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Ernesto Galarza Remembered: A Reflection on Graduate Studies in Chicano History

by Stephen J. Pitti
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JSRI Occasional Papers: for the dissemination of speeches and papers of value to the Latino community which are not necessarily based on a research project. Examples include historical accounts of people or events, "oral histories," motivational talks, poetry, speeches, and related presentations.

Artwork by
Nora Chapa Mendoza, March 1996

The Julian Samora Research Institute is the Midwest's premier policy research and outreach center to the Hispanic community. The Institute's mission includes:

• *Generation of a program of research and evaluation to examine the social, economic, educational, and political condition of Latino communities.*

• *Transmission of research finding to academic institutions, government officials, community leaders, and private sector executives through publications, public policy seminars, workshops, and consultations.*

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SAMORA RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Ernesto Galarza Remembered: A Reflection on Graduate Studies in Chicano History

After watching the conference proceedings for the last two days, I wanted to share a graduate student's perspective about the state of the discipline of Chicano history. What I am offering here is a response to what I think are many of the main themes that surfaced in this week's presentations and discussions, as well as a summary of the type of work being done by my fellow students working on Master's and doctoral degrees. If our meeting aimed both to assess the current state of the field and to push us forward, we would be remiss not to acknowledge that graduate student work is important for understanding where we are, and critical for determining where we ought to go. I would like to relate, as well, some additional thoughts about the conference which have been shaped by my dissertation research on Chicanos in San José, California, and particularly on Ernesto Galarza, a vocal resident of the community who helped establish the field of Chicano Studies.

In my readings and conversations with other graduate students in the field, it strikes me immediately that much of our work aims to recognize the diverse political viewpoints and social formations of ethnic Mexicans living in the United States. Many students are finding recent works in feminist and queer theory most useful in this inquiry, and are influenced by demands in those fields for rethinking paradigms which continue to deny the formative role of gender and sexuality in the construction of subjectivities. There is a suspicion of analytical categories like "family" and "barrio" which seem, when rereading some early works by Chicano historians, the basis for assertions that true Chicanos share and have shared a common nationalism, and are therefore complicit with the censoring of diverse and contradictory positions by Chicanas, and gays and lesbians, for social justice. This has certainly shaped our historical agenda as students in the late-20th century.

Had there been a larger graduate student presence at our two-day event, there might have been more discussion about ways to complicate our understanding of the boundaries and conflicts within "the Chicano community," and more interest in voicing a feminist critique of our historiography, a position generally absent in these proceedings. Students would have paid close attention to Professor Ramón Eduardo Ruíz's efforts to link Chicano history and Mexican history, for example, but might have pushed him and other panelists to pay more attention to the diversity of ethnic Mexican communities in the United States. Informed by the writings of a number of contemporary thinkers — ranging from Gloria Anzaldua to Stuart Hall — many students find the idea of mestizaje useful inanalyzing how Mexico's complexities have been experienced by residents of the U.S. Young scholars are intent on showing how urban and rural inhabitants have negotiated a complex world in which *mexicanidad* could not always be equated with the Spanish-language, the Catholic religion, or *la familia mexicana*. Inspired by new theorizations of subjectivity in the academy, students are attempting to show how ethnic Mexicans in the United States have historically created a hybrid culture that might not be easily recognized as Mexican or American, as those categories have been commonly understood. Along with other scholars in the field, graduate students are illustrating how nationalism, ideologies of gender and sex, class position, and other societal forces have shaped ethnic identities.

It would be a mistake to suggest that in Chicano Studies these efforts are entirely new with the current crop of graduate students. Our efforts are certainly indebted to the works of numerous scholars who have written and taught since the 1960s. Most important to the molding of graduate student work are the debates within feminism, especially the writings of women of color within that field. In addition, there is at least one other scholar, not a feminist, whose legacy drives much of the work being pursued at this time. It is this longtime resident of San José, an immigrant who arrived in the US during the Mexican Revolution, to whom I will now turn.

If we are to push for "new directions in Chicano history," as the conference promised, we must consider the life and work of Ernesto Galarza, author of six books on farm labor and Mexican American communities, Nobel Prize nominee, co-founder of what later would become MALDEF and the NCLR, and close friend of Julian Samora. Several presenters referred to Galarza over the days' events because this noted "scholar-activist," who devoted himself to the

union movement from the 1940s to the 1960s, offered a vision of "action research" to an entire generation of students coming of age in the 1960s and 1970s. Like many in the nascent field of Chicano Studies, Galarza had a combative relationship with traditional forces within the academy. Although he held a BA from Occidental, a Master's from Stanford, and a Ph.D. from Columbia University, Galarza had tremendous difficulty finding a university audience for his writings, and it was only because of the intercession of Julian Samora, then at Notre Dame, that his first book, *Strangers in Our Fields,* found a publisher in 1965. Although he did some college teaching in his later years, he referred to universities as "graveyards of ideas," and remained suspicious of scholarship which was not based in achieving social justice. Since the mid-1960s, many in Chicano studies have expressed similar commitments about the proper role of writing and teaching in a democratic society, and it is this beacon of scholar-activism which has been Galarza's most recognized gift to following generations, professors and students alike.

