

Life along the Border

A LANDMARK TEJANA THESIS

By Jovita González



Edited, with an Introduction, by
María Eugenia Cotera

TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY PRESS
College Station

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First edition

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Mireles, Jovita González, 1904-1983.

Life along the border : a landmark tejana thesis / by Jovita González ;
edited, with an introduction, by María Eugenia Cotera. — 1st ed.

p. cm. — (Elma Dill Russell Spencer series in the West and
Southwest ; no. 26)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-58544-521-9 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-58544-521-5 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-13: 978-1-58544-564-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-58544-564-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Cameron County (Tex.)—Social life and customs. 2. Starr County
(Tex.)—Social life and customs. 3. Zapata County (Tex.)—Social life and
customs. 4. Cameron County (Tex.)—History, Local. 5. Starr County (Tex.)—
History, Local. 6. Zapata County (Tex.)—History, Local. 7. Mexican
Americans—Texas, South—Social life and customs. 8. Mexican Americans—
Texas, South—History. 9. Texas—Relations—Mexico. 10. Mexico—
Relations—Texas. I. Cotera, Maria Eugenia, 1964- II. Title. III. Series.

F392.C25M57 2006

976.4'495—dc22

2006005126

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Preface

Jovita González's master's thesis, "Social Life in Cameron, Starr, and Zapata Counties," has, for most of its life in the world of letters, remained chasteily cloistered in a few libraries scattered across the Southwest. This truly unfortunate circumstance, which the current volume seeks to remedy, has prevented generations of scholars from experiencing the full depth and breadth of our collective intellectual history. The text is now presented here in its entirety, with minimal extra-textual commentary and an introduction that helps to establish the historical context in which it was written. A few editorial changes have been made to the format of the thesis to ensure that it conforms to current scholarly conventions, but otherwise the text is as it appeared when Jovita González first submitted it to her thesis advisor, Eugene C. Barker, in 1930.

"Social Life in Cameron, Starr, and Zapata Counties," is a social history of the borderlands written by one of its "native daughters." As such it offers a picture of the place and its people that could only have come from the mind of a woman on the border between epochs, races, languages, and cultures. Such a woman was Jovita González, who, despite an array of forces marshaled against her—economic, social, patriarchal—managed to articulate a unique vision of the history of her people. This vision, laid out in the following pages, has lingered for far too many years in near-obscurity, relegated to the margins of academic inquiry in footnotes, microfilm, and the storage facilities of major research libraries.

It is a vision that would likely never have seen publication were it not for the dedication of my mentor and friend Dr. José Limón, who first brought the work of Jovita González to my attention. Indeed, it

was Limón who introduced González to a whole generation of scholars through his recovery and publication of two of her manuscripts: *Dew on the Thorn*, a book-length folklore study she wrote in the mid-1930s, published in 1997 by Arte Publico Press; and *Caballero*, a historical novel she coauthored with an Anglo woman, Margaret Eimer, in the late 1930s, published in 1996 by Texas A&M University Press. Both of these works have brought much-needed attention to this previously overlooked and underrated scholar and have helped to burnish her reputation as an astute observer of the Latina/o condition. I thank Dr. Limón for his efforts to enrich our collective knowledge of Jovita González's work, and I hope that the present volume will contribute to our deepening understanding of both Jovita González and her generation.

—*María Eugenia Coterá*
University of Michigan

PART I



Introduction

because of their tenacity and persistency have risen above their class. Others are descendants of the old landed aristocracy. One thing is characteristic of all these men. They are politicians, and that is where the danger lies. Border politics are just emerging from political bossism and rings. If the League tends to educate the Mexican-Americans for purely altruistic reasons, its labor no doubt is meritorious and praiseworthy. But should county bossism be superseded by an organized state wide political machine, the results will be detrimental not only to the Mexican-American citizens but to the state at large.

