

RECOVERING THE HISPANIC HISTORY OF TEXAS



Monica Perales and Raúl A. Ramos, Editors

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Hispanic History of Texas Project

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Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage



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INTRODUCTION

Building a Project to Expand Texas History

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IN A STATE KNOWN FOR ITS SWELTERING SUMMERS, THERE WAS SOMETHING ELSE generating a great deal of heat in Texas in the summer of 2009. The members of a panel of experts providing recommendations to the Texas Board of Education on its K-12 social studies curriculum standards engaged in a debate over what students in the state's public schools should be learning about history. Some reviewers lamented that the experts paid insufficient attention to the nation's "founding fathers" while they overemphasized what the reviewers deemed were less historically significant individuals, such as Thurgood Marshall and César Chávez. Others pointed to the need for an even greater focus on the multicultural origins of the nation and called for a more thorough understanding of the roles that ethnic minorities and women have played in the social, political, and economic life of the nation. Several members of the panel emphasized the need for students to engage primary documents and criticized the current state curriculum for spending too much time on interpretations of documents and what they believed to be an inordinate amount of emphasis on less "factual" historical productions including poetry, folktales, and art.¹ This was not the first time in recent years that Texans became fascinated with historical narratives and documents. Just two years before, the Texas Historical Commission caused a stir over the proposed purchase of an often cited, but never before seen, letter by Davy Crockett, a central character in one of the

state's most revered defining myths, for a reported \$500,000. After forensic tests proved inconclusive in verifying the authenticity of the letter—said to be the last letter Crockett wrote before perishing at the Alamo—the Texas Historical Commission passed on the purchase.²

While these controversies could be written off simply as another battle in the “culture wars,” there was something more fundamental at stake. These two episodes raise some important questions about the politically charged nature of the historical enterprise in Texas and the extent to which history is deeply enmeshed in debates about national and state identity in the present day. They also tell us something about the nature of “historical work,” and, in a related fashion, the nature of the archival process. What is the purpose of history, and who gets to write it? More importantly, how does history get written, and whose historical text represents the “authentic” voice of the past that is thus worthy of preserving?

As one of the first collections of scholarship produced under the auspices of the Hispanic History of Texas Project, the essays in this volume seek to make an important intervention into these very questions. An extension of the Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage Project, Hispanic History of Texas's goal is not only to identify, preserve, and publish documents that uncover the myriad historical voices and experiences of ethnic Mexicans in Texas, but also to promote research that highlights the complex roles ethnic Mexican men and women have played in the shaping of the cultural, economic, and political fabric of the region. The essays in this book—by both established and up-and-coming scholars—are examples of the kinds of innovative work the Hispanic History Project seeks to inspire. By employing a wide range of historical sources and in the spirit of true interdisciplinarity, the authors seek to forge new ground and take the study of Mexicans, Texas, and the Borderlands into new and exciting terrain.

At its heart, this type of project is about more than simply recovering the voices of lost historical actors and simply adding to an existing story. The essays in this volume seek to reimagine the dominant narrative of Texas history and also to transform the very way in which the archival enterprise is viewed and knowledge is produced. Chicana/o scholars have theorized the importance of rethinking the meanings attached to historical artifacts and source materials. As historian Emma Pérez explains, the archive is not a value-neutral repository of incontrovertible truth. Rather, it is a social and cultural product that presents a particular point of view and reifies a distinct narrative, often to the exclusion of other points of view that challenge, disprove, or otherwise upset that common story.³ While archives certainly contain important historical materials that shed light into the events of the past, they also obscure as much as they reveal. More

often than not, archives contain the materials produced by the privileged and governing classes of society. They place emphasis on government documents, letters, books, and memoirs of political leaders or titans of industry—mostly men, and even more often Euro-Americans. Finding Mexican-origin perspectives in the archives is not impossible, but the task is made all the more difficult by the lasting legacy of conquest and the failure to recognize both the potential and the limitations of existing resources. Chicana/o scholars, inspired by the “new” social history, have long understood the value of alternative sources—oral histories, published and unpublished Spanish language writings and periodicals, folklore, photography, and other personal materials.

