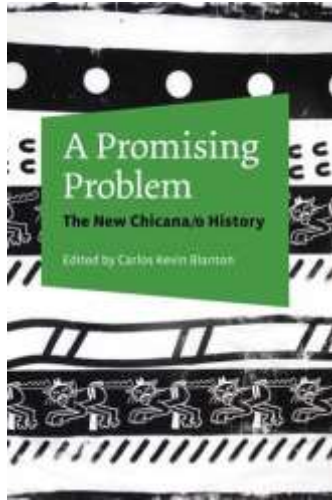


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Book Review

"A Promising Problem: The New Chicano/a History," edited by Carlos Kevin Blanton



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If the 50-year-old field of Chicano studies is known for anything outside the university, it would be for the idea of *Aztlán* — a name for the Hispano homeland in the U.S. Southwest derived from the Aztecs' mythical origin in what is now the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Like the African diaspora or the Jewish diaspora, it's a term used to describe displaced people's cultural bonds and ethnic unity. It's why the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center uses *Aztlán* as the name for its longstanding research journal.

Yet outside Chicano studies, many anti-immigrant nativists have become erroneously convinced that *Aztlán* is a code word for anti-American and anti-Anglo plans for Chicano cultural domination. Deeply influenced by the political power of these pressure groups, in 2010 the state of Arizona effectively outlawed the teaching of Chicano studies in public schools at the K-12 level through the creation of new laws outlawing ethnic studies programs and targeted toward Chicano students.

But even inside the discipline, many academics believe Chicano studies must look beyond its past association with cultural nationalism and isolated ethnographies of Hispanics in the U.S. Southwest to take up research projects that look at how globalization, gender, and interracial and inter-ethnic conflicts and cooperation affect

the development of Chicano communities, which are increasingly located in the American Deep South. It's time "to move beyond Aztlán," in the words of one Chicano studies scholar included in the new anthology *A Promising Problem: The New Chicano/a History*.

By 2011, seven of the 10 U.S. counties with the fastest Latino growth rate — over 75 percent annually — were in the South. In a fascinating essay, "Chicano/a History as Southern History: Race, Place and the U.S. South," Perla Guerrero examines how Mexican immigrants in Arkansas navigate ethnicity, language, discrimination, and the politics of poultry processing labor. Interestingly, most of these newly arrived Latinos in the South did not come directly from Mexico, but came to Arkansas for work opportunities after years of living in recession-prone California.

Guerrero's fieldwork, to be spelled out in a forthcoming book project, tentatively titled *Nuevo South: Latinas/os, Asians and the Remaking of Place*, examines, "What happens when Latinas/os make lives in a region where African Americans toiled for centuries, where systems of oppression were constructed to deal with and exploit them, and where black people fought back through rebellions, marches and cultural production?"

In "Moving Beyond Aztlán," Lilia Fernández argues that it's not just our present moment but a whole century of Chicano and Mexican-American life in the Midwest that has been sidelined by a previous generation of Chicano studies researchers. As early as the 1970s, Chicago had nearly as many Spanish-speaking immigrant families as Los Angeles. But Fernández dryly notes that save for the lone work of one PhD candidate in 1970, there were no academic historical studies of the city's vast and politically influential Mexican community until 2000.

Fernández also cites the need for researchers to examine how Chicanos relate to other Latinos, African-Americans, and Anglos in their community, instead of the ethnic monolith in which they are often framed by academics. Demographics change quickly, she advises, noting the 2000 creation of a Central American Studies program at California State University campus in Los Angeles.

If this new direction in Chicano studies has a figurehead, it would be Carlos Kevin Blanton, this anthology's editor. A historian at Texas A&M University, Blanton has won several awards and accolades for his books' deep research, looking through archival accounts in the 19th and early 20th centuries to reconstruct the lives of early Mexican-American leaders who led the fight for voting rights and bilingual education at a time of open hostility and widespread violence against Chicanos. Last year, he released *George I. Sánchez: The Long Fight for Mexican American Integration* (Yale University Press), a biography of the lawyer, professor, and civil-rights activist who overcame an

oppressed childhood in the mining camps and barrios in Arizona and New Mexico to become president of the League of United Latin American Citizens, where he oversaw several key civil rights lawsuits.

Like so many others in this anthology, Blanton is proud of the current crop of Chicano historians who have integrated their profession sufficiently to serve as presidents of major historical associations and editors of influential history journals. But unlike other disciplines, Chicano studies scholars will, for the foreseeable future, be linked to activism due to the anti-immigrant prejudice against their work. Between mass deportations, violent political rhetoric, and the deployment of U.S. troops along the border, Chicano studies has a political relevance in the larger culture, even where it's not welcome. "This problematic rise in hostility toward Latina/o immigrant and Chicana/os in the United States transcends class status and ideology," Blanton writes. "It forms the social context for the new Chicana/o history of this century."

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