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Margaret A. Villanueva
Michael J. Gonzales

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Border Spaces and Commodity Identity: Recent Perspectives on the Mexican-American Experience

Reviewed by Margaret A. Villanueva

Space is not a scientific object removed from ideology or politics; it has always been political and strategic. If space has an air of neutrality and indifference . . . , it is precisely because it has already been occupied and used, and has already been the focus of past processes . . . . Space has been shaped and moulded from historical and natural elements, but this has been a political process. Space is political and ideological (Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space, 1979:31).

In his recent book, Border Visions, anthropologist Carlos Vélez-Ibáñez describes the ongoing “search for space, place, and connection . . . , cultural creation and invention” that characterizes the long history of the Mexico-U.S. borderlands (1996:213, 207-211, 128). Tracing the borderless movement of peoples across the region since 300 B.C., he focuses on post-1848 conflicts between Anglos and Hispanos/Mexicanos over access to land, wealth, and social power. Reshaped by decades of conflict and political maneuvering, regional spaces were remapped and imbued with new meanings and spatial histories. After 1870, Spanish-speaking residents excluded from their land, and new immigrants, were to be regarded as “cheap labor.” Vélez-Ibáñez argues that “the history of Anglo-Mexican relations has often been defined by this imposed ‘commodity identity,’ a determining but not absolute condition that has strongly influenced how Mexicans are perceived by others and how [they] perceive themselves” (1996:4-8).

Yet this dehumanized identity is constantly contested. In the cross-genre form of “ethnobiography,” Border Visions participates in the ongoing “oppositional” cultural production of artists, musicians, writers, and scholars. As Genaro Padilla observes in his analysis of post-1848 narratives from California and the Southwest: “Chicano autobiographers cannot quite forget what they perceive to be the historical rupture, the violence of displacement, exploitation, and denigration voiced again and again by their antepasados—Seguín, de la Guerra, Vallejo, Chacón, Jaramillo—and deeply embedded in the collective psyche through our cultural narratives, which bring us to the juncture of loose ends from which we (re)build new subjectivities, new communities, and new identities” (1993:238). Padilla cites portions of journals written by Fabiola Cabeza de Baca (who died in 1990 at age 91), wherein she describes the incomplete political process of reshaping and “assimilating” New Mexican spaces into an Anglo-dominated nation-state:

The Hispano has almost vanished from the land . . . but the names of hills, rivers, arroyos, canyons, and defunct plazas linger as monuments to a people who pioneered into the land of the buffalo and the Comanche. These names have undergone many changes, but are still known and repeated. Very likely many of those who pronounce them daily are unaware that they are of Spanish origin. (Cited in Padillo, 1993:230).

New analytical approaches to the politics of space, labor, and identity have also been introduced in critical legal studies. Guadalupe T. Luna, of the NIU College of Law, just published the first of a trilogy of articles that explore the class, race, and gender dimensions of Chicano land use, property rights, and farm labor law (Luna 1996:9-56; See also Gutierrez-Jones 1995). She explores this historical terrain from a legislative, economic, and policy perspective. Like Border Visions, her research and writing opposes the “commodity identity” attributed to Mexican workers, and analyzes the relationship between the poverty imposed on farmworkers and ecological degradation of borderland areas. She argues that the NAFTA agreement reiterates the old equation Mexican=labor because “farmworker concerns are discussed almost entirely within the context of labor law” while economic benefits flow toward corporate owners (1996:11).
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Tracing the cumulative treatment of Mexican-Americans back to abrogation of the Guadalupe Hidalgo Treaty after 1848 (1996:14-15), Luna shows that exclusionary federal legislation and policies pushed Mexican families off the land and subsequently deprived them of rights and protections due to other categories of workers (1996:21, 24-29). She presents the establishment of land trusts within a federal framework as a viable alternative to past and present policies:

“The creation of conditions promoting new economic opportunities in the region, assisting field workers, adding to the diversity of the rural environment and protecting the environment by curtailing uncontrolled growth . . . would enhance longstanding agricultural policies and would promote equal treatment of field workers. Alternative forms of sustainable economic development would expand opportunities to protect existing cropland and the rural spaces of major border areas (1996:54).

