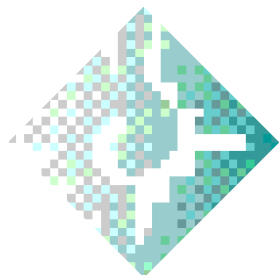


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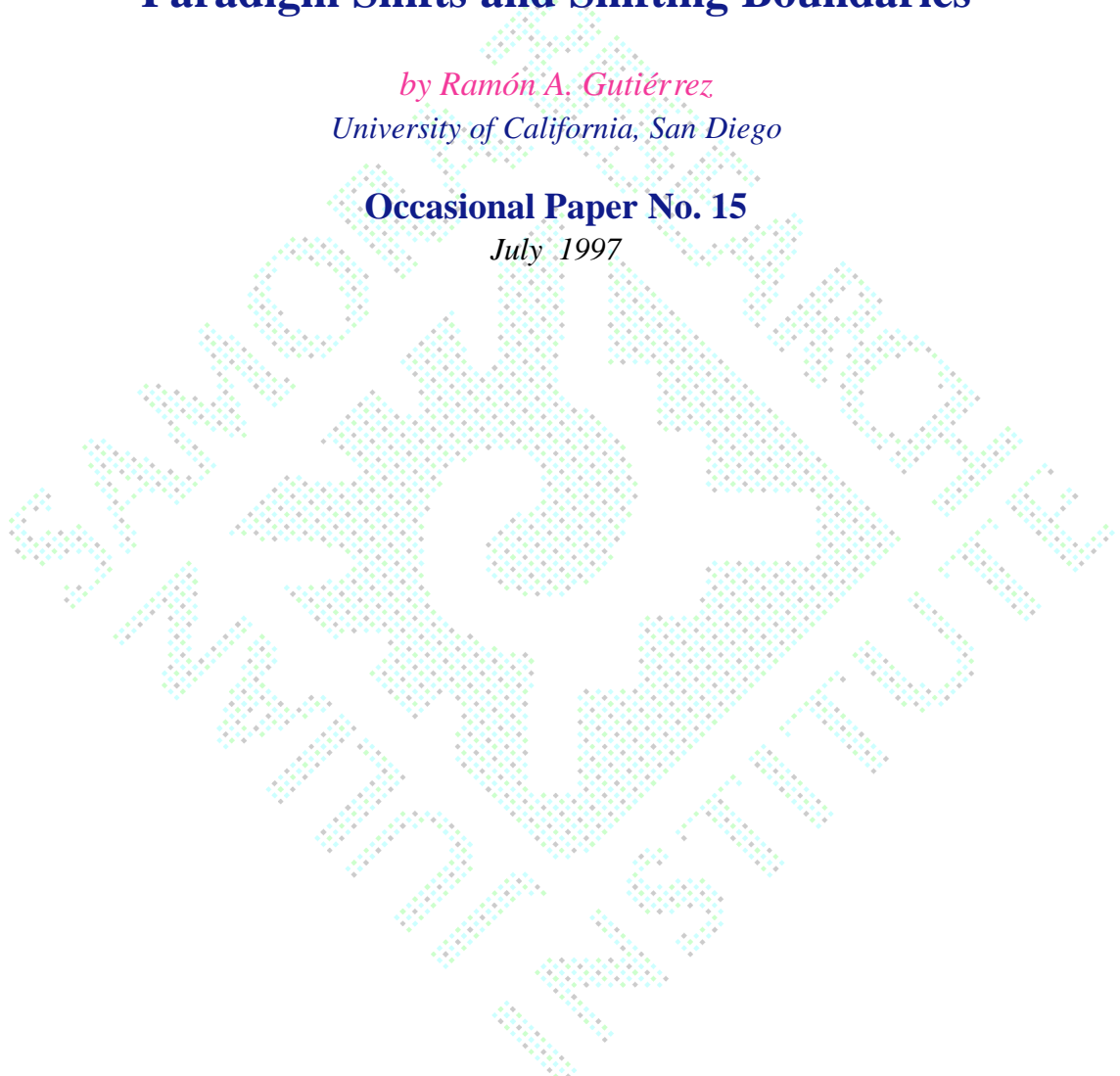
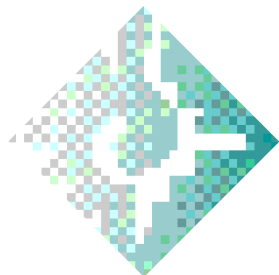
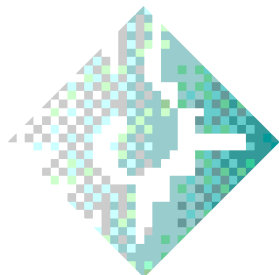
Chicano History: Paradigm Shifts and Shifting Boundaries

by Ramón A. Gutiérrez

University of California, San Diego

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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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- *Provision of technical expertise and support to Latino communities in an effort to develop policy responses to local problems.*
- *Development of Latino faculty, including support for the development of curriculum and scholarship for Chicano/Latino Studies.*

Chicano History: Paradigm Shifts and Shifting Boundaries

“Towards a New Chicana/o History,” the title of this conference, excellently summarizes the theoretical tensions and philosophical divides that have developed in the field of Chicano history over the last 40 years. What is Chicano history? Who and what are its proper frames of reference?

