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Source: *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 82, No. 4 (November 2013), pp. 581-587

Published by: [University of California Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/phr.2013.82.4.581>

Accessed: 04/01/2014 12:50

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# On the Road with Chicana/o History: From Aztlán to the Alamo and Back

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*Chicana/o historians have transformed understandings of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, identity, labor, and space in the United States. In dialogue with the articles for this special issue, my commentary reflects on some of the significant contributions of Chicana/o history, highlighting the themes of complexity and spatial metaphors. I concur with the authors that there still is much historical reconstruction to do, and suggest that this work is important intellectually and politically, given the hostile climate toward Mexicans and immigrants in many parts of the country. This commentary also provides an opportunity to share the course of my scholarly engagement with Chicana/o history and consider its far-reaching influence on my work in the history of medicine and public health in the U.S. West.*

**Key words:** *Chicana/os, historiography, identity, race, United States*

Now is an opportune moment to take stock of the myriad contributions and interdisciplinary sophistication of Chicana/o history. As the authors of these four complementary and engaging articles show, Chicana/o history has deepened and expanded significantly over the past two decades, both building on and challenging the field's foundational scholarship. It is not possible to embark on a comprehensive study of race, ethnicity, class, gender, or the environment in the U.S. West, Mexican-U.S. borderlands, or much of the United States without consulting Chicana/o history. Moreover, critical approaches to racialization, interethnic dynamics, patterns of gendering and sexuality, and the meanings and limits of citizenship—legal and cultural—have been transformed by theoretical insights developed by Chicana/o scholars. The fine-tuned analytics and optics generated by Chicana/o historians have proven to be exceedingly valuable to scholars seeking to understand and convey experiences and patterns of discrimination, exclusion, empowerment, identity formation, and socioeconomic stratification. As the

*Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 82, No. 4, pages 581–587. ISSN 0030-8684

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United States becomes a browner minority-majority country over the coming decades, these tools will only become more intellectually relevant and necessary.

I consider myself profoundly fortunate to have been a fellow traveler whose scholarship has benefited immensely from Chicana/o history. Reading George J. Sánchez's *Becoming Mexican American* and David Gutiérrez's *Walls and Mirrors* in graduate school was a revelation. The books reshaped how I thought about race, identity, and American-ness.<sup>1</sup> Long conversations with Chicana/o historians such as Gabriela Arredondo and Ernesto Chávez as I wrote my dissertation and worked on my first book prompted me to approach the history of medicine and public health from perspectives that highlighted interracial interactions and foregrounded Chicana/o communities in the U.S. West. As Natalia Molina smartly points out in her article, how we frame our questions helps to determine what we find and can see in the archives. Without the scholarly influence of Chicana/o historians, colleagues, and friends from roughly the same generational cohorts, it is unlikely I would have found Carmelita Torres, who led the protests in 1917 against the invasive delousing campaign and quarantine mounted by the Public Health Service, in the El Paso Public Library newspaper collections. Nor would I have started to discern patterns of elevated sterilization rates of Mexican-origin women and men in California state institutions during the eugenics era of the twentieth century, or had tools at the ready to reconstruct Mexican American life experiences while working with documents as biased as surgical authorizations.

The quartet of articles for this special issue, as well as the commentary by Albert Camarillo, demonstrate that Chicana/o history excels at illuminating complexity and also benefits from complex analysis—analysis that can, among other virtues, explode the black-white binary and tease out the ambiguous and shifting sands of the legal status of Mexican-origin peoples over time. As he charts the recent wave of scholarship on the nineteenth century, Raúl Ramos astutely recognizes this complexity. He suggests, and Camarillo's groundbreaking *Chicanos in a Changing Society* demonstrated several decades ago, that recasting the nineteenth century on its own terms,

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1. George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900–1945* (New York, 1993); David G. Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley, 1995).

not just as a foil for Chicana/o history in the twentieth century, can yield profound insights about an era fraught with competing colonialisms, moving borders, and changing allegiances among Mexicans, African Americans, Indians, Chinese, and whites.<sup>2</sup> Ramos argues that reconceiving the nineteenth century can result “in a more complex and situational conceptualization of national identities especially as they affect the place of Mexico and ethnic Mexicans in American history.” Recent scholarship, such as Anthony Mora’s *Border Dilemmas: Racial and National Uncertainties in New Mexico*, which examines how two neighboring towns redefined their identities and alliances in tandem with redrawn boundary lines between Mexico and the United States, is representative of innovative work on the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Revised understandings of the nineteenth century have the potential to transform historical memory, sometimes soberly reminding us that economic and social equality for Chicana/os has not been linear or progressive, and that erasing the messiness of the past distorts the still-contested terrain of citizenship and belonging.

