibility as a Jew, she

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44 For Traditional associations of specific Jewish holidays with the use of luxury goods and the many ways in which advertisement in the United States took advantage of this see Andrew R. Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity* and Jenna Weissman Joselit, *New York’s Jewish Jews: The Orthodox Community in the Interwar Years*. 
appeared to fearlessly draw attention to herself as a Jewish *chica moderna*. It can be argued, therefore, that Brenner’s experimentation with a modern identity reinforced her embrace of her Jewish identity.

At the same time, Brenner’s journals reveal how her interpretation of her identity as a Jewish *chica moderna* transformed following her enrollment in Columbia University. In February 1927, Brenner wrote in her journal reflecting on the shots that were taken of her back in Mexico a few years prior:

> I took a half hour off to have my nails manicured because, at lunchtime, I saw some hard-faced females. They were so masculine that I became uneasy—with what with my haircut and my black velvet jacket and my mannish shirt and black bow tie and soft felt hat—yet Lucy assures me that no matter what, I never look anything but feminine, and what with my changed ideas about boyishness I am glad. A boyish silhouette is all right, but if it stops at silhouette, mannerisms, and spirit are another thing. Anyway, American women haven’t a hint of coquetry. It is either clothes-rack stuff or the intellect or another very crude thing way beyond coquetry.

This journal entry alludes to the fact that Brenner was aware of the power behind her image in the photographs dressed as a man. Equally fascinating is that her views on crossdressing changed over a short period of time, likely reflecting the influences and transformation she experienced at Columbia University. Did the exposure to new ways of thinking in Manhattan shift Brenner’s performativity of her modern Jewish identity? While at one point she appeared to appreciate fashion that would have allowed her to blur the lines between masculine and feminine dress, in 1927 Brenner drew the line at the silhouette. Brenner appeared to have adapted a more conservative identity after spending less than one
year in the Ivy League world in New York City, distanced from the cosmopolitan circles of Mexico City. Brenner also revealed that through her interactions with women from the United States, she believed women to fall within one of three categories: either into fashion and superficial topics, intellectual, or sexualizing of self, something that went beyond flirtatiousness. Brenner experimented with her identity based on each of the three categorizations of women. She attempted to appear to move effortlessly in and out of any categorization but her journals revealed otherwise. As viewed in previous chapters, Brenner’s internal search resulted in a crisis as well as exposed her to multiple men—at times finding herself in uncomfortable and incredibly vulnerable situations. Brenner therefore embodied another contradiction. She at once transmitted national culture and circulated narratives that reinforced Jewish women as the carriers of Jewish religious and cultural identity. At the same time, she posed nude, had sexual freedom, cross dressed, worked, did not marry or have children until after establishing herself in her career and aimed to showcase herself as a liberated, carefree, cosmopolitan Jewish _chica moderna_.

4.7 Fashioning the Exotic Jewish Woman

Through a close reading of Brenner’s descriptions of her fashion in her journals and reviewing the limited photos available of her clothing, it became clear that she opted for more modest clothing. Apart from the image below, where Brenner is dressed as a flapper for what appears to be a costume party, there is no other image or description of Brenner appropriating “exotic” accessories. While she did cross dress and wear a neck tie, she wore little if any makeup, chose high-quality sets made of “reasonable fabrics,” and purchased several large floppy hats. She often wore a black blazer and smoked cigarettes. Brenner’s most significant beauty concern in the 1920s was to remain thin. A contemporary brand
that would match her style would be Ralph Lauren. While the brand is known for its quintessential preppy style, Brenner’s journals document how her fashion sense transformed during her time at Columbia University. She grew more concerned with an item appearing of high value, wearing large luxurious hats and commented on the quality of fabrics and timelessness of certain clothing she added to her wardrobe. Preppy style emerged in the late 1890s and early 1900s as a status symbol, worn by wealthy men who attended Ivy League schools. Brenner’s journals reveal how her style transformed from a rebellious *chica moderna* who cut her hair short, penciled in her eyebrows, and wore men’s clothing to an elegant educated modern woman. She began to wear high quality expensive clothing and presented herself as the well-published and internationally cited Ph.D. anthropologist she was.