Forty years ago, the answers to these questions were simple and clear. Chicanos were men. As Mexican-American civil rights activism metamorphosed into the militant nationalism of the Chicano Movement, between 1955 and 1970, Chicanos were defined as immigrant working men of Mexican peasant origin. They were heroic, indefatigable men, struggling against an exploitative capitalist labor regime; never mind that more than half of all Mexican emigrants to the United States since 1945 had been women. This demographic reality rarely precipitated scholarly reflection. “Man” was the universal subject of historical inquiry, and as the persons who populated the professorate, men unhesitatingly dictated what was worthy of study as Chicano.

“Towards a New Chicana/o History,” evidences a major transformation. How did Chicano evolve into Chicana/o? What does the slash in the word “Chicana/o” signify? Exactly how did it slip in? The movement from the “Old” Chicano history to the “New Chicana/o history,” which this symposium hopes to summarize, perhaps to synthesize, and maybe even to heal, is indicative of larger professional debates about the nature of historical writing and its relationship to the past. Thus, Chicano history is but one of the many fields grappling with the feminist critique of universal “Man.” At this moment, when belief in the Enlightenment project of universal human emancipation has waned, and Positivism and Empiricism are under attack, historians have begun to question their methods and their own most cherished myths.

Struggles between the “Old” and the “New,” be it in Chicano history or any other field, can, in part, be explained demographically as a generational shift in the professorate. Scholars who began their careers in the late 1940’s and early 1950’s have reached retirement age, are trying to perpetuate their concerns into the next millennium, and some are resisting change with the poison power of their pens. But to view these

struggles only demographically would be to deny the fundamental epistemological shifts that are also afoot. The old economic and political certitudes of the 1950’s have crumbled. Capitalism has been denationalized and has taken a more global and more mobile form. Just about everywhere, Communism has been eclipsed. And from our own postmodern condition and perspectives, many proclaim the exhaustion of Enlightenment tenets and modernity’s failure.

The starting point for many of these debates is an assessment of modernity. From the perspective of the postmodern critic, which herein I evoke, modernity was that extraordinary intellectual effort on the part of Enlightenment thinkers to develop objective science and a universal morality and law. The idea was to use the accumulation of knowledge, generated by many individuals working freely and creatively, for the pursuit of human emancipation and the enrichment of daily life. The scientific domination of nature promised freedom from scarcity, want, and the arbitrariness of natural calamities. Rational forms of social organization and thought would liberate one from irrationality, myth, religion, and superstition.

History as a university discipline and profession was born out of this modernist impulse.¹ Historians sought universal truth, laws of human progress, and ways to liberate citizens and subjects. In the late nineteenth century, objectivity and the quest for truth became the collective myths of the historical profession. By reading sources in a detached and dispassionate manner, one could reveal and discover the truth of the past. That knowledge, gained in an “objective” manner, enhanced its scientific value. If scientific rules were imposed on documentary bodies of evidence, the past would be reflected in written history.

At least three major political and ideological interpretations of the past have dominated modernist historical writing over the last 100 years. All three are found in Chicano histories. There was a bourgeois version of the past, a proletarian analogue, and a history that eschewed theory and metanarrative and claimed to be written for its own sake.² Bourgeois narratives of history were anchored in the logic and development of liberal market capitalism. Shackled by the past, the entrepreneurial individual constantly

progressed toward the absolute freedoms of the market economy. The proletarian version of history shared with the bourgeois tale a common starting point in the capitalist economy, but relied on class and class conflict as its moving force. Karl Marx summarized this version of the past well when he wrote in *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle.”³

Characteristic of bourgeois and proletarian constructions of the past was a linear and progressive historical trajectory. Whether a burgeoning capitalist grabbing for markets or a worker yearning for better wages, these narratives of history took one from a dark and bleak past to a bright and bountiful future. Events cumulatively and progressively unfolded in evolutionary sequence. From savagery, to barbarism, to feudalism, to capitalism, to socialism, and ultimately to communism, Karl Marx predicted, was the inevitable path of history.

Writing history for its own sake peacefully coexisted alongside bourgeois and proletarian pasts. Sometimes called historicist, sometimes antiquarianism, this was plain, “common sense” history, local and particularistic. Eschewing larger metanarrative claims, it did not portend to be discovering laws of history, trajectories of the past, or larger schema for understanding human progress. Characteristic of encyclopedias, almanacs, handbooks, and guides to particular themes, these histories were written by local elites for the mastery of local needs, and thus implicitly shared a bourgeois outlook and goal.

