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# *Becoming Mexican American*

## *An Empowering Exemplar of Social and Cultural History*

Anthony Macías

I am honored to evaluate George Sánchez's groundbreaking, meticulously researched monograph *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900–1945*.<sup>1</sup> No matter how many years pass, I will always consider myself George's grateful student, just as I will always be a humble student of history. Accordingly, this essay mixes the personal and professional as it illustrates the methodological, theoretical, and historiographical impact of *Becoming Mexican American* on my own research and on Chicana/Chicano history, as well as the importance of Sánchez's other scholarship and his mentorship.

### **Methodology**

My book *Mexican American Mojo*, like Sánchez's, employs the methods of social history, drawing from diverse sources including government reports, census data, archival documents, theses and dissertations, newspapers and periodicals, and oral histories.<sup>2</sup> Like Sánchez, I also charted the changing demographics of the city's neighborhoods, recreating a social and cultural urban geography. Of course, Sánchez's book, with its ten maps, fifteen tables, and an appendix, is rather social scientific, with a much wider data set. As historian Philip Ethington notes, "Sánchez's analysis of identity formation . . . is built on large samples of quantifiable data."<sup>3</sup> In other words, Sánchez's quantitative findings are a means to his

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qualitative ends, with a metropolitan macro-buttruss supporting keen insights into the nuanced realities of historical actors, the very people whom so many contemporaneous employers, nativists, police officers, and politicians considered little more than exploitable manual laborers or intractable social problems. In this regard, rather than being an aloof number cruncher, Sánchez, inspired by the Greek muse Clio, is an astute practitioner of social history, attuned to “the culture concept.”<sup>4</sup> His bona fides follow in the history-from-below tradition that seeks to “rescue” the lives of ordinary working-class folks, as E. P. Thompson said, “from the enormous condescension of posterity.”<sup>5</sup>

Ethington observes that Sánchez’s in-depth illustration of “community development” conveys “the heterogeneity and fragmentation of immigrant ethnic neighborhoods,” yet “his method is transnational”; the author, he writes, “speaks most loudly” in “the voice of the social historian.”<sup>6</sup> According to George Lipsitz, “Sanchez’s book . . . revealed how the history of the Mexican working class in Los Angeles was also the history of US capital disrupting and transforming the social and spatial organization of Mexican society. It showed how . . . these very disruptions . . . prepared emigrants for modernity and change.”<sup>7</sup> Lipsitz praises the book’s “methodological innovations, a deft blend of social history and critical cultural studies theory,” and remarks: “Consistent with the best traditions of social history, Sanchez mines a rich array of primary sources from a broad range of institutional archives.”<sup>8</sup>

As Ethington states, “Sánchez the cultural historian” claims that “Chicano culture is, like all cultures, constantly in the process of reinvention.” Sánchez’s book makes the case that “Chicanos are and have been both American and Mexican, native and foreign, an ethnic group and a race . . . and traditional and modern. Their lived experience,” Ethington argues, “forces a reinterpretation of all such categories in American cultural history.”<sup>9</sup> Lipsitz writes: “At a time when much previous scholarship in ethnic studies revolved around binary oppositions between domination and resistance, exclusion and inclusion, assimilation and autonomy, visibility and invisibility, *Becoming Mexican American* advanced a dialogic and dialectical argument about identity,” suggesting that “being unable to either assimilate or separate” gave Mexican Americans a unique “optic on power,” which enabled them to “transform the fetters that contained them into weapons of emancipation and liberation.”<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, in the realm of culture, Sánchez utilizes cultural-historian methods and asks cultural-historian research questions. As a result, for example, he documents the cultural adaptations of the Los Angeles Mexican immigrant community during the ultramodern 1920s, revealing a Mexican market for mass-media consumer products; a downtown district of theaters and nightclubs; a Spanish-language music industry of Mexican record-label owners, disc jockeys, and impresarios; and a transformation, via innovation and commercialization, of “traditional” Mexican music. In addition, he chronicles not only how Anglo city

officials harassed Mexican disc jockeys but also how immigrant entrepreneurs created a wide range of business enterprises to serve the city's growing Mexican population.

