

Introduction

Redefining American History: Bert Corona and Oppositional Narrative

Who is Bert Corona? His is certainly not a household name or a name readily identified by most Americans—indeed, not even by most Mexican-Americans in the United States, who have been denied their own heroes in American history.

To put it simply, Bert Corona is a Mexican-American labor and community activist, whom I have admired for many years. After collaborating on the writing of his life history, I admire him even more. Bert Corona is a Mexican-American whose life and political career correspond to many of the key themes and periods of twentieth-century American history, in particular those of the Mexican-American experience. His life and work embody the changing character of the Mexican-American communities in the United States.

Bert Corona was born in 1918 in El Paso, Texas, a child of the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Through his family, Corona symbolizes the thousands of Mexican immigrants and refugees who crossed the U.S.–Mexican border—a border created by nineteenth-century U.S. expansion—seeking jobs and safety. Having grown up along the border as the child of Mexican immigrants, Corona represented by the 1930s a new generation of Mexican-Americans who had been born or raised in the United States and who began to distinguish themselves from their immigrant roots. They were still *mexicanos*, but they were also American citizens. They became aware of an identity that resembled what

W. E. B. DuBois referred to as the “double consciousness” of black Americans: the consciousness both of being black and of being American.¹

As part of what I and others refer to as the Mexican-American Generation, which came of political age between the 1930s and the 1950s, Corona joined in the renewed struggles for social justice and first-class citizenship identified with this political generation. In Corona’s case, the workplace became the main site of struggle. In the late 1930s and the early 1940s, he played a key role in union drives conducted by the CIO (the Congress of Industrial Organizations) among the varied ethnic communities composing the Los Angeles working class. Within the Mexican-American community, Corona joined and worked in the youth-oriented Mexican American Movement (MAM) and in the National Congress of Spanish-Speaking Peoples, a radical Popular Front group influenced by the Communist Party.

In 1942 Corona volunteered, along with thousands of other Mexican-Americans, to fight the “Good War” against fascism. Returning from World War II, he entered the expanding urban and suburban worlds of Mexican-American veterans and their families, who struggled to meet the challenges of a postwar environment that was still too often characterized by racism. In the late forties and through the fifties, Corona participated in and led groups such as the Community Service Organization (CSO) and the Asociación Nacional México-Americana (ANMA).

Anticipating a new decade with the hope of greater changes, Corona was one of the founders of the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA) in 1960. In the early 1960s, through MAPA, Corona more closely linked his earlier labor and civil rights struggles with electoral politics. As the decade progressed, he became a quintessential transitional figure. Although not without doubts concerning the dogmatic ethnic nationalism of the developing Chicano movement, Corona participated in movement politics and contributed significantly to the movement through his work on the issue of extending protection and organization to Mexican and Latino undocumented workers.

Today, in his mid-seventies, Corona is still struggling on this and other fronts. From this committed and lengthy career, Corona provides

1. See Arnold Rampersad, *The Art and Imagination of W. E. B. DuBois* (New York: Schocken Books, 1990), pp. 68–90.

a memory of history, or a “social memory.”² In contrast to the case presented by Richard Rodríguez in his controversial 1981 autobiography *Hunger for Memory*, in Bert Corona there is no hunger of or for memory. Rather, we find memory, history, and identity, rooted and shaped by the struggles of Mexicans in this country to combat oppression and discrimination. “The context of that ‘memory,’” as Ramón Saldivar notes of Ernesto Galarza’s Mexican-American autobiography *Barrio Boy*, “is undeniably historical and discursive.”³

Oppositional History and Bert Corona

This book therefore concerns much more than the life of Bert Corona. It is not only about one individual but also about many individuals and communities. Personal history, as Barbara Harlow observes about many Third World narratives, becomes transformed into historical narrative and analysis. It is a story—a collective story, if you will, or what Ronald Takaki refers to as a “community of memory”—about the struggles by people of Mexican descent in the United States, who have at different times and even within families referred to themselves variously as *mexicanos*, Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, Chicanos, Latinos, or Hispanics or by more regional designations such as *tejanos* in Texas or *manitos* and Hispanos in New Mexico.⁴

This is a story of Mexican-Americans—or those described by whatever name one chooses to use to designate people of Mexican descent in the United States—struggling to overcome barriers of racial discrimination, social injustice, economic exploitation, inferior educational opportunities, and prejudice that caused them to be regarded as less than American. Both individually and collectively, this is an oppositional text, based on Corona’s memories of history.⁵ By oppositional, I mean

2. See Peter Burke, “History as Social Memory,” in *Memory: History, Culture, and the Mind*, ed. Thomas Butler (London: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 97–113.