Brenner used her Jewish identity to establish a place for herself and other Jewish women in the larger vanguard. No studies have considered Brenner in the context of an “exoticism” consciousness, in a way that would understand her productions as not only elevating the exotic from its traditional function as an “ornament”, but also as artistic motivation. Simultaneous to Brenner’s exploration of Jewishness in Mexico, stylized forms of cultural referencing promoted the expansion of a commercial beauty industry that included exoticism as one fashion type among many available for purchase; in other words, appropriation of culture. As a result, “existing symbols of cultural, national, and racial differences were aestheticized by designers and advertisers and marketed to consumers through a discourse of luxury and style” (Hershfield 150). Modern women began to wear oriental perfumes and cosmetics, “‘slave’ bracelets and ‘barbaric jewelry,’ turbans and other ‘exotic’ accouterments” (Steele 233). Centering the exotic helps to understand if
Brenner appropriated her Jewish identity in order to fit in with the transnationals of the Mexican Renaissance and feel valued among intellectuals and artists whom she admired and who characterized her Jewishness as “exotic”. While Brenner positioned herself as a spectacle, did she appropriate her Jewishness to further her personal and professional endeavors? Isabel Santaolalla defines exoticism as “a commodity in which an agency appropriates a ‘colonized,’ domesticated version of an Other to meet its own needs” (10). The result is not an “authentic” representation of the other, but an “aestheticized” construction interpreted as either a desire for the other or a desire to escape from the self into something or someone else” (Hershfield 22). What is interesting in the case of Brenner is that the exotic for her did not serve as an escape from the self. The exotic for Brenner was exactly what led her to embrace her Jewish identity. The “other” was the very facet of her identity, her Jewishness, that she was unable to access until her return to Mexico City in 1923. By adopting the Mexican artists and intellectuals’ interpretation of Jewishness as “exotic” she was able to embrace this part of her identity. Brenner’s understanding of her Jewishness as something desirable, that she first observed from Jewish modern women established in Mexico, such as Toor, inspired her development as an expert on Jewish subjects and further inspired her public performance as a modern Jewish woman leading Mexico’s cosmopolitan art scene.

Brenner’s writing has often been interpreted by scholars as illustrative of her positioning of herself as a Mexican intellectual woman. This dissertation extends this interpretation to interrogate how the task of expressing or revealing the Jewish self was a central philosophical preoccupation of Brenner’s productions and self-definition.
Therefore, to properly categorize Brenner we must consider her as a Mexican-American Jewish transnational intellectual “Chica Moderna.”

Analyzing representations of “modern women” in popular media, fashion, theatre, film, art, and literature reveals useful intersections of gender, embodiment, sexuality, and urban space during a moment of great global change. More attention should be placed on the dress, productions, transgressions and tastes of transnational women protagonists of the Mexican Renaissance to understand how Mexico City transformed into a space where women embraced both a modern and ancestral pluralist identity unavailable to them abroad. In her black hat, man’s necktie, and as viewed here, her naked body, Brenner used her body as a form of placing Jewish identity in direct conversation with Mexico’s negotiation of its post-revolutionary project. The sampling shown here of artistic
productions and participation by women artists highlights the unschooled and often uncelebrated creative genius that contributed so much to Mexico’s modernity project.
5.1 Toward a Post-Modern Mexican Identity?

Once the dust of Mexico has settled on your heart, you have no rest in any other land. Mexico means something to you, in a strange personal way. You remember things about it at unexpected moments and with startling force. You are apt even to quarrel, resent most of the things you said and written about it. You would like to write something yourself, full of your observations and experiences, things which you have not seen in print.

Anita Brenner

Your Mexican Holiday: A Modern Guide

As I researched fashion and its significance in the post-revolutionary context, I came across literary scholar Alba Aragón’s research in Uninhabited Dresses: Frida Kahlo, from Icon of Mexico to Fashion Muse. The author considers Kahlo’s painting My Dress Hangs There (1933) in dialogue with the exhibit Appearances Can Be Deceiving: The Dresses of Frida Kahlo, the first exhibit of the artist’s wardrobe recovered and on view at the Frida Kahlo Museum in Mexico City from 2012-2014. Kahlo’s painting reflects on modernity and national identity and the tension between competing notions of femininity and fashion. These tensions are represented in Kahlo’s painting of Mae West and a disembodied Tehuana dress. I felt tied to this portrait for two reasons. This painting was my first contact with Mexico, apart from the 1990’s Tejano star Selena whom I aspired to be. In my sixth-grade Spanish class, Señora Fluckinger introduced us to the world of Mexican artists and intellectuals. We studied Mexican muralism in comparison to Georgia O’Keeffe, a Wisconsin native and American modernist known for her paintings of enlarged flowers, New York skyscrapers, and New Mexico landscapes. An entry from Brenner’s journal on March 2, 1929 described an evening she spent in New York City with Alfred Stieglitz, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Jose Malanca, a young Argentine painter. Brenner translated for Malanca and described how he was having nothing of “O’Keeffe’s
‘esoterica’” and “art for art’s sake priestliness.” Brenner agreed with Malanca’s opinion of O’Keefe’s approach to art.