Alma García says that Sánchez, “[who] does not view culture as static or monolithic but rather as dynamic, malleable, and emergent, capable of sustaining cultural contradictions and ambiguities . . . examines the formation of an ethnic culture and consciousness.” Yet García also states that Sánchez’s study “lacks an analysis of [Mexican immigrants’] ethnic self-identification,” that it “overlooks” this important “window into the community’s development within American society.”<sup>11</sup> By the same token, Edward Escobar criticizes the author because Sánchez “neglects the immigrants’ reactions” to “white reformers’ attempts to Americanize [them]” and “the Mexican consulate’s efforts to Mexicanize them.” In Escobar’s opinion, Sánchez “simply does not provide sufficient evidence to prove his point” that they developed “an American *ethnic* identity rather than a pure American or Mexican identity.”<sup>12</sup> In addition, Ricardo Romo challenges Sánchez’s argument that the “cultural identity and sense of self of the Mexican American second generation was already shaped before the war,” given the author’s earlier statement that 1930s ethnic Mexican Angelenos “became ambivalent Americans, full of contradictory feelings about their place in American society.”<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, regarding methodology, Theodore Hamerow reasons, “the key to the writing of good history is not method, but talent . . . not the material but the historian using the material”; the ideal historian is “an imaginative, perceptive scholar” “creating a portrait of the human experience.”<sup>14</sup> George Sánchez meets such criteria in full measure, and as Warren Susman clarifies, “The task is never to gather facts or develop intellectual structures alone. For history, like the culture of which it is a part, is something lived, something used.”<sup>15</sup>

## Theory

Sánchez shows how, by 1945, Mexican Americans had developed a unique identity marked by cultural mixing, hybridity, and diversity rather than by a simple linear assimilation from Mexican to American culture; the Mexican “custom” of “cultural blending and creation” incorporated “adaptations” from African Americans and others in multicultural Los Angeles.<sup>16</sup> As Sánchez argues, “The emphasis in Chicano history on bipolar models that have stressed either cultural continuity or gradual acculturation has short-circuited a full exploration of the complex process of cultural adaptation.”<sup>17</sup> Specifically, “any notion that individuals have occupied one undifferentiated cultural position . . . has been abandoned in favor of the possibility of multiple identities and contradictory positions.”<sup>18</sup> In Sánchez’s explication, Mexican American culture is neither “a way station on the inevitable path toward assimilation” nor a “U-turn” heading back to a pure Mexi-

can identity.<sup>19</sup> In this case, Sánchez's supple theoretical model of fluid ethnicity and collective cultural identity, informed by cultural anthropology and cultural studies, drives his narrative of immigration, naturalization, and Americanization; of ambivalence, accommodation, experimentation, resistance, and opposition politics. Indeed, Sánchez declares, "Mexican migrants . . . have been among the first to experience . . . the 'postmodern condition.'"<sup>20</sup>

In García's view, *Becoming Mexican American* "moves beyond the limitations imposed by the theoretical dichotomy of tradition and modernity."<sup>21</sup> Likewise, Ethington submits, Sánchez "ushers the long-standing modernist paradigm . . . into a 'borderlands' framework"; therefore, his book is informed by the postmodern paradigm, which privileges "space over time, irreducible difference, discontinuous fragmentation, decentering, and deconstruction."<sup>22</sup> Refugio Rochín and Dennis Valdés relate how Chicana/o historians "turned to postmodernism to overcome the unitary, dominant, male voice in modernist approaches, and to permit space for the 'other.'" According to Rochín and Valdés, "Postmodernism offers a valuable framework for understanding contradictions, complexity, and hybridity," but it does not adequately "address a critical dilemma among Chicana/o studies scholars"—the "linking of academia and activism beyond the written text"; this omission, they argue, is due to the "weakness . . . inherent in accepting imported models."<sup>23</sup> Carlos Kevin Blanton locates Sánchez's book within a "transitional period" between the foundational nationalist "'Them-versus-Us' mentality," or "traditional perspective," and the "new Chicana/o history." By the mid-1990s, "postmodernism's influence" was visible in "social history's search for the agency of the inarticulate" and in "cultural history's unmasking of assumed categories and identities as well as its emphasis on power and the powerful."<sup>24</sup> As Blanton concludes, "many Chicana/o scholars have, self-consciously or not, embraced the intellectual tenets of postmodernity," which "has moved them interpretively away from the traditional to the new."<sup>25</sup>

