

**MICHIGAN STATE
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Occasional Paper No. 14
Latino Studies Series

**Reflections on the Growth
of Chicana/o History**

*by Alberto Camarillo
Stanford University*

Occasional Paper No. 14
February 1999

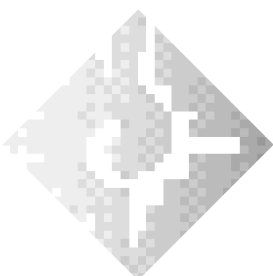
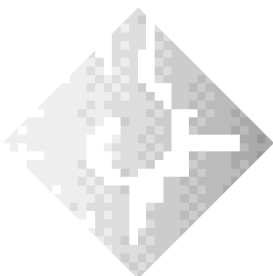
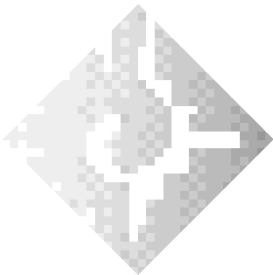
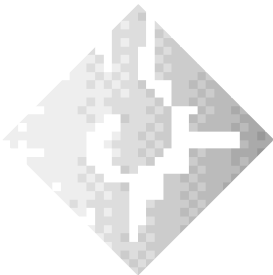
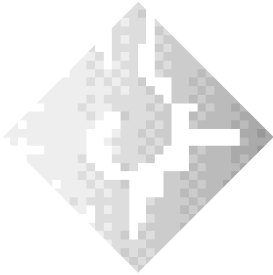
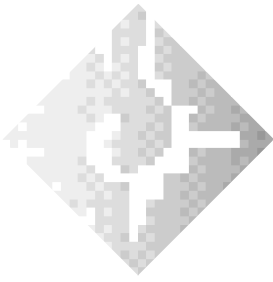


Julian Samora Research Institute

*Michigan State University • 112 Paolucci Building
East Lansing, MI 48824-1110*

Phone (517) 432-1317 • Fax (517) 432-2221

Home Page: www.jsri.msu.edu



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About the Author: [Alberto Camarillo](#)

Alberto Camarillo is Mellon Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies and Professor of History at Stanford University, where he has taught since 1975. Camarillo earned his bachelor's and his doctorate in history from UCLA. His dissertation, "The Making of a Chicano Community: A History of the Chicanos in Santa Barbara, California, 1850-1930," was nominated by UCLA in 1975 for the Allan Nevins Prize as the best dissertation in the U.S. on an American History topic. It is now an important book.

Camarillo has taught courses on race and ethnicity, Mexican American history, Chicano studies, immigration, U.S. urban history, poverty and homelessness, and American West history.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Camarillo, Alberto, (Ph.D.) "Reflections on the Growth of Chicana/o History." *JSRI Occasional Paper #14*. The Julian Samora Research Institute, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Mich., 1999.

The [Julian Samora Research Institute](#) is committed to the generation, transmission, and application of knowledge to serve the needs of Latino communities in the Midwest. To this end, it has organized a number of publication initiatives to facilitate the timely dissemination of current research and information relevant to Latinos.

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Reflections on the Growth of Chicana/o History

Over the past generation, our understanding of American history has been significantly altered by contributions to the literature that have opened up entirely new areas of knowledge and have questioned many longstanding assumptions and interpretations. The influences of the so-called “new” sub-fields of United States history — social, cultural, women’s, labor, urban, western history, etc. — on the study of Chicanas/os have been profound. Equally important is the way these new sub-fields have, in turn, been influenced by Mexican American history.