Dr. Weeks of the University of Texas is more optimistic on the subject and makes the following conclusion:

In conclusion, may it be said that educated Mexican-Americans in general as well as the members of the League of United Latin American Citizens, are agreed that the problem with which they and their racial brothers are faced in Texas and the United States have been created quite as much by their own deficiencies as by the deficiencies of the Anglo-American in his dealings with the two races and two civilizations. In order, therefore, that these people may be able to stand their ground, they must correct their own deficiencies, resulting from ignorance, docility, and prejudice against the Anglo-Saxon and his ways, And doing such, they must show him that they can meet his standards and hence can demand his rights. Thus, without sacrificing the best of their racial heritage, they can remove his racial prejudice.¹⁰

CHAPTER 6



What the Coming of the Americans Has Meant to the Border People

The beginning of the century brought the Renaissance to the border counties. It was an awakening in every sense of the word, socially, politically, and economically. For nearly two hundred years the Texas-Mexicans had lived knowing very little and caring less of what was going on in the United States. They looked southward for all the necessities and pleasures in life. Mexican newspapers brought them news of the outside, their children were educated in Mexican schools, Spanish was the language of the people, Mexican currency was used altogether. When the women craved for finery, it was acquired across the river.

The counties in which these people lived were run by Mexicans, and everywhere, with the exception of Brownsville, the Americans were considered foreigners. These people had lived so long in their communities that it was home to them, and home to them meant Mexico. They lived happily ignorant that they were foreigners in a foreign land. As all provincial people, they considered themselves the elect of the community and looked down in disdain at the few Americans or Europeans who settled among them. The landed aris-

toocracy, impregnable in their racial pride, lived in a world of their own sincerely believing in their rural greatness.

The few American families living in these communities had to adapt themselves to the existing conditions of the element among which they lived, and had become, as has been previously stated, Mexicanized. They spoke Spanish, a few had become Catholic, and many had intermarried with the Texas-Mexican element. The children from these unions had not in any way assimilated the customs and habits of the American parent, but had remained untouched and thoroughly Mexican.

Rude then, was the awakening of these border people when the development of the Río Grande Valley brought hundreds of foreigners to their doors. This invasion of fortune-seeking Americans was a material as well as a spiritual blow to the Mexicans, particularly to the landed aristocracy.

On the other hand, to the *jornaleros* or day laborers, this economic change improved their status in many respects. It meant more than a change of masters, it meant more work, better wages and improved living conditions. No class of society has gained as much by the economic changes as the *jornalero* class has. As previously stated, there has been a shifting of the day laborers from the ranches to the cities. And this has been a great step in the improvement of their condition. However hard their work may be in the towns, it is not as heavy as what they had to do on the ranches, and the wages are much better. Whereas they had earned fifty cents a day as farmhands or goatherds, they are now making anywhere from one dollar to two dollars per day. The old one room *jacal* has been replaced by a small lumber house for which they are paying on the installment plan. The laborers themselves are better dressed, they wear store-bought clothes and their wives may attain their highest ambition, wearing a hat.

They work in the truck garden plantations, in the orange and lemon groves. In the spring and summer they migrate to the fields, to chop or pick cotton as the case may be. During this season enough is earned by the whole family for the winter, should there be a scarcity of work. These people are content with their economic uplift and care very little or nothing as to the treatment they receive from

their American masters. They do not resent any racial distinction or discrimination, the difference between them and their masters is no greater than that which separated them from their former *amos*.

The children of this class are doing something that their parents never accomplished; they are going to school, learning to read, to write, and to speak English. Altogether they are thoroughly satisfied with their lot.

Dissatisfaction, however, is rampant among the middle classes, composed of small shopkeepers and artisans. They read much, mostly in Spanish and they are the thinkers. It is from this group that the United League of Latin Americans gets its members. The laborers are too contented to want more, and the landowners are not interested in the League unless they can be the leaders. This middle class is receiving a public school education and the most ambitious of its members are working their way through institutions of high learning.

Economically both classes resent the invasion of the Americans. The introduction of new and improved methods, the chain stores, and Piggly Wiggles has driven the middle class grocers out of business. The same thing has happened with owners of dry goods stores, drug stores, etc.

It hurts the landowners' pride to see these foreigners do in a short time what they had not been able to accomplish in years. They have seen the Americans appropriate all that had been theirs, even the desert plains. The new arrivals bought this seemingly worthless land at a very low price, and by irrigation and modern machinery have converted the desert into a garden. An undercurrent of dissatisfaction is felt all over the country amongst these two classes. In the towns they see themselves segregated into their own quarters as an inferior race.

The friendly feeling which had slowly developed between the old American and Mexican families has been replaced by a feeling of hate, distrust, and jealousy on the part of the Mexicans. The descendants of the Americans who married Mexican wives in the middle nineteenth century are more Mexicanized than the Mexicans themselves, and some are even ashamed of their American blood.