Stephen Pitti notes that "using analytical tools taken from social history and cultural studies," Sánchez "illustrates that ethnic identities are never 'fixed.'"<sup>26</sup> One of Sánchez's key interventions, Lipsitz writes, "was to make the evidence in the archives sing in a different key through his skilled use of emerging currents in interpretive ethnography, cultural geography, sociology, literary theory, and cultural studies." Thus "Sanchez refused to separate empirical research from cultural theory and instead embraced the generative possibilities of blending archival investigation with cultural critique."<sup>27</sup> For instance, to explain his contention that people are continually in the process of "becoming," Sánchez quotes Stuart Hall, who theorized: "Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. . . . [I]dentities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past."<sup>28</sup> Elaborating on the theoretical underpinnings of his book, Sánchez insists that ethnicity "was not a

fixed set of customs surviving from life in Mexico, but rather a collective identity that emerged from daily experience in the United States."<sup>29</sup> Traditionally, observes Theodore Hamerow, most historians share an outlier's "indifference to formal theory," but heeding theoretical insights helps Sánchez unite "the creative and the analytical elements in the study of history."<sup>30</sup>

### Historiography

Within US history, Sánchez diverges from earlier analyses of European immigrants being "uprooted," in Oscar Handlin's words, or "transplanted," in John Bodnar's.<sup>31</sup> Instead, Sánchez posits a more nuanced, flexible paradigm that pays attention to the complicated workings of culture. As Ethington writes, Sánchez "exhibits an alternative to both the Handlin 'uprooted' model and the newer 'transplanted networks' model" by shifting the focus from modern Chicago to postmodern Los Angeles, a "borderlands 'edge' city."<sup>32</sup> The book therefore also addresses the concerns of urban history, documenting "the transformation of Los Angeles from a pueblo to a metropolis, with white newcomers from the Midwest and East joining Mexican immigrants to remake the city in their respective images."<sup>33</sup> It "adds a new dimension to the portrait" of a fragmented, sprawling landscape, of what has been portrayed as a circus without a tent and as suburbs in search of a city.<sup>34</sup> Zaragosa Vargas admires Sánchez for "charting" the "aspirations" and "adaptive strategies" of "Mexican and Mexican American men and women" "in the Los Angeles urban environment," and for bringing to life "the multifaceted nature of 1920s Mexican Los Angeles," which "was a richly diverse composite" distinguished by "internal differentiation."<sup>35</sup> Pitti similarly points out that in reinterpreting

many of the important changes Los Angeles, the largest Mexican *colonia* outside of Mexico City by 1930, witnessed during the first half of the twentieth century . . . Sánchez pays constant attention to how the diversity of residence, generation, gender, and class among Mexican Americans made for conflict within the community.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to immigration and urban history, Sánchez's book, which won the Western History Association prize and the Pacific Coast Branch award of the American Historical Association, also engages with Western history. Rodolfo Acuña critically explains: "In the field of history the norm is set by prominent members of the American Historical Association and the network of professional organizations and journals that delineate what is accepted knowledge."<sup>37</sup> At the same time, Acuña also states, "Knowledge of the other must become part of the equation that describes society," and he implies that Chicano and Chicana historians can help counteract the "long-standing American reluctance to under-

stand other cultures."<sup>38</sup> Acuña contends that although "many scholars try to be objective . . . they are prisoners of their profession and culture who are tightly controlled by a system of rewards and punishment."<sup>39</sup> While Acuña does not specifically refer to Sánchez's research, to me the prizes awarded to *Becoming Mexican American* do not signal the conformist stamp of approval bestowed upon a well-intentioned historian beholden to the university system of tenure and promotion. Rather, such accolades reflect academic peers respecting scholarship that produced so much new knowledge about a traditionally maligned racial other that it successfully added ethnic Mexicans as a crucial part of the equation that describes twentieth-century US society and post-Turnerian new Western history.