3. Ramón Saldivar, *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), p. 164. See also Richard Rodríguez, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodríguez* (Boston: Godine, 1981).

4. Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1987), p. 96; Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1989), p. 493.

5. James Clifford refers to this type of oppositional text as a “postcolonial

that Corona's life and narrative are centered on a fundamental opposition both to social injustice and to an American historical narrative that has excluded the roles, struggles, and even contradictions of diverse racial and ethnic groups such as Mexican-Americans from the making of American history.⁶ The history of Mexican-Americans and of Bert Corona is in fact a very American story—a part of U.S. history, although not often acknowledged as such.

Mexicans first became part of the United States as a conquered people, following the U.S. invasion and conquest of Mexico's northern frontier, *el norte*, during the U.S.–Mexican War (1846–1848). Those Mexicans who remained in this territory—an estimated one hundred thousand, scattered from Texas to California—were granted American citizenship, but this was often in name only. Despite class differences between Mexicans of the working class and the lower classes as opposed to land-owning and (in some cases) quite wealthy frontier Mexicans, most people of Mexican descent were relegated to a subaltern political, economic, and cultural position within the first decades of Euro-American rule.⁷

Yet by the turn of the century the great influx of Mexican immigrant workers into the Southwest had augmented the nineteenth-century communities and revitalized Mexican culture north of the border. Brought in and coveted as cheap labor by the key emerging industries of the Southwest—railroads, mines, smelters, ranches, and agriculture—Mexican immigrant workers formed the labor foundation for the

ethnographic representation"; see Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 10.

6. See Angie C. Chabram, "Chicana/o Studies as Oppositional Ethnography," *Cultural Studies* 4 (October 1990): 228–247.

7. See, for example, Albert Camarillo, *Chicanos in a Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios in Santa Barbara and Southern California, 1848–1930* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979); Arnolde De León, *The Tejano Community, 1830–1900* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982); Richard Griswold del Castillo, *The Los Angeles Barrio, 1850–1890: A Social History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979); Robert J. Rosenbaum, *Mexicano Resistance in the Southwest: The Sacred Right of Self-Preservation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); Douglas Monroy, *Thrown Among Strangers: The Making of Mexican Culture in Frontier California* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990).

development of the southwestern economy and its integration with the rest of a newly industrializing America. The nearly one million Mexican immigrant workers who arrived between 1900 and 1930 were accompanied by Mexican political refugees fleeing the destruction and dislocation of the Mexican Revolution of 1910. It is in this context that the Corona family saga north of the border commences.

Mexican immigrants and their offspring, who would form the Mexican-American Generation, did not reap the full fruits of their labor. Mexicans began their search for America under severe handicaps, relegated to what were termed "Mexican jobs" (the worst jobs), paid "Mexican wages" (the lowest wages), living in "Mexican barrios" (congested, impoverished, and segregated), and forced to attend "Mexican schools" (the worst schools available).⁸

But this history—what has become known as Chicano history—is not merely a history of victimization. Chicanos, or Mexican-Americans, also possess a history of struggles, both personal and collective, which have been manifested in different ways. Mexican-Americans as a people have participated in oppositional struggles to survive as an ethnic group and to oppose second-class treatment. Some of this opposition has been overtly political, whereas some has been more personal and subtle.

I stress the theme of opposition not to glorify or to romanticize or to exaggerate the concept of struggle in Chicano history, and certainly not to essentialize or suggest a monolithic Mexican-American experience (although I agree with critic Ramón Saldívar that in the experiences of oppressed minorities in the United States, essentialism, or generalization, has in fact represented a form of resistance to the dominant culture).⁹ Rather, I stress opposition simply to note that most people of Mexican descent—whether their politics are liberal, conservative, moderate, radical, or nothing in particular—have resented and

8. See, for example, Mario T. García, *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, and Identity, 1930–1960* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Richard A. García, *Rise of the Mexican American Middle Class: San Antonio, 1929–1941* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1990); Guadalupe San Miguel, *Let All of Them Take Heed: Mexican Americans and the Quest for Educational Equality in Texas, 1918–1981* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987).

