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History and Anthropology: Conducting Chicano Research

by Martha Menchaca
University of Texas, Austin

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**RESEARCH**

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Abstract

I have been asked to speak to you about my historical research on Chicanos from an anthropological perspective. My approach is different from that of the historian, as my intent in conducting historical research is to understand the evolution of culture over time. Therefore, what I plan to do is: first, to explain to you what the sub-specialization of history and anthropology is; second, to discuss the relationship between Chicano Studies and the field specialization of history and anthropology; and third, to close with two examples of my research.

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Her research and teaching interests are in history and anthropology, ethnicity, race, oral history and traditions, acculturation and assimilation, and legal and feminist theory throughout the Southwest and Mexico. Menchaca has authored numerous articles, reports, papers, and essays, and is currently working on a manuscript about the racial heritage of Chicanos.

History and Anthropology: Conducting Chicano Research

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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:

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History and Anthropology

Within the discipline of anthropology there are four sub-specializations: sociocultural anthropology, linguistics, archaeology, and physical anthropology. The study of history and anthropology comes under the sub-field of sociocultural anthropology. In my view, the study of history within anthropology is associated with a more critical and reflexive academic discourse because anthropologists argue that culture must be understood from a historical perspective in order to determine how the structure of a society was formed, to identify who controls power in a community, and to discern how cultural relations have evolved. In his book entitled *Anthropologies and Histories: Essays in Culture, History, and Political Economy*, William Roseberry also asserts that without studying culture from a historical perspective, the researcher may unwittingly misinterpret a people's behavior or misunderstand how a society's economy impacts the social relations of a community (1991).

The idea of historically contextualizing an ethnography was popularized by Franz Boas, who is credited today for being the father of American Anthropology (Jackson 1986). Boasian thought emphasized the importance of understanding each culture on its own terms, and part of the mission of Boasian anthropology was to give to groups that did not enjoy a sense of antiquity the equivalent of a classical past by collecting texts of myths and folklore and by preserving their artifacts. Many of his students sought to understand a society's social structure from a diachronic perspective. For a moment let me explain what the term diachronic is, as it is based on the concept of structure. As you know, the term structure refers to studying a society's formal and informal institutions. (The formal institutions include: the political, economic, legal, and educational domains. And, the informal institutions of a society include: the family, the neighborhood, and the friendship networks). By the term diachronic, Boasian anthropology referred to the study of the social relations of a society over time. The purpose of this diachronic approach was based on the perspective that when anthropologists enter the field, the culture they observe has been influenced by past events.

Thus, my point is: When an anthropologist writes a historical ethnography, the individual examines a contemporary society from a diachronic or historical perspective. I would like to add, however, that anthropologists also conduct historical research that does not include the ethnographic component. This type of historical research focuses on archival records, yet its intent is similar to the historical ethnography, in that the researcher's goal is to understand the evolution of a society's cultural relations, and not necessarily to present a chronology of events.

Cannons

There have been many historical anthropologists and their work has been very critical of racism and the economic exploitation suffered by people living in poverty. One of the earliest ethnographies that I have been moved by was Philleo Nash's monograph entitled: "The Place of Religious Revivalism in the Formation of the Intercultural Community on Klamath Reservation" (1937). This is an account based on archives and oral histories collected from the children of Native Americans who survived the Indian extermination campaigns in California. Most of the remembrances of Nash's informants dealt with their history of survival and the nativistic religious revival movements that surfaced between 1871-1878. The doctrine and ritual of the Ghost Dance were used as forms of ethnic resistance and spiritual empowerment.

Classic studies within the field of history and anthropology include the works by: Clifford Geertz, Sidney Mintz, Marshall Sahlins, Eric Wolf, and Americo Paredes. These scholars critically propose that the interpretation of cultural symbols often necessitates historical contextualization, particularly when the subjects of study deal with interethnic relations and colonial domination. One specific historical approach employed by Eric Wolf in Europe and the People Without History (1982) and Sidney Mintz in Sweetness and Power (1986) is the application of a macroeconomic method or what is often called the metaeconomic narrative. Within their historical approach, both authors argue that the world economy must be closely analyzed before we can understand the culture and structure of a society.

