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Book Review - Race, Place, and Reform in Mexican Los Angeles: A Transnational Perspective, 1890-1940, by Stephanie Lewthwaite

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Gardner was less enthralled by the Texas frontier. He stated that the Río Grande was little more than a “creek” and that Eagle Pass was “the dullest place.” But overall, his letters offer many details about life in the Southwest. They demonstrate how difficult it was for a Protestant Yankee to understand the land and the people who had just been added to his country.

This volume is wonderfully edited and presented. Weber and Elder divide the correspondence into nine sections, and they begin each section with an introduction that enables the reader to understand the larger context in which Gardner was working. The hundreds of footnotes which accompany the letters themselves are marvels of erudition. They contain imaginative and concise essays on a variety of topics, such as how the mail was delivered from the East Coast to El Paso in the 1850s. This volume is a model of how primary sources ought to be published, and it belongs in the library of anyone interested in the history of the American Southwest.

This book was one of David Weber’s final scholarly projects. It is fitting that it dealt with the border between the United States and Mexico, for Weber was the prime agent in the revival of borderland studies over the past four decades. It is also fitting that the borderlands journey which this correspondence recounts began at San Diego, for, as many readers of this journal no doubt remember, Weber taught for many years at San Diego State University before moving to SMU. This superb volume reminds us all how much we have lost with his passing.

Race, Place, and Reform in Mexican Los Angeles: A Transnational Perspective, 1890-1940. By Stephanie Lewthwaite. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2009. Bibliography, illustrations, index, and notes. xii + 298 pp. \$50.00 cloth.

Reviewed by Kevin Allen Leonard, Professor of History, Western Washington University.

The growth of the Mexican community in Los Angeles before World War II attracted the attention of many settlement house workers, educators, and public officials. Several historians have analyzed the words and actions of these reformers. Most notable among these studies are George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (1993), William Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of Its Mexican Past* (2004), and Natalia Molina, *Fit to Be Citizens? Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939* (2006). In her fascinating book, Stephanie Lewthwaite asks readers to reconsider some of what they have learned from these scholars.

Lewthwaite challenges previous interpretations in two ways. She argues that the reform movement in Los Angeles was transnational. Many reformers traveled in Mexico, and their perceptions of Mexican immigrants reflected their experiences in Mexican cities and villages. In addition, Mexican intellectuals and political leaders were engaged in efforts to remake their nation and its people, and some of their ideas and actions influenced the beliefs of educators, social workers, and officials in Southern California. Lewthwaite also insists that scholars need to look beyond central city and East Los Angeles neighborhoods to understand how the “urban-suburban-rural nexus of Greater Los Angeles shaped reform” (p. 6).

Much of the book focuses on reformers' concerns about the housing in which Mexican immigrants lived. The first slum eradication campaign focused on the "house court," which reformers depicted as uniquely Mexican. Lewthwaite argues that the demolition of substandard housing encouraged segregation, because replacement housing was built on the city's suburban fringe.

Lewthwaite directly engages the work of Deverell and Molina in her examination of the plague outbreak of 1924-1925. She points out that these scholars did not notice that officials' response to the plague focused as much on suburban areas as on the central city. She contrasts earlier reformers' photographs of Mexican districts with California State Board of Health photographs from the plague outbreak. Unlike the earlier photographs, which depicted reformers and Mexicans, the Board of Health photographs pictured vacant homes and the burning of the "Mexican Village" in Vernon. Lewthwaite argues that these photographs and a "transnational discourse on public hygiene" justified the "exclusion of the poor, the rural, and the racialized in 1920s Los Angeles" (p. 129).

After World War I, reformers' concern about the state of the housing in which Mexicans lived shifted from the "house court" to "the typical Mexican shack" (p. 139). Some employers, such as the Pacific Electric Railway, responded to the worries of reformers by building "model colonies." The cooperation between reformers and employers, however, disintegrated as the campaign for immigration restriction intensified in the 1920s. Many reformers sided with restrictionists, while employers sought to preserve access to low-wage laborers. Reformers in the 1930s worked to replace "slums" with public housing. In analyzing photographs from the public housing campaign, Lewthwaite shows that many of these pictures contradicted the statements of housing reformers. Instead of showing dilapidated houses and squalor, many photographs captured scenes of orderly rooms and cohesive families.

Other chapters explore different dimensions of a broad "Americanization" campaign. Lewthwaite argues that this contradictory campaign was influenced by intellectual currents in revolutionary Mexico, especially efforts to incorporate rural Indians into the modern nation by emphasizing the country's indigenous heritage. Educational reformers in Los Angeles insisted that Mexicans' Indian heritage made them inherently artistic and that their artistic abilities needed to be developed in schools that specialized in "manual arts" or vocational training. These beliefs reinforced school segregation. As late as the 1940s, reformers associated with the Good Neighbor Policy stated that they wanted to preserve "Mexican traditions, culture, habits and modes of life, and the particular abilities of Mexicans" (p. 221). In the 1930s and 1940s, reformers' actions fueled activism among Mexican Americans, many of whom expressed pride in their heritage and fought against discrimination by joining the Mexican American Movement (MAM) and El Congreso del Pueblo de Habla Español, the Congress of Spanish-Speaking Peoples Congress.

Lewthwaite's interpretation is generally persuasive. However, the book occasionally loses sight of the "transnational perspective," most notably in the discussion of public housing and of the "urban-suburban-rural nexus of Greater Los Angeles." The use of Spanish-language sources might have strengthened Lewthwaite's arguments about transnationalism and Mexican Americans' responses to the reform campaigns. Still, this book represents a significant contribution to the historical literature dealing with race and reform in the early twentieth century.