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Reseña de "Memories and Migrations: Mapping Boricua & Chicana Histories" de Vicki L. Ruiz and John R. Chávez
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I am asking my readers' forbearance, especially those who are scholars and who prefer or enjoy the intellectual traditions as dictated by the academy. I want to introduce the book Memories and Migrations: Mapping Boricua and Chicana Histories by way of storytelling—a technique, of course, that is better appreciated in the oral tradition around our mothers' or grandmothers' kitchen table while rice and beans boil on the stove.

Central to every history book ever written there is a deep subconscious historical background that is recalled by the reader. This subconscious construction of knowledge of the historical background floats to the surface in the consciousness of its readers by way of memory and experience. Here is mine as it relates to the book that is being reviewed, Memories and Migrations: Mapping Boricua and Chicana Histories. When I was a young girl growing up in Chicago's Puerto Rican neighborhood, Humboldt Park, we had one neighborhood movie theater called El Teatro San Juan. It was in this theater where I got a glimpse of the possibility that there were little pieces of history and little parts of me embedded in undefined and unwritten events. It was 1964, and the movie West Side Story was playing. All the issues, misconceptions, and grand narratives of the movie aside, it was the face of Rita Moreno that struck the deepest cord in me, as well as the idea that other Puerto Ricans might actually be suffering the same kind of marginalization my family was experiencing in Chicago's Northwest Side neighborhood. Moreover, for the first time in my life I saw a woman who looked like my mother and who looked like me on the big screen. Consequently, for the first time in my life I didn't feel invisible. At such a young age, how was I to know that Puerto Ricans had a rich cultural history and a history of struggle? How could I know that thousands of miles away a Chicano community was experiencing parallel struggles? In 1964 Puerto Rican transnational migration was just beginning to be considered as having a possible historical significance for the Puerto Rican community, which was caught in a whirlwind of a diaspora in an unwelcoming metropolis. El Teatro San Juan was part of a physical landscape that established an anchor for those families who migrated to the metropolis and who, for various reasons, had decided to grow roots in Chicago instead of returning to the island. El Teatro San Juan was also used for concerts where Puerto Rican artists from the island came to perform. Thus, in this manner, our ties from Chicago to the island were solidified. Less than a decade later, this landmark theater, a place for the Puerto Rican community to gather, was torn down because it became an eyesore to city officials. They had bigger and better plans by way of gentrifying the Puerto Rican neighborhood. Now the question arises: Why should my story of this building have historical significance to the Puerto Rican community in Humboldt Park? And what does this have to do with the book being reviewed? First, because the power of El Teatro San Juan was in its ability to represent a place and space where the Puerto Rican people of Humboldt Park could gather, talk, and sustain themselves through their cultural and political art forms. Second, because El Teatro San Juan is, in brief, a piece of erased history. The formula
for colonization is simple: Should no one remember the significance of the building, of its cultural and political importance, then its significance never existed. Ergo, if this memory is forgotten, history is consequently erased, and the implications are that the Puerto Ricans in Chicago don’t have history there. My point is this: in the book *Memories and Migrations: Mapping Boricua and Chicana Histories*, eight authors excavate stories just like mine. They bring to the forefront of the reader’s consciousness what might have been lost if not for feminist Puerto Rican and Chicana researchers navigating archives for marginalized history about women who made significant contributions to the memory of their communities.

History has always been about critical cultural and gendered politics. History as text is text that is never politically neutral. Using McConaghy’s idea, that “history is a discursive regime which ...incorporates rules for inclusions and exclusions, for speaking and for being silent” (2000: 45), this book counters what is outside the scope of what we know to be true. Scripted history, as we have seen it manifested in school books written for all ages, manipulates theoretical, cultural, and racial assumptions about Puerto Ricans and Chicanos that purport serious implications for knowledge and our self-determination. Privileged history is about the eradication of Others’ history. Clearly, history is about those whose knowledge is privileged and those whose knowledge is marginalized. In this book, we have eight Latina authors who privilege the historical activism of Puerto Rican and Chicana women, highlighting women in the early twentieth century who lived their lives and raised families in a hostile landscape, while struggling against injustices. Thus, the research articles in the book *Memories and Migrations: Mapping Boricua and Chicana Histories* might strike a very deep cord in readers.