In contrast to this macroeconomic historical approach are the classic works produced by Clifford Geertz, such as his book entitled *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth Century Bali* (1980). Geertz has been highly criticized for his narrative style in which the voices of his informants are solely filtered through his monologue. Although I concur with Geertz' critics, his narratives are excellently researched and descriptively thick. Geertz also employs a "historical particularism" approach to the study of culture. When anthropologists use this approach they do not contextualize their community study by examining the world economy. Rather, in the analysis of data anthropologists focus on the particular history, economy, and social relations of the community or region under study.

Americo Paredes has also influenced the field of history and anthropology, with his classic study of *With His Pistol in His Hand* (1958). Unfortunately, it was only a few years ago that the American Anthropological Association officially recognized Dr. Paredes' contributions to the discipline of anthropology. Paredes is another example of an anthropologist who supports the position that cultural studies need to be historically contextualized. Likewise, he has advanced methods to verify this theoretical orientation. For example, in many of Paredes' writings he has demonstrated that community histories and important events germane to Mexican-Americans can be reconstituted by finding evidence in archives. In particular, legal archives offer great value as informative documents. That is, some judicial court records contain narratives that have documented many social injustices committed against racial minorities, and these narratives also contain the ideological rationalizations used by Anglo Americans to justify such practices. Paredes has also demonstrated that events can be reconstituted or verified by using newspaper articles and collecting oral histories.

Recent Works

More current research conducted by historical anthropologists are numerous. However, I consider the works of the following authors to be representative of an anthropology that is more political and critical of the economic and racial inequities that exist in the societies they study. These scholars have also attempted to integrate the

theoretical writings of racial minority anthropologists into their narratives, in order to begin making the discipline of anthropology a field that is not solely dominated by Whites. These authors are: Renato Rosaldo, James Clifford, and Richard Fox. Like Paredes, Renato Rosaldo was one of the first Mexican-American anthropologists who broke into the field of anthropology and proved to mainstream anthropologists that - "Yes, Mexican-Americans have valuable and sophisticated narratives to tell." Rosaldo has numerous books and articles dealing with topics on: social theory, multicultural education, history and society, rethinking ethnographic methods, oral history, Chicano Studies, and research on MesoAmerica and the Philippines (Books: *Ilongot Headhunting 1883 -1974: A Study in Society and History* (1980), *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (1993)). In my analysis, one of Rosaldo's main contributions to anthropology has been his ongoing call to anthropologists to stop making "people of color" appear exotic - for when they are represented in such a manner, they are represented as different, inferior, and as the objectified other.

James Clifford and Richard Fox concur with Rosaldo's critique regarding issues of representation. These two anthropologists are also very critical of the field of anthropology for its insistence in representing people of color rather than allowing them to speak for themselves (Clifford 1988; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Fox 1991). The problem that currently exists is that anthropologists solely seek to represent the "other," rather than developing an academic agenda to encourage people of color to become anthropologists so that they may represent themselves. This academic practice has resulted in the social formation of a shallow discourse that exoticizes subaltern cultures. The existence of poverty, exploitative relations, and patriarchal domination in non-White communities have been documented excellently by anthropologists. Yet, anthropologists have done little to liberate their subjects or to make them seem less exotic (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1992; Taussig 1992). "Giving voices to the voiceless" and using polyphonic writing styles that attempt to represent other cultures through the lenses of the "other" are revolutionary ethnographic techniques that are practiced by anthropologists who support Clifford's school of thought. The problem that persists, as expressed by Rosaldo, Clifford, and Fox, is that the

field of anthropology refuses to allow the “other” to speak. This results in treating people of color as objects. The most blatant example of muting the voice of the other is when anthropologists refuse to integrate the academic discourses of racial minority scholars within the core of anthropological theory. It appears that most anthropologists are content with studying people of color, but are not prepared to study the theories developed by racial minority anthropologists.

I would now like to move on to the second issue I was asked to address: What is the relationship of anthropology and the field of Chicano Studies?

How are Anthropology and Chicano Studies Related?

