

Introduction

This is an old story about people who leave their homeland for some new place. A story ages as it survives over time. This signifies that the story lives. If it is alive, then it is always growing and changing, like all living things, in response to the urgencies of the moment. Which is why this old story can be retold here, and will be told again later, in different ways, for different purposes.

Here, the purposes turn on muted intentions, earnest re-creations, and unintended consequences for people who moved from Mexico to a place where they tried to re-create the familiar. Mexican people came *al norte*, to the north, to continue in life as they had known it, or imagined that it had been or could be.

This story, and indeed other histories of the Mexican people of the United States, has been increasingly well told in recent years. The book in hand could not have happened without the efforts of my predecessors. This book is not an argument with any of them, only a building on the foundations that they have laid. The social scientific study, the oppression-resistance dichotomy, and how Mexicans responded to their second-class status in America have each provided points of departure for such works. More recent writers have concentrated on issues of identity and culture, or—with the knowledge of the usual outcome of the immigrant experience—on the creation of something new, in this case, the Mexican Americans. I mention first the fine books by my two friends and colleagues Ricardo Romo and George Sánchez, which treat much the

same period as this volume does.¹ And I cannot omit Richard Griswold del Castillo, Antonio Ríos-Bustamante, Pedro Castillo, Vicki Ruiz, Juan Gómez-Quíñones, Rodolfo Acuña, Abraham Hoffman, Francisco Balderrama, and Carey McWilliams, whose more general or more specific works have made important contributions to our understanding of Mexican Los Angeles in the first half of the twentieth century.² Special acknowledgment must go to Lisbeth Haas and Gilbert González: not only have their books on Mexican Southern California informed this narrative, but their effective critiques of this manuscript model the collegiality for which our profession is not often properly credited.³ How this book differs from those that made it possible shall unfold in this introduction. Let me say here only that I shall try to view the history not from the outcome, but from the intentions of those who made it. The exertions to, and conflicts over, this attempt to re-create Mexico—in the constraining context of the political economies of California and Mexico, and the weight of history and culture—form the essence of this narrative.

My own purposes are similarly various. Readers should know that the stories in this book parallel the story of my father's family. I can only imagine how my grandfather, a participant both in the turbulence of the Mexican Revolution described in chapter 2 and in the contention in *La Placita* described in chapter 5, would have related this history. He was a passionate political partisan who would have told this story with much more verve and detail, but probably more narrowly. Some of my father's telling (more partisanship) weaves its way into chapter 5. And at least one of my uncles would tell about the boxing. I have the historian's perspective: it is not so much one of detachment (I am a partisan too) as one in which a myriad of sources—social work studies, newspapers (in Spanish and English), government reports, popular magazines, contemporary scholarly journals, interviews with participants—and knowing in part how the story would come out all inform the narrative.

In another way, I am radically, often distressingly, detached. I have not resided in Los Angeles—the place of my birth and the only place where my soul feels at home—for twenty years. I have learned, though, to be thankful for other grand blessings. The Colorado College, especially its Hulbert Center for Southwest Studies, is a marvelous home away from home. Its generous institutional support for this project, especially its Benezet grants, and cooperative and personalized atmosphere are what have made this book possible.

My method here may at times be perplexing. A huge amount of re-

search has gone into this project, but I have not “written up the research.” Rather, I have tried to use my investigations into that array of sources to create a narrative that is about the interaction of the forces of history and economics with the endeavors and passions of human beings. This complex effort to re-create the familiar has remained fragmentary because the urgencies of such grand notions as the family, liberalism and conservatism, urbanization and modernity, the economic marketplace, the spiritual world and fate, and more, all came to bear on Mexican Los Angeles. Thus, these issues, as I understand them, are all woven into the telling. These grand notions and other, more ancillary ones, such as the world market and the Mexican Revolution, American tastes in fruits and vegetables and movie stars, classic Latin American conservatism, the New Deal, and notions of progress, to name only a few, all intertwined with Mexicans’ efforts to continue upon a new landscape. This is why my narrative appears to stray from the subject at hand. Readers will encounter digressions—strands, I would call them—that weave together the explanations for why and how people did what they did. Different readers will, I hope, find that they can grasp different threads that will help draw them into the overall narrative. All of these concerns must be part of the story because it is how people make history—under, of course, circumstances, restraints, and habits that formed their historical legacy.

This, then, is the point of view and method of this book: the most meaningful, indicative, and pivotal aspects of Mexican Los Angeles in the first four decades of the twentieth century—history, political economy, popular culture, and fate—are taken apart and analyzed. So too are *la gente’s* intentions, passions, and disappointments. It is the interweaving of this human saga and the material world that makes understandable the rebirth of Mexican Los Angeles.

This story is one historian’s creation. Of course, it could not have happened without the pathbreaking works and the accumulation of sources cited above. Nonetheless, only I can take responsibility and credit for the interpretations of events, juxtapositions of historical forces and human passions, and choices about which sources to include and, most important, which to believe. Thus I make no claim to scientific method or detachment, just to genuine efforts at openness and theoretical sophistication and to an attempt to amass as much knowledge and compassion as I am capable of. That is the methodology of this book.