All over the border counties, with the exception of such towns as Laredo, Rio Grande City, and Brownsville, where the Mexican

Lesson?
Give
lower
class
more!

M.B.
story

element predominates, a contest between the two elements is being waged. It is a racial struggle, a fight between an aggressive, conquering and material people and a passive, volatile, but easily satisfied race. It is the struggle between the New World and the Old, for the Texas-Mexicans have retained more than their brethren in Mexico Old World traditions, customs, and ideals. The old families resent the gulf with which the newly arrived Americans have separated them. Not that they are anxious for the friendship of the American families but they object to the fact that they are considered an inferior race. The word *white*, which the Americans use to differentiate themselves from the Mexican population, is like a red flag to a bull.

In an interview which the writer had with a Roma citizen whose family had been in Texas for two hundred years the following was gathered:

"We, Texas-Mexicans of the border," he said, "although we hold on to our traditions, and are proud of our race, are loyal to the United States, in spite of the treatment we receive by some of the new Americans. Before their arrival, there were no racial or social distinctions between us. Their children married ours, ours married theirs, and both were glad and proud of the fact. But since the coming of the 'white trash' from the north and middle west we felt the change. They made us feel for the first time that we were Mexicans and that they considered themselves our superiors.

"In spite of these things we showed our loyalty during the World War when we sent our sons to the front, and when those of us who were too old to serve in the army offered our services free of charge to the Draughting Board and war commissions. We hoped that this would change the Americans' attitude toward us, but to them we are still Mexicans. We are told that the trouble lies in the fact that we keep to ourselves and do not want to assimilate. Some of us are willing to do that, but how can we when not for a moment are we allowed to forget the fact that we are Mexicans? That being the case, we are not going to thrust our society upon a people who do not want us. Instead

of becoming Americanized we are getting farther and farther away from that and are drawing ourselves within a shell of self-consciousness and racial pride."

In Edinburg, Hidalgo County, I interviewed a young married man, an official in the Court House, as to what he thought the solution to the interracial problem would be.

"That is a difficult problem to solve," said he, "we lived so long to ourselves as Mexicans, and looked upon Mexico as our country that it is hard for us to cope with the situation. We were wholly unprepared, politically, educationally, and socially when the avalanche of Americans fell upon us. The fact that we received an entirely Mexican education, I am a product of the Colegio Altamirano in Hebronville, made it difficult for us to understand American ideals. And it is our place and our duty now to learn American ways, to send our children to American schools, to learn the English language, not that we are ashamed of our Mexican descent, but because these things will enable us to demand our rights and to improve ourselves. We understand our race, and when we are able to comprehend American ideas and ideals, American ways and customs, we shall be worth twice as much as they, and we certainly shall have the advantage over them. Americans are egoists, and provincial, they over estimate their power and doing so are unwilling to see any other way but their own, It is to our advantage then, to educate ourselves in American institutions, to learn the English language and to exercise our rights as citizens. My children are to receive a public education here, and when they graduate, I shall send them to Mexico for at least two years in order that they may perfect themselves in the Spanish language and that they may know Mexico as Mexico is. We are going now through a very painful period of transition and like the white black bird do not know yet just what we are. Mexicans from across the river look down upon us and call us by what to them is the vilest epithet, *Texanos* and the Americans do not consider us as such,

although some of our Texas-Mexican families have lived here for generations.

"For years we have been part of a big political machine, our vote has not been individual, but now that we are becoming conscious of the meaning of citizenship we want to exert our privileges as individuals. Our labor is arduous, the future welfare of the Texas-Mexicans depends on what will be accomplished during this generation."

The farther one gets away from the river the worse conditions are. In the towns along the boundary line where the descendants of the old grantees live, they have more or less demanded certain privileges, which they still retain.

Segregation of the two races is practiced in every town north of the counties bordering the river. After the World War, when the boys returned from France, a fraternal spirit animated by a common bond made the Texas-Mexicans hope for a change. But this superficial outburst of enthusiasm and emotion was not lasting. Many incidents which occurred lately have disgusted the Texas-Mexicans to such an extent that some have changed from the most loyal American subjects to the bitterest anti-Americans.

