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An Introduction to the Cultural Anthropology and Preservation of the Rio Grande Valley

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An Introduction to the Cultural Anthropology and Preservation of the Rio Grande Valley

Margaret Dorsey and Miguel Díaz-Barriga

Anthropology is the study of human behavior and culture, and anthropologists in the United States divide their research into four subfields of study: physical anthropology; archaeology; linguistic anthropology; and cultural anthropology. North American anthropology draws its impetus from the foundational work of Franz Boas, a professor at Columbia University who lived along the Arctic Circle on Baffin Island, Canada for one year in the late nineteenth century where he kept copious notes of the language, life ways and customs of the Inuit. The following year, Boas collaborated with several museums conducting fieldwork along the North Pacific Coast setting the tone for anthropologists working closely with native peoples taking extensive field-notes about their world and worldviews as well as collaborating with museums to educate the public about these very issues. Following Boas's example, anthropologists have conducted ethnographic research on cultures throughout the world and have, through museums, archival collections, and publications, created a rich record of humanity's diverse belief systems, forms of social organization, and political dynamics. The Border Studies Archive, with its focus on the U.S. Mexico border in general and the Rio Grande Valley in particular, represents one such documentation and preservation initiative.

The Border Studies Archive (BSA), a part of the University Library, houses collections focused on the folklore, histories and lives of people living along the U.S.-Mexican border in South Texas. The BSA's collections include aural, material and visual documentation related to (1) Border Music, (2) construction of the Border Wall and Border Security more generally, (3) Latinas and Politics, (4) Spanish Land Grants, (5) Traditional Mexican American Folklore and (6) Visual Border Studies. The BSA seeks to enable scholarly research on two levels. First, it provides a scholarly resource in the traditional meaning of archive: it houses and makes available original primary source materials for the purposes of writing theses, books and journal articles. It also

functions as a scholarly resource in that the BSA provides a supportive space for the scholarly collection of material in the transborder region with Mexican-origin populations. Meeting this goal often translates into collaborative projects with academics in other programs and institutions. The BSA also houses a collection of ethnographic research on the Rio Grande Valley, thus providing scholars with access to key publications, and showcasing the rich history of anthropological research on the region.

Cultural Anthropology in the Rio Grande Valley

Socio-cultural anthropologists and folklorists have a rich tradition of conducting ethnographic fieldwork in the lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas. In the 1920's and 1930's, Jovita Mireles González conducted ethnographic fieldwork on Mexican American folklore and culture in the region, and this research served as a source for numerous publications in the early twentieth century, including essays in *Publications of the Texas Folklore Society* and her master's thesis, "Social Life in Cameron, Starr and Zapata Counties." She wrote an, until recently, unpublished ethnographic monograph based on her extended ethnographic research titled, *Dew on the Thorn*, as well as a coauthored a novel titled, *Caballero*. Prestigious institutions funded Mireles González's fieldwork in the Rio Grande Valley, and she twice served as President of the Texas Folklore Society.

The most recognized folklorist who conducted field-based research in the Rio Grande Valley is Américo Paredes. Paredes collected the songs, stories, jokes and more generally the folkways and culture of the borderlands. *With His Pistol in His Hand*, his most famous scholarly book turned into a movie, explains the history the borderlands through the *corrido* (generally glossed as a border ballad) of Gregorio Cortez. The song and the book overturn popular misconceptions about Texas Rangers, Mexican American men and borderlands history. For social scientists and students interested in conducting ethnographic fieldwork, his prescient article titled "On Ethnographic Fieldwork Among Minority Groups," is required reading. Mainstream anthropology showed a blindness to Paredes' legacy and contribution to the discipline, both in terms of content, theory and methodology; however, the 1990's saw a late recognition of the impact of his work on the cannon with the publication of Gupta and Ferguson's article in *American Ethnologist* and subsequent anthology.

