Introduction to the
40th Anniversary Edition

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All sins have their origin in a sense of
inferiority otherwise called ambition.
—CESARE PAVOSE

AT THE OUTSET of Barrio Boy, Ernesto Galarza, sixty-six years old when the book was published, explains the volume’s humble beginning. It started as a series of “thumbnail sketches” he repeatedly told his family about Jalcocotán (aka Jalco), the idyllic small village on the Sierra Madre, south of where the Gulf of California meets the Pacific Ocean, where he was born. For years those sketches enchanted those who listened. Then Galarza retold them in a gathering of scholars. The response was equally enthusiastic, to the point that he was encouraged to shape them into a book-length manuscript about his acculturation as a Mexican boy in California at the dawn of the twentieth century.

Passionate as he was about writing—although until then, most of what he had published was scholarly in nature—he nurtured some reservations. Throughout his life, Galarza had fought against economic individualism and for the improvement of labor relations, specifically among Mexican agricultural workers in the Southwest.

— ix —
For a while he worked as the principal in a progressive school. He was a researcher for the Pan-American Union (the forerunner of the Organization of American States), a job that placed him at the center of more than one political storm in Washington, D.C. And he devoted his energy to building unions and establishing broader, more inclusive school curricula. In other words, the format of a memoir was a strategy to bring attention to himself, something he wasn’t prone to do, at least not in front of a large public.

It is important to recognize that at the time, the genre of autobiography was beginning to have some traction in Latino intellectual circles. A number of memoirs had appeared by state governors, such as Miguel Antonio Otero, Jr. (My Nine Years as Governor of the Territory of New Mexico, 1897–1906), or outlaws such as Andrew García (Tough Trip through Paradise, 1878–1879). Later, Puerto Ricans, from the activists Jesús Colón (A Puerto Rican in New York and Other Sketches) and Bernardo Vega (Memoirs of Bernardo Vega) to doctor and poet William Carlos Williams (Autobiography of William Carlos Williams), delved into autobiography to explore their personal, social, ideological, and aesthetic loyalties. However, the Civil Rights era encouraged different viewpoints, and authors such as Piri Thomas (Down These Mean Streets), John Rechy (City of Night), and Oscar “Zeta” Acosta (The Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo and The Revolt of the Cockroach People) opened up the genre somewhat.

Galarza justified the endeavor, as he states at the beginning of the book, by coming up with a couple of clear-cut purposes he wanted to accomplish in Barrio Boy. The first, historical one is that he perceived his path not strictly in individual terms but as a Platonic universal, his odyssey a boilerplate that millions of other immigrants, Mexicans and otherwise, constantly replicated as they
abandoned their places of origin somewhere in the so-called Third World in search of betterment. He was also conscious that, roughly until World War II, the majority of immigrants to the United States had come from Europe, and after the war they came from Mexico and other parts of the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking Americas, the Caribbean, Africa, Oceania, and Asia. His story was theirs, too. By calling attention to his own plight, Galarza could amplify our understanding of the inner struggle a non-European newcomer faced upon arrival.

The second reason he describes—and, in my mind, the true force behind *Barrio Boy*—was psychological, and here Galarza’s reservations about writing a memoir became incentives. He wanted to prove that *el complejo de inferioridad*, the inferiority complex from which Mexicans in the United States supposedly suffer, is nonsense. “The worst thing that has happened,” he wrote, “is that some psychologists, psychiatrists, social anthropologists and other manner of ‘shrinks’ have spread the rumor that . . . Mexican immigrants and their offspring have lost their ‘self-image.’ By this, of course, they mean that a Mexican doesn’t know what he is; and if by chance he is something, it isn’t any good.” Galarza quickly and forcefully responded to this allegation: “I, for one Mexican, never had any doubts on this score. I can’t remember a time I didn’t know who I was; and I have heard much testimony from my friends and other more detached persons to the effect that I thought too highly of what I thought I was.” His complaint was not minor; nor was it targeted toward Anglo professionals with dubious knowledge of the Mexican psyche. Galarza was quietly referring to the Mexican intelligentsia who actively spread the notion of an inferiority complex.