Two years ago in Falfurrias, Brooks County, the American legion had a Fourth of July celebration and dance. For this purpose subscriptions were made from the merchants of the town both Mexican and American. On the day of the celebration all the boys wearing the Legion badges attended the barbecue. All went well. But in the evening when some of the Mexican boys wanted to dance, they were told that the dance was only for *whites*. This, as might well be imagined, was taken as an insult by the Mexican legionnaires. One of them, who had received a decoration for bravery, snatched it from his coat lapel, threw it on the floor and trampled it saying, "If shedding my blood for you Americans does not mean anymore than this, I do not want to ever wear your colors, from now on I am ashamed of having served in your army."

Both classes, the middle and the landowners, are thoroughly disgusted with the situation; the former aspires to the social equality it

feels it must have, the second simply demands what it always had. They oppose the discrimination that is shown concerning their attending certain public places. They resent the fact that in some of the Valley towns, Mexicans are not admitted at cafes, picture shows, hotels, and bathing beaches. The Americans contend that they have been forced to use segregation because of the hundreds of day laborers that would swarm into these places if Mexicans were permitted. The Mexicans on the other hand argue that the laborers are used to segregation in their own country and would not attempt to attend places that the better element frequents. They claim that it would be equally as unfair for Europeans to classify an Anglo-American with an American Negro, as it is to consider a Spanish-Mexican the social equal of an Indian laborer. The Texas-Mexican families do not want social intercourse with Americans. But they do demand the privilege of attending the same public places as Americans do. They are very conservative, have kept the Spanish traditions in regard to the position of woman and look down upon American customs as free, loose, and immoral. Girls are not allowed the companionship of boys, and just seeing American boys and girls together is contaminating to the Mexican youth.

Mexican parents disapprove thoroughly of their children associating with Americans. According to their ethics, woman was made for the home, her duty in life is to create a home and to bring children into the world. In the freedom which American girls enjoy, parents see the beginning of all social evils. Sports are discouraged as tending to make woman masculine. When a Brownsville mother brought her daughter to one of the most exclusive girls' schools in San Antonio, her chief concern was that she should not play tennis because, "playing tennis tended to take away woman from the home."

"I am told that becoming Americanized means being progressive," said a leading Río Grande City citizen, "but if that means that my daughter will bob her hair, disobey her parents, chew gum, smoke, drink, and be out with boys until late at night, and finally elope, and get a divorce at the end of one or two years [of married life, I do not want progress. That is just what American civilization means to us. Our customs may be of the old world, they suited our parents and they suit us now."

One cannot help but wonder at the last statement.

If the older generation feels that way about Americanization the young people do not. The fact that they are all rapidly learning English points in the opposite direction. Ten years ago when visiting the Valley it was noticed that a very small percentage of the school children spoke English. The penalty for using Spanish during recess hours was to make the culprits stand at the place where they were caught *in flagrante*. That order had to be suspended for not one Mexican child was able to play.

Last summer when in the same community, I was amazed to hear all the children, even those under scholastic age, speak English, and slang at that.

There is a group of advanced progressive Texas-Mexicans who, realizing that the future of their children depends upon their getting an American education are sending their sons and daughters to American colleges and universities. And when these girls are among typical American college girls they are not going to sit in their rooms and uphold family traditions. When in Rome they will do as the Romans do. All of these girls are in the process of receiving their education. What their reaction will be when they go back home after four or five years of complete freedom is yet to be seen. Many of the boys are studying the professions: law, medicine, pharmacy, engineering. When this crop of American educated young men return to their respective towns, will they submit to the racial distinctions prevalent in the border towns? That also is a future problem.

Young Texas-Mexicans are being educated. Behind them lies a store of traditions of another race, customs of past ages, an innate and inherited love and reverence for another country. Ahead of them lies a struggle of which they are to be the champions. It is a struggle for equality and justice before the law, for the just demands of full-fledged American citizens. They bring with them a broader view, a clearer understanding of the good and bad qualities of both races. They are the converging element of two antagonistic civilizations; they have the blood of one and have acquired the ideals of the other. They, let it be hoped, will bring to an end the racial feuds that have existed in the border for nearly a century.