This is by no means a call for an end to the archive as we presently know it. However, it is critical to reimagine the archive as something more than the brick-and-mortar building, to expand its boundaries into communities and individuals who have, for generations, been the keepers of history. To do so creates a space for producing new narratives that challenge the older versions that range from incomplete to purposefully exclusionary. Making this broader connection between the professional archive and the countless personal archives in Mexican communities across the state, thereby opening up the field for the creation of new and multiple narratives, is one of the primary endeavors of the Hispanic History of Texas Project.

Challenging paradigms is no easy task, particularly in a state whose creation epic has played boldly on the silver screen and has fundamentally shaped its cultural and racial politics and sense of identity. Yet the seeds have been planted. Beyond recovering and preserving documents and providing resources and research opportunities, the Hispanic History of Texas Project endeavors to open a wider intellectual space through organizing and participating in conferences and meetings wherein new scholarship can be shared and can have a positive and lasting impact. In 2008, the Hispanic History of Texas Project partnered with the Texas State Historical Association to cosponsor the annual meeting convened in Corpus Christi. Of the more than sixty panels, roundtables, and events, twenty-two were Recovery Project panels, radically transforming the composition of the conference itself. The essays selected for this volume represent some of the excellent scholarship presented at that meeting. The Recovery Project has similarly partnered with other organizations, including the Western Historical Association, as well as hosting its own meetings in an effort to make the study of Hispanic people central to the study of Texas, the Borderlands, and the West.

This volume and project come out of several analytical and narrative trajectories. The essays primarily engage themes within the field of Chicana/o Studies, especially as it has developed around Texas subjects. Each of the

authors approaches the field from the related perspectives of history of the American West and Borderlands history generally. The insights introduced here, however, remind readers of the inherent overlap between fields and disciplines, and likewise, the difficulty of producing scholarship in isolation. As such, this volume attempts to create a space for dialogue across and within fields and disciplines. Moreover, it suggests to us the richly textured narratives that emerge from such an approach. By opening up the conversation, we gain greater insight and perspective.

These articles emerge from a longer tradition of challenging dominant historical narratives by exploring novel forms of critical analysis. A half-century ago, Jovita González and Américo Paredes articulated an oppositional narrative to the popular and academic tropes explaining the historical and social location of ethnic Mexicans in Texas. At the University of Texas at Austin, they wrote both scholarly pieces and fictionalized accounts that defined another way of being in Texas. In 1930, while a graduate student, González presented a master's thesis, "Social Life in Cameron, Starr, and Zapata Counties," which recast the Texas narrative in terms of Tejana/o history and society.⁴ For González, the history of the region was bound in the ethnic and racial tension of conquest. She wrote, "Place these two [Mexicans and Anglos] side by side after a war in which one considers itself the victim and views the other as aggressor, and the natural result will not be peace."⁵ González also took another approach toward suggesting alternate perspectives on early Texas history through fiction in *Caballero: A Historical Novel* (cowritten with Eve Raleigh) and the collection *Dew on the Thorn*.⁶ Written during the Great Depression, these works represented nuanced readings of the complex social landscape Tejanos faced after American annexation. This stood in contrast to the larger than life heroes and triumphalist narrative of Texas at the time. Fiction provided González an avenue to circumvent established paths of academic authority. Yet González's fiction was only published recently, thanks to the recovery efforts of scholars engaged in broader projects.

Américo Paredes took a similar tack by publishing an academic analysis in *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero* while also writing a work of fiction, *George Washington Gómez: A Mexicotexan Novel*. In *With His Pistol*, Paredes employs a popular corrido about Gregorio Cortez, performed for decades in South Texas as a critique of the production of historical memory and the Texas mythos. Paredes elevates the song to the level of historical text by using it to recast the story of Cortez and in turn making it the subject of ethnomusical analysis. Using the ballad as a historical text expanded expectations of what constituted "legitimate" historical evidence and in turn situated accepted evidence in a critical frame. The resulting critique of received knowledge that

came from broadening the evidentiary base led to a demystification of the dominant Texas narrative. Or as Paredes summed up, “And had the Alamo, Goliad, and Mier not existed, they would have been invented, as indeed they seem to have been in part.”⁷ And while Paredes could and did directly destabilize the dominant Texas narrative, he pursued fiction as an avenue to explore the impact and weight of the narrative on identity formation. Paredes traces the coming of age of an ethnic Mexican boy in South Texas as he confronts the contradictions and inequities of everyday life. Like *Caballero*, it took decades and a changed literary landscape before Paredes saw the publication of *George Washington Gómez*.