Chicano history, rooted in an older tradition of writing on Mexican immigrants in the United States and of their assimilation over time, was deeply enmeshed in these modernist models. Those who began writing Chicano history in the 1960’s, were, after all, largely trained in American universities, where modernist frameworks still reigned hegemonic. Though in the wake of the Feminist and Civil Rights Movements the meanings of truth and objectivity were being hotly debated in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, alternative frameworks had yet been satisfyingly articulated.

For the bourgeois version of Chicano history one need not look beyond two still popular college textbooks: Matt S. Meier and Feliciano Rivera’s *The Chicanos: A History of Mexican Americans*, and

James Diego Vigil’s *From Indians to Chicanos: The Dynamics of Mexican American Culture*. “Mexican American history begins with the early study of man [sic] in the western hemisphere,” wrote Meier and Rivera.⁴ And so began Chapter One of their epic, a story that went “back as much as 50,000 years,” starting with Asian migration across the Bering Straits, and culminating in 1960’s Chicano protest. According to Meier and Rivera:

*The history of the Mexican American can be conveniently divided into five broad periods: the Indo-Hispanic period, the Mexican period, a period of cultural conflict during the last half of the nineteenth century, a period of resurgence in the first four decades of the 20th Century, and a period of regeneration from World War II to the present.*⁵

The principle motor for this history of “resurgence” and “regeneration” was the economy. “[I]nvestment of capital in mines, railroads, cattle, and agriculture...” ultimately attracted ethnic Mexicans north into the United States and once there, relegated “la raza to a minority position of second-class citizenship in what had been its own land.”⁶ For Meier and Rivera, the word “improvement” critically described the Mexican American past. The labor demands of the American economy shattered the “traditional provinciality” of ethnic Mexicans and made them aware “of new possibilities for improving their social status.”⁷

In *From Indians to Chicanos: The Dynamics of Mexican American Culture*, James Diego Vigil took readers on a similar odyssey from the Ice Age to the 1960’s, offering what he called “a dynamic history.”⁸ Painfully using a life cycle model of human development as his template, Vigil argued that Chicano history could be divided into four major historical periods, each of which corresponded to an evolutionary stage in the human life cycle. The first period, the pre-Columbian, dated from 30,000 BC to 1519, and was appropriately the period of Chicano “embryonic life and infancy.” Chicanos progressed to “childhood” during the Spanish colonial period, from 1521 to 1821. Mexican independence and nationalism between 1821 and 1846, catapulted Chicanos toward “adolescence.” In the Anglo period, from 1846 to the 1960’s, Chicanos reached “early adulthood.” And as a result of the social struggles in the 1960’s, “Chicanos have reached a new plateau, adulthood, in

which they can learn from previous stages and gain further maturity... The metaphor of history as an individual pattern of growth and development becomes awkward at this point: the declining strength of old age, followed by death, does not seem to be in the future of the Chicano people.”⁹

Vigil compounded the history of Chicano maturation with an intersecting matrix, which he called the Six C’s: *class, culture, color, contact, conflict, and change*. Vigil explained:

*The categories of class, culture, and color provide a vehicle to highlight the continuous social order and the way in which several major social features intertwine to make a social history... A contact-conflict-change explanatory sequence clarifies the transformations that a fully functional social system undergoes and pinpoints specific aspects of the upheaval.*¹⁰

All contact-conflict-change situations that Chicanos had historically faced pivoted around “the class factor,” Vigil opined. Racial and cultural issues simply “obscured the real problem source — economic competition.”¹¹ But the economic engine that Vigil, as well as Meier and Rivera constructed in their histories was rather weak. It was a variant of the old “push-pull” immigration model, in this case the economic power of capitalism to “pull” population into Mexico’s north, and from there into the United States.

Interpretive histories of the ethnic Mexican in the United States have been few and far between. More weighty, both in pages and sheer number, are the historical dictionaries, documentary collections, and handbooks on this and that theme. Matt Meier and Feliciano Rivera edited *The Dictionary of Mexican American History* in 1981, and since then, there has been a proliferation of biographical aids on the history of Chicanos, Mexican Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Latinos.¹²

Many of the men who first wrote self-consciously as Chicanos were themselves of ethnic Mexican working class origin. The proletariat model of the past best resonated with their own life experiences and aspirations, and quite naturally came to dominate Chicano histories. Following the great modernist paradigm almost verbatim, Chicano historians told the story of foreign rural peasants being

transformed into immigrants and American workers in the cities of the United States, and in its “factories in the fields,” as Carey McWilliams called them.¹³ While Meier and Rivera, and Vigil, clearly gave workers a role in their tracts, it was a peripheral one. The economy and capitalist development moved history forward. Worker resentment, resistance and revolt were quite secondary.