If one of the stated goals of NAFTA is to benefit this country’s agricultural sector, the labor force must be included in the realm of agricultural law and not simply viewed as temporary and expendable workers. Historically colonized by formal annexation, former owner operators were reduced to poverty, their descendants consistently excluded from the protection and benefits of agricultural law. The NAFTA . . . should incorporate farm preservation at localities impacted by trade liberalization agreements. Establishing a mechanism to encourage alternative forms of sustainable agriculture, by setting aside land trusts in key regions, would encourage and facilitate entry into small farm ownership (1996:56).

Providing rich critical accounts, this recent work by Latino and Latina scholars reveals the historical construction of border spaces as an active and continuing process. Whether oppositional discourses are produced as murals, literature, biography, or legal scholarship, they challenge the “naturalness” as well as the “innocence” of dominant representations and mappings. This new Latino/a research contributes to the impressive interdisciplinary corpus produced by historians like Américo Paredes and José Limón, political ecologists Devon Peña and Oscar Martinez and Richard Griswold del Castillo, anthropologists Laura Pulido, geographer Lawrence Herzog, literary theorists like Gloria Anzaldúa, novelists and poets Pat Mora, Rolando Hinojosa, and Leslie Marmon Silko, among many other researchers, artists and writers. Each one points in a unique way to the political, economic, and cultural processes involved in constructing identities and mapping territories in the borderlands.

References:
Carl Gutierrez-Jones, Rethinking the Borderlands: Between Chicano Culture and Legal Discourse, Univ. of California Press 1995.

Visiting Scholars and Cultural Events

Fall 1996


Norberto Codina Boeras, Cuban Poet and Editor, Poetry Reading, November 14, 1996. With Latino Student Groups.

Ray Gonzalez, Chicano Poet and Writer, Poetry Reading, November 15, 1996. Sponsored by The University Honors Program.


Spring 1997


Panel Discussion—“Alma y Cuerpo: Latin American and Latina Women’s History.” Panel members included NIU faculty and grad student, Sylvia Fuentes-Education; Guadalupe Luna—Law; Elaine Stone-Drummond—Spanish; Moderator, Margaret Villanueva. March 6, 1997. With Women’s History Month.


Faculty Publications and Activities

Egberto Almenas-Rosa—Foreign Languages and Literatures

Publications:

Presentations:

Professional Activities:

Samuel Amaral—History

Publications:
Presentations:

Cecil H. Brown—Anthropology
Publications:

Presentations:

Daniel Cabrera—Allied Health Professions
Publications:

Presentations:

Since 1987, archeologist Winifred Creamer has studied demographic patterns and the impact of Europeans on the Pueblo people of the Rio Grande Valley. With support from the center, the Field Museum of Chicago, the NSF, and the Guggenheim, she has examined 12 large proto historic sites with particular attention to the Pueblo Blanco area. In Emergent Complexity: The Evolution of Intermediate Societies (ed., J. E. Arnold), she shows that existing models of cultural evolution fail to explain the complex patterns developed there prior to Spanish settlement. (“Developing Complexity in the American Southwest: Constructing a Model for the Rio Grande Valley,” Chap. 8, 1996:91-106). Taking into account the changing political, economic, and religious systems that are evident in the archeological data [clustered housing sites, trade articles, movement between riverain and mountain locations, variations in ceramic type and burial wealth], Creamer and her colleagues offer “the possibility that several systems were interacting within the region during the proto historic.” Thus, rather than searching for a singular pattern, she suggests that researchers explore the range of political and social systems that may have coexisted, shifting under certain ecological and political conditions from one form to another.

