

The Berlin Wall in the Imaginary of the Mexican film director Ismael Rodríguez.

The co-production of *El Niño y el Muro*- *The Boy and the Wall*

*El muro de Berlín desde el imaginario del
director mexicano Ismael Rodríguez.*

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La coproducción de El niño y el muro

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This article analyzes Ismael Rodríguez's film *El Niño y el Muro* (1964) from two angles; it looks at its context and revises the history of its production. Secondly, the article explores, through the theoretical framework of transnational cinema, how the film director Ismael Rodríguez, widely acclaimed as a producer of Mexican melodrama, uses this genre and his experience to interpret a social reality.

KEYWORDS: Transnational, Mexican Cinema, Ismael Rodríguez, Coproduction.

En este artículo analizamos la película El Niño y el Muro (1964) de Ismael Rodríguez a partir de dos ejes, uno contextual, al revisar la historia de la coproducción de la película y el segundo eje, el indagar a partir de la teoría del cine transnacional, cómo el director con amplia experiencia en el melodrama exportó su oficio e interpretó una realidad social que en principio le era ajena.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Transnacional, Cine Mexicano, Ismael Rodríguez, Coproducción.

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BACKGROUND

By the 1960s, the experience of Mexican film directors in the cinematic production of Spanish films had already made inroads into this niche sector. At least a dozen Mexican producers had already made the trip across the Atlantic to direct Spanish films under different production methods. From the pioneers of the 1920s and 30s: Miguel Contreras Torres and Raphael J. Sevilla,² as well as the already established directors such as Fernando de Fuentes,³ Julio Bracho and Emilio Fernández,⁴ were just some of those who made the journey in the following decades.

The strength of Mexican cinema by the 1940s was evident through the coproduction of the film *Jalisco canta en Sevilla* (Jalisco Sings in Sevilla, by Fuentes, 1948); according to Miquel:

“*Jalisco canta en Sevilla*” was viewed as the beginning of a new and more sustained collaboration effort between the two countries” (Miquel, 2016, p. 204). The aforementioned work was filmed at the same time as the main Spanish-speaking filmmakers were holding the 1st Cinematographic Competition in Madrid, in June, 1948 (Tuñón, 2001, pp. 121-161).

The circulation of Mexican, Argentinian and Spanish films in the markets of the participating countries was already an established norm. The main objective of the said event was to highlight and explain the

² Miguel Contreras Torres filmed the silent movie *El León de la Sierra Morena* – The Lion of the Dark Mountains (1928); a year prior, he filmed *El relicario* – The Reliquary (1926) in the De Milles Studios in Hollywood, which included scenes filmed in Spain (Ramírez, 1994, pp. 125-129) and Raphael J. Sevilla also directed in Spain for the producer E.C.E., more specifically, the film *El 113* – The 113 (1935) (Campos García, 2015, p. 412).

³ Fernando de Fuentes directed the film *Jalisco canta en Sevilla* – Jalisco sings in Sevilla (1948) in Spain, as well as co-directing *Tres citas con el destino* – Three Appointments with Destiny (1953), together with Florián Rey and León Klimovsky; a tripartite co-production in which each director filmed his part in locations within his own country.

⁴ Julio Bracho and Emilio Fernández filmed, in 1954, the films *Señora Ama* – Mrs. Ama, and *Nosotros dos* – We Two, respectively.

problems that impeded the homologation of the concepts of tariff payments, censorship practices and the free transit of the professional personnel of the medium between like-minded countries.

Beyond the concrete results, and the fact that the contest highlighted that the main obstacles came from the host country, as a result of its inflexible film policies, it became obvious there was a need to create a global organization. That is to say, the committees from each of the participating countries came to the event with the understanding that the trend regarding the future of cinema was that it must transcend frontiers and thus face the unequal competition that Hollywood filmmakers represented.

It was through the movement of professionals between the Spanish and Mexican cinematography that the contest seemed to have come into its own (Elena, 2005). The cinematographic niche of the Spanish press covered the participation of Mexican film professionals within the Spanish studios with great interest, highlighting above all the impressions they had gained through this transnational experience and pointing out the differences they perceived having worked in both national contexts; basically, that the Mexicans, who were accustomed to a more dynamic working rhythm that covered the demand of the markets, had no qualms in expressing the discomfort they felt with the sluggishness of the Spanish film industry (Campos García, 2015).