9. Ramón Saldívar, "The Politics of Culture," in *Rearticulations: The Practice of Chicano Cultural Studies*, ed. Ellen McCracken and Mario T. García (forthcoming).

reacted to being treated as subordinates. Hence, diverse struggles have characterized Mexican-American resistance movements. In an earlier text, *Mexican Americans: Leadership, Ideology, and Identity, 1930–1960*, I focused on the history of Mexican-American struggles against racism and class exploitation from the perspective of key liberal groups such as the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) as well as radical groups such as the National Congress of Spanish-Speaking Peoples.¹⁰

Because both racism and the exploitation of Mexicans in this country have deep roots and have persisted throughout this century, each generation of Chicanos has taken on the struggle in its own way. Both liberals and radicals in the Mexican-American Generation, Corona's generation, challenged the system, but they did so mostly based on the premise that the system was capable of being reformed to allow the full integration of Mexican-Americans. They believed that it was possible to achieve a pluralistic synthesis—or what Werner Sollors refers to as “consent”—between what is Mexican and what is American.¹¹

In contrast, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new generation of Mexicans in the United States more boldly and militantly challenged the system, its years of prejudice against Mexicans, and the historical and cultural amnesia that relegated Chicanos to mostly marginal historical roles and stereotypical cultural contributions. At the same time that they resurrected the civil rights struggles of their parents and grandparents, members of this Chicano Generation rejected earlier themes and goals such as integration, pluralism, and acculturation. Instead, the Chicano Generation asserted the right of Mexicans in this country to political self-determination and proposed an anti-colonial struggle that suggested the future secession of Chicanos and their historical homeland, the Southwest, now called Aztlán after the mythical original homeland of the Aztecs. Although the Chicano Generation felt it necessary to re-create or invent its own version of a tradition of resistance, with corresponding myths, its general discourse and actions were in fact rooted in a collective memory of Mexicans who had been struggling against prejudice since the American conquest during the nineteenth century.

10. García, *Mexican Americans*.

11. Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

Despite the demise (and some would say cooptation) of the Chicano movement and the more conservative general political climate in the 1980s and 1990s, elements of resistance and opposition still remain, although they are less focused and more sporadic. Even those upwardly mobile Mexican-Americans who have benefited from the discourse of “multiculturalism” and “diversity” in the eighties and nineties have not succumbed fully to the forces of cooptation, as Rosa Linda Fregoso notes in her study of recent Chicano cultural productions and artists such as Luis Valdez. For example, within what appear to be assimilationist-oriented films, such as *La Bamba* by Valdez, lie various subtexts of political and cultural opposition based on alternative readings of American history and culture.¹²

It is this history of Mexican-American struggles against injustice that, in a larger sense, this book is all about. “Identity politics,” Lourdes Torres observes about women of color, “has never meant bemoaning one’s individual circumstances, or ranking oppressions, or a politics of defensiveness around one’s issues. Rather, identity politics means a politics of activism, a politics which seeks to recognize, name, and destroy the system of domination which subjugates people of color.”¹³ The same is true of Corona’s case. It is a story of the struggle to maintain in a constructive way some form of ethnic and cultural integrity—the redefinition and reinvention by each generation of the meaning of being Mexican-Americans—against those forces which seek only to valorize Mexican-Americans for the labor that can be exploited from them.

Yet at another level, it is also a history of struggles to assert Mexican-American rights to being American, to occupying a discursive space within an American context—and not solely on a standard set by Euro-Americans, or Anglos, but also on Mexican-American terms. This involves the redefinition of what it means to be an American, what it means to be a citizen. This means changing, for example, traditional views of American development as simply an East-to-West movement

12. Rosa Linda Fregoso, “Re-membering the Border Through Chicano Cinema,” in McCracken and García, *Rearticulations*.

13. See Lourdes Torres, “The Construction of the Self in U.S. Latina Autobiographies,” in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 275–276.

of peoples, from civilization to frontier. It means reinterpreting American history also from a South-to-North perspective, from Spanish/Mexican to Mexican-American to Chicano and to a viable definition of multiculturalism, from frontier to border—borders both real and mythical, both political and cultural—and to the intersections of borders, as suggested by Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa.¹⁴ It involves producing and accepting what Edward Said refers to as “new objects for a new kind of knowledge.”¹⁵

Is Corona's Life Representative of Other Mexican-Americans?