Mario García’s *Desert Immigrants: The Mexicans of El Paso, 1880-1920*, stands out as an exemplar of the proletarian version of Chicano history.¹⁴ Advancing a conservative interpretation by advocating assimilation rather than revolution, the story García told was of Mexican peasants gradually assimilating American lifeways and culture as marginalized workers in the United States. As García wrote:

*Mexican immigrants... shared a common tie with the larger wave of Eastern and Southern European immigrants as well as with black workers who migrated from the rural South to the urban North... Mexican immigrants, like black migrants to the North, may have experienced less economic and social advances owing to persistent racial and cultural discrimination, yet they were significant additions to an expanded multiracial American working class by World War I.*¹⁵

The Mexican “saga” in the United States was “the immigrant story commencing in the late 19th Century, which is inextricably linked with the growth of American industrial capitalism,” wrote García.¹⁶ By embracing the immigrant analogy, he and other historians of the Mexican experience in the United States were simply echoing the regnant social science paradigm of the day.¹⁷ Theorists of ethnicity then believed that, like White European immigrants, Mexicans would eventually be assimilated fully into American life as beneficiaries of full equality and justice.¹⁸

Juxtaposed to this conservative proletarian history that imagined progress for Chicanos through assimilation and Americanization, was a much more radical variant anchored in class struggle and faith in a socialist future. Historian Juan Gómez-Quiñones and the cadre of doctoral students he trained at UCLA have been most identified with this interpretation. Much of Juan Gómez-Quiñones’ own writing was on the his-

tory of Mexican workers on both sides of the United States-Mexico border, particularly their heroic attempts to unionize. These histories studied worker radicalism, labor unionization and strikes, the relationship between Mexican workers and state authorities, political organizations on both sides of the border, and the culture of Mexican workers and Chicanos.¹⁹

Gómez-Quiñones' students, and scholars influenced by his work, wrote histories on the origins of labor activism in fraternal organizations and mutual aid societies.²⁰ Francisco Balderrama studied the role of the Mexican consulates in protecting workers in the United States.²¹ The relationship between Mexican workers and the Communist Party of the United States gained Luis Arroyo's attention.²² Class and class formation in the United States was one of the central threads that unified this work. The dynamics of racism were deemed of less import. Race was but an ideological ploy the ruling class used to divide workers, these scholars maintained. It was false consciousness best ignored. If workers were ever to seize state power, it would be only by organizing along strict class lines, or so claimed Socialist and Communist organizers of ethnic Mexican workers in the United States between the 1920's to the 1960's, as did their historians.

Even further to the political left, eschewing class struggle, assimilation, and civil rights activism, was a radical Chicano nationalism that militated for self-determination and human emancipation. The Chicano's Struggle Toward Liberation was thus the subtitle of Rodolfo Acuña's 1972 book, *Occupied America*.²³ Allying himself with movements of oppressed peoples in the Third World, and invoking the lessons of Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Franz Fanon's works on French colonialism in Algeria, Acuña proposed that Chicanos were an internal colony of the United States and would be liberated only through a national revolution:

[T]he conquest of the Southwest created a colonial situation in the traditional sense — with the Mexican land and population being controlled by an imperialistic United States. Further, I contend that this colonization — with variations — is still with us today. Thus, I refer to the colony, initially, in the traditional definition of the term, and later (taking into account the variations) as an internal

*colony... the parallels between the Chicanos' experience in the United States and the colonization of other Third World peoples are too similar to dismiss.*²⁴

Internal colonialism as an analytic model for understanding the status of Chicanos in the United States was first imported into Chicano history through the writings of Berkeley sociologist Robert Blauner and Tomás Almaguer, who was then his student.²⁵ The idea and theory of internal colonialism initially emerged in the social sciences in the 1950's, as an attempt to explain the "development of underdevelopment" in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.²⁶ Employed by Latin American Marxists as an explanation for the backwardness of areas in which Indians lived, internal colonialism eventually was developed as a theory of ethnic relations between indigenous groups and the larger mestizo (mixed blood) class societies in Mexico, Guatemala, and Peru. The theory proposed that structural constraints, very similar to those through which the metropolis systematically underdeveloped the periphery (colonies), were reproduced internally in a nation-state in relations between the dominant center and Indian communities. Thus the discrimination Indians suffered had not only a cultural manifestation, but a structural foundation as well.²⁷

Nationalist protest movements in the United States were deeply influenced by this colonial paradigm. Harold Cruse, as early as 1962, characterized race relations in the United States as "domestic colonialism."²⁸ Three years later, in 1965, Kenneth Clark in his book *Dark Ghetto*, advanced the proposition that the political, economic and social structure of Harlem was essentially that of a colony; a model Stokely Carmichael and Charles Harris employed explicitly as internal colonialism in their 1967 book, *Black Power*.²⁹ But it was Robert Blauner who best articulated the theory in relationship to American minorities, maintaining that while the United States was never a colonizer in the 19th Century European sense, it had nonetheless developed economically through the conquest and seizure of indigenous lands, the enslavement of Africans, and the usurpation of Mexican territory through war. "Western colonialism," wrote Blauner, "brought into existence the present-day patterns of racial stratification; in the United States, as elsewhere, it was a colonial experience that generated the lineup of ethnic and racial divisions."³⁰