Due to the aforementioned observation, the arrival of Ismael Rodríguez to the European film industry was in no way just a coincidence; this Mexican director was already recognized as one of the pillars of the Mexican film industry, hence, the invitation for him to participate in a transnational production came as no surprise.

In the journalistic coverage of the time, it was quite easy to identify the allusions to problems that, with hindsight, we can interpret as the raw material for the theory of transnational cinema;⁵ having recognized that the national cinema production leading the Spanish-speaking cinema, such as the Spanish and Mexican, were based on the global

⁵ In this paper, we ascribe to the definition of the concept given by Ezra and Rowden: “The transnational can be understood as the global forces that link people or institutions across nations” (Ezra & Rowden, 2006, p. 1).

flow that contributed to the cycle of film making. This was the inspiration for the negotiation regarding film projects and concluded with the projection of the films on the international screens, thus transcending national frontiers.

In this sense, it is worth recalling that, in the case of Mexico, the founding of the cinematographic industry was indebted to the film *Allá en el Rancho Grande*- There on the Rancho Grande, by Fernando de Fuentes, (1936), since through this film a national genre was launched, that of “Ranchera” comedy, and thanks to its screening both in Mexico and beyond the national frontiers, Mexican cinema was able to penetrate the international market, and not only to Spanish-speaking audiences, it was also shown to the Anglo-Saxon public since it was the first Mexican film to be screened with English subtitles (Díaz López, 1996).

At the time of the production of the film *El Niño y el Muro* - The Boy and the Wall, in 1964, Mexican cinema was already widely recognized on Spanish screens; since 1940, and specifically with the projection of *Allá en el Rancho Grande*, no less than 475 films had been shown internationally (Elena, 2012), of which slightly less than half (217) had been Spanish films appearing on the silver screens of Mexico’s cinemas over the same period (Amador, 1982, 1985). As a result, both the participants of the respective national film guilds and the general public were aware of both the themes, the directors, the genres covered and the actors of both the Spanish and Mexican film sectors; in fact, by the early sixties, the aforementioned dynamic of international distribution and the international screening of Mexican and Spanish cinema was already established.

Therefore, at the time of the filming of *El Niño y el Muro*, the certainty existed a priori that the screening of the film would be available to the public on both continents since, from the moment of its conception, the plan already existed to promote the transnational distribution of the film.

THE PRODUCTION OF THE FILM

The co-production of the film began to take shape in December of 1963, with the acquisition of the rights to the story, which at the time was

entitled *El Niño, la Pelota y el Agujero en la Pared* (The boy, the ball and the hole in the wall), written by the North American author Jim Henaghan. The proposal for the co-production of the film came from the Mexican production Company Diana Films, which was owned by the son of Fernando de Fuentes, and which was to team up with the Spanish company owned by the prolific Spanish director Juan de Orduña (Nieto Jiménez, 2014).

Both the story and the script were acquired by the Mexican producer Diana Films. That said, the idea was to equally divide the Spanish and Mexican participation in the production 50-50:

The contract signed between the two companies, on June 1, calculated the Budget for the film to be 10,367,572 Spanish Pesetas, and specified that the responsibility for the filming and the laboratory services would be divided in accordance with the location of the production. Diana Films was to be responsible for the filming in Berlin, where the majority of the exterior scenes were to be filmed (Nieto Jiménez, 2014, p. 552).

Meanwhile, the interior scenes were to be filmed in the Cinearte Studios in Madrid, along with a few additional scenes, including the exterior shots in the Street of *Méndez Álvaro* in the Spanish capital; the final edit of the film was assigned to Juan de Orduña, under the supervision of Ismael Rodríguez.

The film was shot throughout June and July of 1964.⁶ What is most interesting, with regard to this information cluster, is the fact that there was a requirement to provide the film with a nationality, along with the fact that prior to the films production, there had to be an agreement regarding the territorial distribution for the exploitation of the film. The contract included the rights and obligations assumed by each of the two production teams:

⁶ The document provided to us by Rafael Nieto, based on the censorship file, revealed the different stages of the negotiation; it chronologically narrates the production of the film in detail.