The answer to this question is both yes and no. It is yes in the sense that aspects of Bert Corona's life conform to the shared experiences of other Mexican-Americans. For example, Corona, like many other Mexicans, became American as the result of his parents crossing the border as immigrants and refugees during the Mexican Revolution of 1910. Most Mexicans in the United States descend from the immigrant experience—great-grandparents, grandparents, parents, or they themselves have crossed the Rio Grande or the *linia*, the borderline, somewhere between Brownsville and San Diego. As a child of the Mexican Revolution and as a child of what I call the Immigrant Generation in Chicano history, Corona shares this historical experience with many other Mexicans in this country.

Corona's own coming of age in a Mexican-American world, in a world of literal borders (the El Paso–Ciudad Juárez area) as well as cultural borders, parallels the experiences of others who also came of age during the era of the Mexican-American Generation. This generation, distinct in both a political and a biological sense, was forced to confront more individual and collective borders than any generation before it. What did it really mean to be Mexican and American (Mexican-American)?

14. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987).

15. Said is quoted in Harlow, *Resistance Literature*, p. 116. Also see Claudia Salazar, “A Third World Woman's Text: Between the Politics of Criticism and Cultural Politics,” in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, ed. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 93–106.

Writing of the literal border implications of the term “Mexican-American,” William Anthony Nericcio observes: “The hyphen in the name ‘Mexican-American’ serves, in effect, both as a symbol of the bridges that span the nations of the United States and Mexico and, also, a minus sign (–) symbolizing the negation of the peoples forming the culture around that very boundary.”¹⁶

Like the lives of most other Mexican-Americans, Corona’s life has been one of crossing new, symbolic personal, political, cultural, and social borders. The concept of the border is a metaphor for Mexican-American life. This border life and culture are today moving from the margins to the center of American culture and society, as Third World peoples such as Mexican-Americans and other Latinos increase in numbers and influence in the United States.

On a larger scale than ever before, the Mexican-American Generation had to explore these and other issues. Moreover, this search for a new ethnic identity had to be carried out within the context of a changing Mexican-American social reality that was affected on the one hand by the threats and dislocations of the Great Depression and on the other hand by opportunities for social improvement, especially for those who joined the CIO labor struggles of the late 1930s, as Corona did.

Corona’s generation, of course, also shares the memories of World War II. Like thousands of other Mexican-Americans—predominantly men, but including some women—Corona volunteered to participate in the struggle against fascism. And, like most other *veteranos*, Corona came back to discover that although America had changed, not everything had changed. As he and others rediscovered racial and cultural exclusion in their hometowns, this ignited various community and even regional efforts by Mexican-Americans to wage still another war, this time on the homefront. This war was against discrimination and for the integration into U.S. society of Mexican-Americans, many of whom had risked their lives in a conflict to preserve democracy.

All these experiences Corona shares with other Mexican-Americans—or at least with other Mexican-American males, for women were still too often segregated in the more private sphere of the home within

16. William Anthony Nericcio, “Autobiographies at *La Frontera*: The Quest for Mexican-American Narrative,” *Americas Review* 16 (Fall-Winter 1988): 169.

Mexican-American culture. Corona's life and career certainly parallel those of other Mexican-Americans in a broad historical sense. Yet he is not an Everyman. He possesses exceptional qualities, and I have no misgivings about portraying him as an exceptional Mexican-American leader.

Despite those postmodernist critics who applaud the end of the subject and the author in history, racial minority groups such as Mexican-Americans who have been excluded, marginalized, and dehistoricized still need subjects, authors, leaders, heroes—figures of whom we have been deprived, figures we didn't even know existed. Many of my generation grew up in the 1950s believing that true heroes and leaders came only from the ranks of the Anglos and not from among Mexicans.¹⁷

As someone who early recognized the need to struggle against injustice, as a key labor and community leader, and as an activist whose leadership has extended and survived over various historical periods in Chicano history, Bert Corona is without question exceptional. He clearly is not a follower. He is a leader in the best and most progressive tradition of that term. Yet he is not so exceptional that he stands by himself. As is evident in the memories of his life, Corona places his leadership within the context of what some critics refer to as the "collective self"—that is, his memories of struggle are social and collective rather than individualized. Unlike the leadership described in the traditional Western male autobiography, his is instead a social leadership, for the many rather than for the few.

