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Seven different words for 'cookie'

Susana L. Gallardo | Sep. 30, 2009

Latina/o identity in the United States

Fall Books

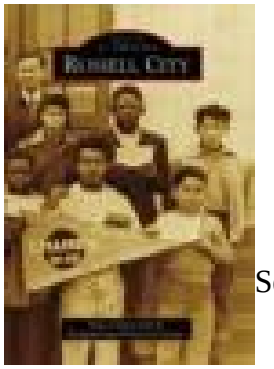
In her piece in this issue, Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs draws on the human senses to connect us to diverse figures that ?confuse? and ?mystify? us (see story [1]). We are angry, upset, laughing, crying, drunk -- all of those messy emotions that define us as human beings. These are the things that tie us irretrievably to people immensely different from ourselves. Sometimes in the talk of difference and diversity, we forget that lines of difference are always grounded in lines of humanity. The unfamiliar specificity of a stranger?s pain is still pain, and their joy, still joy.

So when asked to illuminate some of the particulars of Latina/o identity in recent writing, I have to restrain myself from getting bogged down in denouncing politically safe terms like ?Hispanic? (where is Hispania?) and ?Latin? (who speaks Latin anymore?). Instead, I take refuge in current work by Latinas and Latinos who give us brilliant insight into different facets of Latina/o identity. That identity is not a single fossilized category, but differs by history (often of dislocation), region, *mestizaje*, family, language, religion, class, and experience with racism.

Chicana/o hip-hop music culture offers us a particularly rich example of this diversity. Pancho McFarland in his *Chicano Rap: Gender and Violence in the Postindustrial Barrio* explores the unique fusion of multiple American influences on his own identity, including rural New Mexican culture, working-class Mexican-American culture, and African-American hip-hop.

He directly grounds a dynamic Latino identity with the rap traditions of ?creative use of language, its communal nature, its ?reality,? its subject matter, its pedagogy, and its expressed privileging of people of color and our cultures.? He also insists on analyzing Chicana/o rap in a broader American context, identifying the problematic glorification of violence and misogyny against a backdrop of the increasing marginalization of youth and people of color by capitalist globalization and economic restructuring.

From a more traditional academic perspective, Garland D. Bills and Neddy A. Vigil, authors of *The Spanish Language of New Mexico and Southern Colorado: A Linguistic Atlas*, document a similar variety of forces influencing Latina/o identity. This systematic study of language patterns in the region asks, for example, why there are seven different Spanish words for cookie: *bizcochito, bollito, craque, galletita, galleta dulce, cuqui, cuque*. The answer lies in one of many colorful maps that expose linguistic roots in European Spanish, indigenous nahuatl, Mexican Spanish, English and various local Spanish dialects -- all stemming from a swirl of migrant peoples and generations across the U.S. Southwest. This is a fascinating work that characterizes the complexities of Latina/o identity: People move, language changes, history is made.



Several recent titles remind us we cannot move forward without a clear view of the shaped by our past. The shared difficulties of successive waves of immigration is a theme of María Ochoa?s local pictorial history of the lost town of Russell City, Calif., in her book *Russell City*.

In an array of portraits and snapshots, we see the town as a site of dreams big and little, reminding us how easily a small historic community can be wiped away. Russell City was largely removed through eminent domain, so that now only an annual reunion picnic and personal memories mark ?the community once built and now tossed

Books reviewed

THE SPANISH LANGUAGE OF NEW MEXICO AND SOUTHERN COLORADO: A LINGUISTIC ATLAS
By Garland D. Bills and Neddy A. Vigil
Published by University of New Mexico Press, $80

THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO
By Junot Díaz
Published by Riverhead Trade, $14

I KNOW THE RIVER LOVES ME/ YO SÉ QUE EL RÍO ME AMA
By Maya Christina Gonzalez
Published by Children?s Book Press, $16.95

INVENTING THE FIESTA CITY: HERITAGE AND CARNIVAL IN SAN ANTONIO
By Laura Hernández-Ehrisman
Published by University of New Mexico Press, $29.95

CHICANO RAP: GENDER AND VIOLENCE IN THE POSTINDUSTRIAL BARRIO
By Pancho McFarland
Publisher by University of Texas Press, $24.95

SEXO, EROS, MATRIMONIO
By Jesús Mario Morillo
Published by Triangle Publishing, $21.84

RUSSELL CITY
By María Ochoa with the Hayward Area Historical Society
Published by Arcadia Publishing, $21.99

LATINOS IN LOTUSLAND: AN ANTHOLOGY OF CONTEMPORARY SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA LITERATURE
Edited by Daniel A. Olivas
Published by Bilingual Press, $30

THE BLACK MADONNA IN LATIN AMERICA AND EUROPE: TRADITION AND TRANSFORMATION
By Mikelonzo Olexiewicz Perlaza
Published by University of New Mexico Press, $27.95

CESAR CHAVEZ AND THE COMMONSENSE OF NONVIOLENCE
By José Antonio Orosco
Published by University of New Mexico Press, $24.95

LAND OF A THOUSAND DANCES: CHICANO ROCK 'N' ROLL FROM SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA
By David Reyes and Tom Waldman
Published by University of New Mexico Press, $21.95

