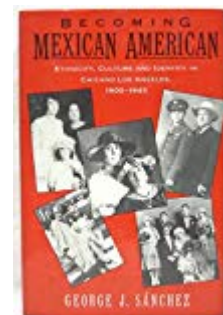


**Mario T. García.** *Memories of Chicano History: The Life and Narrative of Bert Corona.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994. xviii + 369 pp. \$22.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-520-20152-1.



**George J. Sanchez.** *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. \$42.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-506990-7.



**Reviewed by** Joseph A. Rodriguez

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The personal account by Mexican American organizer Bert Corona, as edited and reproduced by historian Mario T. Garcia, and George J. Sanchez's detailed synthesis of Mexican-American urban history intersect in the city of Los Angeles. Corona moved to Los Angeles from El Paso during the Great Depression after receiving a basketball scholarship to attend USC. In *Becoming Mexican American* Sanchez notes that many of Los Angeles's Mexican Americans arrived by way of Texas and specifically El Paso where railroad and agricultural work drew them from Mexico.

Sanchez's book provides insights that help explain Corona's personal experiences. We learn that Los Angeles was a growing metropolis characterized by a richness of racial and ethnic

groups. Mexican-American barrios included many European Americans, Asians, and blacks (77). Mexican-American neighborhoods were dispersed throughout the city producing frequent contact between Mexicans, blacks, Asians, and Anglos. This geographical dispersal may have encouraged some Mexicans to emphasize their English language abilities because of frequent contacts with non-Spanish speakers. For example, Corona remembers his shock upon encountering on a Los Angeles bus Mexican Americans who refused to speak to him in Spanish.

Los Angeles' ethnic and racial diversity also may have helped temper somewhat Anglo racism towards Mexican Americans. Making an argument similar to one put forth recently by sociolo-

gist Tomas Almaguer, Sanchez suggests that the presence of Asians, whom many whites considered "unassimilatable," helped further the view that Mexican Americans, in contrast, could be assimilated. This conclusion, however, encouraged white reformers to view Mexican culture as inferior, and led to extensive Americanization efforts, particularly focused on Mexican women. The largely Protestant reformers deprecated Spanish and insisted that immigrants learn English, and preached the ills of the Catholic faith which they assumed led to larger families and a lack of industriousness.

Sanchez argues that Mexicans in Los Angeles benefited from the city's wide variety of manufacturers. Mexicans found jobs in a variety of industries due to the area's rapid economic expansion and because Henry Huntington's interurban network made many work sites accessible. These factors opened up for Mexicans "alternative employment opportunities beyond those offered by a labor recruiter" which allowed them to "avoid the most exploitative arrangements" (69).

Los Angeles' rapid population growth created opportunities for Mexicans to interact with other ethnic groups. Corona, in the late-1930s, became a labor organizer for the CIO where he worked closely with many European American organizers. Through his labor organizing, Corona endeavored to garner the support of all working class Americans in the struggle against the depredations of the capitalist system. Possibly as a result of his experiences with whites in the diverse communities in both Los Angeles and the Bay Area, Corona was never comfortable with the ethnic nationalism that arose in the late-1960s. He questioned the use of latino-centrist terms like "cosmic race" and rejected Reies Lopez Tijerina's anti-white rhetoric.

Los Angeles was also a city undergoing intense labor struggles. In the early 1900s the Industrial Workers of the World organized Anglo, Latino, and Asian farm workers though with little

long-term success. During the Great Depression the rise of industrial unionism led labor officials to hire Mexican-American recruiters to help organize the Spanish-speaking community. Mexican-American women were particularly active and effective labor organizers, especially in the garment trade industries.

Despite these successes, Sanchez describes the discrimination in housing, schools, and employment Mexicans faced throughout Los Angeles. In response, Mexicans asserted the validity of their culture through numerous means. Though white reformers pressured for Americanization, Mexican culture thrived in many Mexican schools supported by the Mexican Consulate, numerous stores and restaurants, Mexican movies, dance clubs, music stores, and Spanish-language newspapers. The attraction of Los Angeles' mainstream popular culture, however, created conflicts between traditional-minded parents and their children who wanted to "be-bop" and dress like the stars (including Mexicans Ramon Navarro and Lupe Velez) in the latest hit movies.

Corona also demonstrates the complexity of inter-ethnic relations. In recalling his work for the CIO in the 1930s, Corona provides insights into Los Angeles' industrial growth. Particularly interesting is his account of organizing waste-industry workers. This industry, founded by Jewish refugees from Russia, primarily employed Russian and Mexican women in iron, metal, paper, rubber, glass, and rag recycling. In the plant Corona recalled watching "Russian women wearing beautiful kerchiefs on their heads and beautiful blouses and skirts" working beside Mexican women and Russian and Mexican men.

Labor unions hired female recruiters to organize the many women working in manufacturing. While working for El Congreso, which helped the CIO organize Mexicans, Corona associated with Luisa Moreno and Josefina Fierro, both of whom were effective recruiters. Corona particularly recalled Fierro's forceful personality. After a male

unionist accused her of dressing too provocatively she told Corona that her critic "had a peter that big"--indicating less than an inch with her fingers--"and what he does have, he can't get it into a women 'cause his gut sticks out in front of him" (122).