The distribution of benefits: Juan de Orduña in Spain, its Colonies and former Colonies; Portugal, its Colonies and former Colonies; Turkey, Morocco, Tangiers, and Spanish, Portuguese and Turkish ships; Diana on the American continent, the Antilles, Iceland and the Philippines. The rights in the rest of the world were to be shared 50-50 (*Archivo General de la Administración, Cultura, Permiso de rodaje, Caja 36/04870* – General Archive of the Administration, Culture, Permission to film, Box 36/04870).

A further paragraph of the contract referred to the formats, including those that “could be invented,” a clear reference to the future regarding the technological advances of the industry:

Within a three-month period from the creation of the standard copy, Orduña is obliged to send Diana Films a duplicate negative, along with the necessary material to produce a new soundtrack for the American market. The distribution, as stated in the solicitude by Fortunato [Bernal], includes the exploitation on 35mm, 16mm, television and “any and all systems yet to be invented.” Both parties may carry out sales, but with the prior approval of the other party (*Archivo General de la Administración, Cultura, Permiso de rodaje, Caja 36/04870* – General Archive of the Administration, Culture, Permission to film, Box 36/04870).

The rhetoric used in the negotiation of the pre-production stage is articulated, above all, in economic terms; the final product is referred to as merchandise, which in a certain way it was, but the nationality of the film was also being disputed. The Spanish producer requested his Mexican counterpart to allow the film to be considered as Spanish so as to be able to distribute the film in Germany. Additionally, he requested that the film be released in the same year, since the film would then be able to participate in the awards granted by the *Sindicato de Espectáculos de España* (Spanish Entertainment Union).

The theme of the nationality of the film *El Niño y el Muro* was complex from the very beginning. Although the work teams, the invested capital, and the logistics of the exploitation of the final product were all well-defined, in practice, the representation and the imaginaries of those involved did not fail to place their stamp of identity on the film,

which led to the inevitable production of a hybrid film, since the contexts, the production dynamics and the cultural interpretation implies a decodification process and a negotiation between the “self” and the “non-self,” constituted a film with a hybrid personality, as defined by Jameson:

Hybridization is not some synthesis between races and traditions, it is not some middle or mediatory term in which traits from both sides of the border are selected and combined. Nor is it a situation of multiple personalities or languages, in which we pass effortlessly from one personality to another, and then back again (Jameson, 2010, p. 316).

The dispute of personalities to which Jameson alludes was already annotated in the document, from the moment the nationality of the picture was disputed; but the most interesting point that comes to mind when further analyzing the film is to note the mixture of the filmic traditions used by those involved in the treatment of the script; in how the Mexican Ismael Rodríguez and the Spaniard Pedro Mario Herrero, the adapters and screenwriters, were initially planning to interpret the original idea of the North American Jim Henaghan in a German context. The original story of *El Niño y el Muro* was a dramatic work, since the actual situation was dramatic in itself. As such, it is of great interest to focus our attention, above all, on the tone provided by Rodríguez; as we mentioned at the beginning, he was not exactly characterized for being a measured director. Prior to beginning the analysis of the film, it is worth referring to a few aspects that characterize Ismael Rodríguez.

ISMAEL RODRÍGUEZ, A VERY SPECIAL DIRECTOR

Ismael Rodríguez had something very special; he practically grew up at the same time as the Mexican cinematic sector was being developed. Being the youngest child of a family of cinematographers, he learned the different trades and branches of film production; he began as a sound engineer, which was the specialization he gained in California in the 1920s.

He was a director by trade, who nonetheless shot some films with an authorial approach. In his wide-ranging filmography, one can find some risky moments which had positive outcomes, such as the film *La cucaracha* – The Cockroach (1958) which starred two actresses who were widely considered as rivals: María Félix and Dolores del Río; another film which was considered by the general public as pitching two rivals together: Jorge Negrete and Pedro Infante, was the *ranchera* comedy *Dos Tipos de Cuidado* – Two Types of Care (1952).

