

Important but Neglected: Midwest Latino/a Biography and Memoir

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Incredible though it may seem, there are no full-fledged biographies or memoirs of any Midwest latina/os – not a single one. Indeed, there’s a lack of serious biographical and memoir treatment of latina/os generally. Other than César Chávez – a giant who deserves many books – almost no latino/as have been the subjects of full-fledged biographies. The few exceptions include a biography of civil rights leader Héctor P. García and one of historian Carlos E. Castañeda.¹ The situation is equally dire in the case of memoirs. True, Ernesto Galarza’s *Barrio Boy* was published over forty years ago, but that was with the encouragement and support of Julian Samora – and Samora and Galarza pioneered scholarship on latinos (as noted by the chair of our panel, Silvia Pedraza.) The next memoir would not appear for over a decade: Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger for Memory*. Yet another decade would pass until the appearance of three more: Víctor Villaseñor’s *Rain of Gold* (1992), Rubén Navarrette’s *A Darker Shade of Crimson* (1994), and John Phillip Santos’ *Places Left Unfinished at the Time of Creation*.²

Also, I should make note of Mario T. García’s unusual blend of biography and memoir, *Memories of Chicano History: The Life and Narrative of Bert Corona*. Is this work more a biography, more a memoir, or does it transcend them both? García puts it this way,]: “The result is a *testimonio*, a collaborative autobiography in which historical

¹ Jacques Levy, *Cesar Chavez: Autobiography of La Causa* (New York: Norton, 1975); Richard Etulian, *Cesar Chavez: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Palgrave, 2002); Richard Griswold del Castillo and Richard A. García, *César Chávez: A Triumph of Spirit* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995); Roger Bruns, *Cesar Chavez: A Biography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), Dan La Botz, *César Chávez and La Causa* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2006); Ignacio M. García, *Héctor P. García: In Relentless Pursuit of Justice* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2002); Felix Almaráz, Jr., *Knight without Armor: Carlos Eduardo Castañeda, 1896-1958* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1999).

² Ernesto Galarza, *Barrio Boy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1971), ix; Silvia Pedraza, Silvia, “Beyond Black and White: Latinos and Social Science Research on Immigration, Race and Ethnicity in America”, *Social Science History*, Volume 24, Number 4 (Winter 2000), 697-726; Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory* (New York: Bantam Books, 1983); Víctor Villaseñor, *Rain of Gold* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1999); John Phillip Santos, *Places Left Unfinished at the Time of Creation* (New York: Viking, 1999); Ruben Navarrette, *A Darker Shade of Crimson* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993).

memories are preserved more through oral traditions than through written documents.”³

What do scholars of biography and memoir think of his analysis? Well, there is no indication that any of them have ever even heard of *Memories of Chicano History*. This is yet more evidence of the spadework that needs to be done – and in the case of personages in the Midwest, needs to begin!

This dire situation is even more egregious – glaring – when one considers that biography and memoir so powerfully engage the general public. Indeed, what historian James Veninga says about the efficacy of biography can apply to memoir as well.

We glimpse inside a person to see a life unfold. We see the influence of environment on personality and personality on environment. We discover anew the nature and meaning of the seasons of life. We see success and failure, love and hate...and insights into another age [but also] we gain knowledge about the universal conditions under which all lives are formed and lived, the conditions of freedom and fate...We are not given answers, only insight...We meet fate [alone, but] we may be able to meet fate with courage. Therein lies our freedom. Therein lies the gift and beauty of good biography.⁴

And, I might add, the gift and beauty of good memoir. Take the opening of *Barrio Boy*: “Unlike people who are born in hospitals...I showed up in an adobe cottage with a thatched roof...in the wild, majestic mountains of the Sierra Madre de Nayarit.” Ernesto Galarza’s mountain village was so remote that even if you lived there, he wrote, “arriving...was always a surprise.” He explained, “The location of Jalcoctán was meant to give protection against outsiders...The first settlers were refugees” from the coast,

³ Mario T. García, *Memories of Chicano History: The Life and Narrative of Bert Corona* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), introduction.