Notes

CHAPTER 1

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2. *Ibid.*, 293.
3. Alejandro Prieto, *Historia de las Tamaulipas*, (México, 1873), 172-74.
4. Polly Pearl Crawford, *The Beginnings of Spanish Settlements in the Lower Río Grande Valley*, master's thesis, University of Texas, 1925.
5. México, *Archivo General de la Nación, Historia, Descripción General de la Nueva Colonia de Santander*, Tomo 55, p. 64, University of Texas Library.
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8. Prieto, *Historia de las Tamaulipas*, 172-75.
9. *Ibid.*, 207.
10. *Ibid.*, 212.
11. Matamoros Archives, Vol. XIV, 150. Lucas Fernández to the border towns, 1827.
12. Matamoros Archives, Vol. XIII, 155.
13. México, *Archivo General de la Nación*. Tomo 55, p. 64.
14. México, *Archivo General de la Nación*. Tomo 55, p. 64.
15. Henderson K. Yoakum. *History of Texas from Its First Settlement in 1685 to Its Annexation to the United States in 1846* (New York: Redfield, 1856), 289.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Emilio del Castillo Negrete, *México en el Siglo XIX*, 141.
18. Letter from Gen. Antonio Canales to H.W. Haines. *Gaceta del Gobierno de Tamaulipas Ciudad Victoria*, November 28, 1840, 1.
19. Moses Austin, *The Austin Papers*, ed. Eugene Barker, Annual Report of the American Historical Association. v. 2, 1922.

13. Reminiscences of Miss Antoinette Stewart, aged 80 years. Río Grande City, Starr County, Texas, August 17, 1929.
14. This material was collected from several old people who lived through this period and remember conditions as they existed some fifty years back, and who have witnessed the development of the country. Such are Miss Katie Edwards, now in Edinburg, seventy-five years old, who lived at Río Grande City and Roma, Miss Florentina Cox living at Roma, Don Francisco Guerra y Guerra, a ranchman in Starr county, Mrs. Rosa Davis Viscaya, Río Grande City.
15. Don Manuel Guerra.
16. *Revista Católica*, Las Vegas, New Mexico, September 19, 1915.
17. From Dolores Corréa Zapata, *La Mujer en el Hogar*. This text was in use in 1900 at a private school in the San Roman Ranch.
18. José Antonio Sanchez de la Barquera, *Compendio de Urbanidad, en verso*, 16-17, 21-22, 26.
19. *El Nacional*, Piedras Negras (Coahuila), July 7, 1927.
20. W. H. Chatfield, *The Twin Cities of the Border*, 10-11.
21. *Ibid.*, 16.
22. This was practiced all over the border, several of my own relatives held certificates in this manner. It is from them that I have gathered this information.
23. Thomas Stewart, Miss Antoinette Stewart, Miss Lou Davis, Downy Davis, Pedro Nix, Miss Mamie Nix, Sam P. Vale, and José Vale.
24. School Reports. In the State Department of Education, for the scholastic years 1914-15, Austin, Texas.

CHAPTER 5

1. Statistics of population of the United States Tenth Census 1880. United States Census Report 1910, 804.
2. O. Douglas Weeks, "The League of United Latin American Citizens." Reprinted from *The Southwestern Political and Social Science Quarterly*. Vol. 10, No. 3, December, 1929, Austin, 8-11.
3. Testimony of James B. Wells, Glascock and Parr. Supplement to the Senate Journal, Regular Session of the 36th Legislature (Texas 1919, Austin), 846-51.
4. *Ibid.*, 890.
5. Family records in my possession taken from the Mier archives, supplemented by archives in possession of Don Luis García Mier, Tamauipás, Mexico.
6. *Corona Funebrer, Dedicada a honrar la amada memoria de Don Manuel Guerra*, Río Grande City, Texas, June 9, 1915, 2-6.

7. *Brownsville Herald*, (Brownsville, Texas), September 25, 1928. Written by Miss Celia Perez, Río Grande City, Texas. This is the essay verbatim as it appeared in the Brownsville paper. Miss Perez, daughter of a Republican leader in Río Grande City, had a Spanish education, therefore the mistakes in English.
8. O. Douglas Weeks, "The League of United Latin American Citizens." Reprinted from *The Southwestern Political and Social Science Quarterly*. Volume 10, Number 3, December 1929, Austin, Texas, 2.
9. *Ibid.*, 8-10.
10. *Ibid.*, 21-22.