At the time when the silver screens of Mexico were inundated by Mexican series and westerns, he dared to shoot an anti-western film: *Los Hermanos del Hierro* – The Brothers of Steel (1961). He contracted the Japanese actor Toshiro Mifune to play the role of an Indian, in *Ánimas Trujano* – The Important Man (1961). He proposed that Pedro Infante should play the role of an Indian (*Tizoc*, 1956) “to inject him with a dose of humility”. In *Los tres huastecos* – The Three Huastecos (1948) he utilized a new technique for the era, with Pedro Infante interpreting three characters, which at certain points of the film actually appeared together on the screen. That said, probably the most important merit attributed to Rodríguez was that he was recognized as being a visionary for the actors: Pedro Infante was his most exalted actor.

In the interview with Ismael Rodríguez by the historian Eugenia Meyer, for the series *Testimonios para la Historia del Cine Mexicano* – Testimonies on the History of Mexican Cinema, the director recognized some of the defects in his films and took responsibility for them, namely the overacting of many of his actors (Meyer, 1975, p. 121), but he also praised the good work carried out by certain actors, especially the child actors such as Evita Muñoz (*Chachita*) and María Eugenia Llamas (*La Tucita*).

Melodrama is a genre that abounds in his filmography, though it is not the most common, nor the only one. Rodríguez is conscious of the fact that melodrama is a genre which is somewhat limited and, for him, “the end of melodrama is laughter.” Maybe for that reason he defines as a mechanism with a large presence in his films: “tears together with laughter.” Is that not the reason why the trilogy of Pedro Infante is still showing on the television screen, again and again? There are many generations who have cried over the misfortunes of Pepe “*el Toro*.”

The presence of Ismael Rodríguez in a European production lent itself to considering the film with a certain suspicion. How was he going to approach a reality that was probably alien to him, to transfer his trademark characteristics: the exploration of the melodrama, pure and simple?

TRANSNATIONALITY ON THE SCREEN

In *El Niño y el Muro*, the main story is focused on the adventures of Dieter, a young boy of around five years old who lives with his parents in West Berlin. It's a middle-class family; Ana, the mother, works in a factory and Günter, the father, is a postman. Most of the time, Dieter entertains himself on his own. On returning from school he spends all his time at their neighbor's appliance store, since he wishes his parents would buy him a ball which is on show at the store. When he finally gets it, the ball ends up flying over the other side of the Wall; he tries several times to cross the border guarded by the soldiers, but when he is unable to retrieve it, he proceeds to make a hole in the wall by removing one of the breeze blocks. Meanwhile, the ball has been found by a small girl, Martha, who lives in the East. A friendship develops between the two children, leading Martha to return the ball to Dieter, who then gives her some money to buy a ball for herself. When Dieter returns to the Wall, the breeze block has been replaced and the Wall is once again sealed. Dieter throws his ball over the Wall to Martha and promises to return and, once again, make a hole in the Wall. End of story.

The movie was filmed in 1964, three years after the second phase of construction on the Berlin Wall, in August of 1961, when the city became totally divided. The director inserted part of a documentary film on the Wall in one of the initial sequences of the film, a resource which introduced the audience to the significance of the Wall. Dieter enters the neighbor's store, to once again admire the ball he desired, whilst the owner of the store is watching a German television report on the construction of the Wall (Figure 1). The human drama of what the abrupt separation of families signified, as well as the attempts to escape to the West, and the desperate suicides are shown. Everything is recreated in the documentary, while Dieter, oblivious to everything, admires the ball.

FIGURE 1



Source: Fernando de Fuentes and Juan de Orduña (1964).

The Wall appears as a backdrop for Dieter's games, and only acquires the sense of a barrier when the ball escapes to the other side of the Wall, once it is shown as impossible to retrieve from the Eastern side. However, once he had removed the breeze block from the Wall, in such a way as to destroy the barrier through this symbolic act, and once the relationship with Martha is formed, for a short while, and through the games played by the children, their isolation and loneliness is forgotten, each one in their own zone.

The tone of the film is classified as one of the neo-realist texts of post-war Germany, whereby the social and economic conflicts take their toll on relationships. Dieter's parents lead unsatisfied lives due to their economic situation. Ana feels frustrated by the life she leads, she does not share Günter's way of thinking; he resists the temptation to acquire accommodation through credit. He believes that in four years' time he will have enough money to buy the house in cash. Ana longs to have another child, since she feels Dieter spends too much time alone. However Günter, for his part, sees the arrival of another child as just an additional cost and considers he should not allow himself that luxury (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2



Source: Fernando de Fuentes and Juan de Orduña (1964).

