

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Irene Isabel Blea. *Researching Chicano Communities: Social-Historical, Physical, Psychological and Spiritual Space*. Westport, Conn. and London: Praeger, 1995. xiii + 159 pp. \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-275-95219-8; \$98.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-94974-7.

Reviewed by David Manuel Hernandez (University of New Mexico)
Published on H-LatAm (April, 1996)



Generalizing Chicana and Chicano Communities

Irene Isabel Blea's *Researching Chicano Communities: Social-Historical, Physical, Psychological, and Spiritual Space* is based on the author's 1970s sociological dissertation, a study of the Bessemer Chicano community in Colorado. Blea's stated purpose is to compare and contrast this community to the development of the discipline of Chicano Studies and to other Chicano communities in the Southwest. As well, Blea asserts that the text "instructs the student on the cultural elements of doing research in Chicano communities, and presents the current condition and social issues in these communities" (p. xi). A look at the table of contents indicates a logical sequence of chapters that includes defining the community, reviewing the literature, data collection and methodology, as well as chapters on Chicana feminism, theory and practice, and contemporary issues.

The text, however, fails to accomplish its generally stated objectives and is repeatedly disrupted and paralyzed by weak analysis, dated sources, sweeping generalizations, personal opinion and odd proclamations, uneven and misplaced topics, redundancies, and severe typographical, grammar, and syntax errors throughout the text. The severity of these problems not only renders the text difficult to read and often unintelligible, but it calls into question the responsibility and purpose of the publisher in issuing an obviously unedited text.

Like many Chicana/o texts, *Researching Chicano Communities* begins with a discussion of the nomenclature used to define Chicana/o communities, attempts to

reverse basic stereotypes of these communities, and offers an abbreviated history of Chicanas/os. Blea stresses the importance of self-definition, "a definition that comes from those being studied" (p. 1), and she attempts to depart from common assumptions of the Chicana/o community as being homogenous, urban, crime-ridden, and poor. However, in attempting to reverse these stereotypes and the frames of pathology and "social problems," Blea offers a simplified social history and resorts to the language of pathology throughout the narrative. More so, by relying almost exclusively on her 1970s Bessemer study, Blea reinforces generalizations and extrapolates the findings of this small southern Colorado community in the 1970s to contemporary Chicana and Chicano communities throughout the United States.

Blea writes that "Bessemer had its share of neighborhood winos" (p. 69) and refers to them as "deviants living, and being tolerated, in the Chicano community ... [and who] were not treated badly" (p. 10). Likewise, Blea painstakingly tries to disassociate Chicanos from gang members, displaying little knowledge of urban culture, or the complexity involved in gang affiliation. Blea writes, "Today, back yards and alleys can be dangerous. They are prime targets of thieves and drug addicts and are places for gang hangouts" (p. 132). Blea continues, "the front yard is no longer as well maintained because it can mark a house as affluent, making it subject to breaking and entry" (p. 132). Not only does she pathologize participation in gangs and drug use, but Blea implies that communities purposely maintain an impoverished front

yard, displaying a generalized culture of fear and ignorance of the socio-economic conditions involved. Similarly, when listing examples of “deviancy” Blea lists HIV along with drugs and gangs (p. 36) and consistently uses the word *barrio* as synonymous with ghetto and deteriorating communities.

With constant references to her 1970s Bessemer study, which “drew heavily on the [sociological] work done between 1928 and 1967” (p. 19), Blea’s text suffers from dated sources, and a twenty-year gap between that study and communities today. Besides the obvious regional variance, historical changes that are not addressed include, but are not limited to, increased globalization of the economy, large increases in immigration from Latin America and Asia, the economic effects of the Reagan-Bush administrations, and the impact of AIDS on Chicano communities. No other communities are introduced, and Bessemer, Colorado is used as a prototype of *the* Chicano community. Likewise, long descriptions of observations made in Bessemer are often introduced without an explicit connection to the passage being read. As well, the 1970s study is described at length in the “Contemporary Issues” chapter, while few recent studies, with the exception of the author’s publications, are introduced.

As a text meant to assist students with research, the book is problematic. While giving a few basic organizational and field techniques that Blea employed in her 1970s study, the advice is unevenly shared and interrupted by typographical errors, generalizations, and personal opinion. Blea repeatedly states that “a non-finding is a finding,” but she offers few examples. However, Blea repeats, at times almost verbatim, ideas from earlier chapters, and contradicts her own methodology. For example, after placing importance on the literature review, (but revealing few current studies), she contradicts her own advice, informing the reader that she conducted the review after she collected data to avoid bias. There is no discussion of the bias the Chicana/o researcher can inflict on the studied community without a review. Most obviously lacking is a discussion of writing skills in presenting findings. In fact, I argue that simple and semi-corrective generalizations, vague and convoluted sentence structure, and odd proclamations set a flawed example of community studies. Blea’s closing advice in one chapter exemplifies this vagueness. Blea writes, “researchers must be vigilant and well informed before entering the field” (p. 46). Vigilant about what?