Reflecting on the state of the literature in the late 1990’s, one cannot forget that only two decades ago studies on Mexican Americans formed a nascent, relatively unknown subfield of mainstream U.S. history. Unlike the other major immigrant and racial minority groups in the U.S. — especially European immigrants, African Americans and Native Americans — Mexican Americans were largely excluded from historical analysis. During the last quarter of the twentieth century, however, this exclusion has been addressed, and though the works of a few pioneering scholars must be given credit for helping to define the early historiography, it was the first cohort of Ph.D.’s trained as specialists in Chicana/o history (the majority of whom are Chicanas and Chicanos) who laid the foundation for the development of this field of historical inquiry during the 1970’s and 1980’s.¹

Many of the central questions posed in the foundational literature in Mexican American history during the 1970’s and 1980’s laid the groundwork for more recent scholarship. This literature has served as the springboard for studies that pose new, provocative questions and open new areas of inquiry. In many ways, the questions I examined in my first book, *Chicanos in a Changing Society*, reflected the initial stages of historical scholarship in Chicana/o history. The primary purpose of this book, first published in 1979, was to contribute to the recovery and reconstruction of an ignored and obscured past — a history in which people of Mexican origin in the Southwest were cast into the shadows if not altogether omitted from historical consideration. What became of the people, I asked, who inhabited the pueblos and towns in Mexican California after the Mexican War and large scale migration of Anglos into the Southwest?

How did the changes in the regional and local

economy, the political institutions, and the cultural milieu of southern California’s growing towns affect the resident Mexican communities? How were Mexican workers incorporated into the labor markets of a new capitalist economic order in California by the twentieth century? What were the basic continuities and changes which characterized Mexican American society in southern California between the second half of the 19th Century and the first third of the twentieth century? What factors contributed to the heterogeneity within Mexican American communities? These constituted the leading questions in *Chicanos in a Changing Society* and, with some exceptions and variations, were also posed in several monographs published during the 1980’s and later.

Looking back upon the past 15 years of historical scholarship on Mexican Americans, it is gratifying to observe the development in this area of study and to see how it has attracted a growing number of younger historians. It is particularly satisfying to have played a role in the training of many of these Ph.D.’s who, in turn, are expanding the boundaries of Chicana/o history and who are themselves mentors now involved in training the next generation of scholars. These and other historians have published many books and articles which have not only contributed new information about Mexicans in the U.S., but have asked important new questions that have influenced other sub-fields in American history.

Though it is appropriate to identify studies which focus on Mexican American history as belonging to a specialized subfield, most cannot be so neatly categorized because they also cross boundaries into other sub-fields of American history.²

We now know so much more about Chicana/o history as a result of the publications of the past two decades. This literature ranges widely, both in scope and chronology (although it focuses primarily the 19th and 20th Centuries), but four areas in particular have attracted the greatest amount of attention by historians: studies of 1) urban communities and various subregions of the Southwest; 2) workers in urban and rural locales, including regions outside the Southwest; 3) women; and, finally, 4) political and institutional histories, broadly defined.

Given the overwhelming urban character of Chicanos during the 20th Century, it is no surprise that several historians have carried out research on the origins and development of Mexican American communities in the principle cities of the Southwest. The earlier historiography indeed set a precedent for this focus on Mexican Americans in cities, and as others contributed to this burgeoning area of study, our knowledge of the urban experiences of Mexican Americans mushroomed in two ways.

First, the number of urban sites studied increased between 1980 and 1990. Though many important cities have yet to be analyzed, we now have an excellent array of monographs which examine the varieties of urban community formation among Mexican Americans, including several studies which focus on Los Angeles, Tucson, Houston, El Paso, Laredo, and San Antonio. In addition to studies of particular cities, several books examine the history of Chicanas/os in the rural towns and agricultural subregions of the Southwest — including northern New Mexico, southern Texas, and southern California — while others have provided overviews of Mexican American history at the statewide level.³

The urban and sub-regional studies published over the past decade not only broadened the geographic focus of analysis, but expanded the topical and thematic coverage of Mexican American history. So, too, have studies which focused their analysis on Mexican American women. Most studies include some discussion of women in their narratives, but those works which focus primarily on Chicana history have posed new questions about women's work, gender relations, and the multidimensional roles of Chicanas within Mexican American communities and within the larger society. Just as the urban and sub-regional studies of Mexican Americans have contributed to the study of the west and to urban history, historical work on Chicanas has derived in part from and has contributed to the field of U.S. women's history and labor history.