Jovita González and Américo Paredes set the stage for a series anthropologists to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in the Rio Grande Valley, including scholars at UTPA who have worked closely with their students to collect data on the folklore, cultural and life ways of the people living in the Rio Grande Valley for the past forty years. For 27 years, Anthropologist Mark Glazer worked closely with his students at UTPA who collected the jokes, recipes, stories and remedies from residents of the Rio Grande Valley. This research culminated with publication of *Flour From Another Sack & other Proverbs, Folk Beliefs, Tales, Riddles & Recipes: A Collection of Folklore from the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas* (Glazer 2006). The materials collected by Dr. Glazer

and his students now form a collection at the BSA exceeding 100,000 files and valued at \$1 million. Anthropologist Robert Trotter also worked closely with students at UTPA studying *curanderismo* (folk healing). Their project culminated in the ethnographic monograph, *Curanderismo*. In the 1990's, Sociologist Chad Richardson also worked closely with students at UTPA to document the experiences of service workers in the region and published *Batos, Bolillos, Pochos and Pelados* based on their collaborative research.

Paredes's legacy of using music as a vehicle to tell the history and social experience of Mexicanos in the RGV, not often found in the history books, continues to inspire ethnographers and ethnomusicologists. In the Rio Grande Valley, Manuel Peña conducted fieldwork on conjunto music and published a classic Marxian-inspired monograph titled, *The Texas-Mexican Conjunto: A History of a Working-class Music* (University of Texas Press 1985?). Margaret Dorsey's ethnographic fieldwork carried out in the Rio Grande Valley on the relationship between music, politics and marketing came to fruition with the publication of an ethnographic monograph titled, *Pachangas* (University of Texas Press 2006). More recently and following in the rich tradition of studying music, culture and society in the Rio Grande Valley and Mexico, Cathy Ragland published *Musica Nortena: Mexican Migrants Creating a Nation Between Nations* (Temple University Press 2009).

In the past twenty years, sociologists and anthropologists have published a corpus of ethnography focused on immigration and border security. David Spener conducted extended ethnographic research in and around Raymondville on migration, which culminated in the ethnographic monograph titled, *Clandestine Crossings: Migrants and Coyotes on the Texas-Mexico Border* (Cornell University Press, 2009). Robert Lee Maril conducted ethnographic fieldwork with the border patrol over the course of two years, including September 11, and published, *Patrolling Chaos: The U.S. Border Patrol in Deep South Texas*, an exploration of the lives of border patrol agents and their work in the Border Patrol's Rio Grande Valley sector. Santiago Guerra, an anthropologist from the Rio Grande Valley returned home to conduct fieldwork in Starr County, and is finalizing his book-length publication, *Narcos and Narcs: Drug Trafficking and Policing in the South Texas-Mexico Borderlands*, on smuggling. Anthropologist Laura Kym Neck conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Cameron County on the border wall. This research culminated in the publication of her dissertation titled, *Fighting the Wall: Understanding the Impact of Immigration and Border Security on Local Borderland Identity in Brownsville, TX*. Anthropologist Cecilia Balli also lived in Brownsville studying the border wall's construction and that research will form the basis for non-academic publications on that issue (personal communication 2010). Miguel Díaz-Barriga and Margaret Dorsey conducted ethnographic research on the border wall's construction in Hidalgo, Starr and Cameron Counties for two years (2008-2010), ran a blog while they were in the field titled "A Nation Divided," and have subsequently published a series of articles on border security based on that fieldwork and are finalizing an ethnographic monograph on the border wall and border security more generally titled, *Militarization on the Edge*.