Chapter 1 describes how Mexican people and their institutions appeared on the landscape, how they came into view: that is, how the Anglo Americans superficially viewed them and how they themselves, in the

process of re-creating the familiar, came into view by building homes and institutions and by conducting themselves in particular ways in such important matters as the spirit world and pastimes. On this old Spanish/Mexican homeland, immigrants lived mostly hidden from view, except when they were called a labor or health “problem.” They built only for themselves on a landscape called not just Los Angeles but also, in a popular phrase of the time, *México de afuera*, “Mexico outside” or “outer Mexico.”

This is a transnational history, or perhaps better, this is a transborder history. Chapter 2 analyzes the causes of what I have called “the First Great Migration” (I would say that we are in the process of the “Second” right now), as well as the historical legacies of California, especially regarding matters of work and race, awaiting them in that new place. I hope that readers will think of this not as a long digression but rather as an explanation: an understanding of the hearts and minds of the people of Mexican Los Angeles, their received wisdom and their aspirations, requires an understanding of the history and culture of both Los Angeles and the place from which Mexicans were coming.

Mexicans in the United States have often been portrayed as marginal to both the economy and the society of Southern California. Octavio Paz asserted that “This Mexicanism—delight in decorations, carelessness and pomp, negligence, passion and reserve—floats in the air” in Los Angeles, and old-style urban histories mention Mexicans only in passing.⁴ Chapter 3 shows how perceived marginality is the opposite of reality. Indeed, Mexicans have been central to the functioning of the agricultural economy of this most productive farming state in the union. Then, too, they have been constructed as a problem when “Mexican” is associated with “dirty,” and as fantasy figures when “Mexican” has been reconstructed as “Spanish.”

Chapter 4 tells the extraordinary story of the three-way encounter between American popular culture, the children of *México de afuera*, and their parents and cultural leaders, who sought to counter the subversive influences of that repulsive and attractive notion we call “modernity.” So many things mixed together: a profusion of necessities and opportunities associated with children and with new ways of conducting oneself; everyday tasks and joys usually having to do with the daily labors of subsistence and family; and ancestral commands and human inconsistency. In this, my favorite chapter, about movies, fashion, courtship, and schools, we see how people with both diverse intentions and various degrees of intentionality break free from old subjections; how they become subjects of new institutions, ways of thinking, and spirits;

how, in other words, Mexican culture changed in an American city; how Mexicans continued in the new place, in some ways the same, in some ways different.

Chapter 5 should, if nothing else, divest readers of any prejudices about a single Mexican point of view about politics north or south of the border, or about life in the north. While this chapter often treats the conflicts between Mexicans and Americans, it emphasizes the different positions that *mexicanos de afuera* took regarding the Mexican Revolution, labor organization, and how to deal with American politics and institutions.

This transborder perspective makes the issue of language difficult. Spanish and English are both beautiful, captivating, and expressive languages, which, while they have much in common, do not always translate easily. In some cases, I have tried to communicate the meaning of Spanish words by giving a translation. Where Spanish words have appropriately been left in the Spanish, I hope that either the context will make them clear or they are close enough to English for those without Spanish to understand them. (I did most of the translating myself, but with my classic third-generation Mexican-American Spanish sometimes not up to the challenge of the flowery and archaic language of the early twentieth century, I received help from my esteemed friend and colleague Clara Lomas.) Words and phrases like *México de afuera*, *el norte* (the north), and *sociedades* (the Mexicans' fraternal and cultural institutions) have been left in Spanish because no English word or phrase can evoke the meaning of these original Spanish terms. I often use *americanos*, and, I judge, quite effectively. Of course the term "Americans" is at best confusing since they have been a polyglot people. But Mexicans themselves called all those we can grossly group in the category of fair-skinned, English-speaking people *americanos*. Our learned perspective informs us that there was much diversity among those people, but the Mexicans saw their foremen, teachers, social workers, movie stars, policemen, and so on simply as *americanos*. We certainly know that Americans of German, Slavic, and Irish descent cannot be accurately called Anglo Americans, just as Puerto Ricans, Colombians, and Mexicans cannot be reliably lumped together as "Hispanics." Thus I use *americanos* often, especially when I want to give my readers the sense of how Mexicans were perceiving white English speakers. (Mexicans did not include, for example, African Americans in this appellation, but simply called them *los negros*.) I have appended a glossary that gives simple translations, and deeper meanings, of all the Spanish words used here.

One more caveat: it is worthwhile to reflect on what it means to

become a subject of historical analysis. *Subject* derives from the Latin *subjicere*, which means “to place or put under.” It seems to me that historians often act to put people under the superior perspective, information, and detachment that our positioning later in time permits. One outcome is that our voice and tone are frequently ironic, bemused, and patronizing. From our panorama in the present, we see much more clearly and wholly than our subjects did the events, issues, and ideas that confronted them. A good example is the treatment of the migrations of Mexican families presented in the second chapter.

One of the qualities of a good book, in my view, is that it makes us think about things in new ways, that it transforms our sense of reality rather than simply confirming our suppositions, cleverness, and preeminence. We must proceed then with some humility and empathy: people will indeed be our subjects here, but if this is to be a good book, then, reader, you and I both must subject ourselves to (“place under,” in other words) these historical subjects. If we do, we will wonder, criticize, hope, and despair, and be perplexed, saddened, reconciled, and optimistic, all a little more.