In so doing, *Becoming Mexican American* also utilizes the tools of labor history, since Sánchez traces how "the racially motivated exclusion of Chicanos . . . forced the community to fight back, to develop an oppositional class consciousness championing distributive justice for all rooted in claims about equality, cooperation, and dignity."<sup>40</sup> Just as Douglas Monroy argues that Mexican immigrants in southern California initially created a *Mexico de afuera* politics, but eventually organized in solidarity with workers and activists of all nationalities for the US labor movement, Sánchez maintains that Mexican immigrants' ethnic politics, whether reactionary or radical, were forged by increasing interactions with the dominant Anglo American culture.<sup>41</sup> In Ethington's view, the book "is a history of ethnic identity formation within a history of class formation."<sup>42</sup> Similarly, according to García, "Sánchez shows how the Los Angeles community of working-class Mexican immigrants . . . developed class-specific cultural survival strategies," and he "skillfully" focuses "on their working-class labor activism, highlighting the major contributions of women labor activists."<sup>43</sup> Pitti also comments that Sánchez underscores how "a vanguard of women workers entered trade unionism," while Vargas concludes, "This text will have a wide audience among historians of labor."<sup>44</sup>

Yet beyond its contributions to immigration, urban, Western, or labor history, Sánchez's book exemplifies the best practices of social and cultural history. As Lipsitz asserts, "Sánchez's discovery of alternative archives" enabled him to show that "Chicanos in Los Angeles were not merely passive victims of capitalism and white supremacy but also active creators of a vibrant social world." In Lipsitz's estimation, "The visible and invisible work that the book has done . . . helps us see how history happens and why culture counts."<sup>45</sup> The postmodern theoretical impact on Chicana/o studies and Chicana/o history was part of a broader cultural turn spurred by 1980s research and writing by Chicana feminists, who critiqued exclusionary aspects of Chicano nationalist ideology and attendant limitations in Chicano Movement-era scholarship, as well as by a fresh focus on popular cultural forms. For Lipsitz, culture counts, as he proved with his classic essays "Cruising around the Historical Bloc: Postmodernism and Popular Music

in East Los Angeles” and “Con Safos: Can Cultural Studies Read the Writing on the Wall?”<sup>46</sup> For me, cultural history provides a flexible paradigm to fruitfully analyze Chicana/o culture, racial formation, ethnic identity, and the uses, abuses, and contestations of power. To my mind, cultural history topics, methods, and theories also allow scholars to effectively enter what José Cuello describes as the long-simmering “debate concerning how, and on what terms, Chicana/o history should relate to the mainstream historiography of the United States.”<sup>47</sup>

For example, in discussion with Sánchez’s book chapter “The Rise of the Second Generation” and his article “Reading Reginald Denny,” I sought in my book to situate the Mexican American Generation, or what has been named the GI Generation, squarely within the United States of America’s Greatest Generation, those who survived the Great Depression and won World War II.<sup>48</sup> As Elizabeth Escobedo notes, documentary filmmaker Ken Burns failed to do this, rendering Mexican Americans, and their patriotic service, invisible.<sup>49</sup> The Mexican American Generation has also been dubbed the Pachuco Generation because of the iconographic import of *pachucos* and *pachucas*, who were inspired by the African American-created zoot suit. Sánchez claims that these zoot suiters were emblematic of working-class Mexican American Angelenos’ increasing estrangement “from a society unable to provide adequate jobs or education.” Indeed, as he argues, Mexican migrants and their children expressed an “ambivalent Americanism” within the context of intense racial discrimination and a lack of significant upward economic mobility.<sup>50</sup>

Vicki Ruiz has revealed the cultural shifts created by Chicana flappers and other second-generation Mexican American women spellbound by the advertising propaganda of Max Factor cosmetics and by the Hollywood movie industry, with its cult of personality celebrity culture. Although these women subverted stereotypes of passive, subservient *Mexicanas*, their adoption of new cultural forms altered, but did not undermine, their Mexican identity.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Monroy traces the changing gender roles, family relations, and cultural syncretism among Mexican Americans as part of a historical trajectory in which they began to affirm their rights as citizens and protest the discrimination of being treated like Mexicans: subject to vigilante violence, police brutality, and forced repatriation. He also analyzes the Americanizing effect of popular culture, showing how second-generation Mexican Americans succumbed to the allure of film and fashion, and detailing their repulsion-attraction response to US society, which promised them exciting new possibilities amid segregation, low wages, and inferior education.<sup>52</sup>

