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Mario T. García. *Memories of Chicano History: The Life and Narrative of Bert Corona.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994. xviii + 369 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-520-08219-9; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-20152-1.



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Memories of Chicano History represents a partnership between historian Mario T. García and long-time community activist Bert Corona. The product of several years' work, Corona's narrative is gleaned from fifty-five hours of interviews and several hundred pages of transcript. García and Corona both label the book a *testimonio*, a collaboration between a scholar and an activist, in the tradition of works such as Elizabeth Burgos-Debray's *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. As García writes, "This book is a collaborative text. Corona is clearly the subject of the testimonio, and he provides both the raw materials and a certain structure to the narrative. I, as his collaborator and the producer of the project, help to assemble the narrative by the very questions that I raise and the organization I give to these questions, in addition to transcribing and writing the narrative itself" (p. 343). As García points out, *testimonios* and autobiographies are rare within Chicano history, thus the significance of Corona telling his own story.

The book's foreword, written by U.S. labor historian David Montgomery, hints briefly at what is to come. Montgomery sees three lessons emerging from Corona's narrative. First, Corona's experiences, particularly during his childhood and youth on the Texas-Chihuahua border, illustrate through "everyday experi-

ence" the ways in which multiculturalism is and has been negotiated by Mexican people in the United States (p. xii). Second, Montgomery points to the shifting sphere of political organizing over the sixty years of Corona's public life covered in the narrative. Third, Montgomery highlights Corona's observations regarding the ineffectiveness of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society program, which failed to release "the force and strength of the great body of poor and working people" (p. xiv). In a narrative emphasizing historical agency rather than victimization, it is precisely the struggle to empower "the great body of poor and working people" that is most memorable.

The narrative itself, arranged in chronological sequence, encompasses sixteen chapters covering more than seven decades in the life of Humberto (Bert) Corona, born in El Paso, Texas in 1918, a "child of the [Mexican] Revolution." The narrative is both introduced and concluded by García's own narrative and analysis. García places Corona's life and story into a broader context through the use of concepts drawn from history, sociology, literary criticism, and feminist theory. García emphasizes the oppositional character of the narrative, writing that "most people of Mexican descent—whether their politics are liberal, conservative, moderate, radical, or nothing in particular—have resented and reacted to being

treated as subordinates. Hence, diverse struggles have characterized Mexican-American resistance movements” (pp. 5-6). Corona’s discussion of his public and political life illustrates the point well, revealing the variety of issues, strategies, organizations, and formal and spontaneous actions that Mexican Americans have undertaken in their fight for equality.

Corona’s narrative traces his life from his childhood on both sides of the U.S.- Mexico border in the 1910s and 1920s through his work with undocumented immigrants and his hopes for the 1990s. In the first chapter, “Child of the Revolution,” we catch a glimpse of Corona’s formative years as he discusses the influence of his father, mother, and grandmother. Corona’s father, Noe Corona, fought in the Mexican Revolution of 1910 as a Villista. His father was later assassinated by people who Corona’s family believed to be agents of President Alvaro Obregon. “The memories of my father and of the Mexican Revolution had a strong influence on me and my own later political and social views. The Revolution, my father’s role in it, and his martyrdom symbolized the struggle for social justice. This would be the same struggle I would later pursue” (p. 36). Corona’s mother, Margarita Escapite Salayandia, and grandmother, Ynes Salayandia de Escapite, too, were fundamental influences on his life. As Corona attests, “From both of them I received a sense of right and wrong and a sense of duty about helping others, especially those suffering injustices” (p. 37). Corona credits his Protestant upbringing with creating a strong sense of orientation towards community.