Both González and Paredes used historical fiction to propose alternate constructions of ethnic identity. Set in the context of their academic production, these works suggest that they sensed limits to the explanatory power of scholarly production. The question remains, though, whether these limits were structural or analytical. Were the limits related to marginalization within the academy or a lack of sources related to what was archived and how it had been organized? There is also the matter of recovery. Silenced for decades because of the racial and political climate in which they lived, González and Paredes found ways of challenging the dominant narrative, but it was only after many years that their critiques and alternative perspectives could be seen and appreciated. Fiction was a way around the power structure, and, in this way, fictional works do allow the author to break from the empirical constraints and authoritative perspective expected in academic work. On the other hand, alternate figurations had to make their way into popular and official history through gatekeepers in universities. The extent to which these alternate voices enter into wider debates about power and knowledge is shaped by those stories deemed legitimate and authoritative. We must, in a sense, imagine how this new history appears as we seek to expand archives and the historical record.

A second generation coming after the Chicana/o movement has continued to confront the dominant narratives within the academy. Those working on Texas have developed a deep literature on Mexican Texas aimed at shifting the discourse.⁸ Following the general movement incorporating social science analysis in the field of history, these works made use of census data and social theories to paint a broader picture of Mexicans in Texas and racial and ethnic relations generally. By using quantitative evidence and revisiting events from multiple contexts, these historians created a space for ethnic Mexicans in Texas history and situated the region’s myths into a broader framework.⁹ The current generation of historians follows their lead by employing social analysis while consciously engaging textual and narrative critiques to bring broader meaning

to this subject. The authors in this volume connect with these developments in a variety of ways.

Historians of the American West have also moved Texas history in a direction that attempts to account for complex social and cultural interactions, particularly in border regions. Through a methodology perhaps best epitomized by Richard White's *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815*, historians have started to recast conquest and colonization through a lens that takes subaltern agency seriously and makes room for mutual impacts between groups.¹⁰ White's now-standard text provides a generation of scholars a model of new possibilities for exploring the idea of a geographic, metaphorical, or symbolic space wherein mutual misunderstandings create new meanings. Historians of the West have produced an increasing number of works of comparative race and ethnicity as well as novel formulations of indigenous communities. Post-*Middle Ground* history allows for the merging of social science with the fictionalized narratives of González and Paredes by presenting a narrative that accounts for nuance and ambiguity in social relations. More to the point of our project, all these historians have continued to emphasize the importance of expanding the evidentiary base to make sense of these worlds.

A rich literature on textual critiques of Texas myths and dominant narratives has shown one direction that historians can follow to extract meaning and significance from alternative sources of Texas history. José David Saldívar, Emma Pérez, and Richard Flores excavate power relations and subject positions through discourses of the past and present in both history and literature.¹¹ In their hands, Chicano history and border analysis provides insight beyond the lives of those in the region and exposes the lines of authority. The Recovering the Hispanic History of Texas Project seeks to both expand the evidentiary base and broaden the definition of what constitutes evidence. These essays touch on the rich analysis that is possible with a fresh and dynamic reexamination of the past. The Project attempts to increase investment and participation in redefining Texas history. Scrutinized from the “outside” as parochial or provincial—and fiercely guarded from within as exceptional and sacred—Texas's dynamic and diverse history deserves more. In the hands of previous scholars, and of the authors included here, we seek to recover Texas history in a more fundamental way.

As we think imaginatively about the nature of historical record collecting, the Project and this volume make a case for expanding the lines of inquiry beyond the static categories to which we have long been attached. Recent scholarship has pointed to the imperative need to break free from the kinds of binaries that have limited immigration, border, Chicana/o, and ultimately, Texas history: immigrant versus settler, citizen versus “alien,” Mexican versus Amer-

ican. For generations, scholars examined the history of Mexican-origin people through the prism of immigration, assimilation, and the nation state. While this work contributed in fundamental ways to our understanding of the Mexican experience and laid the foundation for the work we engage in today, the global realities of the twenty-first century compel us to forge new intellectual terrain. What happens when we ask different questions and try to answer them from a different perspective? By using new methodologies and using categories like gender and sexuality, migration, transnationalism, and globalization as critical analytical devices, we recover a whole new set of stories and experiences and gain a better understanding of the world in which we live.¹² Taking this call to heart, the essays in this volume seek to forge new paths into historical territories, both familiar and not, in order to provide different insight into history. The question is not, “What is Texas?” but rather, “Where is Texas?”