According to Sánchez, “To be Chicano, in effect, is to be betwixt and between”; included in some arenas yet excluded from others.<sup>53</sup> Their class instability illustrates that despite their desire for the good life and their considerable agency, the Mexican Americans of the war years remained structurally constrained by



what the larger society would and would not allow. For instance, Sánchez opens his final chapter with an anecdote about a municipal judge, Arthur S. Guerin, dismissing all charges against a group of Mexican American boys whom the police in Venice Beach had harassed, shoved, and ridiculed in May 1943, during a melee one month before the so-called Zoot Suit Riots. One of these young men, Alfred Barela, wrote the conservative, white-collar Mexican American judge “an angry, but thoughtful letter,” in which he defiantly declared,

I want to be treated like everybody else. We're tired of being pushed around. We're tired of being told we can't go to this show or that dance hall because we're Mexican or that we better not be seen on the beach front, or that we can't wear draped pants or have our hair cut the way we want to. . . . My people work hard . . . and they should have justice.<sup>54</sup>

Of the Mexican Americans who came of age in the zoot-suited war years, Beatrice Griffith commented, “They are Americans, but to the fifth generation they are known as ‘Mexicans,’ if their skin is dark or they bear a Spanish name.” As a result, many among them reported, “We're Americans for the draft, but Mexicans for getting jobs.”<sup>55</sup>

During World War II, as Sánchez and others have demonstrated, Mexican Americans countered rejection, intimidation, and civil rights violations while fighting for social, economic, and political advancement. My research indicates that ducktailed *pachucos* and pompadoured *pachucas*, with their unique language, sharp threads, and commanding presence, demanded respect on beachside boardwalks, downtown boulevards, and streetcar seats. Their in-your-face fashions claimed urban public space and announced that Mexican Americans would no longer remain subservient or marginal, providing historical evidence for a versatile, improvisational Chicana/o expressive culture. Thus, Sánchez's historically specific case study paved the way for future research by shedding a bright light on interrelated topics important to Chicano/Chicana studies.

As Ethington states, *Becoming Mexican American* “resists . . . directly defining the features of the Mexican American culture,” yet “this powerful book . . . accomplishes too much to afford the space or time for the substantive critique of cultural contents.”<sup>56</sup> Therefore, it remained for subsequent scholars to try to define, or at least interpret, the features and functions of the Angeleno Mexican American culture that, Sánchez posits, first found its voice during the throes of the Great Depression. Toward that end, in my dissertation-turned-first-book, I documented Chicana/o participation in jazz, zoot suit culture, rhythm and blues, rock and roll, and Latin music, arguing that Mexican Americans, alongside African Americans, not only repudiated second-class citizenship but also transformed metropolitan Los Angeles. I revealed the links between a vibrant Chicana/o expressive culture and postwar social and geographic mobility, showing how Mexican Americans

challenged their own segregation while producing hip, cool urban styles, and how many of them moved into blue-collar suburbs east of East Los Angeles.

Likewise, regarding the study of Latinas/os and their role in the United States, I hope to produce new knowledge with my current research project, "Chican@ Americana: National Character and Popular Culture," which analyzes images of and performances by Chicanos and Chicanas in US cinema, television, and theater, contextualizing biographical sketches vis-à-vis the twentieth-century multicultural manifestations of Edmund Morgan's "American paradox."<sup>57</sup> Ethnic studies scholarship scrutinizes flaws in the foundational national axiom that "all men are created equal"—the logic of innate racial superiority and inherent inferiority—and critically reevaluates other signifiers of Americanness, such as the march of Manifest Destiny progress, civilization, and capitalist industrial development across a virgin land of retreating Western frontiers. I am putting Chicano/Chicana studies in dialogue with the national character literature on the core values of a common US culture, the demands of African Americans for true democracy, the racial management of foreign immigrants, and the narrative of ever-expanding personal freedoms becoming more available to an increasing number of citizens. To redefine Americana by placing Chicanos and Chicanas at the center of the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, I am trying, as Sánchez did in a collection on Latinos remaking America, "to accord the Latino condition its rightful prominence in U.S. history," and I am arguing, as Ruiz did in an article on *nuestra América*, that "our America is American history."<sup>58</sup>