The book actually piqued my interest in a rather unconventional way. It did so by way of an apology. Regretfully, many Latinos also subscribe to dominant culture’s grand narratives in a dangerously unconscious fashion. To prove this point, on the very first page of the book, Chavez, one of the editors of the book, issues a formal apology in the preface. Chavez, making a reference to a book he had previously written, *Lost Land*, admits to his gross omissions related to Puerto Rican women and Chicana women’s voices. These omissions relate to his forgetting of Chicanas’ significant historical participation. Chavez states, “I had not consciously looked for female perspectives and had simply missed most, to put it mildly. With this present book, however, I’m making up for my mistake…” (p. ix). *Muy bien*, I thought. Let’s see how you made it up to Puerto Rican women and Chicanas.

As a history professor of Chicano history, Chavez’s “making up for my mistake” statement demonstrates how deeply embedded are the gendered patterns that both men and women perform on a daily basis. All types of scholars have indeed participated in gendered choices and gendered exclusions in the documentation of history, thus reproducing the marginalization of women’s work and their activism in history. Chavez’s omission also demonstrates how normative it is to exclude women’s perspectives in research, even by Puerto Rican and Chicano scholars. Thanks to Ruiz, the second editor of the book, who, through a review she wrote about Chavez’s *Lost Land*, called into question his omission of women’s contributions to Chicano history. In *Memories and Migration*, and to Chavez’s credit, both Ruiz and Chavez purposely take the women’s side to highlight Puerto Rican women’s and Chicana’s participation in acts of democracy, civil disobedience, self-determination, and autonomy in spite of the personal consequences suffered by each in their line of action.
The book’s concept was born at a symposium in 2004. Originally, the intent of the book was to “...push geographical analogies further—to consider regions, sub-regions, and localities across interstate, international, and conceptual boundaries” (p. x). The women scholars, who were asked to submit proposals, challenged the editors to revise the original intent of the book. A more specific perspective emerged from the writings submitted, one that focused on the experiences of twentieth-century Puerto Rican women and Chicanas, as well as how they marked their communities. Ruiz, one of the editors, speaks rightly of these contributions when she stated in the preface that “Latina histories reveal how transnationalism does not require travel across vast oceans but occurs within and across the Americas” (p. 7). Her comment has deep implications for Latina scholars, for it is a call for more research on ourselves.

The contributors to the book, two Puerto Rican women scholars and six Chicana scholars, all with unique writing styles and approaches to research, provide the reader with various historical contexts for examining what might be forgotten. Thematically, the eight chapters relate pieces of forgotten history, events, and under-reported activism enacted by Latinas. Powerfully, the collective writings of the book contradict the Anglo-centric scripted imaginings of who Puerto Rican women and Chicanas are. The chapters collectively point to the way external political influences interacted violently with Latino communities, affecting those who had been here long before Anglos arrived, and the more recent twentieth-century Puerto Rican settlements in New York and Chicago. Together the book aspires to be more than just a fact-finder’s treasure chest. It points to progressive movements that lay a foundation for the social activism conducted by Puerto Rican women and Chicanas in various parts of the United States. It also points to the reality of our diverse histories in the U.S. On the one hand, the book features case histories on how groups of women protested against anti-union companies, like the women who had to raise families in the Rockefeller company towns and the women who actively participated in the 1958 New York garment strike. On the other hand, some of the chapters focus on distinct women, like Alva Torres, who through singular action made contributions to their communities. Together, the authors break through the whitewashed neutrality of scripted history, while countering the pigeonholed image of the essentialized and passive role of Puerto Rican women and Chicanas in history. All of the contributors deliberately point to the recovery of various Latina perspectives in the U.S. with their scholarly work.

One of the book’s strengths is the investment of the individual authors to excavate information that might otherwise be lost. In the first chapter, Montoya unveils how women whose husbands worked for the Rockefeller’s Colorado Fuel & Iron Company during the 1930s had to negotiate an existence in an oppressive company town in light of the shadow of the Ludlow Massacre that shocked the nation in 1914. Montoya shines a light in the face of the company’s Industrial Representation Plan, which literally held the Chicano families hostage to strict behavioral controls and surveillance within the family camps, and which enforced a strict racial hierarchy among the different racial and ethnic groups in the camps. This chapter is thoroughly researched and emerges as a finely written interrogation of Rockefeller’s company towns, as well as Chicanas’ various forms of resistance inside the company-controlled communities.