In 1985, Renato Rosaldo wrote an article entitled “Chicano Studies, 1970 to 1984.” This article was very significant, for it was the first time that the *Journal of Annual Reviews of Anthropology* published an article on Chicanos, written by a Chicano. The journal is very prestigious and one of the most respected within our discipline. This article was also significant because it revisited the Romano-Madsen debate, a controversy that was ignited by the words of two anthropologists, and which to a large measure, led to forging the theoretical characteristics of Chicano Studies. The debate focused on two opposing anthropological interpretations about the nature of Chicano culture, and on the issue of whether the Chicanos are at fault for the poverty they experience in South Texas.

On the one hand, in 1968 Octavio Romano wrote an article criticizing social scientists. It was entitled “The Anthropology and Sociology of the Mexican-Americans: The Distortion of Mexican-American History” (Romano-V 1968). Here Octavio Romano asserted that Anglo American scholars were generating a “deficit thinking” discourse, in efforts to blame Chicanos for the social and economic problems that Anglo American racism had generated. Romano brilliantly charged that Anglo American scholars, particularly anthropologists, failed to analyze how racism (and more specifically social segregation) had been used by the majority population to obstruct the social, economic, and political mobility of the Mexican-origin population. Romano urgently called Chicano students - and any

person who opposed racism - to contest the stereotypes and racist propaganda that were being perpetuated about his people. These stereotypes, Romano argued, were dangerous because this was the ideological discourse used in the United States to blame Chicano culture for the social problems they were experiencing.

On the opposing camp from Romano was William Madsen. Madsen and Romano knew each other well, as they had worked together on the “Hidalgo-Cameron Ethnographic Health Project,” which resulted in the production of Madsen’s highly controversial book entitled *Mexican-Americans of South Texas* (1964). Madsen was the project director and Romano was a member of the ethnographic field research team. In his book, Madsen argued that Mexican-American culture was the root cause of their inability to succeed in America. That is, their inability to become socially mobile was intrinsic to their culture. Allegedly, the Mexican-Americans’ cultural core - which was composed of familism, Catholicism, honor, and machismo - led these people to behave dysfunctionally, and thus obstructed their ability to move forward in society. The mother, in particular, was identified to be the prime cause of this dysfunction, for she taught her children to be passive, fatalistic, suspicious, lazy, and to seek immediate gratification. And, if her children were male - she taught them to disrespect women and to commit violence against them.

Having worked in Madsen’s research team, Romano clearly knew that these were ethnographic distortions. He charged that Madsen was a racist who was perpetuating false stereotypes of Chicano people without considering how a history of discrimination had impacted them. This debate was ignited, and Romano used this context to introduce a Chicano theoretical agenda. He proposed that the study of Chicano culture should be historically contextualized in order to understand how institutional discrimination affected Chicanos. Romano’s recommendations significantly contributed to the future direction of Chicano Studies and also influenced anthropologists. It became quite clear to anthropologists that, if they study American culture, they must be careful because the natives will read their research and counter with more reasonable interpretations.

My main point in reminding you about this account, is that Chicano Studies and anthropology have a long and intertwined history. Also, I provide this setting to briefly address Edward Said's critical assessment of anthropology (1989). He states that although the discipline of anthropology has produced countless studies that treat people with respect, White anthropologists continue to dominate the representations of people of color. Furthermore, these scholars have done very little to recruit people of color into the discipline (in efforts to change its discriminatory racial hierarchy). Edward Said views this to be a critical problem as the "other" continues to be represented by those in power. Said offers a similar analysis as Paredes, who states that people of different cultures have the right to study each other (Paredes 1978). However, when those in power refuse to allow the other to speak the structures of domination are reinforced. I concur. Certainly, anthropologists no longer endorse a discourse a la Madsen. However, the academic power relations that existed between Madsen and Romano still persist. White male anthropologists continue to control most departments and disciplinary journals, while racial minorities have yet to become part of the academic power structure.

I would now like to turn to a discussion of my work.

Historical Ethnography and Archival Approaches

My research reflects the theoretical influence of the field of anthropology and the theoretical agenda set by Romano. Using two of my studies, I would like to illustrate two different types of histories anthropologists reconstruct. They are (1) historical ethnographies and (2) histories reconstructed on the basis of archives. I will first speak about my book entitled *The Mexican Outsiders: A Community History of Marginalization and Discrimination in California* (Menchaca 1995) as an example of an ethnographic history. This book provides an ethnographic history of the prejudice and discrimination experienced by the Mexican-origin people of Santa Paula, California. In this book, I attempt to write about their untold local community history and their memories of marginalization and discrimination. In writing their oral histories and verifying their accounts with written documents, I

describe how unequal interethnic relations were structured and reproduced through the use of coercive social mechanisms.