James Diego Vigil writes that *Becoming Mexican American* "compares favorably" with similar "works charting the saga of American ethnic groups and their struggle to become integrated into the fabric of the United States."<sup>59</sup> As Frances Aparicio argues regarding the multimedia *Americanos* project, an effort that "intends to insert Latinos into the U.S. social imaginary as agents and contributors to 'American' society" can reveal "unresolved tensions . . . between the integrationist urge and the reaffirmation of difference," but its "decolonizing potential" will be "limited" if it downplays "the structural, political, educational, and cultural forms of racism that Latinos face" or decontextualizes "the historical tradition of . . . resistance."<sup>60</sup> *Becoming Mexican American* does not imply that Mexican migrants are similar to European immigrants; nevertheless, can their respective experiences be productively compared and contrasted by Chicana/o historians? For example, second- and third-generation Jews' comparatively rapid upward mobility led to the Ku Klux Klan targeting them, to restrictive housing covenants and WASP establishments and social clubs excluding them, and to Ivy League university admissions quotas restricting them. While Cherríe Moraga warned against different groups ranking oppression, the comparison remains instructive: ethnic Mexicans suffered from lynchings; disenfranchisement; extreme discrimination in housing, schooling, and employment; police criminalization, harassment, and brutality; and mass deportations. In an article

of mine, "Multicultural Music, Jews, and American Culture: The Life and Times of William Phillips," I analyze the positions of Jews as producers, circulators, facilitators, and consumers of popular music, examining how they emerged from a heterogeneous citizenry to overcome social exclusion and defamation while Midwestern migrants and longtime Anglo residents imposed their civic vision and ideological grip upon Los Angeles via realpolitik redbaiting, redlining, and racialized investments in business development as well as in whiteness. I conclude that by the 1960s, US Jews had clearly made their mark on the nation's society through a stubborn, satirical, and successful ethnic culture that still maintained difference.<sup>61</sup>

There I quote Sánchez's article "What's Good for Boyle Heights is Good for the Jews: Creating Multiracialism on the Eastside during the 1950s"; Sánchez and I are definitely engaged in multiple conversations.<sup>62</sup> A 2016 essay by historian Luis Alvarez, which cites both my article and Sánchez's, maps Eastside imaginaries along relational and transnational circuits of Chicana/o politics, thus placing the Jewish-Chicana/o connection in an even wider historiographical context.<sup>63</sup> In Alvarez's history cross-cultural currents flow, in Sánchez's book the Mexican American Generation members' "dual identity" develops, and in my monograph their version of African Americans' Du Boisian "double consciousness" manifests. These relationships between Chicanas/Chicanos and the descendants of formerly marginalized European immigrants and formerly enslaved Africans raise historiographic questions only partially answered by Mexican *mestizaje*, Brown Power ideology, and Chicana/o cultural-studies ontology, each of which affirms an ancient hemispheric indigeneity that persists in our current age of alleged colorblindness. Finally, in retrospect, it occurs to me that by focusing on Phillips in that "Multicultural Music" essay, I was also inspired by the way Sánchez deployed the life experiences of one representative historical actor, Zeferino Ramírez, as a narrative device to unfold the tale he tells in *Becoming Mexican American* and to wrap it up in the conclusion.

By beginning and ending his book with the story of Ramírez's life between 1927 and 1945, Sánchez bridges the Immigrant and the Mexican American generations. Yet within Chicana/o historiography, the political-generation model breaks down after the Chicano Movement generation, which was followed by what have been called post-Movement, Xicana/o, Chican@, Chicanx, Latina/o, or Latinx generations. As Alvarez states, since "cultural history is as much about continuity as it is discontinuity," scholars must "complicate the conventional periodization of Chicana/o history that emphasizes rupture between the Mexican American, Chicana/o, and post-Movimiento generations."<sup>64</sup> Sánchez's book operates within the political-generation framework, but he has been admonished for diminishing "the importance of the substantial Mexican-American political activity that occurred before the depression."<sup>65</sup> Another reviewer criticizes Sánchez

for neglecting “major influences from the nineteenth century,” which produced many “Mexican-American leaders and organizations [that] remained active well into the twentieth century.”<sup>66</sup> This “minor flaw” in *Becoming Mexican American* evokes Antonio Ríos-Bustamante’s question: What significant continuity was there between the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries?<sup>67</sup> The issue of cross-century continuities also brings to mind Sánchez’s analysis of Mexican Americans and education, which perhaps should have acknowledged the argument by Martha Menchaca and Richard Valencia that late nineteenth-century ideologies of white supremacy and Mexican inferiority structured the school segregation of Chicana and Chicano students deep into the twentieth century.<sup>68</sup> Nonetheless, Sánchez’s book fills more historiographical gaps than it ignores. For instance, it also presaged future scholarship on Chicana/o religious beliefs, inter-ethnic history, residential housing diversity, community internal differentiation, gendered labor relations, and popular music practices, making *Becoming Mexican American* as relevant today as ever.