In chapter two, “La Placita Committee: Claiming Place and History,” Otero provides her readers with the historical account of Alva Torres’ immersion into the politics of gentrification, otherwise known as urban renewal. By way of initiating
a grassroots movement to save memory and sacred space, Otero uses a flawless narrative style to share the information garnered in interviews, photographs, and data, while recounting Torres’ efforts to save the heart of her community, La Plaza de la Messilla, located in the old center of Tucson, Arizona. By identifying what is significant to her community, Torres forces town officials into a discourse about power, influence, and marginalization. Otero, in relating Torres’ narrative, does something even more important as well. Otero identifies for the reader how critical it is for Latinas to name, identify, and bring into public discourse what is important to us. The issues of displacement, gentrification, power, and resistance are key themes, and Otero’s analysis clearly establishes the importance of those points.

Leyva, in chapter three, “Cruzando la Linea: Engendering the History of Border Mexican Children during the Early Twentieth Century,” reveals the significance of scripting children into history. Leyva states that “centering children’s experiences and representations... enables us to realize more clearly the obstacles faced by the Mexican community and the strategies employed by adults and children to assert agency” (p. 72).

Leyva’s idea is that children cross many borders: physically, developmentally, culturally, and racially. Her research is composed of a myriad of case studies of children who crossed the Mexican-U.S. borders. She provides the reader with an amazing supply of quotes from interview transcripts of children and their relatives, as well as documents, policies, even U.S. government officials’ comments that all together weave a wider perspective of what it was like to cross the Mexican-U.S. border during the early decades of the twentieth century. What amazes most is how arbitrary those turn-of-the-century immigration policies were instituted, and how threatening the children were viewed by the U.S government. Even more, in the midst of uncertainty about their future in the U.S., children who crossed the border, whether they crossed alone or with relatives, represented the process of translation and representation of culture, language, and resilience that have brought us into the twenty-first century, as it relates to our current turbulent and nebulous immigration policies.

Chapter four, “Lived Regionalities: Mujeridad in Chicago, 1920–40,” by Arrendondo, takes the reader into a different direction. In this chapter, Arrendondo addressed the concept of mujeridades, which she defines as “the competing visions and beliefs about what Mexican women could and should do” (p. 94). Overall, issues of cultural, gendered, and generational clashes paint this chapter’s discourse. However, after analyzing some of the generalizations proposed in this chapter by the author, I had to raise the question: Can mujeridad also include the competing visions and beliefs about other Latinas? With photos and interviews Arrendondo supports the idea that “mujeres traveled across many geographic and psychic spaces in their journeys to Chicago” (p. 113). However, our author makes and re-states generalizations about Mexican women that can be true of other Latinas. For instance, Arrendondo makes several interesting claims in this chapter. One is that, “At any given historical moment, the Mexicanas included here were accumulations of the many experiences and the knowledge of the places they had lived” (p. 96). Another is that “...Mexicanas living in Chicago during the 1920’s and 1930’s helped spin a transnational/multiregional web that extended throughout the Midwestern and southwestern United States to parts of northern and central Mexico” (p. 97). Somewhere in me I resist privileging the notion that this is true only for Mexicanas, especially since I was born and raised in Chicago, and I also have the accumulation of many experiences. Mohanty (2006) has acknowledged that, “After all, the point is not just to record one’s history of struggle, or consciousness, but how they are recorded; the way we read, receive, and disseminate such imaginative records is immensely
significant” (p. 78). Sometimes assumptions like these are written as a means of countering the grand narratives that have been written by non-Latinas. Yet, paradoxically, it may result in ostracizing other realities and other truths. Nevertheless, Arrendondo’s research is a testament to women’s struggles against transnational patriarchal cultural values.

Whalen, addressing the 1958 Dressmaker’s Strike in chapter five, effectively relates the ILGWU’s walkout and rally that convened over 105,000 members in Madison Square Garden. Whalen’s reconstruction of the event and her use of interviews, as well as public and private sources, results in a magnificent flow of different yet parallel experiences. Taking complex and seemingly scattered pieces of history, her account of this one event is a superb compilation of all of her sources. She brings to life various personalities that influenced the strike, both Puerto Ricans and others, who struggled for better wages and working conditions for more than 100,000 workers employed in the garment industry while building a tightly woven narrative.