In her article, Natalia Molina insists on complexity by illustrating how Chicana/o history can benefit from a relational framework. She reminds us that Carey McWilliams was one of the first scholars to apply a relational lens to analyzing Mexican American history and identity. His keen awareness of the multiracial dynamics and tensions in the making of modern California relied on a relational optic that scholars such as Molina have fine-tuned through interrogations of historical sources that go beyond the conventional and expected. She pithily asserts, “a basic guiding principle for doing research: how you define your research *subject* shapes your research *process* and *question*.”

Applying this principle through relational analysis, Molina echoes what several Asian American historians too have stressed: Twentieth-century racialization should be understood in light of the harsh policies against the Chinese that began in the nineteenth century, which in turn served as a template for anti-Mexican racism even as Mexican Americans were not necessarily immune to Sinophobia. Along these lines, several recent works probe the variegated ways in

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2. Albert Camarillo, *Chicanos in a Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios in Santa Barbara and Southern California, 1848–1930* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979).

3. Anthony P. Mora, *Border Dilemmas: Racial and National Uncertainties in New Mexico, 1848–1912* (Durham, N.C., 2011).

which Mexican and Chinese communities co-constructed each other, on both sides of the Mexican-U.S. border, during eras when anti-immigrant nativism of varying stripes adversely affected all racialized groups to some degree.<sup>4</sup> Relational analysis requires reading historical materials against the grain and between the lines, as well as encouraging graduate students to search with curiosity for untapped historical sources. In addition to presupposing a racially complex rather than monochromatic landscape, this approach has the added benefit of bolstering the still much-needed work of the historical reconstruction of the everyday in Chicana/o history.

Miroslava Chávez-García concludes her masterful reflection on Chicana history with an invitation to scholars that “we still have unlimited themes to excavate and studies to produce.” Leading the reader through the beginnings and blossoming of Chicana/o history, Chávez-García emphasizes that unearthing Chicana experiences, locating Chicana voices, and capturing the intersectionality of the lives of Chicanas requires cross-disciplinary approaches. Musicology, ethnography, and literary analysis, joined with historical research informed by feminist and gender analysis, has produced some of the richest, most evocative, and transformative scholarship in Chicana studies. Moreover, this work should be considered praxis, as lived and theorized by women of color, who often have written from the margins and talked back to misogyny, ethnic nationalism, racism, and homophobia. These articles underscore that there is not one monolithic Chicana/o history but a rich diversity of scholarship that, as Ernesto Chávez eloquently states, coheres around the understanding that “Mexican Americans are a racialized people, with a unique and fundamentally common history.” One of the challenges for coming generations of Chicana/o historians will be to maintain a center of gravity for the field as it continues to diversify centripetally in exciting directions. Undoubtedly the commitment to documenting the struggles and victories of Mexican-origin populations in the United States will remain unswerving and, it could be argued, is more imperative than ever.

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4. See Grace Peña Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican: Global Migration, Localism, and Exclusion in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (Stanford, Calif., 2012); Julia María Schiavone Camacho, *Chinese Mexicans: Transpacific Migration and the Search for a Homeland* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2012).

The opening anecdotes of Chávez's and Ramos's articles underline that the politics of citizenship and national belonging, and the dividing lines between alien and native, are very fraught today. Even with Barack Obama presiding over perhaps the most racially sensitized modern presidential administration, deportations of undocumented immigrants are at all-time highs, and the greatest expansion ever of health insurance access in the United States excludes undocumented immigrants from all but last resort emergency Medicaid. There is also a strong current of anti-immigrant sentiment, often directed at Mexicans or anyone perceived as Mexican (especially Central Americans), that unoriginally uses many of the stereotypes produced during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including depictions of Mexicans generally as overly dependent free-loaders and Mexican women as hyper-breeders eager to birth anchor babies on U.S. soil. Thus, ethnic Mexicans and Chicana/os continue to struggle for legal recognition and basic human dignity. This struggle extends from courtrooms, immigration centers, and medical facilities into classrooms and debates over whose history matters. Arizona's House Bill 2281, which bans Chicana/o curricula in public schools and was recently found constitutional by a federal judge, is one of the latest assaults on ethnic studies that uses the red herring of reverse racism to categorize Mexican American studies as left-wing and anti-white.<sup>5</sup>

Although challenging H.B. 2281 and S.B. 1070, among the most draconian anti-immigration measures in U.S. history, will involve ongoing civil rights litigation, related skirmishes over historical memory and conflicts over which historical actors can populate American identity narratives are also likely to play out. Whether it is Twitter vitriol after a Chicano boy, a native of the Alamo City, Texas, sings the national anthem before a pro basketball game, or efforts of the Mexican American Digital History project to ensure that adequate coverage is given to Chicana/o history in the next revision of California's public school textbooks, historical memory is a critical issue. More mainstream narratives need to incorporate the layered, usable, and accessible stories of the past written by Chicana/o historians.