The year in which *Barrio Boy* was released, 1971, is of the essence to understanding Galarza’s reaction.
Roughly a decade before, a series of English translations of prominent sociohistorical and psychological studies of Mexicans at home and abroad had appeared, among them Samuel Ramos’s *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico*. Ramos offered a psychoanalytic interpretation of the nation’s *Weltanschauung*, suggesting that since the time of the Spanish conquest a spirit of imitation of European modes had generated a feeling of unworthiness among Mexicans. Another was Octavio Paz’s *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, which, in its first chapter, “The Pachuco and Other Extremes” (written after Paz spent time in Los Angeles on a Guggenheim Fellowship), discusses *pachuco* in particular, meaning the “variations” of Mexicanness filtered through the prism of acculturation to Anglo patterns of behavior. Knowing about the process of acculturation firsthand allowed Galarza to resist the easy categorization. His memoir was shaped accordingly. He added: “It seems to me unlikely that out of six or seven million Mexicans in the United States I was the only one who felt this way. In any event, those I knew and remember and tell about had an abundance of self-image and never doubted that it was a good one.” Of course, the risk he was taking was large. He could have ended up producing not a wrenching narrative about the interior life of a boy but a programmatic treatise. Fortunately, Galarza’s memoir still feels fresh four decades after the original publication.

Divided into five parts, it covers approximately thirteen years in Galarza’s life. Roughly half of them take place in Jalco (he was born in 1905), and the other half, moving at a faster speed, cover his uprootedness in 1911, when some members of the family abandoned Jalco as a result of the Mexican Revolution, their northbound transit across the border, their arrival in Sacramento, California, their sink-or-swim transition into a
culturally different environment, and his employment as a young farmhand. Coherently, only the first part of the book deals with Jalco, whereas the other four parts span a total of seven years, the span of time in which Galarza believes his transformation from a mexicano to a Mexican American took place.

Everything is seen from a child’s perspective. Galarza portrays himself as a naïve yet curious child, passionate and full of humor, using the child’s perspective as his unifying structure. The departure from his village is seen as banishment. “[It] was for the most part an easy place in which to live. The neighbors and compadres and comadres who scolded you for your bad manners or sent you on errands did not interfere much if you were respectful and stayed out of the way.” There are enchanting scenes where he is taught how to roast pinole, brew atole, steam tamales, and barbecue bananas, which are used to show the passing of knowledge from mother to child in a rural setting. Or, the boy explains how people in Jalco speak in two languages, Spanish and with gestures, offering a catalogue of specific gestures used in the town (“if you bent one arm and tapped the elbow with the other hand, it meant “He is stingy”) and describing the secret sign language that he and another child developed. Barrio Boy is imbued with this sort of enchanting detail.

But, again, it is the aftermath of the departure from Jalco that gives the narrative its traction. The child is made aware that peasants are up in arms against dictator Porfirio Díaz. In response, Díaz’s special mounted police, los rurales, terrorize everyone. The boy doesn’t know what kind of transformation is sweeping his family away as Mexico descends into a civil war. Galarza and his relatives seek refuge in nearby Tepic, the capital of the state of Nayarit. In Tepic he comes face to face with the real world as it is: unfair, anarchic, violent. Although
he still appreciates the beautiful colors displayed on a mercado, for instance, all in all he is frightened; and fright gives way to disorientation as the boy slowly realizes that his village was an oasis. Among the things that most shake him is the abysmal division between the haves and have-nots. Galarza offers this description:

Close about the plaza and the cathedral were the townhouses that intrigued me greatly. These were the homes of the rich, los ricos. The high front walls were neatly painted brown, grey, pink, or light cream. The street windows were even with the sidewalk with long iron bars that reached almost to the roof. Lace curtains, drapes, and wooden screens behind the bars kept people from looking in. Every townhouse had a zaguán and a driveway cutting across the sidewalk, ramped and grooved so that carriages could roll in and out.

By quick looks through the zaguanes, since my mother would not let me stop and stare, I began to have some idea of how los ricos lived. They rode in carriages directly into their houses. Servants opened and closed the grill and led the horses to the stable in a back patio. The mandado was always brought from the market by kitchen maids and cooks. The ladies and gentlemen had barbers and hairdressers come to their homes. Seamstresses and menders made deliveries to a servant at the cancel, not being allowed beyond that point. The bright patios, sometimes filled with the singing of canaries and warblers and the screeching of parakeets, settled in my mind another difference between people—those who lived in these casas solariegas and those who lived in vecindades. People who had townhouses and horses and carriages called themselves the gente decente of Tepic.