In my book I also illustrate how anthropologists use ethnographic histories to argue how the past and the present are interrelated. Specifically, I demonstrate how present cultural relations are impacted by past events. I clearly show how past events of social injustice have affected the Santa Paula's contemporary interethnic relations.

Now I turn to my ethnographic history.

Santa Paula is a biracial agrarian community in Ventura County, located sixty miles northeast of Los Angeles. Currently, Santa Paula is an ethnically balanced Anglo American and Mexican-origin community that is politically and socially dominated by Anglo American families who owe their wealth to the citrus industry (Belknap 1968; Menchaca 1989; Triem 1985). The city has a long and unpleasant history of social segregation, which has evolved into an interethnic system that I refer to as "social apartness." My conception of "social apartness," a construct developed for this analysis, refers to a system of social control in which Mexican-origin people are expected to interact with Anglo-Americans only on Anglo-American terms. Anglo-Americans determine the proper times and places in which both groups can come into contact. There are clear social boundaries that define where the Mexican-origin population is unwanted and displaced. This system is maintained by enforcing interethnic norms of correct social comportment. In other words, there is a set of prescribed and proscribed interethnic rules that serve to maintain cordial, yet socially distant relations. Indeed, this system is a manifestation of modern racism and ensures a type of privilege enjoyed by the Anglo Americans of Santa Paula.

Social apartness is manifested in (1) the perpetuation of school segregation, (2) the unbalanced urban development of the Mexican neighborhoods in comparison to the predominantly Anglo-American neighborhoods, (3) the forced social isolation of Mexican-origin people, with respect to social clubs and churches, and (4) the belief of racist Anglo-Americans that Mexican-origin people can be humiliated when the groups come into contact. This system of social apartness cannot be

labeled “segregation,” because neither laws nor violence is used to confine Mexican-origin people in particular social spaces. Social apartness is different from segregation, because segregation against people of color was sanctioned by federal law (Robinson and Wife v. Memphis and Charleston Railroad Co. 1883; Plessy v. Ferguson 1896) and enforced by local police departments. Violence was also used by White Americans to terrorize people of color and thereby prevent them from breaking segregationist laws. Today, in many rural communities of the United States, segregation still exists because violent and coercive actions are practiced by White Americans against people of color, in order to ensure that they remain within their ethnic neighborhoods (see Feagin 1989). In Santa Paula, however, social segregation in its traditional form evolved into a system of social apartness. As in the past, Anglo-Americans continue to determine the community’s social space - but now they use new methods of enforcement. The problem with this system is that it is a subtle type of oppression, in that it serves to humiliate, debase, and marginalize people of Mexican descent. It also leads to unbalanced economic rewards that favor the Anglo-American community.

So now that I have defined and briefly described what social apartness is, I need to illustrate how this community’s interethnic social relations evolved and how this behavior was conditioned by past events.

The History of Santa Paula

Santa Paula was founded by Chumash Indians and subsequently colonized and settled by Spanish and Mexican colonists. Many of the residents of Santa Paula are of bicultural ancestry - Chumash and Mexican. The Chumash and Mexican populations built an irrigation system, planted the first orchards, and established ranchos and *rancherías*. (*Rancherías* were Indian villages that retained close contact with the Spanish or Mexican colonists in exchange for agricultural knowledge or military assistance. Legally, the Spanish incorporated the Indian villages as part of their colonial municipalities). Following the Mexican-American War of 1846 to 1848, the United States government dispossessed the former inhabitants of their land rights and transferred legal title of the land to Anglo-American homesteaders and eastern capitalists. In 1867, Santa Paula experienced a tremendous influx of Anglo-Americans and they

became the majority population. They immediately took over the land employing by both legal and illegal means. Only one wealthy Mexican land owner - Julio Peralta - was able to successfully defend his property rights by taking the homesteaders to court. In three court cases, Julio Peralta was deemed to be the rightful owner and the squatters were ordered to leave his land. However, since the Anglo-American population outnumbered the Mexicans they used violence against Julio Peralta and forced him to leave town. By the turn of the century, all Mexicans in Santa Paula were converted into farm labor and only eight families were able to subsist by other means.