⁴ James Veninga, *The Humanities and The Civic Imagination* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 1999), “Biography: The Self and the Sacred Canopy”, 274-288.

where “the Spaniards had come, killing the Indians with the guns and running them down with their hunting dogs.”⁵

In other words, a memoir or biography of a latina/o, if engagingly written, can reach well beyond academic circles, to that wide public audience that loves the stirring saga of a trailblazing life, or someone’s evocation of their long-lost world. Thus *Places Left Unfinished at the Time of Creation* was a finalist for the National Book Award, while *Barrio Boy* remains in print and is widely referenced, in works ranging from Michael Denning’s *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* to Caroline Kennedy’s *A Patriot’s Handbook: Songs, Poems, Stories and Speeches Celebrating the Land We Love*.⁶ Meantime *Hunger of Memory* eclipsed them in the attention it received from national cultural elite and (perhaps not coincidentally) even as it alone presented an assimilationist trope. But while *The New York Times*, to take one example, gave Richard Rodriguez’s memoir by far the most coverage, nonetheless “the newspaper of record” also reviewed the memoirs by Santos, Navarrette and Villaseñor as well. Thus this genre has indeed proven a vehicle for national recognition.⁷

⁵ Galarza, *Barrio Boy*, 3-7.

⁶ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997); Caroline Kennedy’s *A Patriot’s Handbook: Songs, Poems, Stories and Speeches Celebrating the Land We Love* (New York: Hyperion, 2003).

⁷ *The New York Times* devoted two separate reviews to *Hunger of Memory* and named it a “Notable Book of the Year”. Paul Zweig, “Child of Two Cultures”, *New York Times Book Review*, Feb. 28, 1982, 1; Le Anne Schreiber, “Books of the Times: *Hunger of Memory*”, *The New York Times*, March 1, 1982, C15; “Notable Books of the Year”, *The New York Times Book Review*, December 5, 1982, 14; National Book Foundation, “National Book Awards – 1999” <http://www.nationalbook.org/nba1999.html> (accessed February 13, 2010); Tom Miller, “Children of Another Revolution”, *New York Times Book Review*, September 8, 1991, 20; “Fight Fiercely, Ruben Navarrette, Jr.”, *New York Times Book Review*, October 21, 1993, 20; Suzanne Ruta, “North toward Home: A Mexican-American [sic] Explores His Roots and His Native Land”, *New York Times Book Review*, December 5, 1999, 53.

Of course, like any approach, the world of biography and memoir has its shortcomings. As you well know, traditionally such works have spotlighted members of the elite in particular. And, yes, part of the appeal of such works to the general public is precisely the extent to which the profile of a single life play into an individualistic ethos. But latina/o lives, with their complicated relationship to the dominant society, hold the promise of accounts that do not underplay the structural factors operating in a life – operating on a life, one might say, as in that opening section of *Barrio Boy*, with its seamless reference to colonial domination. As such latino/a biographies and memoirs can present structural factors in an effective – even subversive – way to the average reader.

Countless Midwest latina/o lives cry out for treatment as biographies and/or memoirs – as with the founder of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, Baldemar Velásquez. In writing this piece I made this Velasquez reference not knowing that he would in fact be featured at the conference – and no wonder, given this historic significance of his work. Meantime he has provided a few tantalizing glimpses into his life story. For instance, in an article for Ohio State’s latino student newspaper, Velásquez recalled that

When I was 5 years old, we began our journey in the back of a flat-bed truck with wooden sideboards and a canvas over the top. We were crammed with five or six other families huddled together trying to keep warm in the cool nights, as the humming of the truck wheels served as a mesmerizing lullaby. Early morning pit stops were not gas stations, where we weren’t allowed to use the bathrooms, but rather wooded areas where men and women would go in different directions to relieve themselves. Arriving in Ohio, we were introduced to shelters that were often barns or chicken coops, and if we were lucky, a one room shack equipped with a two burner kerosene stove...⁸

⁸ Baldemar Velásquez, “From the Ashes”, *QuePasa OSU* (Spring 2008)
<http://quepasa.osu.edu/issues/sp08/miexperiencia.htm> (accessed February 10, 2010).