When I stumbled upon *My Dress Hangs There* for a second time twenty-two years later, in the context of researching Brenner and exploring fashion in early twentieth century Mexico, it felt as though my universes aligned. I had originally overlooked Mae West in the upper left-hand corner in the first analysis. This time I was transported back to my fifth grade “Great Americans in History” costume of choice, a silk Red Mae West gown, complete with a fake cigarette and a bleach blonde curly wig. My grandmother helped me practice the Southern drawl for my presentation, and the famous quote “You only live once, but if you do it right, once is enough.” Now I consider the importance of Kahlo’s intention to include West in her painting, in contrast to the red embroidered huipil and long green skirt with a white pleated flounce at the center of the image. Lacking a figural subject, *My Dress Hangs There* draws attention to qualities “that stand as traces of humanity against cold architectural materials: the dress in the center, the peeling movie star poster, the collaged newspaper photographs and bar graph, all seem ephemeral records of human activity in a recent but fast receding past” (Aragón). Mae West is the only human figure distinguishable in the painting. Her appearance, often hurriedly explained, is a key counterpoint to the disembodied Tehuana dress that provokes a commentary on national identity, tradition, and modernity through the language of fashion.

The year of Kahlo’s sojourn in Manhattan coincided with Mae West’s break into a Hollywood film career. According to Ramona Curry “central among the qualities that Mae West represented…were an active, even predatory, sexuality and a bold, mocking manner…much of West’s appeal—and her capacity to shock—derived from the way her
image systematically contradicted the period’s middle class social ideals of female chastity and feminine modesty” (2). Within My Dress, the American performer serves as Kahlo’s foil, the embodiment of a gendered and highly sexualized identity to which the Tehuana dress standing in for the artist remains impermeable. The painting can be interpreted as a refusal of West’s interpretation of feminine seduction and the masculine gaze it implicitly attracts. The Tehuana dress, in contrast, carries a presumed continuity from Mexico’s indigenous past, contrasting West’s fashionable image that brings us to the industrialized and modern present which Kahlo’s dress withstands, defying time and place. I wondered how in the 1930s, these female archetypes took on new meanings and were reshaped and reinterpreted.

Kahlo’s use of traditional garments was unconventional. She removed them from a presumably static context and brought them into a modern practice of self-fashioning. Kahlo fashioned an “exotic” presentation for herself: she at once claimed a mestizo, indigenous, and Jewish identity through her costumes while simultaneously embodying an “exotified” interpretation reflected in modern fashion. Brenner’s Jewish identity may have influenced Frida Kahlo to perform a Jewish identity. The expansion of the commercial beauty industry and cosmetics allowed women to portray “exotic looks.” Women could choose from and perform female beauty types through exotic iconographic characters such as Turkish, Japanese, and American Indian (Hershfield 150). As modernity became a sought-after project worldwide, appropriation became normalized, “Fashion was above all a mode of self-expression; exoticism was simply another category of style through which Mexican women could advertise their modern identity” (155).

As in Europe and the United States, the Mexican label of exotic was utilized for advertising fashion, cosmetics, and
“looks” made available for women to adopt as their own in their process of creating a modern identity.