By the early 1900’s, a system of social segregation had also been institutionalized throughout Santa Paula. Mexicans were only allowed to live in the Mexican East Side, all of their social activities were confined to their neighborhoods, and when schooling was finally extended to Mexicans it was also provided in a segregated and inferior manner. By 1925, 950 Mexican elementary students attended a wood school house composed of eight classrooms, while 667 Anglo American elementary students attended a modern school composed of over 21 classrooms.

In addition to social segregation, the parents of the students were paid substandard farm labor wages. Throughout Santa Paula’s history, Mexican parents fought back against the economic inequities by organizing several labor unions throughout the history of Santa Paula. However, every time they formed a union their resistance was met with hostility and violence. Labor strikes were repeatedly broken by the use of police brutality and the labor leaders imprisoned. Worse of all, from 1910 to the mid-1930’s the Ku Klux Klan was used against Mexicans to frighten and to force them to conform to Santa Paula’s segregation and labor wage norms.

After World War II, when Mexican-Americans returned from serving in the war, the veterans and the Mexican-American merchants launched a civil rights movement to desegregate Santa Paula. They formed coalitions with other Mexican community members. Several times they attempted to take over the city council, to desegregate the neighborhoods and the local theater - which forced Mexicans to sit on one side of the theater. It was not until 1959 that social segregation began to be dismantled, after Mexicans insisted on sitting wherever they wanted in the

theater and entering any store that they wanted. Residential segregation occurred gradually, but it was difficult to abolish. It did not break down on a large scale until businessmen built a new residential district and decided that it was a profitable venture to sell houses to Mexicans.

It was not until after the termination of the bracero program in the mid 1960's that gradual improvements began to occur for Mexican-American farm labor. When the Mexican national contract laborers returned to Mexico, the domestic farm labor force of Santa Paula was able to launch several massive strikes, demonstrating to the growers that if their company's production was to run smoothly, wages needed to be raised and housing conditions improved. By the mid-1980's, the majority of the farm workers had launched a judicial court battle against the growers in order to improve the housing conditions in the labor camps. The courts ruled in favor of the farm workers and within a few years the dilapidated labor camps were converted into modern working-class neighborhoods.

Today, although farm labor conditions and Santa Paula's interethnic relations have improved, the Mexican-origin community continues to be subjected to racist practices. The schools have not been desegregated, although the California State Office of Education has asked the Santa Paula School Board of Education to do so. The Mexican-Americans have also not been able to dismantle the at-large electoral system which consistently favors Anglo-Americans during city council elections. In turn, the city council continues to disproportionately fund urban improvement projects in the Anglo-American neighborhoods (e.g., repairing of streets and drainage systems, maintenance of parks, erecting youth recreation centers) despite the demographic reality that more people live in the Mexican neighborhoods. The city council has also failed to relocate a pesticide company and an oil tank farm which is located next to the largest Mexican school.

One area where Mexican-origin people have been able to fight back is in their shared interethnic public places. Although the norm of social apartness serves to maintain the separate Mexican and Anglo-American communities, Anglo-Americans know that they can no longer spit at Mexican-origin people. Furthermore, Anglo-Americans are aware that if they humiliate a Mexican national – and a Mexican-American observes this – it will not be tolerated.

Now, I return to my initial point about how past events influenced Santa Paula's current interethnic relations. I found that a history of discrimination has allowed Anglo-Americans to consider Mexican-origin people to be inferior. Examining Santa Paula from a historical perspective also elucidates why there is so much social distance between Mexican-origin people and Anglo-American citizens. It also helps to explain how Anglo-Americans achieved the political power and social privileges they enjoy today. Social segregation, dominant group violence, the prohibition of farm workers to bargain collectively, and racism have been effective means used to control and dominate people of Mexican descent.

Next, I briefly turn to my current archival research on Mexican-Americans and Native Americans.