Chapter 3, “Border Education,” and chapter 4, “Border Depression,” document Corona’s coming of age. We read of his first political action, participating in a students’ strike in fourth or fifth grade at Harwood Boys School in Albuquerque where a coach customarily tried to silence outspoken Mexican students through corporal punishment. As a result of the student strike, the coach was forced to apologize. By high school, Corona was participating in a study group formed by Mexican American students at El Paso High School, then undergoing a transition from an almost all-Anglo school to an integrated school. By the 1930s, Corona says, a Mexican American identity was becoming evident as Mexicans became “increasingly bilingual and bicultural” (p. 65). In 1936, Corona left El Paso for Los Angeles with a basketball scholarship at the University of Southern California. There he became involved with the Mexican American Movement (MAM), a group of students, Protestant ministers, Catholic priests, and social workers who organized conferences and meetings focusing on various social and

economic problems confronting Mexicans in the United States. As we read in chapter 4, “Welcome to L.A.,” it is also at this point that Corona began his involvement with the CIO.

Chapters 5 through 15 document the impressive number of organizations and organizers with which Corona worked over the course of several decades. In the 1930s Corona joined the Longshoremen’s Union, eventually becoming a CIO organizer. It was during this period that Corona developed a working-class identity. “Despite my more middle-class family background, I considered myself working class when I joined the Longshoremen’s Union, because I was now on my own and working. I figured that joining the union was in my best interest as a worker” (p. 96). As the index attests, the following decades saw the emergence of numerous progressive Mexican American organizations, including the Asociacion Nacional Mexico-Americana, El Congreso Nacional del Pueblo de Habla Espanola, the Mexican American Political Association, and La Hermandad Mexicana Nacional, to list a few. Along with his discussion of the working of the various organizations, Corona provides us with his impressions of such dynamic organizers as Luisa Moreno, Josefina Fierro, Cesar Chavez, and Dolores Huerta. It is in these discussions that we perhaps best see the sense of “collective self” evident throughout the narrative. As Garcia points out, “Corona centers his narrative not only on his own accomplishments and successes but on the collective efforts of his community, including both the leadership of numerous less well known Mexican-Americans and the efforts of the rank and file” (p. 349).

Chapter 16, “Pensamientos,” concludes Corona’s narrative with reflections on the past and on the future. He ends on a positive note, asserting that, though the struggle is not over, with “vision, commitment, and tenacity, strong progressive leadership is possible” (p. 340). This final chapter also reveals one of the major tensions within the work, the tension between the experiences of one individual and those of the community. “What I’ve done with my life, I’ve chosen. My life and career are shaped by the particular circumstances that I encountered. But these are unique to me,” declares Corona (p. 322). Yes, many of his particular circumstances are unique, but in many ways Corona embodies the Mexican American generation. Like so many others, Corona was the child of Mexican immigrants who fled the Revolution. He came of age during the Great Depression and World War II, two events that helped shape the world view of that generation. He, like others of his generation, de-

manded a place in American society, a place that they endeavored to define for themselves. And he represents the small, yet growing, number of Mexican Americans in the 1930s who received a high school (and in Corona's case, a brief college) education. Also, like others of his generation, Corona exemplifies the optimism and raised expectations of the Mexican American generation. Yet, as Corona admits, his dedication to organizing for social change is unique.

Herein lies one of the most fascinating aspects of Corona's narrative. Without detracting from the significance of his public and political life, it is perhaps in the discussion of his private life that we uncover the most critical information necessary for understanding Bert Corona. What makes an individual dedicate his life to social change? How did his childhood experiences, his family, his education, and his church help to engender in him a strong sense of justice and the need to organize for change? How do organizers survive economically when the fight for social justice is often work whose rewards are not monetary? The answers to these questions lie in Corona's family stories, those of his parents, his grand-

mother, and his wife of more than fifty years, Blanche (nee Taff) Corona. Corona is, on the one hand, an exceptional individual, yet his work is carried on within the context of community and immediate family. This is perhaps the most important lesson in Corona's narrative.

Significantly, this work points to the tensions evident in several critical relationships. How does an individual life reflect (or not reflect) the life of a community? What is the relationship between history and storytelling? What is the relationship between memory and history? What is the relationship between the exceptional and the everyday? It is within the narrative of Corona's life that we begin to find answers to these questions. *Memories of Chicano History* is vital reading for anyone interested in questions of social change, Mexican American history, or *testimonio*.

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