Economic development and health care are other contemporary topics of ethnographic research in the RGV. In 2008-2009, Seth Pipkin conducted fieldwork in the Rio Grande Valley on international trade and the success, and lack thereof, of local communities to attract commerce. His dissertation (MIT) provides a useful explanation as to why Brownsville and McAllen grew unevenly, in spite of Brownsville having economic advantages. Celina Callahan-Kampoor, a doctoral candidate at the University of California-Santa Cruz lived in the Rio Grande Valley from 2012-2014 ethnographically studying diabetes and is in the process of completing her dissertation. Medical Anthropologist Jill Fleuriet, another native of the RGV, specializes in the reproductive health and healthcare among immigrant women from Mexico and Hispanic women living in the borderlands of South Texas. Medical Anthropologists Ann Millard and Margaret Graham conduct research in the Rio Grande Valley on border health, early diabetes prevention, reproductive health, and farmworker health and, among their many publications based on research in the RGV, have a book manuscript under contract on maternal and child health.

Student Learning and Community Engagement

Anthropology, with its focus on ethnography, fosters student learning through community engagement. The Border Studies Archive engages UTPA students not only in utilizing the collection, but also in expanding the holdings of the collection from their own scholarly endeavors. The BSA's collection began from the work of students in Anthropologist Mark Glazer's Mexican American Folklore course. Dr. Glazer's students collected folklore from their own families and deposited those stories in the Traditional Mexican American Folklore Collection in the Archive. Students at UTPA who enroll in Mexican American Folklore utilize this collection and continue to expand it by adding the folklore of their own families. Students at the graduate level have also contributed to the archive. Orquidea Morales is a wonderful example. Ms. Morales graduated from UTPA with a Master's of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies and a Graduate Certificate in Mexican American Studies from The University of Texas-Pan American in May 2011. Ms. Morales will continue her education with a full fellowship to the Ph.D. program in American Culture at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Before leaving UTPA, she donated her Master's thesis on La Llorona and video materials to the Archive, once again expanding the collection with exceptional work from our students.

Another example of anthropology fostering student learning through community engagement was made apparent in a recent keynote address by the noted Mexican-American Studies scholar Dr. Aida Hurtado. A 1978 University of Texas-Pan American graduate, Dr. Hurtado notes that her participation in an ethnographic project on *curanderismo* (folk healing) in the Rio Grande Valley, directed by Dr. Robert Trotter, was a key element of her academic success. The project, which included interviews with community members and observation of healing practices, provided both mentoring for undergraduate students and an opportunity to produce research that was relevant for the community, particularly doctors. The BSA, through a

TexTreasures Grant, provided by the Texas State Library and Archives Commission, preserved and digitally archived Dr. Trotter's research materials with the dual goal of preserving this historical record of *curanderismo* practices and documenting its impact on student learning.

Finally, one of the four subfields of anthropology, archeology, is at the heart of another major initiative at UTPA with which the BSA collaborates, the Community Historical Archaeology Project with Schools (CHAPS). In a joint effort with the CHAPS Program, the BSA has organized student workshops and assisted students in collecting oral histories for the class, "Rediscovering the Rio Grande Valley." This collaboration has led to a number of publications that feature the writings and contributions of UTPA students. In another collaboration, the Border Studies Archive assisted CHAPS in organizing the conference, "From Porciones to Colonias: Curriculum Innovation in the Rio Grande Valley." This curriculum development conference, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), showcased Rio Grande Valley K-12 teachers of US history, Texas History, Science, Social Studies and English and the lesson plans they developed to build a culturally relevant curriculum. Focusing on place-based learning to make lessons memorable, these lesson plans are designed to enable students to recall information as it relates to their shared culture and community.

If you refer to the BSA's website, http://portal.utpa.edu/utpa_main/lib_home/archive_home, you will find this material under our Spanish Land Grants Collection, which began as collaboration with the CHAPS team. This collection began with Dr. Sonia Hernandez's work who oversaw student research on *porciones* or Spanish land grants. This research begins with life histories of local families and traces their land acquisition to first European contact in the borderlands. Following the course of approximately 300 years of change, this documentation and these histories specify the shifts that large tracts of property underwent. The collection provides an overview of historical developments as they relate to land ownership by highlighting research on land title deeds/abstracts, maps of *porciones* and present-day *colonias* or unincorporated subdivisions, census records and published genealogical (or family) trees of the various families who owned *porciones*.

