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Critical Latin American and Latino Studies (review)

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Critical Latin American and Latino Studies. Juan Poblete, ed.

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003. xli and 241 pp., notes, references, no graphics, two tables, no index. \$19.95 paper (ISBN 0-8166-4079-3).

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As Latin Americanists, questions of where our livelihoods are headed are important. We like what we do, and hopefully we offer something valuable to the community by doing research and teaching. Poblete's collection of eleven essays treating the history, status, and future of Latin American Studies (LAS), and Latino Studies (LS), is perhaps most usefully viewed as meta LAS and LS, and offers us some reflections and prescriptions about the changing mandates of institutional support of Area and Ethnic Studies (AES).

Poblete's lengthy introduction discusses the problematique of such words as Hispanic and Latino/a, and sets up the discussion of LAS and LS in this increasingly globalized post Cold War context. There is a very definite focus on Chicano/a, Puerto Rican, and Cuban American issues, really to the exclusion of the rest of Latin America and Latino/a communities in the United State. The editor also defines some of the conundrums of our scholarship including the misunderstanding of Hispanics in the United States as a homogeneous bloc, the utility of our research for community needs as opposed to detached objective scholarship, bilingualism or the lack of it in the public conversation, and the improbability of doing good research on immigrant communities without researching the sending regions and the migrant circuits associated with those communities. The collection works through the themes of numerous epistemologies, such as LAS and LS, AES, literature, global economies, indigenous issues, linguistic conundrums, and race. Common in many of the thorough referenced and noted essays are

discussions of language and globalization.

Part I, "On the History of Area and Ethnic Studies," addresses concerns including the changing zeitgeists that influence funded research and the general bureaucratic context of research institutions. It is argued that Latino Cultural Studies has been more a cultural and political assimilation tool of the Western internal colonizers than a field of study used for pure research. LAS, LS, and AES have "been considered touristic voyeurism" (p. 7), instead of research driven by more pure motives. Westerners in the research institutions have considered themselves racially superior to Latino/a culture. The bureaucrats at the policy making levels are described as racists who view Latino studies as fake scholarship and a grandstand for a special interest group. The point is made to consider the importance of North America as the fifth greatest Latin American space due to its number of Spanish speakers, driving home the ridiculousness of the simplistic political conversation and naive media which treat Latinos/as in North America as a bloc, when in fact the population represents a diaspora from all over Latin America representing many world views. It is on this point that LAS and LS can co-labor at the bureaucratic level. The problems associated with ethnic labels such as those on census forms are also an important subject. The October 7, 2003 elections in California showed how real a concern this is with the defeat of Proposition 54. Different approaches to LAS, LS and Pensamiento Critico (PC) are discussed as well. Most of the different approaches are due to the genealogy

of academic paradigms and cultural mandates on the discursive.

In addition to a defense of Dependency Theory, it is suggested that scholarship endogenous to Latin America tends to be directed towards solving problems, but research generated in North America is indifferent, and perhaps treats Latin America as a utility, as if Latin America were there to service North American scholars. The point is made, a truism ignored all too often in the public mind as well as in LAS, that the language of scholarship really does matter, and that English as the *lingua franca* of LAS represents the hegemony of North American scholarship and the subaltern position of similar analyses written from Latin America in Spanish or Portuguese. The history of LAS is traced from its beginnings in the early Cold War mandates to build linkages with politically and economically unstable regions south of the border, to the current context of not fearing revolutions from the south and needing to work harder at demonstrating clear, convincing, and consistent evidence of relevance. This changing motivation to support Area and Ethnic Studies (AES) takes place consequentially with a shift toward global market driven educational objectives, such as producing graduates who can create wealth, and away from scholarship that is not easily econometrically quantified.

The second section of the volume, Part II "Different Knowledges and the Knowledge of Difference: Gender, Ethnicity, Race, and Language," presents more discussion on the "perils of panethnic forms of identification" (p. 106), the political and economic "usefulness" of Latinos/as, linguistic chauvinism and the *menospreciando* of Spanish language press and popular and high literature, indigenous communities' epistemological methods and knowledge content and desire to continue existing as unique cultures, changing theories of knowledge, and disunity in the body of Spanish language media in North America.

The final section, Part III "The Critique of the Future and the Future of

Critique", offers perspectives on what action may be needed to direct LAS, LS, and AES to a desirable and useful position in the North American academic institutions. An especially useful correction is offered to the pessimistic view that the end of our field as we know it is near: "...conditions today may be more propitious for the establishment of Latino studies than they were a generation ago" (p. 194). The problems of finding meaning in racial and ethnic labels, the propensity of state institutions to continue to use them despite the recognized problems with them, and the reality that these labels are influential determinants of quality of life for immigrants in the U.S. from south of the border are subjects of Part III. John Beverly concludes the section, and indeed the volume, with his polemic on globalization and cultural hegemony. "Multiculturalism is not a tourist's eye view of 'ethnicity'" (p. 235), rather it is that exposure to other cultures that arrives via propinquity. He asserts that true multiculturalism will be the path to successful socialism.

The authors of the eleven essays on the changing state of LAS, LS, and AES present observations that I believe they would readily identify as being from the political, cultural, and economic "Left". As such, it is clearly far from what anyone should consider objective scholarship; rather it should be seen as their effort to win the uncommitted to their way of thinking. Marx is frequently invoked and class struggle is a common theme throughout the volume, as is a generally critical treatment of predominant North Americana (perhaps not all of it deserved). There are quite a few strong charges made throughout the volume, either suggesting or plainly stating, that Anglo America is intentionally trying to keep "inferior" races in their "proper" place (pp. xxvii, 8, 26, 29, 215). There is little recognition of positive contributions by the West, North America, or the U.S. Legitimate problems of globalization are highlighted, without a balancing narrative on the benefits.

I believe that program directors, de-

partment heads, grant writers, and some others can find some astute observations and analysis here, as long as the reader can get around the solidly Left presentation. It can be argued that policy decisions are ideologically driven, thus, any book that deals with such subject matter should be approached with similar understanding. The reminders of the importance of language, the difficulties of race or ethnicity labels, the changing atmosphere of research, and the problems of popular sovereignty presented by global trade negotiations are invaluable. I would like to have seen in this volume more data tables, an index, and graphic organizers of some of the arguments. Yes, this means pictures, but we geographers understand how much information can be conveyed by a simple graphic thoughtfully created. Key words: *Latino/a*, *multiculturalism*, *Chicano/a*, *indigenous*, *globalization*