Although the author’s writing style is simple and

accessible in terms of vocabulary, Blea’s narrative degenerates into colloquial phrases, convoluted sentences, and repeated use of passive instead of active sentences. This reduces the agency of some of the subjects she wishes to empower. For example, under the bold section-heading “Shoving the Paradigm,” Blea writes, “Biographies of women and much Chicana poetry appeared” (p. 81). This passive “appearance” of Chicana scholarship hardly indicates the agency and hard work of Chicana scholars and certainly does not indicate a “shove.” The colloquial nature of her sentences also detracts from the text. Blea writes, “At one time I had gone to the archives to do research on some dead people” (p. 83). As well, Blea’s sentences consistently refer to an idea presented in a prior passage and draw conclusions without analysis—“The consequence of this resistance is poverty” (p. 68). This writing style creates an unstable trajectory of thought and disables such paragraphs from standing on their own narrative integrity.

Similarly, although Blea provides several bold headings to provide organization throughout the text, the discussions often do not engage the heading and are curiously buried inside another topic. In a discussion of “environmental issues,” Blea introduces “la virgen de Guadalupe” (not *la virgen*) without explicit explanation of her connection to the environment (p. 138). In fact, whole discussions, such as “social space” and “theory and practice,” occur in chapters other than those that bear these titles. Although this could be explained as healthy slippage in the dynamic subject of Chicana/o research, these misplaced passages occur without textual cognizance. As such, the reader must continually remind herself/himself what section and chapter is being read.

Blea indicates in the introduction that she directs a gendered lens to the communities (or really community) under study. The author accurately writes, “Chicana feminism is incorporated because Chicano Studies and the civil rights movement, which so heavily influenced Chicano Studies, have been inappropriately characterized as male” (p. xii). As well, Blea states that “Gender, as well as sexual orientation, influences [sic] every aspect of life, including the research process that permeates how the community is conceptualized and studied” (p. xiii). However, the author’s treatment of gender and sexuality, like other topics in the text, is generalized, often superficial, and at times reaffirms dynamics she wishes to subvert. Most obvious is Blea’s constant reference to “la Chicana” as the terminology to describe Chicanas in the United States. Blea’s “la Chicana” denies the heterogeneity within Chicana communities and reduces the di-

ologue to a singular Chicana who somehow represents the multivalent experiences of Chicanas. This conflicts with Blea's assertion that "Chicanas have had to function with a multiplicity of oppressions at several levels; and because of this, have learned alternative ways of thinking, creating, and organizing" (p. 12). Also, the author makes generalizations about Chicanas, as well as Anglo communities. Blea writes "White women had a history of addressing women's issues in the United States. Chicanas did not" (p. 91).

Even more, Blea reductively theorizes sexism as rooted in a lack of respect that Chicanos lost after the conquest of Mexico—"somewhere between 1848 and today, some of them forgot it" (p. 91). This notion of respect veils the complex dynamics and various causes of sexism and the connections to other forms of discrimination. Blea continues to create gender dichotomies, instead of dismantling them—"There are times when the gentleness of females is appropriate, and there are times when very assertive behavior is mandatory" (p. 55)—and issues opinions—"A few men are now feminists" (p. 85); and "Chicanas, like black women, never abandoned their men" (p. 86)—instead of offering current, substantiated findings or grounded definitions.

Blea's discussions of sexuality are additive at best, mentioning this important topic sporadically. While the author mentions that sexuality affects research, she does not situate her own subjectivity as a researcher and, overall, maintains a heterosexist survey. She also makes confusing statements about sexuality. "The concern of ethnicity does not become consumed by sexual preference issues. They intersect ethnicity" (p. 87). What does this mean? Blea writes that "homophobic attitudes are similar to sexism and racism" but she offers no analysis of these similarities nor mentions the differences (p. 87). Also, though she states that gays and lesbians are often misunderstood by the Chicana/o community, she writes that "gays and lesbians note their responsibility to filter through the messages and create lives for themselves. It is society's responsibility not to interfere" (p. 107). This is a weak and complacent approach to homophobia, removing the responsibility and accountability from Blea's non-specific "society." This attitude also echoes Bill Clinton's "don't ask, don't tell" policy. Lastly, Blea states that "it is difficult to get information on this segment of the population" but does not question how her own heterosexist study impacts this "difficulty" (p. 135).