Political scientist Gregory D. Schmidt and his graduate students have received support for their research on electoral politics in Peru, including his recent publications analyzing the Fujimori “tsunami” phenomenon, or “electoral tidal wave.” In his article “Fujimori’s 1990 Upset Victory in Peru: Electoral Rules, Contingencies, and Adaptive Strategies,” published in Comparative Politics (1996:321-354), Schmidt argues that certain electoral rules not only influenced political strategies and campaign processes, but ultimately affected the nation’s electoral outcome. Winning second-place in the first round election by adopting a centrist stand, Fujimori attracted votes from the left and apriista conservative populists in the runoff. Schmidt contends that without provisions for simultaneous candidates and a majority runoff, Fujimori would not have been able to build up voters’ support. After publication of a book on this topic (Understanding the Fujimori Tsunami: Electoral Rules and Partisan Competition in the 1990 Peruvian Elections, Univ. Press of Florida), Professor Schmidt will return to Peru to complete his research on executive-legislative relations of 1990-1992 and Fujimori’s April 1992 “autogolpe.”

Linguistic anthropologist Cecil H. Brown published the article “Lexical acculturation, areal diffusion, lingua francas, and bilingualism,” in Language in Society (1996 25:261-282), a Cambridge University Press journal. As part of a longer project on lexical acculturation in Native American languages throughout the continent, he found that “bilingualism, almost always involving a lingua franca as an auxiliary language, constitutes the single most important factor promoting lexical diffusion across area languages” (1996: 278). In his study of 292 cases, Brown focused on the areal diffusion of native language words for imported European objects and concepts. He notes that approximately 80% of shared terms occur among closely genetically related languages, while distant or unrelated languages tend to share native labels for these objects only when these have diffused to them from a lingua franca [Mexican Nahuaat, Chinook Jargon, Peruvian Quechua].
Winifred Creamer—Anthropology

Publications:

Presentations:
(1996) “Pueblo Blanco at A.D. 1500,” Friends of the Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe, New Mexico, Apr.

Professional Activities:
(1996) Lead Travel/Learn program to Guatemala and Costa Rica, March.

Michael J. Gonzales—History

Publications:

Presentations:

Peter Gutierrez—Psychology

Publications:
(1996) “Adolescent Attitudes About Death in Relation to Suicidality” (w/ C.A. King and N. Ghazziudin), Suicide and Life Threatening Behavior (26).
Jorge Jeria—Leadership and Education

Publications:
(Forthcoming) “Education, the missing pieces of NAFTA,” Convergence, w/ Sygielski.
(1996) “Inter/Multiculturalidad en una perspectiva de educacion de personas adultas,” La Piragua, (Santiago, Chile) 2(13).

Presentations:
(1997) Lecture at Conference Regional Preparatoria da V Conferencia Internacional de Educacao de Adultos Brasília, Brazil UNESCO.

Awards and Honors:
(1997) Sabbatical leave to research “The Responses of Communities to the Educational Reform in Chile.”
(1997) Grant from the NIU Faculty Development Office for a seminar on educational reform in Sao Paulo and Recife, Brazil.

Cosette Kies—Leadership and Educational Policy Studies

Publications:

Jeff Kowalski—Art

Publications:

Presentations:

Monique J. Lemaître—Foreign Languages and Literatures

Publications:

Guadalupe Luna—Law

Publications:
Rosita L. Marcano—Leadership and Educational Policy Studies

Publications:

Presentations:
(1996) “Helping educational leaders deal with ‘retention in grade’,” (w/ C.L. Fulmer) & “Analyzing the teaching and learning culture of an educational leadership cohort group,” (w/ C.L. Fulmer), Annual Conference of the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration, Texas A & M University, Corpus Christi, TX, Aug.

Robert B. Marks Ridinger—Founders Library

Publications:

Elaine Stone-Drummond—Foreign Languages and Literatures

Presentations:

Gregory D. Schmidt—Political Science

Publications:
(Forthcoming) “Presidential Usurpation or Congressional Preference?: The Evolution of Executive Decree Authority in Peru,” In Executive Decree Authority: Calling Out the Tanks, or Filling Out the Forms?, J. M. Carey and M. Soberg Shugart, Eds., Cambridge University Press, NY.

Presentations:

Margaret Villanueva—Anthropology

Publications:

Presentations:

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Awards and Honors:

Jack Weiner—Foreign Languages and Literatures
Publications:

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