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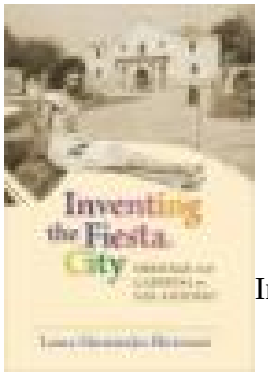
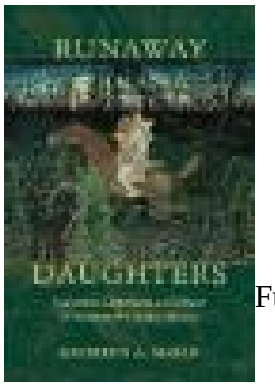


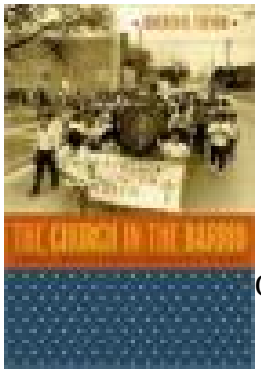
In Texas, Laura Hernández-Ehrisman looks to the regional history of San Antonio as a historically segregated city, and the ?San Antonio Fiesta? tradition as a marker of change, its various iterations over the years serving to mitigate calls for inclusion with middle-class anxieties about class and race (*Inventing the Fiesta City*).



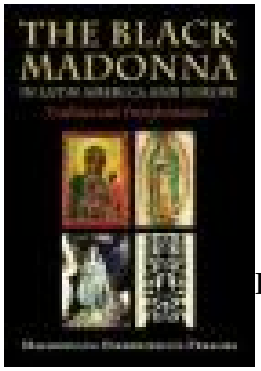
Further south in *Runaway Daughters*, historian Kathryn Sloan combs through 19th-century court records of the southern state of Oaxaca to document change in working-class families and the state.

As courts increasingly accepted the individual claims of errant daughters and sons against the good of the communal family, she sees a shift from an indigenous communal ethic to a burgeoning Mexican liberalism.

Religious beliefs and practices are a productive site for cultural cross-fertilization. Historian Roberto Treviño writes an excellent study documenting a unique Catholic tradition he calls the ?ethno-religious Catholicism? of Mexican Americans, which ?made room for faith healing and other practices deemed superstitious by clergy; favored saint veneration, home altar worship and community-centered religious celebration that blurred the line between the sacred and the secular; and tended simultaneously to selectively participate in the institutional Catholic church yet hold it at arm?s length.?



Grounded in over 25 years of study, Treviño?s *The Church in the Barrio* is a must-read in a church that will soon be 50 percent Latina/o. Malgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Peralba also points to syncretic, or mixed, religious traditions in her study of the appropriation and transformation of the Virgin Mary throughout



Drawing on traditions from Poland to Latin America to the U.S. Southwest, she concludes that ?Catholicism, Amerindian traditions and African Òri¸sà worship? -- through their syncretic contact in the Americas -- ?have been woven together? (*The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe*).

And in a refreshing contribution to a Catholic theology of marriage from a Latina/o perspective, Colombian-American former priest Jesús Mario Murillo writes *Sexo, Eros, Matrimonio*, a thoughtful reflection on church teaching drawing on his experience as a priest, marriage counselor, husband and father. Murillo uniquely contrasts his theology with patriarchal culture, demanding a theology of gender equality for ?a union of complete humanity? (*?union de la totalidad del ser humano?*).

The historic crusade of César Chávez for basic labor rights for farm workers continues to be a powerful symbol of Latina/o identity. In *Cesar Chavez and the Theory of Nonviolence*, philosophy professor José-Antonio Orosco argues that Chávez deserves further study as a ?community intellectual? who marshaled his theory of nonviolence in support of a broad-based movement between peoples ?to build coalitions that could confront the powerful elites that stood in the way of great social justice and radical democracy.?

In the end, how we define our identity is always personal, drawn from sources as diverse as music, art, fiction and bad TV shows. *Land of a Thousand Dances*, by David Reyes and Tom Waldman, takes us on a 20th-century romp through the Mexican-American musical traditions of Southern California. This is an almost personal collection of stories, vignettes and photos about local groups like Tierra, the Midniters, the Plugz and El Chicano, as well as the more familiar figures of Ritchie Valens, Lalo Guerrero and Los Lobos.

Chicana artist/illustrator Maya Christina Gonzalez draws on Mexican border tradition to make childhood come alive with her new children?s book, *I Know the River Loves Me/Yo sé que el río me ama*. Beautiful lines like ?I know the river loves me because ... when I leap into her arms she takes me in? are complemented by the brilliant colors and imagery of Gonzalez?s art.

As a social scientist, I feel slightly traitorous to close here with fiction, yet remain convinced it is in fiction that we are most open to connecting across lines of identity. I had that feeling recently, reading a short story by Alex Espinoza in the new edited collection *Latinos in Lotusland*, a clever combination of Los Angeles stories by Latina/o writers. In a brief piece, Espinoza illuminates the lives of two angry men, flawed human beings whose lives briefly intersect with each other, and with my own as a reader. The story culminates in a momentarily blissful drive down an L.A. freeway with the windows down and night air streaming in.

I am reminded that in specificity lies universality. Identity politics are only divisive if we remain closed, unwilling to consider the possibilities of engagement, only looking for ourselves in others.

Susana L. Gallardo is a third-generation Chicana who teaches women?s studies and social science at San Jose State University in California. Her e-mail address is catholic@chicanas.com.

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