Blauner admitted that race relations and social change in the United States could not be explained entirely through internal colonialism because the country was a combination of colonial, racial, and capitalist class realities. Internal colonialism was a modern capitalist practice of oppression and exploitation of racial and ethnic minorities within the borders of the state characterized by relationships of domination, oppression, and exploitation. Such relationships were apparent as: 1) *forced entry* — “The colonized group enters the dominant society through a forced, involuntary, process;” 2) *cultural impact* — “The colonizing power carries out a policy which constrains, transforms, or destroys indigenous values, orientations, and ways of life;” 3) *external administration* — “Colonization involves a relationship by which members of the colonized group tend to be administered by representatives of the dominant power. There is an experience of being managed and manipulated by outsiders in terms of ethnic status;” and, 4) *racism* — “Racism is a principle of social domination by which a group seen as inferior or different in terms of alleged biological characteristics is exploited, controlled, and oppressed socially and psychologically by a superordinate group.”³¹

White skin racial privilege was at the heart of the colonial relationship, manifested as an “unfair advantage, a preferential situation or systematic ‘headstart’ in the pursuit of social values, whether it be money, power, position, learning, or whatever.” White people had historically advanced at the expense of Blacks, Chicanos, and other Third World peoples, particularly in the structure of dual labor markets and occupational hierarchies. Given these material facts, racism was not a form of false consciousness; it resulted in concrete benefits for Whites.³²

Chicanos quickly saw themselves as an internally colonized population within the United States that was socially, culturally, and economically subordinated, and regionally segregated by white Anglo-Saxon America. Sociologist Tomás Almaguer gave these ideas their fullest scholarly elaboration as applied to Chicanos. Others soon followed Blauner and Almaguer’s lead: Rodolfo Acuña and myself in history, Joan W. Moore in sociology, and Mario Barrera, Carlos Muñoz and Charles Ornelas in political science.³³

When internal colonialism was taken from the global to the local level of analysis, the barrio, or ghetto, became its focus, as apparent in the titles of important historical works by Albert Camarillo, *Chicanos in a Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios in Santa Barbara and Southern California, 1848-1930*, Richard Griswold del Castillo, *The Los Angeles Barrio, 1850-1890*, and Ricardo Romo, *East Los Angeles: A History of a Barrio*.³⁴ In all of these works Chicano history began in 1848, at the end of the U.S.-Mexico War with the legal and political incorporation of ethnic Mexicans into the United States. If anything defined the ethics of the Chicano moral community of memory and history in the barrio, it was the belief in collectivism and an explicit rejection of individualism. Chicanismo meant identifying with *la raza* (the race or people), and collectively promoting the interests of *carnales* (or brothers) with whom they shared a common language, culture, religion, and Aztec heritage.

* * *

A Chicana feminist critique of the personal politics of Chicano history and its historians was first articulated in political practice. Only later, as women gradually began to earn advanced academic degrees, was it voiced in scholarship. Couched first as an assault on male chauvinism, by 1969 radical Chicanas were beginning to see themselves as triply oppressed, by race, class, and sex.³⁵ Within the Chicano student movement women were being denied leadership roles and were being asked to perform only the most traditional stereotypic roles — cleaning up, making coffee, executing the orders men gave, and servicing their needs. If women did manage to assume leadership positions, as some of them did, they were ridiculed as unfeminine, sexually perverse, promiscuous, and all too often, taunted as lesbians.³⁶

The sexism rampant in the Chicano Movement prompted Irene Rodarte to ask rhetorically of movement men, “Machismo or Revolution?” — a question Guadalupe Valdes Fallis reformulated as “Tradition or Liberation?”³⁷ Others, such as Anna Nieto-Gómez, Velia García [then Hancock], and Mirta Vidal, spoke out about the sexism in the movimiento, militated for the liberation of women, and drew attention to the ways that racial and sexual oppression operated in the mythic Chicano nation of Aztlán.³⁸

Chicano men initially deemed the feminist critique an assault on their Mexican cultural past, on their power, and by implication, on their virility. If Chicanos were going to triumph in their anti-capitalist, anti-colonial revolt, divisiveness could not be tolerated.³⁹ Chicana feminists who were influenced by ideas foreign to their community — namely bourgeois feminist ideology — were, according to the men, “malinchistas,” traitors to the race. Be “Chicana Primero,” the men exhorted, asking the women to take foremost pride in their cultural heritage and to reject women’s liberation.⁴⁰ Adelaida del Castillo, among others, retorted that women were not seeking to dominate the movement. They only sought full equality: “True freedom for our people can come about only if prefaced by the equality of individuals within La Raza.”⁴¹

Just as Chicano scholars who were interested in interpreting the history of the Southwest as a history of racial conflict between Anglos and Mexicans explicitly chose 1848 as the beginning of Chicano history, Chicana historians began re-visioning a past ordered by a very different sense of time. For women, it was not the U.S.- Mexican War that was most important. It was instead, the first major act of conquest in the Americas, Spain’s defeat of the Aztec empire. Judith Sweeney, in her 1977 historiographic essay on Chicanas, was the first person to propose a new chronology for Chicana history. That history, she stated, began in 1519 and could “be divided into three major periods: the Colonial Period (1519-1821); the 19th Century (1821-1910); and the Contemporary Period (1910-1976).”⁴² Others writing on the history of Chicanas quickly followed Sweeney’s lead.⁴³