Indeed, I have been teaching Sánchez’s work for years, and my undergraduate Chicana/o studies and ethnic studies majors and minors, many of whom were raised by immigrant parents, relate and compare the process of cultural adaptations and retentions detailed in *Becoming Mexican American* to their own personal experiences and family histories. Meanwhile, Sánchez’s former PhD students, including John Nieto-Phillips, Jaime Cárdenas, Miroslava Chávez-García, Omar Valerio Jiménez, Natalia Molina, John Mckiernan-González, Gabriela Arredondo, Jerry González, Priscilla Leiva, Gerardo Licón, Abigail Rosas, and Ana Elizabeth Rosas, have enriched the study of Mexican, Chicana/o, and Latina/o identity in the United States with their teaching at the undergraduate and graduate level and with their respective books, articles, and essays.

### Mentorship

As Steven Spielberg has said, “The delicate balance of mentoring someone is not creating them in your own image, but giving them the opportunity to create themselves.”<sup>69</sup> Accordingly, I would like to hereby publicly acknowledge and thank George Sánchez for all of the years of professional advice, guidance, and mentoring he has generously given. He recruited me to the PhD program in history at the University of California, Los Angeles, where, under his direction, I began research on the lives, careers, and philosophies of the Mexican American actor Anthony Quinn and the *Mexicana* actress Katy Jurado. He then helped me mature personally and intellectually at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, where he led rigorous, lively discussions among graduate students from the history department and the American Culture program in his seminars on twentieth-century US historiography and Latina/o historiography, and where he provided

patient preparation for my oral examination, timely tough love as I faltered during that process, close readings of my dissertation chapters, and of course, many letters of recommendation.

After I served as the graduate advisor/director of graduate studies for my department, I gained a renewed appreciation for Sánchez's leadership and contributions to building graduate programs at the University of Michigan and at the University of Southern California, his behind-the-scenes efforts recruiting and retaining undergraduate and graduate students and faculty of color, and his administrative work ensuring institutional affirmative action accountability in academia. I have personally benefited from caring, dedicated mentorship, not only by Sánchez but also by the other members of my dissertation committee, David Scobey, Frances Aparicio, and Charles McGovern, as well as by Cherríe Moraga and Lawrence Levine during my undergraduate years at the University of California, Berkeley. Along the way, other mentors have selflessly looked out for me, including Brenda Stevenson, Robin Kelley, Kristin Hass, Abel Valenzuela, Paul Lopez, Lionel Sesma, Anthony Ortega, Ken Wissoker, Raul Fernandez, Sherrie Tucker, Eric Porter, Devra Weber, V. P. Franklin, Joe Childers, and Carlos Cortés.

In like manner, I strive to assist students as a teacher, as an office-hours counselor and academic advisor, and as a chair and member of exam and dissertation committees in ethnic studies, history, sociology, English, critical dance studies, and religious studies. I have also enjoyed the privilege of serving as a faculty mentor to first-year Ph.D. students and their peer mentors in my university's graduate student mentorship program, facilitating the success of individuals in sociology, psychology, critical dance studies, music, history, education, English, religious studies, anthropology, mathematics, comparative literature, ethnic studies, and Hispanic studies. By reaching out and lending a helping hand to the next generation of scholars I honor George Sánchez, who apprenticed under Albert Camarillo and thereafter created a legacy of mentoring among his many protégés. The resulting informal network has encouraged us to talk shop and share work with supportive colleagues, while our advisor's professional precedent has established a tradition of kind and compassionate nurturing. Our continuation of his work is akin to the way jazz musicians pass on an each-one-teach-one ethos, or the way martial arts grandmasters mentor students, who refine the techniques and discover their personal, original styles, becoming masters and training students of their own.

## Conclusion

The conclusion to *Becoming Mexican American* reprises its themes of "acculturation and ethnicity," "cultural adaptation," "cultural change," and "cultural revival and re-creation" fueled by "the constant infusion of Mexican culture" into ethnically diverse barrios, where "American consumerism contributed to assimilation."