Or as he put it in an interview on Toledo Public Television:

Labor contractors would humiliate your mother, your brothers and sisters who were younger than you, in the fields by the crass talking, trash talking, those kinds of things makes a young man very angry – let alone when crew leaders would steal your money – from the back-breaking labor that you’re doing... and I decided from a young age that when I grew up, if I could do anything about it, I would, so I started working with my dad and my mom and their circle of friends...in the community...[T]hat became our first base of organizing, but we didn’t think about forming a union; at that time I didn’t know anything about labor unions. I had more experience in the civil rights movement, being a college student, and I thought that maybe we could fashion the Farm Labor Organizing Committee like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: that we’d be an advocacy group out there demanding change for farm workers. We realized very shortly after we started that that wasn’t going to be enough, that what we really needed was an organization in which workers could achieve some sense of self-determination...so I visited nearly every labor union in northwest Ohio and asked them to organize us, and nobody wanted to, because they said, “Well, these are temporary workers and they’re hard to organize,” so when everybody said “no” to us, we said, “Well, we’ll just start our own union.”

Time does not permit further quotes from him, but these include moving stories of César Chávez and MLK as mentors. Imagine if Velásquez wrote a full-fledged memoir – or if a biographer wove together this life story in stirring prose! As the interviewer on Toledo Public Television, Dr. Jack Lessenberry, said in his concluding remarks to the viewers, “What I find amazing is...that the union, or at least its founder, have not been the subject of a major book and a movie.”⁹

Think of the many other latinos and latinas from the Midwest that deserve profiling! I will only mention one more: María Varela. She is a reminder of yet another scandalous omission: that there is still not a single, solitary full-fledged biography of any Chicana – no, not even Dolores Huerta, for whom biographies thus far have been limited to juvenile accounts. Also, no Chicana to my knowledge has published her memoir.

⁹ Jack Lessenberry, interview with Baldemar Velásquez, *Deadline Now*, WGTE, September 21, 2007 http://www.wgte.org/wgte/item.asp?item_id=782 (accessed February 10, 2010).

María Varela, however, actually has been approached by a literary agent. Thus this would be the first a) full-fledged Chicana memoir and b) memoir by someone from the Midwest – in Varela’s case, from Chicago.

Doubtless she received the book contract on the strength of her having won a “genius” award from the MacArthur foundation and as one of “1,000 Peace Women” from around the world nominated collectively for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005 by an international women’s group. Here is an excerpt from her profile for that nomination:

Land-grant activists in northern New Mexico turned to civil disobedience in the late 1960s to protest the earlier appropriation of land by incomers, after New Mexico became part of the United States, [and] Maria [Varela] worked for this Alianza Federal de Los Pueblos in 1968. [Thereafter] she became Program Director of a new agricultural cooperative...then co-founded and directed a health clinic. Around [1979] she began talking with community members about a bigger project that would combine their traditional pastoral skills and culture with modern marketing methods...

The project was Ganados del Valle (Livestock of the Valley)...Ganados del Valle has turned around the economy of the Chama valley region by linking economic, cultural, and environmental sustainability and survival...In support of these businesses and projects, Ganados established a loan fund, a scholarship fund, a land fund, a work-based college program, and many workshops and opportunities for training and teaching.

...Ganados families have been farming in this area for many generations but have come into conflict with environmentalists – often recent residents of New Mexico – over the issue of grazing vs. wildlife habitat...[Varela] has been a key figure in trying to change public policy and the thinking of mainstream environmental groups in support of local shepherders. She argues: “Collaboration can provide the opportunity for the kind of cross-cultural communication that is necessary to address social, economic, and environmental problems.... But unless the issues of race, class, and culture are faced head-on, I question whether collaboration can make a dent in deeply held ethnocentrism, rooted in still deeper historical legacies. Breakthroughs are possible, but only if we can gather the courage to risk stepping outside our colonized worldviews.”

Maria is a dedicated and gifted organizer, a brilliant thinker and planner, and a visionary. She believes in grassroots change through the empowerment of ordinary people. She is a committed collaborator who takes the long

view...Ganados del Valle...has become a model for other rural communities. It exemplifies principles of community organizing and community empowerment, and there is much to learn from the analysis and strategizing that went into it....[She] has inspired many students, organizers, farmers, and urban residents in the southwest and across the country.