A chronology for Chicana history that began in 1519 and not 1848, was not an arbitrary and mindless act. Rather, it placed at the very center of the political debate about the future and the past, the issues of gender and power. By choosing 1519, women focused attention on one of Mexico’s most famous women, Doña Marina. Doña Marina was a Mayan woman of noble ancestry who befriended Hernán Cortés in 1517. Cortés availed himself of Doña Marina’s considerable knowledge of the local political geography and of her knowledge of various indigenous languages. Acting as his mistress, translator and confidant, Marina helped Cortés to forge local antipathies toward the Aztecs into a fighting force that Cortés successfully unleashed on

Tenochtitlan. In Mexican history, Doña Marina, also known as la Malinche, had often been seen as a villain, as the supreme betrayer of her race.⁴⁴ And on this point many Chicanos were in accord. Malinche was a traitor, stated Luis Valdez in his 1971 play, *The Conquest of Mexico*, because “not only did she turn her back on her own people, she joined the white men and became assimilated...”⁴⁵

Adelaida R. del Castillo, Cordelia Candelaria and others were quick to respond, rehabilitating Malinche in historical writing as the primordial source of the two concepts that women were eager to place at the core of the Chicana Movement — *mexicanidad* (Mexicanness, or a unity of Mexican culture on both sides of the border) and *mestizaje* (race mixture or a belief in cultural hybridity). “Malinche is the beginning of the mestizo nation,” wrote del Castillo, “she is the mother of its birth, she initiates it with the birth of her mestizo children.”⁴⁶ Whatever the facts — in the case of Malinche there are dreadfully few — the crafting of a her/story and feminist chronology shifted the debate. Racism and sexism were now of equal importance. The male ethos of carnalismo, or brotherhood, and Chicanismo, so central as organizing themes in Chicano histories, were now complicated by *mexicanidad* and *mestizaje*.⁴⁷ *Mexicanidad* subverted Chicanismo because it asserted that Mexicans on both sides of the border shared a common culture and past, and had never been isolated and insulated as an internal colony in the United States. Thus, implicitly an ethno-class struggle for liberation was being proposed, not one of national unity. By emphasizing *mestizaje*, women drew attention to their role in the reproduction of the nation, not a pure-bred nation, but one based on extensive racial mixing and hybridity.

If the aim of Chicano history had been to decolonize the mind, making ethnic Mexicans in the United States more than the arms with which they toiled in the factories and fields, Chicanas were intent on decolonizing the body. Male concerns over job discrimination, access to political power, entry into educational institutions, and community autonomy and self-determination were augmented by female demands for birth control and against forced sterilizations, for welfare rights, for prison rights for *pin-tas*, for protection against male violence, and most importantly, for sexual pleasure both within marriage and outside of it.⁴⁸

Despite the rhetoric that “La Nueva Chicana,” the “New Woman” had to shatter cultural stereotypes to define herself, those definitions were initially contained within the still hegemonic proletariat model of the past.⁴⁹ The condition of Mexican American working women was but a shorter, less important chapter of the working-class struggles men had waged.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, feminism forced a change in historical interpretation, heightening the centrality that the intersection of race, gender and class assumed. Histories of Mexican emigration to the United States is a good case in point. As was noted, although more than half of all of the Mexican immigrants entering the U.S. since 1945 had been women, this fact was frequently ignored. The works of Vicki L. Ruiz and Susan Tiano, Margarita B. Melville, Gilbert Cardenas and Esteban Flores, and Rita Simon and Caroline Brettell, offered important correctives to this oversight.⁵¹

But even more exciting were the studies by Chicanas that linked race, class and gender domination at the work place, with gender domination within the home. Patricia Zavella’s splendid work, *Women’s Work and Chicano Families*, studied women cannery workers in the Santa Clara Valley of northern California, showed how mechanization had contributed to female labor segregation, and how the labor market reinforced traditional family roles within the household.⁵² Vicki L. Ruiz covered very similar terrain in her masterful, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives*, a study of Mexican women’s unionization attempts in the California food processing industry.⁵³

In addition to these very traditional topics, what was perhaps most revolutionary was that Chicanas began to write and to express a complex inner emotional life. Reflecting in 1970 on the participation of Chicanas in the liberation movement, Enriqueta Longauey y Vasquez stated that while the role of the Chicana previously “has been a very strong one — [it has been]... a silent one.”⁵⁴ That silence was shattered. And as the veil that shrouded the subordination of women was ripped apart, exposing sexism and homophobia as ills just as debilitating and intensely experienced as racism and class oppression, modernism itself was rethought.