The *porciones* project is a perfect example of how the CHAPS Program and the BSA coordinate on projects that highlight the multicultural history of families and their land in the Rio Grande Valley. Students conduct land title research in the Hidalgo County Courthouse and collect family oral interviews. They trace land and family histories back to the original land grants awarded by the King of Spain in the 18th century when this region was claimed and settled by Spain and organized as the province of Nuevo Santander. Despite the importance of *porciones* as key components of South Texas early life and as a reminder of the Spanish legacy in this region, the history of the grants and its inhabitants has been, until recently, largely ignored. Given the location of the University of Texas-Pan American, in the heart of South Texas, this project to recover the history of the *porciones* is of immense value to the community.

Preservation

Currently, aside from museums and historical markers, no proactive approach exists cultural preservation in the region. The BSA, founded in 2009 with Dr. Margaret Dorsey as Curator, seeks to fill this void conducting interviews and collecting folklore in the Rio Grande Valley but also preserving these materials at the highest archival standards. The community has responded to the BSA by participating in interviews and donating materials, including historical documents, films, and even music collections. A few examples: Stefanie Herweck and Scott Nicol, environmentalists and anti-border wall activists, have donated to the Border Wall and Border Security Collection, over 1800 photographs and 1,000-plus government documents, correspondence with local, state, and national elected officials, and 43 objects of ephemera. This collection contains some of the most extensive research available on border security, focusing on the sociological and ecological ramifications of the border wall's construction along the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo. Cathy Ragland donated over 150 hours of ethnographic interviews and other audio recordings with local, regional, and transnational musicians, which forms the basis of *Musica Nortena: Mexican Migrants Creating a Nation Between Nations*. Alejandro Madrid donated 65 hours of recorded material to the Border Music Collection, 50 hours of ethnographic interviews and 15 hours of live performance. This material formed the basis of the award-winning book, *Nor-tec Rifa!: Electronic Dance Music from Tijuana to the World*.

One of the main tasks of the BSA is to take these materials, often recorded in an analog format, and format them for the purposes of preservation and accessibility. The Border Studies Archive is currently in the process of converting analog audio and video recordings, such as Texas Conjunto Music Hall of Fame and Museum donation to Border Music Collection of 302 locally recorded and locally pressed records, record press plates and other record company ephemera dating from the 1950's to the 1980's to digital files. Digital audio recordings are the standard for long-term preservation of audio recordings, regardless of their original format. While there is no widely accepted best practice for analog video preservation, archives are applying the techniques used for analog audio recordings to analog video recordings.

Most recently, the National Endowment of the Humanities awarded the Border Studies Archive in collaboration with the Museum of South Texas History, a grant to assess our audio and visual collections. This professional assessment will form the basis for the next phase of preservation of the history and culture of the Rio Grande Valley.

Conclusion

The CHAPS Program and the BSA missions draw impetus from a larger anthropological effort that both documents—through fieldwork, interviews, photographs as well as audio and visual recordings—and preserves the cultures of the Rio Grande Valley.

Notes: Many scholars point to John Gregory Bourke, a military man who took rigorous notes of the habits of people in the borderlands in the late nineteenth century and published in the *Journal of American Folklore* and *American Anthropologist*, as one of the first ethnographers of the area but his research that lead to those publications occurred in the upper Rio Grande Valley, which extends from El Paso, Texas to Taos, New Mexico. After publishing those articles and six books, Bourke served a two-year tour of duty in the lower Rio Grande Valley, primarily based in Starr County and from that experience published a controversial essay in the popular magazine, *Scribners*.

The Border Studies Archive at the University of Texas-Pan American has a filmed version of Dr. Hurtado's talk on file.