An exhibition in London titled *Frida Kahlo: Making Her Self Up* showcased over 200 pieces of Kahlo’s clothing, jewelry, and possessions. Scholars have described Kahlo as an outsider regarding her physical disabilities, the unfaithfulness of her husband, and her bisexuality. The director of the exhibition declared that Kahlo’s “rejection of gender orthodoxy and conventional fashion-as an artist who also transcended disability-allowed her to forge a unique identity which spans age, gender, and geography in its appeal” (Weiner). The commodities of the era allowed women to create new relationships with the body and to dress themselves up according to a modern aesthetic. This exhibit triggers a curiosity about how Kahlo may have fashioned a Jewish identity to center herself as a Mexican Jewish cultural elite. This dissertation does not claim that Brenner led Kahlo to invent a Jewish identity (whether or not Kahlo’s self-claimed ethnicity was invented is discussed briefly in chapter two and not a topic that is verified in this research). In fact, Kahlo, according to Israeli art historian Gannit Ankori, mentioned her father’s Jewish

![Figure 32: Frida Kahlo’s cheek color: Revlon Blusher in Clear Red](image)

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heritage most frequently after 1936. Therefore, this was after Brenner’s most frequent contact with Kahlo in Mexico City in the 1920s. Rather, Kahlo’s performance of her self-fashioned Jewish identity and artistic productions as a “chica moderna” serve as an excellent expansion on how women went about performing their identities.

Art historian Julia Weiner examined Kahlo’s biography and discovered a large association with Jews. Kahlo had two relationships with Jewish men, the Hungarian Jew Nickolas Muray and Leon Trotsky. In 1938, Kahlo’s first and only solo exhibition in New York was at a gallery owned by a Jewish man, Julien Levy. A series of photographs taken
by Levy of Kahlo in 1937, a year before her solo show, show her topless and hint at the affair she had with Levy during her time in New York. Her closest friend was Jacques Gelmen, a Russian-born Jewish film producer who had settled in Mexico. She also befriended two Jewish women photographers, Lucienne Bloch, who worked with Rivera in New York, and German-born Gisèle Freund, who had fled war-torn Europe for Buenos Aires in 1942. The V&A South Kensington exhibition *Frida Kahlo: Making Her Self Up* reveals another Jewish connection as it includes some of the makeup that Kahlo used. Helena Rubinstein, the Polish American cosmetics entrepreneur was a fan of Kahlo’s art. She bought a painting from Kahlo during a visit to Mexico in 1941 and sent her powder compacts from her company Helena Rubinstein Incorporated Cosmetics. Kahlo preferred makeup from Revlon, founded by the Jewish American businessman Charles Revson (Davies M. Exhibition 673). The exhibition showed Kahlo’s still in package Revlon Ebony eyebrow pencils, which the exhibition claimed she used for her signature black monobrow. Her signature lipstick “Everything Rosy” was from Revlon as was her signature blush and nail polish, all showcased at the sold-out exhibition. It can be interpreted that the makeup, created by Jewish entrepreneurs, was another tool Kahlo used to self-fashion an identity that included Jewish origin (Winer 28).

The tools that Kahlo used to perform her Mexican Jewish identity were on display at the Brooklyn Museum in New York in May 2019. The exhibition, *Frida Kahlo: Appearances Can Be Deceiving*, co-sponsored by Revlon, was the first in the United States to showcase artifacts from Casa Azul [Blue House, Kahlo’s historic house museum and art museum dedicated to her life and work]: clothing, jewelry, hand-painted corsets, and original Revlon cosmetics that Kahlo purchased. While it may be a
stretch to claim that Kahlo solely used Jewish-owned makeup companies, there is no doubt that Kahlo performed a particular image that incorporated a Jewish identity. In the 1920s, Mexican intellectuals and business entrepreneurs enforced Mexicans’ development of a “national” exotic shaped by transnational visions of Mexico and international discourses that were central to post-revolutionary national identity (Hershfield 130). It is fascinating to consider how Kahlo used makeup from foreign Jewish entrepreneurs to create a “look” that is seen today as iconic of Mexican culture. Furthermore, Kahlo experts claim that she is the most recognizable Mexican artist in history and has received unprecedented international attention since her death in 1954. Therefore, it is dismaying that only a handful of scholars have commented on her self-fashioning of a Jewish identity.