* * *

There were many reasons why the certitudes and beliefs of modernism started to crumble, why intellectuals groped for other interpretive frameworks and

critiques. Two world wars, death squads, the Holocaust, the obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the constant threat of nuclear annihilation prompted some to wonder about modernity’s promises. Around the globe, everywhere that nationalist and socialist revolutions had been won in the name of liberation had become systems of human oppression. Capitalism, too, had been radically transformed, given global and mobile form, deterritorialized, and also denationalized. Simultaneously, deindustrialization was taking place, displacing workers and eclipsing the labor movement’s importance. As these changes transpired, modernist versions of the past, both bourgeois and proletariat, seemed less plausible trajectories toward a liberatory future. The moment to theorize something beyond modernism was at hand. Postmodernism was born.

Postmodernism is a term that means different things in different disciplines. A postmodern culture is one in which a formerly unified subject is split into his or her constituent parts; in which a single homogeneous style is superseded by a number of heterogeneous fashions. Postmodernism usually refers to a particular constellation of styles and tones in cultural practice, most notably pastiche, blankness, a mixing of forms, level and styles, a relish for repetition, revealing the constructed nature of work.⁵⁵ In philosophy and history, postmodernism has been associated with an aversion to any project that proposes universal human emancipation through reason, science and technology. While eschewing such metanarratives as Marxism and Freudianism, it has acknowledged “the multiple forms of otherness as they emerge from differences in subjectivity, gender and sexuality, race and class, temporal (configurations of sensibility) and spatial geographic locations, and dislocations.”⁵⁶

Mexican-American, Chicana, and Chicano intellectuals embraced postmodernism as an analytic mode in the late 1980’s to explode the fictions of Chicano history, showing how there never really was one “Chicano” culture or community with a capital “C.” Instead, they viewed Chicanos and Chicanas as an eclectic composition of peoples and traditions. Tomás Almaguer’s essay, “Ideological Distortions in Recent Chicano Historiography,” began the demystification of Chicano history, exposing the false epistemological closures and the simplistic ideas that he, as well as other Chicano intellectuals, had claimed as their credo in the 1960’s. Almaguer argued that, motivated primarily by the desire to challenge the dominant assim-

lationalist model of the 1950's, Chicanos embraced a colonial analysis that depicted the history of Chicanos as that of a colonized minority waging a neo-colonial struggle against racism and imperialism.⁵⁷

However strongly these sentiments were felt in the 1960's, the analysis was wrong, Almaguer argued. Historically, ethnic Mexicans in the United States had straddled several classes and had never been viewed monolithically, either by themselves or by outsiders. In the racial hierarchies that had evolved in the U.S. Southwest, ethnic Mexicans occupied an intermediate position between Anglos and Indians. In short, much of what had been written was an ideological distortion of the past, fashioned to fit the political tenor of the day. Almaguer developed all of these themes more systematically in his *Racial Faultlines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California*.⁵⁸

The call for the elaboration of an analytic schema that better reflected the complexity of the ethnic Mexican population in the United States had various exponents. In her 1987 book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa explored language in order to illustrate the complexities of ethnic Mexican culture on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. Anzaldúa identified eight forms of Spanish she spoke and described how and when each was used:

*My "home" tongues are the languages I speak with my sister and brothers, with my friends. They are [Pachuco (called caló), Tex-Mex, Chicano Spanish, North Mexican Spanish dialect, and Standard Mexican Spanish, with Chicano Spanish] being the closest to my heart. From school, the media and job situations, I've picked up standard and working class English. From Mamagrande Locha and from reading Spanish and Mexican literature, I've picked up Standard Spanish and Standard Mexican Spanish. From los recién llegados, Mexican immigrants and braceros, I learned Northern Mexican dialect...*⁵⁹

Anzaldúa's point was that the relationship between language and, identity was not as neat and easy as Chicano nationalists had once imagined.

David Gutiérrez similarly shattered the unity in a former theme, immigration, in his book, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity*.⁶⁰ While in many ways this book can be categorized as a traditional history of an immigrant group — what some might call the “old” Chicano history — what was particularly innovative about this book was the ethnic complexity that it recorded. History here was not the backward projection of 1960's Chicano identity, but the struggle among workers from various regional cultures in Mexico, stratified by generation, gender, class, and occupation, competing with, and only occasionally allying with, older resident populations in the United States Southwest of Mexican and Hispanic origin. Identity and culture were contested among the members of these groups, and were also in opposition to the constraints and limits placed by states and dominant ethnicities.

If the “old” Chicano history depended on certitude, on objectivity, on disinterestedness, and on “facts” gathered in a systematic and unbiased fashion to reveal the truth, “new” Chicana and Chicano historical writings have been presented as “readings,” “positionings,” “perspectives,” and “constructions” of the past. Far from certitude or even a search for truth, historical writing was presented as a narrative prose discourse that was invented, constructed, and positioned in relationship to power. The unmarked universal “Man” of modernism who was disembodied and spoke from no particular place, was, in post-modern narratives, embodied in females and males, in bodies that were marked as brown, black, white, Asian, Latino, and hybrid, and that operated in erotic economies of multiple possibilities: heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, transgendered.