One aspect of the film worth mentioning is the scarce physical contact between these three protagonists. There are very few demonstrations of love toward the child, nor between his parents. In contrast, Dieter and Martha, despite the Wall, manage to touch and communicate with each other.

The political context is presented as a backdrop and is used to reinforce the drama, thus leading to certain vestiges of melodrama. Meanwhile, the grocer shares the experience of many Berliners of the time; he lives alone with his daughter, since the mother was trapped in the East; we assume this separation was through misfortune. As a result, the father has to face the problems associated with his teenage daughter Karin on his own. When the daughter undergoes her first sexual experience with a man who does not value her, the father guesses what has happened and blames the incident on the absence of the mother.

The character of Karin also serves to justify the presence of one of the soldiers who guards the Eastern side of the artificial frontier. The soldier spies on Karin, who on realizing she was being spied upon pays it no importance, even taking advantage of the situation when the sol-

dier is confronted with the dilemma of shooting a man trying to cross the border. Karin's pleading look stops the soldier from shooting, but is unable to stop one of the other guards from shooting.

The city of Berlin symbolically represented the context of the Cold War, the abrupt separation of two international geopolitical beliefs; however, the Berlin Wall, when seen from a distance, also acted as a device which linked the global, national and local conditions of the time. The global idea was due to the geopolitical context, since the city of Berlin was divided into sectors and guarded by Soviet and North American soldiers (representing of the two economic-political systems), respectively. The national, because we are aware that the separation of Berlin was also extended to the whole of Germany, thus resulting in the creation of the two Germanies: the Federal Republic and the Democratic Republic; meanwhile, the local scene alluded to the separation of the Berliners in the Eastern and Western sectors. Finally, the main backdrop of the film portrays the drama of the separation of humanity, to different degrees.

Both Juan de Orduña and Ismael Rodríguez had a place in their local cinemas, probably more the former, having been a founding filmmaker of Spanish cinematography, while Ismael Rodríguez was appreciated above all for his work at the box office. The experience of filming in another country had to have been a great teaching aid to Ismael Rodríguez, since he had to adjust to the different production dynamics and the new codes that he had to become accustomed to.

Given that the concept of transnational cinema overlaps into geopolitical territory, which transcends frontiers regarding the production and commercial exploitation of a film, *El Niño y el Muro* was a dignified example of this form of cinematic production; firstly, due to the fact that in addition to having two well-defined teams, the Spanish and the Mexican and, having done the filming in Germany, this European country became the third "partner;" and secondly, due to the context, the locations and the theme of the film, it constituted the "contact zone" between Spain and Mexico. Having arrived to this point, we should ask ourselves: What was the significance of the Berlin Wall for these two representatives of cinema with a long tradition of folklore and melodrama? What would be the intermediate tone for the representation of

a dramatic situation such as the construction of the Berlin Wall? Up to what point were they able to assimilate the immediate reality and ponder the tragic situation which, up to that point, had not manifested the true magnitude of the building of the Wall?

It is difficult to contemplate that a scene such as the Berlin Wall could be used as a context for such a trivial situation; evidently the explanation was a form of distracting the attention of the censors to what they were really wishing to show. Everything of interest in the film was related to Dieter; Rodríguez insisted on protecting the innocence of the boy who only realized what the true significance of the Wall was, a barrier, once he had lost contact with his friend (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3



Source: Fernando de Fuentes and Juan de Orduña (1964).

In the aforementioned file, we found a note that led us to interpret why it was that the film intended to ignore the political theme; they interpreted it as obvious that the film's theme was unbelievable:

The theme of this film is: Where there are two people, there is a wall. We have chosen a location with the presence of two world powers; this is a mere

pretext for the development of one of the universal ideas of our time: the incommunicability, the profound differences between the generations and the dramatic struggles of the human soul. *El Niño y el Muro* aims to enclose a small message of peace. It is a tender and poetic love story between a Romeo and a Juliet, both of whom have just turned six. Berlin, September 1961 (General Administration Archive, Culture, Box 36/04114).