In addition, Maria Varela has contributed to the training of a new generation of organizers [and] she has helped to influence and sustain several state and national-level institutions that support appropriate rural development. Through her teaching, publishing, and photography Maria Varela has reached a wider audience with information and inspiration. Maria Varela's deep-rooted commitment to social and economic justice, and democratic community empowerment, exemplifies peace work in the most positive sense.¹⁰

Raised in Chicago, María Varela attended Alverno College in Milwaukee in the early 1960s and was elected student body president. She then became a national leader of the Chicago-based Young Christian Students. While virtually forgotten today, YCS was important nationally at the time, particularly in the Midwest. Here is Varela on the subject, in her one memoir article thus far:

By the 1960's YCS was a world-wide student movement that, while rooted in Europe in the early 20th century, was growing in influence in Africa, Latin America and Europe by mid-century. Many YCS leaders were involved in independence movements and resistance efforts in the Third World. Several were disappeared or killed. We were infused with a sense of vocation that as Christians we are to be actively engaged in dismantling racism, economic injustice, anti-democratic forces and unjust wars....It did not call for acts of charity on behalf of the oppressed, but more importantly...to "reconstruct society altogether."

After graduating from Alverno College, I was invited to join the national staff of YCS in Chicago. We made \$7 a week and the organization took care of housing and food. I was a field worker, organizing YCS chapters on college and university campuses... I also represented YCS at summer conventions of the National Student Association. There I met the founders of the Students for a Democratic Society.¹¹

¹⁰ 1000 Peace Women, "Maria Varela"

http://www.1000peacewomen.org/eng/friedensfrauen_biographien_gefunden.php?WomenID=883 (accessed February 13, 2010).

¹¹ María Varela, "If You Have Come to Help Us, Go Home!", *U.S. Catholic Historian*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Winter 2008), 68-70; Charles E. Cobb, Jr., *On the Road to Freedom* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books,

Meantime, SDS founder Tom Hayden, in his own memoir, wrote that Varela was an author of the organization's historic *Port Huron Statement*, which Varela herself has characterized as “a student manifesto critiquing US social and foreign policy and laying out a vision of participatory democracy.”¹²

Next it was the civil rights movement that called Varela, who left the Midwest for Mississippi's “Freedom Summer” in 1964. After that she participated in the rising Chicano movement, documenting it with some of the best photographs of the United Farm Workers in California, then provided equally important images of Corky Gonzales's Crusade for Justice in Denver and Reies López Tijerina's land-rights movement in New Mexico. Indeed some of these gripping images would be featured decades later in the PBS series *Chicano! The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement*. As a photographer Varela was able to operate as a recognized player in the Chicano movement at a time when women in all aspects of American life – including the activist movements – were largely excluded from official leadership positions.¹³

Still, it was with community organizing that she found her calling. As historian Vicki Ruiz has noted, in the end Varela concluded, “It is not enough to pray over an injustice or protest it, or research it to death, but then you have to take concrete action to

2008), 168; María Varela to author, Aug., 2006.

¹² Tom Hayden, *Reunion: A Memoir* (New York: Collier, 1989), 84, 95, 110; Varela, “If You Have Come to Help Us, Go Home!”, 70.

¹³ Take Stock/Images of Change: “María Varela”, <http://www.takestockphotos.com/pages/varela.html> (accessed February 13, 2010); Francis Arturo Rosales, *Chicano! The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1996), xi, 182, 214.

solve it.”¹⁴ But that also means, of course, that for the activist-turned-memoirist, writing is not the first calling. This points to one of the drawbacks of memoirs in contrast to biographies, with another perhaps being that biographers tend to approach the subject with more detachment and also more ability to draw from archival and secondary sources. For instance, I am using the lives of Varela, Velásquez, and several other visionaries to serve as the vivid, contemporary, human face for a study of Mexican American civic activism in historical perspective. In so doing I can feel free to point out the importance of these personages in ways that they may not feel comfortable doing themselves. Still it is a María Varela or a Baldemar Velásquez who alone can provide the definitive firsthand account.

In other words, each of these lives deserves both a biography and a memoir. That all of this is virtually uncharted territory speaks to the fact that, as the Toledo PBS interviewer put it at the end of his program on Baldemar Velásquez, his importance has been ignored in a world where “the big studios and publishing houses see [the Midwest as] ‘flyover country’.”¹⁵ Add to that the fact that such public arbiters have virtually ignored the lives of Mexican Americans, and we have double work to do – triple, when you count the gender factor. Thus I eagerly look forward to hearing your suggestions of Midwest latina/o lives that deserve our attention. And I encourage those of you who are Midwest latina/o scholars and activists – and are of a certain age (!) – to write your own memoirs. Think what you have witnessed! Think what you can tell us!

¹⁴ Vicki Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican American Women in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 144-145.

¹⁵ Lessenbery interview.