Corona volunteered for service in World War II hoping for an aviation assignment. But Army officials rejected his application for aviation training and labeled him "potentially subversive" because of his involvement with the CIO. Corona never fought in combat and he expresses his bitterness about having remained a lowly "buck private" due to red-baiting. The fact that he had never become a member of the Communist Party (the reader is left to speculate about why) seems to have made the blacklisting even more painful.

Corona's account provides fewer details of working-class Mexican-American life after he moved to the Bay Area and became involved in a series of political groups, notably the Asociacion Nacional Mexico-Americana, the Mexican American Political Association, and the Viva Kennedy and Viva Johnson campaigns of the 1960s.

It was in the Bay Area that he encountered Fred Ross who helped form the Community Service Organization (CSO) around San Jose. Corona criticizes Ross for having raised the specter of the red scare in order to benefit the CSO. Ross cunningly solicited donations by arguing that the CSO's success in organizing Mexicans would help keep the communists from establishing a presence in the community. Ross's denigration of the CP did not sit well with Corona who respected the party's many efforts on behalf of American workers.

Corona also became temporarily associated with Cesar Chavez and he supported the United Farm Workers union during the 1960s. However, Corona disagreed with Chavez's demand that the INS crack down on illegal immigrants, because growers used them as strikebreakers. Corona also argued that growers wishing for greater control

over their agricultural work force preferred to employ braceros instead of illegals. Growers used the contracts they signed with the braceros to tie the workers to specific farms. Illegal immigrants, lacking any binding agreements, had no compunction about abandoning a grower for a higher paying job elsewhere.

The final portion of Corona's account describes his views of the Chicano movement. He criticizes Chicano activists for their ethnic nationalism and their rejection of class alliances. He compares the 1960s Chicano student activists to the labor movement of the 1930s, arguing that the Chicanos had little understanding of the economic realities that resulted in the exploitation of the working class. He also criticizes the Chicano political strategist Jose' Angel Gutierrez for not understanding the need to reach out beyond the Chicano community for votes. However Corona respected Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales's ability to inculcate ethnic pride among Mexican American college students.

Corona's critical views of the Chicano movement underscore how complex social protest had become by the 1960s. Chicanos were not just questioning economic inequality but also the desirability of cultural assimilation as well. Mexican American college youth, quite logically, no longer viewed unionization as the only goal. Rather, as college students they criticized racism in college recruitment and the lack of courses on the Mexican American experience. Corona articulates some of the tensions that existed within the Chicano community in the late-1960s, conflicts which historians have as yet failed to analyze.

Corona's account is valuable as an example of the political impact of multiculturalism. Corona grew up speaking Spanish and English and seems to have had few problems adjusting to mainstream society. Precisely because of his comfort in both the Mexican and Anglo societies he became an effective union organizer. His multiculturalism began very early and shaped his political views

throughout his life. For example, the 1930s Corona read Jack London's account of the life of Joe Rivers, a Mexican campesino who joined Pancho Villa's forces in the Mexican Revolution after his wife was raped and killed by federal troops. During the war, he became a prizefighter in El Paso and donated his winnings to the revolution. Corona remembered that Rivers delivered ice to his family after retiring from boxing. The strong impression London's story had on Corona suggests how political activism often springs from the interaction of ethnicities and cultures in the United States.

Unfortunately, the account's portrayal of Corona's success as an organizer overshadows almost all other aspects of his life. Perhaps the book's relative silence on such personal matters reflects the collaborators' effort to produce an "oppositional history." Because they believe the account must serve that role, there is little room to explore cultural issues that do not directly relate to discrimination, unionization, community organizing, and politics.

Despite this shortcoming, Corona's history is valuable because it represents a first-hand account of many important historical developments that directly affected the Mexican American community. Sanchez's *Becoming Mexican American* is similarly valuable for its wide-ranging approach. Sanchez's study is the most wide-ranging history of an urban Mexican American community now available. He succeeds in synthesizing an impressive amount of secondary material and fills out the history with numerous facts culled from primary sources. Sanchez skillfully compares the Mexican-American experience with the current literature in the fields of American social and ethnic history. On occasion Sanchez offers new insights. For example, he notes that Los Angeles Chicano gangs originated partly from youth clubs formed by Protestant reformers seeking to inculcate leadership among Mexican Americans. Sometimes he promises more than he can deliver. For

example, though he suggests he will discuss the impact of the repatriation on those who remained behind he never accomplishes that goal.

When considered together, these books interact in interesting ways. While Sanchez asserts that Mexican-American activism in the 1930s resulted from the second generation's efforts to "integrate themselves into American society," Corona's account suggests that rather than struggling to gain acceptance from the mainstream, his political awareness and success as an activist grew out of his comfort with his Mexican American identity, the result of having grown up in a multiethnic society. His friendships with white organizers and his reading of works by white authors, rather than producing a desire to assimilate, helped motivate his efforts to ensure that all workers were treated fairly and equitably.

These books make a large contribution to the history of Mexican American labor and political groups, popular culture, women, entrepreneurship, and the influences that flowed in both directions across the southwestern international border. Because both books are multifaceted accounts of Mexican American history each raises important questions about ethnic identity in American history in general.

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