Editorial

(Re)Constructing our historical memory

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What is memory? What is nostalgia? Whose reality, whose truth is canonized, valorized, legitimized, through the retelling of people's lives, experience, death? These questions undoubtedly contribute to (re)shaping our understanding of the past and present of Latino/as in the United States, as much as they do our scholarship. Like oral traditions and story telling, our printed words too remind us of some events at the expense of others; of some ways of (re)membering the world and our experience; of people's lives – at the expense of others.

The current issue explores these questions from a variety of perspectives, examining the implications of what is left in, and what is left out, in our ongoing, multiple, diverse approaches to documenting the Latino/a experience in the United States. Elena Machado Sáez examines the influential work of Ilan Stavans in shaping and structuring the Latino/a literary canon. Exploring the implications of his multiculturalist framework in the construction of *Latinidad*, she points to Stavans' explicit equation of culture with the Spanish language. Through his approach, Machado Saez argues, Stavans privileges Western European culture, positing the indigenous as Other, thus ultimately structuring Latino/a identity in opposition to American indigenous cultures.

Mary Aileen Seliger's comparative analysis of the dialogue between law and literature in the works of Américo Paredes and Tomás Rivera explores the role of contractual agreements in shaping the pressures and resistance to assimilation in relation to particular spaces of identity formation. Through the emphasis on people's individual lives, choices, and values, she contextualizes her discussion in a colonial social system that is, in turn, rooted in prejudice and inequality. In so doing, her article points to the ways that a collective migrant community consciousness centered on place can provide an alternative for TexasMexicans' identity formation, which, in the context of exploitation and injustice, would otherwise succumb to the pressures of assimilation.

Ron López' article presents a community's history specifically in terms of its active participation in ensuring its own preservation. In the process, we are

made aware of the symbolism that particular struggles, whether won or lost, so often leave behind. Nowhere is this more clear than in the battle waged by the women of Chavez Ravine to preserve their community. Grounded in oral history and interviews with the participants, Ron López documents the ways that the women's struggle against eviction was grounded in their claims to belonging and patriotism. While the movement ultimately failed to achieve its goal, it nevertheless served to influence the course of local politics and endures as a symbol of Chicano/as' presence and resistance.

Journalism too has played a significant role in shaping immigrants' lives and experience in a new context, and hence in the construction of the community's history and memory. Raul Tovares analyzes the Spanish-language newspaper *La Opinión*, which began to be published in Los Angeles in 1926. His article documents the Mexican American experience and the ways that the newspaper contributed to shape immigrants' understanding of, and ties with both their old and new societies.

Finally, while historical and journalistic documentation of a community's experience is essential to its members' histories and memories, as Maja Horn argues, nostalgia too is important to apprehend a given population's lives. Thus, through a close reading of Oscar Hijuelos' *The Mambo Kings*, her analysis recovers the significance of nostalgia for understanding the specific context of Cuban American lives, and the "real and imaginary spaces assigned to them" in the United States.

In addition to the articles above, in our *Vivencias: Reports from the Field* section, we publish a letter written by Juana, a Mexican mother who writes of the loss of her son as he sought to cross the US–Mexico border. The letter is addressed to Enrique Morones, founder of Border Angels, a "non-profit organization supporting humanity," dedicated to saving the lives of the hundreds of thousands who are today being forced to address the ravages of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in their homeland. They often confront the 127 degree scorching heat of the desert along the border, and the freezing cold temperatures of the mountain passes, in an effort to ensure the survival of the families they leave behind. Taking water, food, and winter clothing into the desert and mountains near the border, the Border Angels' very existence, like their active commitment to the immigrants' ongoing struggle for life, is also a daily reminder, and, in this sense, a re-membering, of those who die along the way.

As Juana writes of her son, "*he was a noble, hard working, honest young man who wanted to get ahead and to get to know a country so many young people dream about I don't know how he died, if in the desert or the river. However it was, it is irreversible and tragic.*"

Through their actions, Border Angels ensure that hundreds of immigrants, young and old, men and women, do survive, and their lives, perhaps above all else, can help us (re)construct the collective history of the NAFTA-created

unemployment, hunger, despair, and destruction of their homeland. It is a history that is today also inscribed in our own nation's experience – even as those who succeed each also recounts his or her own personal remembrance of their crossing, and make their individual journey a part of our collective, transborder memory. Like death, human life is not anchored in a nationality, nor is it legitimized by a “legal status;” moreover, as human beings, as we well know, survival is not possible without hope. As Julio Cortázar reminded us long ago, “*la esperanza no nos pertenece; es la vida misma renovándose.*” (Hope does not belong to us: it is life itself being renewed). And so, the presence of Latin American immigrants in this country is, above all, a tribute to the human spirit, an affirmation of our human dignity; like their resistance, their very presence in this society, like our own, is *la esperanza* itself embodied by each man and woman who did make it, who is here, *marcando presencia*. Thus, each becomes a daily reminder both of our own hopes, as well as of the spirit of the hundreds who, every year, become part of our nation's historical memory – regardless of what ultimately happened to them during their crossing, of how they died, of how their stories come to be (re)told, (re)membered, (re)constructed.

Border Angels (www.borderangels.org) undoubtedly deserves our full solidarity and support.

Saludos!

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