Moreover, Corona's leadership is part of a larger expression of leadership that emanates from the Chicano communities of his own Mexican-American Generation, as well as those of earlier and later generations. Corona's cohort of Mexican-American leaders also represent oppositional figures in American history. They symbolize disjuncture, rupture, and interruption of a social process and a historical

17. In this sense, I would agree with Regeina Gagnier (although I would place more stress on the "collective self") when she writes concerning the emergence of the female oppositional voice: "In literary critical terms, women who have never possessed the authorial signature are not ready to give themselves over to the deconstructive or postmodern 'death of the author,' and they cling more tenaciously to individualism" ("Feminist Autobiography in the 1980s," *Feminist Studies* 17 [Spring 1991]: 140).

narrative that has largely relegated Mexican-Americans to the margins of second-class citizenship, to the status of what poet Pat Mora terms “legal aliens.”¹⁸ Corona and his cohort participate in the “politics of memory” by constructing oppositional memories, or what Michael Fischer calls a “counter rhetoric,” against the dominant side of American history, which is centered on the advancement of some by the exploitation of many others.¹⁹ “Memory recovers history,” Genaro Padilla asserts, “and in recovering reshapes it, revises it, reassigns meaning to it, reinvents and repossesses it for the individual.”²⁰

Bert Corona and American History

We can learn a number of things about American history through Bert Corona’s narrative. At a general level, one of these is certainly the perspective that American history not only is the result of the specific types of victimization that people of color have experienced but also is the result—and this is perhaps more important—of the role that minorities themselves, male and female, have played in constructing history. Corona exemplifies at a leadership level the importance of historical agency in the making of Chicano history. From his initial involvement in the struggle against injustice when he was in grade school and participated in a school strike to protest the maltreatment

18. Pat Mora, “Legal Alien,” in Mora, *Chants* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1984), p. 54.

19. See E. San Juan, “The Cult of Ethnicity and the Fetish of Pluralism: A Counterhegemonic Critique,” *Cultural Critique* 18 (Spring 1991): 224; Michael M. J. Fischer, “Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory,” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), p. 213.

20. Genaro Padilla, “‘Yo Sola Aprendi’: Contra-Patriarchal Containment in Women’s Nineteenth-Century California Personal Narratives,” *Americas Review* 16 (Fall-Winter 1988): 93. “Counter-memory,” George Lipsitz notes, “looks to the past for the hidden histories excluded from dominant narratives” (“History, Myth, and Counter-Memory: Narrative and Desire in Popular Novels,” in Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990], p. 213). Also see David Thelen, “Memory and American History,” *Journal of American History* 75 (March 1989): 1117–1129; and David W. Blight, “‘For Something Beyond the Battlefield’: Frederick Douglass and the Memory of the Civil War,” *Journal of American History* 75 (March 1989): 1156–1178.

of Mexican-American students by the teachers, Corona has actively labored to change conditions both for Mexican-Americans and for others.

Rather than waiting for someone else to better the conditions of Mexican-Americans, Corona has always taken the initiative to bring about change. This struggle has been strategically modified over time, from the initial years of organizing CIO unions in Los Angeles to his current work in helping to protect and assist undocumented workers and their families. Despite the common stereotypes—or what ethnographers Clifford and Marcus refer to as “visualisms”—of Mexican-Americans as lazy, passive, and fatalistic people, Corona’s life and narrative challenge these images. By engaging in what Octavio Romano terms “historical confrontation,” Corona provides counter-images of Mexican-Americans as active, engaged, and future-oriented people whose oppositional stance is not itself intended to destroy but rather to build—in this case, to build a better and more just America.²¹

Along these lines, Corona’s narrative also emphasizes a second theme: a sense of continuity within the struggle for social change in American history, specifically in the Mexican-American experience. One of the impressive aspects of Corona’s career has been his consistent commitment and dedication to social change. He is in essence a “man for all seasons,” seeking to engage and to organize the widest possible circle of people. Strongly influenced by the CIO unionizing efforts and the Popular Front politics of the 1930s, Corona has always been anti-sectarian and anti-dogmatic. Although clearly a man of the left, he has always interpreted this position in the most general of ways in order to include in the fight against injustice as many people as possible, regardless of their political views.

And he has done this consistently through several periods in Chicano history. Although centered within the Mexican-American Generation, Corona has not been completely tied to his own generational position. As a classic transitional figure, he has adjusted and helped to shape the politics of later periods. This is most clearly seen in his transition to involvement with the more militant and certainly more separatist-

21. Clifford and Marcus, *Writing Culture*, p. 11; Octavio Ignacio Romano, “The Historical and Intellectual Presence of Mexican Americans,” *El Grito* 2 (Winter 1969): 32–46.