— xiv —
Ultimately, these impressions on class would play a major role in Galarza’s career as activist and educator, defining his ideological stand in favor of workers on the international stage.

Like any other autobiography, *Barrio Boy* is about the self establishing its boundaries in the universe, finding its parameters. The narrative is packaged as a series of connected facts organized to persuade the reader that life is coherent, sequential, and meaningful. Obviously, life itself is anything but: it is messy, hectic, empty of any rationale. We, who live it, inject it with a purpose. Fittingly, Galarza opens with an epigraph from *The Education of Henry Adams*: “This was the journey he remembered. The actual journey may have been quite different. . . . The memory was all that mattered.” Memory, indeed, is what makes the journey worth the effort.

The fourth part is called “Life in the Lower Part of Town,” and it rotates around Galarza’s view of the barrio as a new village. It is symbolic that the word barrio is constantly italicized: in his eyes the place itself, like the Spanish word for it, is Mexican, although little in it is actually mexicano. He comes across people of Italian, Portuguese, Filipino, Dutch, and other ethnic backgrounds, and Mexicans from Chihuahua, Sonora, Jalisco, and Durango. He makes the distinction between the physical place itself—the barrio—and the colonia, the community of Mexicans that live in it. In the colonia he first comes across the word for what he himself will one day become: a chicano. (Yes, he italicized this word as well.) Galarza uses the word to describe unskilled workers, who, like his family, were born in Mexico and just arrived in the United States:

The chicanos were fond of identifying themselves by saying they had just arrived from *el macizo*, by
which they meant the solid Mexican homeland, the
good native earth. Although they spoke of *el macizo*
like homesick persons, they didn’t go back. They re-
mained, as they said of themselves, *pura raza.*

In the barrio, the boy’s horizons expand. His family
grows in number (he talks of two sisters and a brother).
He witnesses a folk-healing scene of *curandería,* finds a
job as a messenger at Western Union, then works in the
field and gets his first try at negotiating with the *autori-
dades,* goes to dances, and is accepted into a music band
at the Y.M.C.A.

In the concluding pages, the reader finds him work-
ing in agricultural camps. He loves music, books, and
people. In fact, the last scene portrays Galarza on a bicycle
headed for high school, inspired by a teacher, Mr. Everett.
Might he make it to the debate team? he wonders. The
story of his origins is thus complete, but the story after
the story is just as compelling. Encouraged by a handful
of adults he came across in high school, Galarza attended
Occidental College on a scholarship. (His papers are ar-
chived at the College Library, where a room is named
after him.) He spent his senior year in Mexico. After the
armed struggle that forced his family to leave, Mexico
sank into another war from 1926 to 1929, called *La Cristi-
ada,* in which the government set out to persecute Catho-
lic priests. (Graham Greene wrote about it in his novel
*The Power and the Glory.*) Witnessing the debacle, Galarza
researched the role of the Catholic Church in the nation’s
political and social fabric. This became the topic of his se-
nior thesis, which was published in book form (*The Roman
Catholic Church as a Factor in the Political and Social History
of Mexico*) in 1928, shortly after his graduation.

He then received a master’s degree from Stanford
in history and political science and later completed his

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doctorate at Columbia in economics. His dissertation was released by Mexico’s premier public publishing house, Fondo de Cultura Económica, as *La industria eléctrica en México*, in 1941. From 1932 to 1936, before he completed the doctorate, Galarza and his wife (Mae Taylor, whom he married in 1929 and with whom he had two daughters, Karla and Eli Lu) worked as principals, and subsequently as owners, of the Gardner School, an experimental private school in Jamaica, Long Island. Many of the pedagogical ideas he sought to implement later on started there. Then he was hired by the Pan-American Union as chief of the Division of Labor and Social Information. His task was to research labor disputes in Latin America. World War II was in progress. The fight against fascism was an imperative, followed closely by antagonism toward any form of communism. Galarza felt that good diplomatic relations between the United States and Latin America, although not a priority on the global map, were instrumental for a healthy future. The recruitment of millions of soldiers into the U.S. army led to a desperate need for cheap labor at home, which resulted in the creation, in August 1942, of the Bracero Program, designed to offer contracts to temporary Mexican workers employed in agricultural labor throughout the Southwest.