Blea's discussions of "space" are vague, scattered throughout the text, and never clearly defined for the

reader. Although Blea admittedly states that "it is futile to attempt to sharply categorize these aspects of the community for they frequently overlap" (p. 2), the slippage is so great that it distracts and confuses the reader. Similarly, her concerted efforts to correct stereotypes with revisionist history, while a little helpful, are often too condensed and romantic. In fact, at times she refers to a "golden age" for Chicana/o communities. Blea writes, "This feeling of togetherness existed in the Chicano communities of most urban areas, and it also existed in the isolated rural villages and mid-size farm communities where Chicanos lived along with Anglos" (p. 17). As well, Blea simplistically and romantically writes, "After their return and settlement [after 1692], the Spanish-speaking communities learned to respect, interact with, or ignore their differences with the native people" (p. 3). Blea's use of history serves to void nuance, and essentializes the experiences of Chicanas and Chicanos.

Essentializing statements and odd proclamations, in fact, permeate the entire text, and, especially for the reader without a background in Chicana/o Studies, should not be taken at face value. Several examples follow: "It would be more likely that the researcher would encounter shyness among the younger respondents" (p. 34); "Chicanos do not think much about their own church history and the nature of the historical roots of their faith" (p. 104); "In the rural areas patriotism is sometimes higher due to the lack of a critical voice" (p. 134); "Mexican American women who date immigrant men are considered cheap, and the shared space is divided" (p. 135); "Anglos, Chicanas, and Chicanos have a responsibility to make the life cycle less stressful" (p. 145); and "The best industries for Chicanas/Latinas to work in are telephone companies" (p. 106). These examples obscure reality and beg questions that are not answered in the text. For example, with regard to the last generalization, regarding Chicanas who work in the manufacturing of phones and phone equipment: it is among the most environmentally hazardous of industries today.

Similarly, odd proclamations and observations occur frequently without explanation or analysis, placing the responsibility on the reader to presume Blea's implied, but not understood, train of thought. Several examples follow: "The spiritual relationship is exercised when students study and take tests in college" (p. 105); "Riots in large cities ... scare some sexists and racists into behaving appropriately" (p. 94); "Most Chicanos now see themselves as superior to the environment" (p. 124); "Those outside the rural areas wonder why Mexican Americans and Indians live in poor houses and have ill health but

drive expensive pickup trucks” (p. 136); “Interaction with the criminal justice system is differentiated along class lines, and it can be said that every Chicano who has an encounter with the law is an activist of some sort” (p. 121). This final example is especially dangerous, raising the status of domestic abusers, rapists, and drunk drivers to the level of political activists.

Finally, I would like to discuss the role of the publisher in the distribution of this excessively flawed text. The typographical errors that I found in one reading numbered, conservatively, at least three dozen. The errors are not exclusive of the captions for photos that introduce chapters or the references at the end of each chapter. Besides many spelling errors of common words, Blea makes “cultural typos” throughout the text. The author marks 1879 as “11 years” after the U.S. conquest of Mexico, which actually occurred in 1848, not 1868 as implied (p. 20). The Barelas barrio in Albuquerque, New Mexico, is spelled “Barellas” (p. 6). Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz is spelled “So Juana” (p. 80). “La virgin [virgin]” (pp. 108,138) exemplifies a mixed translation, using the Spanish pronoun and the English noun. As well, Blea makes basic errors in grammar, syntax, and definitions. For example, Blea discusses inter- and intra-group relations but defines them incorrectly. She writes, “Inter-group relations are defined as relations, interactions,

among Chicanos. Intragroup relations describe interactions between Chicanos and other racial/ethnic groups” (p. 127). These errors are the shared responsibility of the author and publisher.

Irene Isabel Blea’s *Researching Chicano Communities* is simply not characteristic or representative of the professional quality of scholarship available from Chicanas and Chicanos. A narrative is never established because of the confusing sentence structure and frequent disruptions by typographical and grammar errors, odd proclamations, and misspellings that include the names of Chicana/o barrios, academics, and artists. The publisher obviously neglected to edit the copy of this text and, I argue, is accountable for misrepresenting the work and scholarship of Chicanas/os. Especially considering the often marginal access of Chicana/o texts to major publishing houses, the publisher’s motive and commitment to publishing books by Chicanas/os are suspect. In closing, there is a sad irony (and typo) when Blea writes, “Publishes [sic] may have either accepted the stereotype of the illiterate Mexican or they may not have ventured to study and develop the existing market” (p. 37).

Copyright (c) 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: David Manuel Hernandez. Review of Blea, Irene Isabel, *Researching Chicano Communities: Social-Historical, Physical, Psychological and Spiritual Space*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. April, 1996.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=362>

Copyright © 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.