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5. Roque Planas, "Arizona's Law Banning Mexican-American Studies Curriculum is Constitutional, Judge Rules," *Huffington Post*, March 11, 2013, at [www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/11/arizona-mexican-american-studies-curriculum-constitutional\\_n\\_2851034.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/11/arizona-mexican-american-studies-curriculum-constitutional_n_2851034.html).

Navigating in-between spaces and identities is a talent cultivated by many Chicana/o scholars, so well-honed, in fact, that it can be hilariously parodied by Chicana/o comedians such as Lalo Alcaraz and Esteban Zul. This satirist duo coined the term “self-deportation” in 1994 in response to the passage of Proposition 187 in California, which sought to restrict “illegal immigrants” from using public hospitals and schools.<sup>6</sup> In a similar vein, Chicana/o historians have produced evocative and versatile spatial metaphors that allow for the construction of interstitial identities and provide theoretical arenas for grappling with, and sometimes liberating reprieves from, cross-cutting power differentials of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and other social categories. Beyond the Chicano movement and the possibility of Aztlán (albeit occupied largely by hostile forces), David Gutiérrez proposed a potentially more strategic “third space.” Building on foundational scholarship in Chicana/o history by Camarillo, Vicki Ruiz, and many others, Gutiérrez described this third space as a site of resistance and potentiating identity formation: “Mexicans were increasingly forced to devise defensive strategies of adaptation and survival in an intermediate, ‘third’ social space that was located in the interstices between the dominant national and cultural systems of both the United States and Mexico.”<sup>7</sup>

With her enviable poetic touch and in dialogue with Gloria Anzaldúa, Emma Pérez gendered and queered this impulse, showing how we might unpack identities and histories in a “decolonial imaginary” where patriarchy and white feminism were held in abeyance. Into this Chicana breathing space, new historically inflected subjectivities might gain greater traction.<sup>8</sup> These spatial metaphors have proven their staying power in Chicana/o history. They are readily evident in scholarship on the borderlands and the urban

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6. Robert Mackey, “The Deep Comic Roots of ‘Self-Deportation,’” *New York Times*, Feb. 1, 2013, at [thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/02/01/the-deep-comic-roots-of-self-deportation/](http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/02/01/the-deep-comic-roots-of-self-deportation/).

7. David G. Gutiérrez, “Migration, Emergent Ethnicity, and the ‘Third Space’: The Shifting Politics of Nationalism in Greater Mexico,” *Journal of American History*, 86 (1999), 488; also see Vicki L. Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America* (New York, 1998).

8. Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington, Ind., 1999); Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, 1987).

U.S. West, and in recent important works by scholars such as Ana Rosas and Alicia Schmidt Camacho.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps it was the political poignancy and analytical power of these spatial metaphors that attracted me to Chicana/o history during my graduate training and as I attempted to develop a framework to understand the intertwining of medicalization and racialization in and around borders defined by nations, institutions, and laws. Coming of age in the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1980s and pursuing a B.A. at San Francisco State University, where I had the privilege of taking classes and doing internships in the Raza Studies Department (now Latina/o Studies), probably sensitized me to Chicana/o and Latina/o histories. My engagement with Chicana/o history intensified over the coming years of graduate training at the University of California at San Diego and the University of Chicago, and soon became an integral component of my dissertation and subsequently my first book, as well as many other writings. Even as I embarked on new projects on eugenics, genetics, and public health in U.S. and Latin American history, I maintained a strong connection to Chicana/o history, which to this day is critical to my ongoing collaborative efforts to analyze the demographic characteristics of 15,000 sterilization orders processed by California state institutions in the first half of the twentieth century. I consider myself a welcomed ally in a vibrant field and will continue to be a fellow traveler on the road of Chicana/o history.

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9. See, for example, Ana Elizabeth Rosas, "Breaking the Silence: Mexican Children and Women's Confrontation of *Bracero* Family Separation, 1942–1964," *Gender & History*, 23 (2011), 382–400, and Alicia Schmidt Camacho, *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (New York, 2008).