Convinced that it was unfair and exploitative, Galarza distrusted the program. An example of his stance and of the type of research in which he engaged at the Pan-American Union is the pamphlet *Labor in Latin America*, released in 1942 under the aegis of the American Council on Public Affairs. Here Galarza states that “the workers of Latin America have long been in the front line trenches of democracy. Their present solidarity with the workers of the United States, their support of the United Nations, their efforts on behalf of greater
inter-American cooperation express long-held attitudes and convictions.” In particular, he believed that maladjustment in Mexico impacted labor relations across the border. Thus, he argued, “The time has come for the creation of a joint international agency, composed of representatives of the United States and Mexico, to develop and carry out a long-term program of resettlement, rehabilitation and regulation of migration between the new republics.” In other words, Galarza, based on his own experience in labor camps that are chronicled in *Barrio Boy*, wanted a replacement for the Bracero Program that was fair and egalitarian.

It was a Quixotic dream, yet it validated a lifetime of progressive thinking. As scholars Rudolfo Acuña and Richard Chabran have argued in their discussion of Galarza’s achievements,* he often antagonized the U.S. State Department by proving that American companies were in cahoots with powerful business interests in the countries he studied, Bolivia among them, in order to keep their profit margins high. His report caused an uproar in Washington, D.C. He resigned but was asked to return to the Pan-American Union. *Harper’s Magazine* offered him a contract to write a piece on the scandal. Once he submitted it, the piece was turned down. Yet Galarza did not give in to defeat. He spent the next two decades as an activist, as well as a relentless historian of Mexican labor in the Southwest. He was recruited by the National Farm Labor Union (later called the National Agricultural Workers Union, or NAWU), which prompted him

to move to San Jose, and was involved in strikes against the Di Gregorio Fruit Corporation in Arvin, California, a tomato strike in Tracy, and a strike of cantaloupe pickers in Imperial City.

In 1974, Galarza was interviewed about a research project on which he had embarked in Alviso, a predominantly Mexican town on the southern tip of San Francisco Bay. The place was undergoing radical change as a result of the rapid growth of a nearby urban center, which made the site attractive to private and public interests and resulted in a gentrification that fractured the cohesion of the Mexican population. He witnessed how, in 1969, a health clinic started by the Ford Foundation expanded with a federal grant from the Office of Economic Opportunity. Soon the clinic was the town’s major employer. The clinic concentrated power in a handful of people and decimated other employing entities. Galarza was asked what he could do to preserve the barrio. He responded, with pain evident in his words (included in the booklet *Action Research: In Defense of the Barrio*):

> Whenever you get into a study project of this sort you’re in the presence of major forces, and you can’t see what those forces are unless you’re in action. But the preservation of a barrio is not the ultimate answer to anything. It’s the same sort of thing you get when people talk about preserving a way of life. It’s a pretty meaningless phrase. It doesn’t tell you anything about what’s going on in the present world today. Now there are always sentimental reasons for wanting to help people not lose their homes. These are powerful feelings but they don’t give you much of an intellectual idea of what’s going on.

His response is essential to understanding Galarza’s character. He fought for the improvement of the
conditions of Mexican labor. But he was a no-nonsense thinker, who realized the speed with which social mores are transformed. The picture he offers in Barrio Boy of the barrio as a place of encounter with other ethnic groups belongs to the past: the new American city is built as a galaxy of suburbs, and the immigrant's place of landing did not have the permanence in the 1970s that he had encountered in the 1920s.

During the 1950s, Galarza was a constant presence in congressional hearings, accusing the Bracero Program of bias. He even wrote another pamphlet, Strangers in the Field (1956), that became a cause célèbre and brought a grant of $25,000 to the NAWU to develop organizing strategies in order to help Mexican labor. Galarza's involvement led to three ground-breaking volumes: Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story (1964), Spiders in the House and Workers in the Field (1970), and Farm Workers and Agri-Business in California, 1947–1960 (1977). Anyone interested in the forces that led to the labor-organizing efforts of Cesar Chavez and other Chicano leaders of the United Farm Workers Union (a stepchild of NAWU) must start with these studies, produced during the years that Galarza was gradually moving from activism to college-level teaching and research as his raison d'être. He was on the faculty at various universities, including San Jose State University, the Universities of California at San Diego and Santa Cruz, and the University of Notre Dame.