While Galarza would have delighted in the presence of a Chicano History Conference at the Julian Samora Research Institute, we must do more than invoke his name in thinking about the future of this academic field. We must appreciate that Chicano Studies has only begun to turn to areas which Galarza believed were central to researching and writing about the experience of ethnic Mexicans in the United States. As an expert on international labor migration, Galarza knew that the US-Mexico border region was being transformed in the post-War period, and that ethnic Mexicans living around the United States were increasingly tied, in one way or another, to the international arena. Galarza would, therefore, applaud the growing interest in the border region, and more generally, in analytical terms like "border" and "borderlands" which have become central to our critical vocabulary. Until his death in 1984, Galarza had worked hard for over forty years to convince residents of the United States and Mexico that all regions, from Chiapas to Maine, shared a single economic and political system, and that therefore every resident of the United States had an interest in Mexican affairs, and vice versa. Galarza's work should remind us, especially, that the field of Chicano history must speak to the broadest possible audience in Mexico and the United States.

Galarza's ghost therefore forces us to begin a discussion of how we position our work for an international, hemispheric public. We must consider the positive and negative ramifications of the movement of Chicano history away from the discipline of Latin American Studies, where most students were first trained in the late-1960s and early-1970s, to its present position as a sub-field of United States history. Because they are increasingly taught by US-specialists, graduate students in Chicano history today probably know less about Latin America than those who entered the field in the 1960s and 1970s. As historians have struggled over the last thirty years to include ethnic Mexican people in the narratives of American history, there has been only sporadic discussion about how to continue working within the field of Latin American history. In this age of NAFTA, the field must assess how to work effectively in both American Studies and Latin American Studies, strategize about becoming an institutional bridge between departments and conferences in the two fields, and exchange more ideas with Mexican scholars interested in topics like colonialism, urbanization, class stratification, migration, race and representation, and politics. These efforts will challenge the way most departments arrange themselves around national histories, and will certainly raise difficult questions about, among other things, the training of future graduate students. Faculty and students therefore face a challenging task in working both inside and outside the national historiographies of the United States and Mexico, but in doing so will likely reshape the field in the next decade. New studies comparing communities of ethnic Mexicans on both sides of the border will raise important questions about national exceptionalism, and reorient our understanding of how labor, culture, and capital have moved on a south-north axis.

In addition to pushing the national boundaries which have emerged in Chicano history, Galarza's legacy impels scholars to consider how their work fits within multi-racial movements for social justice in the Americas. Not only do we need to continue discussing how to become better public intellectuals, circulating ideas beyond the classroom and the university bookstore, we also must continue to ask about the relevance of academic debates to the larger public. Galarza might also suggest a reassessment of the value of our scholarly discussions to those outside

the university. Before his death in 1984, for example, he wondered about the utility of claims to an "authentic" Chicano way of being, and of "authentic" Chicano Studies. He might now ask why those ideas continued to emerge at this conference, almost thirty years after the discipline of Chicano Studies formally began. Perhaps his suspicion of debates about authenticity stemmed from his family background — Galarza's German father had immigrated to Mexico — or from his coalition-building class politics, which taught him that many in the ethnic Mexican community opposed the labor movement. Whatever the cause, Galarza might caution conference-goers that such discussion of who "counts" as Chicano distracts from the need to push forward in other endeavors. At the conference, we were reminded about this troubling issue of authenticity by panelists Ramon Gutierrez, Maria Montoya, and Lorena Oropeza.

Galarza was always driven in part by a desire to educate non-Mexican people about the history and culture of ethnic Mexicans, and he would ask how debating authenticity serves the diverse students in our university classrooms. Because Chicano Studies has always been student-driven, he would urge the field to respond to the growing number of Central American, Caribbean, Anglo-American, African American, Native American, and Asian American students who are interested in Chicano history. Moreover, because cities like New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco are bringing ethnic Mexicans into closer contact with Asian American and African American residents in new political coalitions, Galarza would certainly push Chicano historians to reassess their field in light of these significant demographic and political changes. As an accomplished educator, he questioned the place of cultural nationalism in our pedagogy, and whether older definitions of what "counts" as politically committed scholarship can still hold in this era of migration and economic restructuring.

Galarza's scholarship and political commitments remind historians, finally, to remember the critical importance of interdisciplinary approaches to the study of culture and society. Martha Menchaca's comments about combining ethnographic and archival research suggested to conference-goers one approach to interdisciplinarity. As a scholar, Galarza read and contributed to the fields of economics, history, sociology, anthropology, international relations, and linguistics, and many graduate students are also finding it necessary to pursue course work and directed readings outside History departments to address topics which have not yet been adequately covered in our historiography. Many studies are being done at universities which have Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies programs to guide these inquiries, and Galarza might look with approval on these efforts to combine different methodologies and critiques. But the movement of Chicano Studies into these departments and programs raises new questions for the field which we could only begin to address at our two day conference. Although Albert Camarillo and Evelyn Hu-Dehart touched on the issue, we need more debate about what the field might learn from African American, Asian American, and Native American Studies, and the ways Chicano Studies can challenge other disciplines to rethink issues like conquest, racism, national identity, and diaspora, which together constitute the foundation for exciting new studies being done around the country. Historians who interact with literary scholars can push Ethnic Studies to adopt the materialist analysis which is often absent in studies of literary, cinematic, and artistic "representation." At the same time, graduate students are in an excellent position to use new theories of racial difference, urban space, and colonialism to draw upon an established Chicano historiography, and to develop new materialist approaches to the study of ethnic Mexican communities.

At the JSRI conference, Michigan State witnessed the rumblings of many debates which reflect both the past and the future of Chicano History, and those tremors suggest new projects for students and faculty who will take the discipline into the next century. In so doing, scholars young and old who continue to examine the state of our academic field would do well to consider Ernesto Galarza's position on the limits of cultural nationalism, the connection between scholarship and activism, the importance of an international interpretive framework and increased contact with academics in Mexico, and the value of interdisciplinary studies for enriching historical study. These issues present new challenges, and call for future conferences in which faculty and students can together plot new directions in Chicano History.