The conjunction of such complex subject positions led to the development of intersectionality as a powerful theme in historical writings on Chicanas and Chicanos. When a person occupied two or three overlapping statuses, did that intersection create a particular and different type of reality? Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith first asked this question about intersectionality in a now famous anthology entitled, *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*.⁶¹ Here Hull and her collaborators highlighted the ways in which the hegemonic category “woman” really only meant White middle-class women. Black women were being excluded in feminist theory and practice. Black only

meant men in Black nationalist thought. Black women were thus eager to understand how the status of Black and women intersected in distinct ways. Ultimately these women theorized “women of color” as a distinct subject position and identity. Critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw gave intersectionality its most rigorous legal examination, noting how U.S. Courts allowed Black women to litigate only as women for gender discrimination, only as Blacks for racial discrimination, but not as Black women when these two statuses compounded discrimination in unique ways.⁶²

Writing as a Chicana, Jewish, lesbian, tejana of working-class origin, Gloria Anzaldúa used the concept of intersectionality to explore the realities of the U.S.-Mexico border zone. The international border created a clear dichotomous separation, but the complicated cultures that underlaid this divide produced numerous ways of living and loving, not just two. For Anzaldúa, cultures creatively blend in the border zone into something new that is not quite Mexican, not quite part of the United States. In this borderland, she writes, “you are neither hispana india negra española ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata, half-breed caught in the crossfire between camps while carrying all five races on your back.”⁶³

Writing on the history of the Spanish conquest and domination of New Mexico’s Pueblo Indians during the 17th and 18th Centuries, Ramón A. Gutiérrez further elaborated on the intersection and conjunction of statuses. Gutiérrez wrote:

*The conquest of America was not a monologue, but a dialogue between cultures, each of which had many voices that often spoke in unison, but just as often were diverse and divisive... As such, the historical process that unfolds here is a story of contestation, of mediation and negotiation between cultures and between social groups. This is not a history of Spanish men or of Indian men, or of their battles, triumphs, and defeats. It is a history of the complex web of interactions between men and women, young and old, rich and poor, slave and free, Spaniard and Indian, all of whom fundamentally depended on the other for their own self-definition.*⁶⁴

The works of Hull, Crenshaw, Anzaldúa, and Gutiérrez were exemplary of a move away from sharp oppositional binaries in social theory and prac-

tice. Oppositions have increasingly been theorized as generative tensions at polar ends that mutually require each other and that are constantly in process and flux. The recent literature on racial ideology, most notably on the social construction of whiteness, is a good example of this. Novelist Toni Morrison correctly analyzed the polar opposites and the fluidity of the racial order in the United States when she observed that each new generation of racialized immigrants had moved upward and been whitened by “buying into the notion of American Blacks as the real aliens.”⁶⁵ In his important article, “The Possessive Investment in Whiteness,” George Lipsitz examined the central, but uninterrogated role of whiteness, which emerged in the United States as a legal identity and cultural practices created out of “slavery and segregation, by immigration restriction and Indian policy, by conquest and colonialism.” Lipsitz showed how the U.S. government had invested in particular forms of whiteness through family and welfare policy, through mortgage loan policies, through tax policy, and through the very wage structure of urban places.⁶⁶ Karen Brodtkin Sacks similarly studied the impact of real estate practices on Jews and African-Americans in “How Did Jews Become White Folks?” showing how the latter had been disadvantaged by restrictive covenants.⁶⁷

Following these leads, as well as the path-breaking work of David Roediger, historian Neil Foley has recently completed, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in the Cotton Culture of Central Texas*.⁶⁸ Herein Foley studies land, labor and race relations in south-central Texas to understand the complex social heterogeneity and hybridity that were there created when cotton culture from the U.S. South and cattle culture from Mexico’s north were fused. By interrogating the great unmarked category of race — whiteness — as it applied to Mexicans he has splendidly shown the dynamism of racial ideology, the fluidity of racial categories, the complex web of socio-racial positions created through the overlap of race, class and gender statuses, and the meanings of blackness at the denigrating bottom of the labor regime.

What postmodern scholarship on identity tells us is that because of the radical restructuring of the ways in which capital operates, workers migrate around the globe, and communication technologies link persons across wide spaces, ethnic identities, despite appearances, are never fixed and timeless, moving unidirectionally as governed by those laws that theoretically

should regulate modes of production, psychic economies, and the assimilation of immigrants in host societies. Rather, ethnic identities are produced locally, in the here and now, as creative and contestatory responses to complicated global structural and cultural processes. As local productions, ethnicities are always organized around the generational, gender, occupational, and residential experiences of a group, and thus are quite complex. As I have tried to show through an exposition of the logic of their arguments, Marxists, nationalists, and feminists have all been critical of such postmodern understandings of identities because they claim that historical actors are left without an explicit theory of agency. Michael Peter Smith's retort is that: "The focus upon the process of cultural production of politically and socially salient differences in race, class, ethnicity, gender, and sexual preference are intended to show, as art theorist Victor Burgin points out, that the meaning of such differences is 'something mutable, something historical, and therefore something we can do something about.'"⁶⁹

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