Kahlo’s central European ascent was central for her own self-representation and performativity as was her claiming an indigenous identity through her dress. The Tehuana’s loose-fitting huipil in 1920s Mexico coincided temporally with flapper fashion elsewhere in the West. Anthropologist Marta Turok’s essay “Self Portrait in a Velvet Dress” confirms Kahlo’s use of garments from a variety of ethnic groups throughout her life, beyond the Tehuana dress. In detailing the extensiveness of the artist’s dress collection, Turok offers valuable insights into the cultural politics that made Kahlo’s persona possible. Turok also suspects that Kahlo combined items of clothing with seeming recognition of their traditional cultural meanings at times, and with apparent ignorance or disregard of others. What misreading, erasures, and reinterpretations might have gone into the making of Kahlo’s style, by Kahlo herself to begin with, and by extension, the national culture symbolized by her wardrobe collection?
I have chosen to center this painting and Kahlo’s embrace of a Jewish identity as an epilogue, as for me it summarizes what would follow in the Mexican Renaissance and the lasting but overlooked impact Brenner may have had on the Mexican artists and intellectuals who we see so often today in pop culture. Kahlo’s painting appears to represent a hesitant reflection on tradition itself and the fragility of cultural objects as they circulated across borders and pulled apart, undergoing reinterpretations throughout the twentieth century. Brenner in the 1930s, as did other women of the period, transformed herself into a scholar and modern woman, she learned to take herself seriously and redefined herself as she became a wife, doctor and mother.

In the years after 1927, Mexico was no longer a destination for political pilgrims, but rather a mecca for cultural pilgrims who wished to peer at ancient monuments and the works of contemporary muralists. Members of the intellectual avant-garde, in collaboration with political pilgrims, spent the last years of the 1920s casting themselves “as bold adventurers willing to delve deep into the ‘unknown’ countryside… out of which they turned up a steady trove of musical and visual discoveries” (López, Crafting Mexico 141). On April 29, 1927 Brenner described this atmosphere in her journal as she took off to the countryside on board a train to Mérida to conduct research for her book Idols Behind Altars:

Our first day in Merida was very excellently spent—indeed we saw all of the city at all hours and in all moods. Strange as it may seem, it is very much like San Antonio, aspect and climate, except, of course, details like the round white houses on the edge, like this, and in which you can catch glimpses of cool dark interiors with people in hammocks…then the market, where we bought henequen slippers, striped oriental things—and embroidered “huipiles,” or smocks—also straw hats for Chichen.
Delighted with the sweetness of the people. They have throaty, melodious faces and speak with rhythm like a song: They are gently and kindly, have none of the desire to “ridicule” or get the best of a stranger that is always evident in a Valley of Mexico Indian especially.

While Brenner abandoned her journal upon her marriage to the New York Jewish physician David Glusker, her last entries reveal a woman who had found her confidence and voice. At the end of 1930, Brenner returned to Mexico after spending another two years in New York. The year prior, she had won a Guggenheim fellowship and was eager to explore Mexico with the grant funds. The same year, she was placed on the Jewish Honor Roll, the annual “who’s who,” compiled by The American Hebrew, that honored Jews and non-Jews for notable achievements and “outstanding contributions to local, State and national government, education, literature, science, the theatre and Palestine welfare in the New York Times,” (“Honor Roll Listed by Jewish Magazine” New York Times 1938). Brenner’s name was listed along with three other men: Waldo Frank, Walter Lippmann, and Ludwig Lewisohn (Glusker, Anita Brenner 17).

Her diaries conclude on June 3 1930, just before her wedding with Glusker, “On the eighteen I shall be married and after that life will change completely, even in its external aspects” (qtd. in Glusker, Avant-Garde Art 787). On June 18, 1930, Brenner married Glusker, a Jewish American World War II veteran and medical student in New York. Brenner and Glusker were married by Rabbi De Sola Pool, an orthodox rabbi, at the Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue in New York (132). Brenner had intentionally wanted “a very Jewish wedding” in order to challenge her new in-laws. Glusker had been brought up in the Ethical Cultural school, a branch of Conservative Judaism that “retains the ethics
and the morality of the Jewish religion without stressing the role of God.” Glusker’s mother had rejected her Jewish Orthodox upbringing by joining Ethical Culture (132). Brenner used her Guggenheim fellowship to fund part of her honeymoon with her groom. Brenner and Glusker had two children, a daughter, Dr. Susannah Joel Glusker (1939-2013), a historian who taught at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City, and a son, Dr. Peter Glusker (1936–2020), a physician who had a medical practice in Fort Bragg, California. In an unpublished typescript from 1933, Brenner expressed her self-identification as a writer and the continued conflicts that came with her career:

I am a writer. I am called a successful writer because editors and publishers know me and [buy] my work. Yet with this reputation and equipped with a brilliant university training which gives me the highest academic standing, I in 1933 cannot find a way to live that will produce the two satisfactions that I seem to need. One, the security that my work will feed, clothe, shelter me and keep me intellectually alive by providing a surplus for recreation and study. Two, the sensation that I am participating in and contributing to a common effort. I do not have the first because I write without security.

