

Borderlands History Interview Project Presents Dr. Ernesto Chávez

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The Borderlands History Interview Project (BHIP) will showcase the voices of respected historians in our field to discuss their current projects and views on the future of borderlands history. We're excited about this new venture and look forward to your comments!

While at the 2015 American Historical Association conference in New York City earlier this month, I was able to sit down with Dr. Ernesto Chávez, Associate Professor at the University of Texas, El Paso, to discuss his latest project and his take on borderlands history. He graciously accepted to be the first interviewee in our BHIP series, highlighting scholars who are changing and challenging our field. We nestled into the Hilton hotel conference room chairs, and trying not to disturb the other historians gathered charging their phones and frantically answering emails, we began our interview about his life, his new project, and the history and future of borderlands.

Dr. Ernesto Chávez has deep roots in the border. Chávez was born in Los Angeles, California, but his family was originally from Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua one of the largest cities on the U.S.-Mexico line. He is the youngest of five brothers and made El Paso his home after graduating with a PhD in History from UCLA and accepting a teaching post at UTEP in 1994. He has written two books and several articles during his tenure there.



His
first
book,
Mi
Raza

(<https://borderlandshistory.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/ec.jpg>)

Dr. Ernesto Chávez, 2014

Image: Christopher A. Velasco

Primero (My People First!): Nationalism, Identity, and Insurgency in the Chicano Movement in Los Angeles, 1966-1978 (2002), chronicles the development of the movement through various organizations

with a sound critique of essentialist ideas about nationalism that governed large parts of the movement. Chávez's second book, an analysis of the war that stripped Mexico of almost half of its territory, *The U.S. War with Mexico: A Brief History with Documents* (2007), discusses this generally misunderstood aggression. He highlights the significance of the racist discourse that helped foment support for the war against Mexico and includes fascinating documents by noteworthy historical figures like South Carolina Senator John C. Calhoun, Walt Whitman, and Frederick Douglass.

Currently, he is at the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center as the Institute of American Cultures Chicano Studies Research Center visiting researcher and is steadfastly completing a third manuscript on Ramon Novarro. Mexican-born Novarro lived a complex life as a gay, Catholic, American silent film star and, as Chávez notes, Novarro straddled metaphorical as well as geopolitical borderlands.

We discussed the ways in which this project exemplifies new directions in borderlands history that focus on the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Moving beyond triumphalist notions that uncritically celebrate borderlands cultures, Novarro's story complicates the ways we understand the lives of the subjects we study. Chávez contends that Novarro's identity was deeply linked to his sexuality, his religion, and his career as a Mexican actor in America although some aspects of his life served to divert attention to or quell fears about others. While Novarro's story ends tragically at the hands of a Hollywood hustler, Chávez seeks to recover his life for Chicano/a and borderlands history and underscores how Novarro negotiated and navigated his complex identities.

When Chávez linked Novarro's life to Chicano/a studies, I happily asked him about the place of Chicano/a (and by extension Latino/a) studies in borderlands historiography and the resurrection of his paper "Is Aztlán in the Borderlands?" Given that Chicano/a scholars have written about the U.S.-Mexico border for decades, Chavez ponders the omission of many of these seminal texts from borderlands courses and book lists. In order for the field to engage critical questions on race, gender, class, and sexuality it must include works from those who not only write about, but also from a borderlands perspective. Much like the history of Novarro's life, Chavez affirms that incorporating Chicano/a texts as part of borderlands historiography helps us gain greater insights into the complexities of life en la frontera.

We spoke on many other subjects, and I always cherish any opportunity to participate in conversations about education, knowledge, and the significance of history with my mentor. Chávez is direct, thoughtful, and carries a great affection and warmth for students who work hard and are dedicated to perfecting their craft. On behalf of the entire staff at the Borderlands History Blog, I congratulated Dr. Chávez for receiving the 2014 American Historical Association Individual Equity Award for his mentorship of a new generation of Chicano/a and Latino/a doctoral students. With much humility Chávez admitted that in the end his greatest reward was to see his students thrive within the academy and to continue to create new knowledge.

To listen to the full interview:

<https://soundcloud.com/borderlandshistory/dr-ernesto-chavez-interview> (<https://soundcloud.com/borderlandshistory/dr-ernesto-chavez-interview>)

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