The essays that follow have been divided into three sections. In “Creating Social Landscapes,” the authors each reveal the complex ways in which the diverse peoples of the Texas borderlands negotiated difference and forged common ground in a changing political, social, and economic landscape. Francis X. Galán explores the oft-forgotten Texas–Louisiana borderland in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, where Native Americans, Tejanos, and Euro-Americans forged a peaceful relationship on the fringes of the Mexican frontier. Exploring the intersection of Mexican and Native local healing practices and professionalized medicine of the United States Army, Mark Allan Goldberg reveals how health and healing became critical sites wherein issues of racial and national difference were debated and how disease and health came to be important markers for defining the national body. Emilio Zamora illuminates the profoundly transnational character of ethnic Mexican’s social world, as evidenced by the plans to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Mexican independence by funding the construction of schools in Mexico. Highlighting both conflict and consensus, the essays in this section challenge us to conceive of Texas not as a place defined by geographic and national boundaries alone, but as multiple landscapes shaped by myriad processes of intercultural exchange, interaction, and conflict.

The next section, “Racialized Identities,” encourages a critical examination of lived experiences in those Texas landscapes. The essays in this section challenge the notion of race as a simple or fixed category. More importantly, they expand our understanding of civil rights mobilization, showing the various ways in which people of color demanded racial justice, particularly in the state’s public schools. Virginia Raymond introduces us to the fascinating Alberta Zepeda Snid, a mother and activist, who played a pivotal role in the 1968 rebellion at Edgewood High School and the community’s subsequent challenge of the Texas

school finance system in *Rodríguez v. San Antonio ISD*. Although Snid's name has disappeared from the record, Raymond uncovers a more multiracial, gendered, and politically diverse response to educational reform in Texas. Dennis Bixler-Márquez recounts the educational reforms enacted in Crystal City as a result of the political successes of the Raza Unida Party. His analysis of the making of the documentary film, *The Schools of Crystal City*, and the context from which it emerged is enhanced by his own experience as an active participant in the Leadership Training Institute (LTI) at Stanford University. Both essays shift our attention to the locations where identities are constructed and politicized.

The final section, "Unearthing Voices," takes up the vital question of recovery, not only in terms of bringing lost voices to the fore, but also in terms of bringing new interpretations as well. James Crisp revisits well-known documents attributed to Tejanos to explore nuance and ambiguity evident when translating Spanish into English. Crisp argues that Anglophone historians have conveniently misconstrued these texts to support the dominant narrative of Texas history when closer scrutiny reveals they present an alternate understanding of the past. In a similar vein, Norma Mouton uses oral history and sermons to uncover the previously untold story of Reverend Gregorio M. Valenzuela, a prominent Mexican Protestant minister, shedding new insight into the religious and cultural diversity of Mexicans in Texas. Donna Kabalen de Bichara takes on the writings of two Mexican writers—Leonor Villegas de Magnón and Jovita Idar—to explore how these women crafted a rich bilingual and bicultural space through their writings. Although both women are well-known in literary circles, these privileged women also provide insight into the hidden feminine spaces in the borderlands.

The essays contained in this volume make important strides toward envisioning a new kind of history of, and for, Texas. They show the transformative power of reconfiguring the dominant themes and narratives and what is possible when scholars employ new methods, take interdisciplinarity to heart, and think creatively and critically about the archive and historical artifacts. The result is a volume that is far from conclusive, but one that we hope points the way to a different path and that encourages work that further challenges scholars to think beyond the old paradigms.

Notes

¹ "The Culture Wars' New Front: U.S. History Classes in Texas," *Wall Street Journal* 14 July 2009 <<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124753078523935615.html>>, accessed 14 July 2009. The controversy made its way into the national spotlight, raising concerns about how curriculum changes in Texas would affect textbooks sold to other schools across the country. On May 21, 2010, the