

A MEXICAN-AMERICAN FEMINIST MEDIEVALIST

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When I first decided to go to graduate school to study medieval history, a few members of my family thought that I was ashamed to be Mexican-American. After all, I'm studying European culture, the culture of Mexico's oppressors. I have often wondered what it means to be Mexican-American - how I'm supposed to live and think and love. When I was growing up I sensed that I lived between at least two worlds. In the affluent, white neighborhood where I grew up and went to a private school, most of the Mexicans and Mexican-Americans my friends came into contact with were cleaning their houses or serving their food. More than once, I had friends tell me, "But you're not really Mexican. You're not one of Them." I suppose I'm not, if you limit your definition to people who speak English with a Mexican accent and do your gardening or take your order at fast-food restaurants. Unfortunately, these stereotypes are not limited to the minds of white suburban high-school students.

When I applied to the University of California, Riverside for undergraduate studies, I applied under the Affirmative Action Program as a Mexican-American. I checked that one little box that told the admissions office my ethnicity, and when I received my acceptance letter I got an additional letter explaining that since I had been admitted as a Mexican-American, I would have to attend basic English courses during the summer. The fact that I had taken the Advanced Placement exam in English and gotten the highest score possible, the fact that I had gotten high scores on the verbal section of the SAT, these things meant nothing. It had already been decided that because I was Mexican-American, I did not have the basic English skills required to do college-level work. I did not attend UC Riverside.

In 1939, my uncle was the first of my grandmother's five children to attend a non-segregated elementary school. One year earlier my grandmother had refused to enroll him in the Mexicans-only school that was the only option for immigrant children. In 1994, Proposition 187 passed by a large majority here in California. In that vote, Californians told the rest of the world that Mexican immigrants are all the same, and that they are certainly not real people with a past or a future.

I think I began to realize a long time ago that there is a balance between shaping one's own identity and having it shaped for one. When I fill out forms, I will always check the box that defines my ethnicity as Mexican-American, but my identity as a Mexican-American woman is what I make it. One of the keys to shaping the identity of a culture or an individual is a knowledge of history. As an historian, a mixed-mutt mestiza can reclaim both sides of her past and find strength in them. The Spaniard who is my great-grandfather is as much my ancestor as the Yaqui Indian who is my great-grandmother.

I feel that being a feminist is a natural accompaniment to being an ethnic minority. While I didn't choose to be a Mexican-American, becoming a feminist was an outgrowth of my desire to reclaim the past and find my identity within it. I am happy to say that in the graduate program I am in I have had the freedom and encouragement to do so. I am a female, flip-side of Christopher Columbus, venturing from Aztlan to stake my claim in the Old World.

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