Excellent books have been published, for example, on Mexican American women workers in the food processing industries in California, on the role of northern New Mexican women in adapting to changing socioeconomic conditions in their towns, and on the women in the northern frontier regions of colonial New Spain and Mexico. The high quality of ongoing work in Mexican American women's history

contributes significantly to several sub-fields of American history.⁴

The increasing attention paid to women as workers in regional and local labor markets reflects a major development in Mexican American labor history. Questions about how Mexican workers were included or excluded from various sectors of the occupational structure go hand-in-hand with questions about how Mexicans contributed to the labor union movement, both in urban industries and in rural, agricultural unions. Studies of farm workers have been augmented with studies of workers in industries ranging from the oil industry in Texas to the auto industry in Michigan. Labor or working class history has expanded substantially in recent years with questions which explore the relationship between capital and labor, the incorporation of Mexican immigrant workers into labor markets, labor conflict, and unionization.⁵

Whereas the category of labor history actually includes a diverse grouping of studies dealing with Mexican workers in the U.S., another broad category of publications can be described as political-institutional history. This category includes studies ranging from histories of Mexican American community organizations to the study of educational segregation to an analysis of the political impact of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Political and institutional histories may also include studies of particular generational cohorts and social classes within Mexican American communities during the 20th Century. A more recent study focusing on continual immigration from Mexico and the impact on political orientations of Mexican Americans expands significantly the historiography on political-institutional studies.⁶

To be sure, the field of Mexican American history — as outlined in this brief reflection on the literature — has progressed steadily since the publication of some of the baseline monographs of the 1970's and early 1980's. Historical studies on Chicanas and Chicanos are a diverse and rich collection of writings which now constitute a dynamic subfield of history, one that is very much alive and one that will continue to reinterpret and advance our knowledge of the past. The ongoing training of new Ph.D.'s will help to ensure the maturation of this subfield and the continued publication of important studies will contribute to a better understanding of one of the most important ethnic groups in American history.