The many black-and-white photographs he took of Mexican Americans, especially in his later years, are emblematic of Galarza's commitment to record Mexican-American culture in all its manifestations. The Chicano Movement, with figures such as Chavez, Dolores Huerta, Reies López Tijerina, Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzáles, Oscar “Zeta” Acosta, and Rubén Salazar, was a cathartic
moment in the history of the United States. While the Civil Rights era was—and still is—perceived as an effort for equal opportunity for blacks, a fundamental role was also played by Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Filipinos. Although Galarza was older than most Chicanos active in El Movimiento, through his work at the Pan-American Union and NAWU he had been at the heart of the struggle for self-emancipation. In his writings he seldom uses terms like Chicanismo, but it is tangible in his tone that he regards himself simultaneously as a witness of, and a participant in, the dramatic changes the nation was undergoing. His photographs are the primary instrument for another pursuit that Galarza developed in his later years: the production of a series of children’s books that he himself funded. Released in the early 1970s and published by Editorial Almadén, as a group these were called Colección Mini-Libros, including Aquí y allá en California, Un poco de México, and Poems, pe-que, pe-que, pe-que-ñitos. At a time when the children’s book industry almost totally ignored Mexican Americans, these volumes were designed to promote literacy among young Spanish-speaking and bilingual readers.

At Notre Dame, Galarza met and forged a strong friendship with Julián Samora, a professor of sociology from 1959 to 1985 and a pioneer in Mexican-American Studies who specialized in immigration, civil rights, public health, and rural poverty among Latinos. Samora was the author of Los Mojados: The Wetback Story and co-author of The History of the Mexican-American People and Gunpowder Justice: A Reassessment of the Texas Rangers, among other works. (In 1990, Samora received the Águila Azteca medal from the Mexican government, along with Cesar Chavez.) Together with Samora and Hernán Gallegos, who was executive director of the Southwest Council of La Raza, Galarza published a history of Mexican

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Americans in 1970 that includes scores of photographs; while he had always enjoying taking photographs, only in his last decade (he died in 1984) did he take the hobby seriously. In any case, it was his Notre Dame colleague who motivated him, in the scholarly conference I mentioned at the start of this introduction, to turn Galarza’s family anecdotes about Jalco and Sacramento into a book. When *Barrio Boy* was finished, Samora released it in his series “United States–Mexico Border Studies Project” with the University of Notre Dame Press. Samora described it as fitting the profile of “Chicanos who have lived through and survived the acculturative process,” and “who appreciate the numerous obstacles to, and the struggle for, self-identity in a strange culture, while resisting complete ‘Americanization.’”

Samora’s statement is thought-provoking. Among other things, it begs for a comparison of acculturation with Americanization. Are they one and the same? Or does the boy undergo acculturation but reject Americanization, as Samora suggests? If anywhere, the answer, I believe, is in the language in which Galarza’s memoir is delivered: neither Spanish nor Spanglish (writing it in the latter would have been heresy for an educator of Galarza’s type), but a straightforward, unadulterated English, which he learned in his teens but in which, at the time of writing, he felt at home. Insightfully, at the end of the memoir he included a glossary. Its role is crucial because, throughout the thumbnail sketches turned into a full-fledged autobiography, Galarza insists on using italicized Spanish words, which he seldom explains—for instance, *asqueroso* (“a most filthy person, a person so untidy or of such unhygienic habits as to make one’s skin creep”) and *pizarrín* (“a small slate used by schoolchildren instead of paper and pencil; could be wiped clean with a wet rag, a sponge, or with

— xxii —
the tongue”). These explanations go beyond a standard dictionary: they are deliciously idiosyncratic. All this is to say that the language in which *Barrio Boy* comes to us, and the glossary it includes, allow us a glimpse of who Galarza’s target audience was: the Americanized reader.

Not an American per se, but an *Americanized* person, like Galarza himself, with an abundance of self-esteem, one capable of understanding what immigration as a story is all about.