In the early years of her marriage to Glusker, Brenner described her struggle to make a living with her salary as a writer and the lack of economic security. Brenner appears mature and self-aware, clearly articulating her perception of her status and the challenges she faced.

5.2 Bold Adventurers to Mexico’s Countryside

In the 1930s, the nature of the collaboration between Mexicans and foreigners began to change. As foreigners increasingly influenced the conceptualization, collection,
and presentation of indigenousness, popular art, and national identity anxieties were tied to a broad concern about the expansion of U.S. economic and political power during the interwar years. Much of the concern about foreign interference was that it threatened to destroy Mexican culture, but the critique of the foreign gaze sometimes shifted in the other direction, accusing foreigners of overvaluing folklore and tradition. Some American bohemia and intelligentsia never ceased to regard Mexico as a folkloric remain of the past. The modernists looked south to Mexico not for its modernity but rather its rootedness in tradition. New Yorkers in the 1920s and ‘30s could view a remarkable number of exhibitions of Mexican fine and folk art at venues such as the Weyhe Gallery, the Downtown Gallery, and The Art Students League. Brenner, Porter, Reed and the transnational floating intelligentsia constant intersections with the two countries, particularly between New York City and Mexico City, had a lasting impact. The Metropolitan Museum of Art presented an exhibition of Mexican art in 1930, followed by a major Rivera retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 1931.

The 1930s saw some transnational intellectuals merge their formerly unchartered cultural projects into a coordinated state cultural project. On January 20, 1930, during his last days in office, President Emilio Portes Gil signed an executive order that created the Departamento de Monumentos Artísticos, Arqueológicos e Históricos (Department of Artistic, Archaeological, and Historic Monuments). The DMAAH offered intellectuals employment and in the context of the global economic depression embraced artists and intellectuals to promote its mission. Artists, intellectuals, researchers, and politicians became absorbed in this state apparatus and thus limited their opportunity for political opposition. By the 1930s, Mexican nationalists grew concerned about the foreign influence
in the promotion and study of Mexican national culture. The DMAAH countered this foreign influence by offering Mexican researchers “their first taste of a reliable domestic source of patronage” (López, Crafting Mexico 140). In response to research expeditions undertaken by foreigners, such as Toor, Tannenbaum, and even Brenner, the National Museum’s Department of Ethnology dispatched its own cultural exploration of southern Mexico.

In 1930, Brenner encountered a different Mexico. The artistic and intellectual circle had scattered, though some remained in Mexico to write and paint, escaping the Depression in the United States. Others worked in the United States. Brenner spent her honeymoon traveling the state of Guerrero with Glusker to document the origins of Mexican art. She described the journey in a way that would not be appropriate today as “a bit of savage, primitive, glorious honeymooning.” The newlyweds had an unconventional marriage. Following their honeymoon Brenner returned to Mexico City from Guerrero, and Glusker returned to New York to start his medical practice. Brenner stayed in Mexico to begin writing her guidebook, Your Mexican Holiday (1932). The book had great commercial success and five more editions followed, the last in 1947. In 1932 The New York Times described the book as “An Indispensable Guide to Mexico.” The book presented readers with clear information about what to see in Mexico and how to get there while also addressing fears similar to those prevalent today among foreigners (Glusker 143). Brenner defended Mexico, as she did from the very beginning, and transformed fear into excitement.

Throughout her lifetime, Brenner remained an activist and ambassador of Mexican culture abroad. Brenner returned to Mexico with David in 1945. Ten years after her return,
in 1955, Brenner launched *Mexico/This Month*, a monthly magazine published from 1955 to 1972. The magazine, like *Folkways*, included poetry, archaeology, and decorative arts, and promoted the work of emerging artists such as the surrealist Mexican artist and designer Pedro Friedberg. It also had a calendar of *fiestas*, where to go, places to visit, sports, theater, music, food, customs and traditions, advertising, and an art feature about an artist or a theme (Ugalde Gomez 146). The magazine sought to improve social and business relations between Mexico and the United States by promotion of American travel, investment, and retirement in Mexico. On December 1, 1974, at the age of 69, Anita Brenner died in Ojuelos de Jalisco, 83 kilometers east of Aguascalientes, in an automobile accident.