In the remaining chapters of the book, Elizabeth Salas, Marisela R. Chavez, and Virginia Sánchez Korrol continue to interrupt dominant discourse with their research on Puerto Rican women’s and Chicanas’ activism. Salas’s “The Floating Borderlands: Identity, Farmwork, and Politicas in Washington State,” Chavez’s “Pilgrimage to the Homeland: California Chicanas and International Women’s Year, Mexico City, 1975,” and Sánchez Korrol’s “The Star in My Compass: Claiming Intellectual Space in the American Landscape” make outstanding contributions to the voices of the subaltern. What these Puerto Rican women and Chicanas’ research indicate is that there is a close relationship between the struggles that Puerto Rican women and Chicanas have endured. Our authors help us to see the embedded-ness of essentialism, gendered discrimination, and racism. Additionally, these women scholars have shown that doing research is a phenomenon that is socially and culturally situated. Each woman scholar has spoken from a position of gratitude and consciousness while reminding us that our history—too often ignored, marginalized, or erased—is waiting for us to excavate it. Unveiled history, what we know about ourselves and what we uncover about ourselves, can reconfigure entire communities of people. The authors show that it is morally right and just to name ourselves and do research in our own names.

The book does suffer from some limitations. First, it only has eight chapters, which is rather short for an anthology of women’s scholarly work. Second, in the preface Chavez mentions that during the initial stages of the book the editors received proposals from only Puerto Rican scholars. Why then are there only two represented? My last critique of the book is more ideological in nature. My concern is that the book attempts to indirectly engage in cultural mediation between Puerto Rican women’s history and Chicana history. The book does elevate the importance of women’s struggles, and there are commonalities about agency and the women’s ability to confront and, at times, to overcome their struggle with distinct forms of marginalization. Each of the chapters has a unifying effect of bringing together distinct perspectives of women’s histories through the common oppressor—the Anglo-centric grand narrative. However, as readers, we need to consider the danger of normalizing our own essentialization. There exist different discourses and unique historical events that produce different political and/or social consequences for Puerto Rican women and Chicanas. Additionally, within these discourses there exist predicaments, historical and contemporary, that drive us in different political directions. What I would have liked the editors to consider is the inclusion of a final chapter—one that would discuss the idea of Puerto Rican women and Chicanas having oppositional cultures that, at times, are dictated by dominant culture policies. There are radical
and conservative positions that make us distinct, and as a reader, I would have liked to theorize on the possibilities and limitations of women’s agency to effect social change in light of racism, ethnocentrism, classism, and the impact of globalization.

As Maura I. Toro-Morn has noted, “Research conducted by feminist scholars... shows how women’s experiences with capitalism, colonialism, and migration differed from mens’ and how the intersection of social class, gender, race, and sexuality further differentiates the Puerto Rican experience in profound ways” (2008: 269). We can conclude that this is also true for Chicana history. Focusing on Puerto Rican women and Chicanas’ histories across the United States, the editors provide the readers with a collection of essays, each of which is dedicated to a piece of history that has been overlooked, erased, and forgotten. Each of the eight authors focuses on resurrecting a piece of feminist history taken literally from the bottom drawer of archives. The history is embodied in struggles to maintain buildings, homes, and communities. The research by the various authors also portrays the cultural tensions experienced by first-generation and second-generation mothers, fathers, and daughters. In this way, Memories and Migrations: Mapping Boricua and Chicana Histories, provides a forum for discussion, while we search, perhaps even recover, forgotten truths about ourselves as Puerto Rican women and Chicanas—as activists, truth-tellers, and scholars.

Finally, for the subaltern scholar, there is a profound understanding of how for more than five hundred years the history of indigenous and colonized communities has been marginalized and erased, both abroad and here. The book is a testament of how women of color, in our case Puerto Rican women and Chicanas, have been especially excluded from historical records, thereby rendering their activism unrecognizable and nonexistent. According to history, as interpreted and scripted by dominant culture, Puerto Rican women and Chicanas’ imprint of activism is null and void in the grand narratives of historical documentation. Thankfully, the authors who contribute their research to this book highlight the participatory nature of history-making in the U.S. by Latinas; they reframe and reclaim Latina history. My hope is that the editors continue to make up for a mistake by considering another volume by Puerto Rican women and Chicana scholars.

REFERENCES

Matters of Choice: Puerto Rican Women’s Struggle for Reproductive Freedom

By Iris López
New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008
208 pages; $25.95 [paper]

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