The theme of non-communication alluded to in the annotation seemed to want to justify those of censorship, in this case of the Spanish censorship, when referring to the marital bed scenes. In the end, what we see on screen is the rejection of Dieter's parents to one another. The final edit of the film was carried out by both producers together, who also negotiated some of the references from their own trenches so as to be able to exploit the film in their respective countries.

We can confirm, without any shadow of a doubt, that at the moment of filming *El Niño y el Muro* Ismael Rodríguez was already an experienced director. At the time, he was 47 years old, meaning he had already spent a little over thirty years on film sets; moreover, this was his 45th film in the long list of his filmography. The opportunity for him to work in European cinema helped him develop a more adequate tone for the filmic styles of the Old Continent. He left behind the fast-paced rhythm of his Mexican productions and used a more paused rhythm for this film. The actors, wrapped in the weak light of Berlin's summer, were directed towards a more contained, measured kind of acting, more in line with the drama form than that of melodrama.

As we mentioned earlier, this film could be identified more with Italian neo-realism (black and white photography, with gray tones) and Spanish realism (a certain harshness in the treatment of social problems) than with the Mexican films of the time. Much of the production design was due to the director being able to read the codes of the European cinemas in vogue and put aside his formula of "tear struck laughter" to provide a more realistic personality to the film, and thus in line with the human drama signified by the construction of the Berlin Wall.

We shouldn't lose sight of the fact that although the overarching element of the story was Dieter's perception of the world; the reality that is revealed through the daily life of Berlin is where the real tragedy

lies, in that the child fails to notice the reality of the situation, until, that is, he has to come to terms with the fact that it is impossible for him to play with his young friend Martha. That is to say, the tragic aspect of the story was portrayed per se, there was no need to add anything else, a point that was very well captured by the Mexican director.

Ismael Rodríguez had lots of experience working with actors, and especially child actors, so it was not difficult for him to achieve the desired recording of the child protagonist; we believe that he got Nino del Arco to act with great naturalness.

With respect to the reception of *El Niño y el Muro*, in Mexico it had a very good box office; it was premiered on July 15, 1965, in Mexico City's *Variedades* cinema, running for no less than fifteen weeks (García Riera, 1994, p.76).

In Spain it was another story, it was shown in the Tenth Week of the *Cine Religioso y Valores Humanos* - Religious Film and Human Values Festival of Valladolid, in April 1965. For its premiere in Madrid, it remained on screen for two weeks, starting on June 27, 1966, in the *Paz* cinema. It also participated in the *Mar del Plata* Festival of 1965, in Argentina; as well as the Cork Festival in Ireland in the same year (Nieto Jiménez, 2014, p. 553). We do not have testimonies regarding the reception and premiere of the film in Germany.

CONCLUSIONS

In the final edit of the film that we see projected in the cinemas, as spectators we rarely perceive all the negotiating that is implied regarding the procedure followed to make a co-production. The film *El Niño y el Muro* is a good example of how the participation of the producers was negotiated from the very start of the project, including all the different production phases.

Studying the film along with the filming and censorship records, which are stored in the General Archive of the Administration of Alcalá de Henares, enabled us to explain the terrain of the negotiation and realize how, in the background of the dispute, referents of identity that fight to be present when having to ascribe to protocols that legislate the making of a film are also present, in this case in a tripartite manner.

The concept of *transnationality* frames the production of a film in a wider and more complex spectrum that refers to the geopolitics of a market that involves different branches of cinematographic production. It is a concept which has been coined relatively recently, but that doesn't stop us from applying it when revising films from yesteryear, so as to clarify contact zones. It also demonstrates that national boundaries are relaxed, negotiable, and assume compromises; in this sense, we identify the concept as being in constant flux and construction.

On the other hand, the analysis of the film *El Niño y el Muro* revealed that, regarding the transnational character of a film, different geopolitical spaces come into contact whereby they coexisted on different levels: global, national and local. Ismael Rodríguez exported his trade and built his narrative with an open attitude through which he was able to combine his identity referents inherent in his personality and origin, together with the tradition of the measured European styles, with their contained emotions, and by exploring dramatic stories, which were the reality of the construction of the Berlin Wall.

The final scene of the film, when Dieter throws his ball to the other side of the Wall, could be a great metaphor to illustrate the transnationality of a film: the coming and going across the frontiers.

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