The climax of Brenner's experimentation with cultural and artistic innovations fell between 1924 and 1927. Simultaneous events unfolded in 1920s Mexico City, and the power of the coincidence must not be overlooked: Mexico’s cultural Renaissance, the development of consumer culture, the appearance of the *chica moderna*, Jewishness emerging as an ethnic identity in Mexico, women’s increasing presence in the public space, and the production of a national identity. It was within this period that female protagonists of the Mexican Renaissance thrived. It is essential to acknowledge that many of these transnational women were privileged. Chapter two expanded on that fact that these political pilgrims traveled voluntarily rather than under duress. They traveled out of principles that could not be addressed within regional and national boundaries (Monsiváis). Many women were able to rely on financial support from their fathers. Thus, the ability of female

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45 For more on *Mexico/This Month* see Claire Lindsay, *Magazines, Tourism, and Nation-Building in Mexico*, “Mapping Capital in Mexico/This Month (1955-1971).” Lindsay is the first scholar to research the magazine based on original archival work. Lindsay affirms that the magazine operated as a vehicle for boosting tourism and the economy at a critical period of Mexico’s modernity (93).
protagonists of the Mexican Renaissance to maneuver within a seemingly strict code of gender expectations depended on their place within a class hierarchy and a family circle (Rubenstein, *Bad Language* 57). As emphasized in chapter three, the political pilgrims, artists, and intellectuals who surrounded Brenner offered her the possibility to submit publications to Jewish journals in the United States, which afforded her financial independence from her father and opened doors to other opportunities. Chapter four saw how artistic productions became a natural outgrowth for Brenner and other women artists of their cosmopolitan identity. Their work became an intimate portrayal of how they perceived themselves and their place in Mexico’s experimental climate. By examining Brenner's participation in photography, art, and fashion scholars access a novel window into a Mexican Jewish woman’s experimentations with modernity, particularly emphasizing how this cosmopolitan Jewish *chica moderna* manifested. Brenner embodied her identity as a modern intellectual Jew by cutting her hair, donning modern dress, posing nude, claiming sexual freedom, having sexual relations with multiple men, and taking ownership of her space in the public realm as a Jewish woman. This occurred congruently with the emergence of a public Jewish identity. Brenner detached herself from her Jewish identity in Texas, yet as a Jewish Mexican *chica moderna* across the border, she transformed. Brenner embodied a Jewish *chica moderna* in her lifestyle, fashion, and professional activities, and it rippled through her interactions, expectations, and desires in relation to gender. Brenner did not identify with a particular feminist cause, nor did she explicitly write about gender and women issues extensively apart from her writing on the white slave trade. However, she did take full advantage of the climate where women enjoyed expanding professional opportunities and male-female collaborations. Mexico and
Columbia University were unique spaces that allowed the combination of intellectual freedom and independence for Brenner to emerge as a Jewish *chica moderna*.

A transnational movement covering multiple countries, the Mexican Renaissance is shocking in its intimacy. Everyone was connected. The avant-garde circle of transnational artists and Mexican elites was quite small but its impact would last until the present. The Anita Brenner papers at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center offer a multifaceted perspective on a complex figure. Modernism in Mexico City involved an international circuit of people and the archive allows scholars a closer look into how such a distinctive Jewish woman’s transnational perspective emerged and manifested in that particular space. As a consequence of her membership in the intelligentsia, and her status as a *chica moderna*, transnational cultural diplomat, and Jewish intellectual, Brenner juggled complex identities and roles. In 1929 she wrote a poem in which she identified as the “Daughter of two countries, citizen of none” (Glusker 56). While Brenner was often torn between contradictory impulses for most of the period examined in this dissertation, she was remarkably successful at acquiring social, spiritual, and cultural awareness. By examining Brenner’s work throughout the 1920s, scholars may reexamine commonly accepted geographies of modernity. “I would like to say, sometime, somewhere,” Brenner was quoted in a *Times* article published in December 1974, “that being an American brought up in Mexico gives one an obsession to reconcile two ways of life, two almost opposed points of view, two sets of emotions and interests.”
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“10,000 Jews Plan to Go to Mexico. Stranded in European Ports. They are Barred from this Country by Quotas Laws. Invited by General Calles. Refugee Emergency Committee