From Indians to Mexicans: Law and the Public Culture of the Mission and Ranchería Indians of the Southwest

A large part of my archival research focuses on using legal archives to reconstitute American history. I would like to read to you from a paper that I am working on entitled "From Indians to Mexicans: Law and the Public Culture of the Mission and *Ranchería* Indians of the Southwest." This manuscript presents a cultural and legal history of the mission and *ranchería* Indians of the Southwest. Theoretically, it has been influenced by Eric Wolf's macrosystem approach and Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of the influence the legal domain has upon the culture of people. It is also an example of a piece of work that reflects archival sources.

The theoretical aim of this paper is to delineate how laws and government policies transformed the public culture of the mission and *ranchería* Indians. The legal literature I review ranges from 1528 to 1872 and covers, Spanish, Mexican and United States periods. This manuscript concludes that, after the Southwest became part of the United States, former mission and *ranchería* Indians were pressured to claim Mexican citizenship in order to survive. When mission and *ranchería* Indians converted their public culture and passed for Mexican, they were exempt from the *Indian Intercourse Act* of 1834, which decreed that Indians were to be placed on reservations or exterminated.

I now turn to a part of this paper that focuses on a section of Texas history. After the Mexican-American War of 1846 to 1848, the United States government recognized that the conquered Mexican population of the Southwest was racially diverse. With the exception of New Mexico, most of the conquered population had been politically disenfranchised and were not given the full rights of citizens (e.g., voting, practicing law, running for office). With respect to the mission and *ranchería* Indians, government officials acknowledged that they were culturally part Mexican, and therefore should be distinguished from the nomadic Indians and be given some of the political rights of Mexicans.

Previously, mission and *ranchería* Indians had been declared Mexican citizens. Therefore, after the Mexican-American War, the United States Congress gave each territory and state the right to decide if the mission and *ranchería* Indians should be given a special status, thereby exempting them from the *Indian Intercourse Act* of 1834. The Act outlined the legal status of the Indians and stipulated that Indians must be placed in reservations or exterminated if they refused to be relocated. Since the Indians in Texas had been forced to leave or had been exterminated prior to the end of the Mexican-American War, the surviving mission and *ranchería* Indians no longer posed a political threat. In 1849, therefore, Texas passed liberal legislation with respect to mission and *ranchería* Indians and exempted them from the *Indian Intercourse Act*. In other words, if these types of Indians wanted to remain in Texas rather than relocating to the reservations, they were required to either prove that they were culturally Mexican or that they were in the process of becoming Mexican. Furthermore, the state government decreed that if mission Indians could document that they were culturally Mexican, their land claims would be validated by the United States government. The legal procedure that Indians had to follow was stipulated in the Texas State Supreme Court ruling McMullen v. Hodge and Others (1849). Former mission Indians would be able to retain titles to the properties they were granted under Spanish and Mexican property laws and be exempt from federal Indian legislation if

they followed these procedures. To be eligible for such consideration, they had to prove that they or their ancestors: 1) were released by missionaries, 2) spoke Spanish, 3) passed a two-year secularization probationary period where they were observed to have practiced Mexican traditions, 4) had been Spanish subjects or practicing Mexican citizens (e.g., voted, ran for office, practiced the holy Catholic Sacraments), 5) obtained property alienation rights releasing their land from the tutelage of the church or government, and 6) had their land surveyed according to United States law.

Under McMullen v. Hodge and Others (1849), the state also ruled that in the case of the *ranchería* Indians, they would be allowed to live among non-Indians if they could prove that they had adopted a Mexican lifestyle. However, the *ranchería* Indians would not be given property rights, unless they could prove that their village had been formally incorporated into a Mexican township before the Mexican-American War

As a result of this legal process, many mission and *ranchería* Indians survived and were pressured to lead a Mexican cultural lifestyle. Furthermore, I would like to iterate that my research on mission and *ranchería* Indians is an example of how law and culture have been historically intertwined. That is, those in power enact laws which impact peoples' behavior and culture. In the case of the Indians of the Southwest, if they preferred to not be placed in reservations they needed to prove that they were culturally Mexican. This was a way of coercing their public culture to change by the use of legal mandates.

Conclusion

In closing, I have illustrated the type of research anthropologists who specialize in history and the study of Chicano people conduct. I have also attempted to illustrate the influence Octavio Romano has had in my research, for I concur with him that the study of culture needs to be historically contextualized.

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