In this "new borderlands" or "middle ground," Mexican Americans served as "cultural bridges," yet they were "citizens . . . within a society that too often denied them equal opportunity."<sup>70</sup> Sánchez's denouement thus emphasizes the "cultural strategies" improvised within the struggle between structure and agency by people who "negotiated the most critical decisions regarding their cultural future, in spite of how and in which ways their options were delimited by socioeconomic realities."<sup>71</sup>

Like other scholars who have reviewed *Becoming Mexican American*, I agree that Sánchez's "broad and detailed account is riveting," "persuasively interpreted," and "full of surprises and insights."<sup>72</sup> Ethington calls the book "a masterful landmark."<sup>73</sup> Vargas characterizes it as "a fascinating and richly textured study," and Pitti describes this "engrossing, entertaining, and important study" as a "fascinating story."<sup>74</sup> In Escobar's opinion, this "spatial and chronological journey" is "ambitious," "bold and sweeping," and Sánchez "consistently provides thoughtful insights and provocative analysis."<sup>75</sup> As Oscar Martínez comments, "the author's findings are illuminating," and as Romo concedes, "Sánchez tells a compelling story" that is ultimately "engaging."<sup>76</sup> In the words of artist and writer Jose Antonio Burciaga, Sánchez is "a consummate scholar and masterful storyteller."<sup>77</sup>

The power of knowledge production in general, and the obligation of history in particular, can be found in satisfying what Hamerow describes as "the need felt by all of us to relate the isolated events of our private life to the common heritage, to the collective experience of the society of which we are a part."<sup>78</sup> I endeavor still to meet this need by showing how integral Chicana/o history is to redefining the collective US experience beyond a monolingual, monocultural common heritage. Whether self-identified as Chicanos/Chicanas or not, the progeny of Mexicans in the United States represent a distinctive culture for which the black-white racial order of the nation, like the categories in its constitutionally mandated decennial census, cannot account. Unlike European Americans, they are not, as David Roediger says of "white ethnics," an "in between people" racialized as "not yet," "not quite," or "off-white."<sup>79</sup> On the contrary, they have historically been considered nonwhite despite their technical legal status. Edward Telles and Vilma Ortiz, analyzing quantitative data from 1965 to 2000, find that "ethnic identification for Mexican Americans remains strong even into the fourth generation" and "that the experience of assimilation, where it occurred, was far slower than it was for European Americans," concluding that "Mexican Americans were still far from assimilated and definitely had not become accepted as white."<sup>80</sup> *Becoming Mexican American* has motivated me to investigate this process over time through the prism of popular culture.

In short, I am an interdisciplinary cultural historian and comparative ethnic studies scholar, fascinated by popular culture, whose body of work will always be indebted to and aspire to the exhaustive research, factual command, intellectual honesty, historical gravitas, and narrative ease of George Sánchez's

award-winning book *Becoming Mexican American*. As the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm believed, “It is not subject matter or scholarly viewpoint or research technique which produces enduring works of historical learning, but imaginativeness and creativity.”<sup>81</sup> To once more quote another influential George in my career—George Lipsitz—*Becoming Mexican American* “remembers people who have been forgotten” by “using the archives to give voice to our ancestors.” “Every time we return to it,” Lipsitz continues, “it is a different book due to the different currents coursing through it. . . . In responding to an author’s argument, readers create their own argument, and the best books create those conversations.” In this way, Lipsitz notes, “Books stay with us in life.”<sup>82</sup>

Fernand Braudel, cofounder of the *Annales* school of historiography, in the revised conclusion to his classic tome on the Mediterranean world, bemoaned the way “historical books age more quickly now than in the past. A moment passes and their vocabulary has become dated, the new ground they broke is familiar territory, and the explanations they offered are challenged.”<sup>83</sup> As David Greenberg elucidates, reviewing Richard Hofstadter’s *The American Political Tradition*, “Works of philosophy can last for millennia, novels for centuries. Works of history, if they’re really good, survive maybe a generation.”<sup>84</sup> Representing the generational cohort whom Sánchez trained, I present my own assessment of a key historical work as testimony to its remarkable longevity. Twenty-four years after its initial publication, I am still intellectually unpacking *Becoming Mexican American*, a book now in its second printing that has indeed stayed with me, empowering me to reach my full potential and inspiring me anew.

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