Endnotes

1. A version of this essay was published as the "Preface to the 1996 Edition" of *Chicanos in a Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios in Santa Barbara and Southern California, 1848-1930* (Harvard University Press, 1979 and 1996). Parts of the preface are reprinted here with permission from Harvard University Press.
2. The citations noted in the footnotes for this essay emphasize published monographs as examples of the development of Chicano history. For more comprehensive discussion of the historiography, both books and periodical literature, see the following essays: David G. Gutiérrez, "Significant to Whom?: Mexican Americans and the History of the American West," *Western Historical Quarterly*, XXIV, No. 4 (November 1993); Richard Griswold del Castillo, "Chicano Historical Discourse: An Overview and Evaluation of the 1980s," *Perspectives in Mexican American Studies*, 4 (Mexican American Studies and Research Center, University of Arizona, 1993); Alex Saragoza, "The Significance of Recent Chicano-Related Historical Writings: An Appraisal," *Ethnic Affairs*, 1 (1987). For a more focused review of the literature which emphasizes what the authors refer to as "culture-based explanations," see Gilbert G. González and Raúl Fernández, "Chicano History: Transcending Cultural Models," *Pacific Historical Review*, LXIII, No. 4 (November 1994).
3. For urban community case studies, see the following: Richard Griswold del Castillo, *The Los Angeles Barrio, 1850-1890: A Social History* (Berkeley, 1979); Mario García, *Desert Immigrants: The Mexicans of El Paso, 1880-1920* (New Haven, 1981); Ricardo Romo, *East Los Angeles: A History of a Barrio* (Austin, 1983); Gilberto M. Hinojosa, *A Borderlands Town in Transition: Laredo, 1755-1870* (College Station, 1983); Rodolfo Acuña, *A Community Under Siege: A Chronicle of Chicanos East of the Los Angeles River, 1945-1975* (UCLA, 1984); Thomas Sheridan, *Los Tucsonsenses: The Mexican Community in Tucson, 1854-1941* (Tucson, 1986); Arnoldo De León, *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt: Mexican Americans in Houston, Texas* (Mexican American Studies Center, University of Houston, 1989); Richard A. García, *The Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class: San Antonio, 1929-1941* (College Station, 1991); George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1990-1945* (New York, 1993). For community studies of smaller towns in the Southwest, see, for example, Arnoldo León, *Benavides: The Town and Its Founder* (Benavides, Texas, 1980); Gilbert G. González, *Labor and Community: Mexican Citrus Worker Communities in a Southern California County* (Champaign, Ill., 1994); Lisbeth Haas, *Conquests and Historical Identities in California, 1769-1936* (Berkeley, 1995). For studies of Mexicans in various subregions and states of the Southwest and Midwest, see the following: Arnoldo De León, *The Tejano Community, 1836-1900* (Albuquerque, 1982) and *Mexican Americans in Texas: A Brief History* (Arlington Heights, Ill., 1993); Albert Camarillo, *Chicanos in California: A History of Mexican Americans* (San Francisco, 1984); David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986* (Austin, 1987); Douglas Monroy, *Thrown Among Strangers: The Making of Mexican Culture in Frontier California* (Berkeley, 1990); Ramón Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500-1846* (Stanford, 1991); Tomás Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley, 1994). James B. Lane and Edward Escobar, eds., *Forging a Community: The Latino Experience in Northwest Indiana, 1919-1975* (Chicago, 1987).
4. The following monographs and anthologies explore a variety of historical topics which focus on Chicanas: Vicki L. Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-1950* (Albuquerque, 1987); Sarah Deutsch, *No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on an Anglo-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880-1940* (New York, 1987); Julia Kirk Blackwelder, *Women of the Depression: Caste and Culture in San Antonio, 1929-1939* (College Station, 1984); Adelaida R. Del Castillo, ed., *Between Borders: Essays on Mexicana/Chicana History* (Encino, Calif., 1990); Adelaida Del Castillo and Magdalena Mora, eds.,

Mexican Women in the United States: Struggles Past and Present (UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, 1980); Patricia P. Martin, *Songs My Mother Sang to Me: An Oral History of Mexican American Women* (Tucson, 1992).

5. For a recently published overview on Mexican workers in the United States, see Juan Gómez-Quiñones, *Mexican American Labor, 1790-1990* (Albuquerque, 1994). See also, Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives*; Dennis N. Valdes, *Al Norte: Agricultural Workers in the Great Lakes Region, 1917-1970* (Austin, 1991); Clete Daniel, *Chicano Workers and the Politics of Fairness: The FEPC in the Southwest, 1941-1945* (Austin, 1991); Zaragosa Vargas, *Proletarians of the North: Mexican Industrial Workers in Detroit and the Midwest, 1917-1933* (Berkeley, 1993); Emilio Zamora, *The World of the Mexican Worker in Texas* (College Station, 1993); Devra Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold: California Farm Workers, Cotton, and the New Deal* (Berkeley, 1994); Camile Guerín Gonzáles, *Mexican Workers and American Dreams* (New Brunswick, 1994).

6. For examples of political and institutional histories on Mexican Americans, see the following: Juan Gómez-Quiñones, *Chicano Politics: Reality and Promise, 1940-1990* (Albuquerque, 1990) and *Roots of Chicano Politics, 1600-1940* (Albuquerque, 1994); Mario T. García, *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, and Identity, 1930-1960* (New Haven, 1989); Richard Griswold del Castillo, *The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo: A Legacy of Conflict* (Norman, 1990); Carl Allsup, *The American G.I. Forum: Origins and Evolution* (Austin, 1982); Francisco Balderama, *In Defense of La Raza: The Los Angeles Mexican Consulate and the Mexican Community, 1926-1936* (Tucson, 1983); Guadalupe San Miguel, *"Let Them All Take Heed": Mexican Americans and the Campaign for Educational Equality in Texas, 1910-1981* (Austin, 1987); David G. Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley, 1994).