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Chicano While Mormon: Activism, War, and Keeping the Faith

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Ignacio M. Garcia. *Chicano While Mormon: Activism, War, and Keeping the Faith*.
Madison, N.J.: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2015.

Reviewed by Jorge Iber

Anyone familiar with the area of Mexican American/Latino history is acquainted with the extensive writings of BYU's Professor Ignacio M. Garcia. Among his many works are important tomes in this field of academic study such as *United We Win: The Rise and Fall of La Raza Unida Party*; *Hector P. Garcia: In Relentless Pursuit of Justice*; *Viva Kennedy: Mexican Americans in Search of Camelot*; and, most recently, *When Mexicans Could Play Ball: Basketball, Race and Identity in San Antonio, 1928–1945*. While all of Garcia's works focus on issues of social justice and Chicano/Mexican American (and, more broadly, Latino) identity, his work on high school hoops in his hometown of San Antonio, Texas, Garcia's most recent effort (prior to the book being reviewed here) sets up effectively much of the philosophical and storytelling underpinning presented in this autobiographical work, *Chicano While Mormon*.

In his sport and social history offering, Garcia examines the significance of Lanier High School (in San Antonio) and the impact of the tremendous success of this basketball team (the Volks), including two state titles, upon the establishment, development, and sustenance of ethnic pride in his neighborhood. In short, he argues, the Volks' victories on the courts of Texas made it possible for barrio-dwellers to challenge the rampant notion of the inferiority of Mexican Americans and to measure themselves against (and more often than not, triumph over) a majority populace that looked down upon this group's intellectual and physical abilities and work ethic. This book shows that sport can be utilized as a vehicle of resistance to the oppression and stereotyping of this particular community.

Likewise, in *Chicano While Mormon*, Garcia demonstrates, through a personal and highly revealing work, how religious affiliation and belief can sustain an individual in trying social (including political)

and personal circumstances. Among the most poignant discussions are those concerning how Garcia's faith helped him navigate his difficult teenage years in Texas and his tour of duty during the Vietnam War, particularly as he reached out to help locals and avoided the pitfalls of drugs and other vices so prevalent among combatants. Fortunately, this enlightening aspect of the book is not new for this genre. For example, I studied several similar cases in my research on Latino Mormons in Utah. Those of us who embrace our faiths sincerely can, and quite often do, enjoy similar results and make similar pronouncements. Devotion to a particular creed can help overcome the difficulties confronted in one's family and neighborhood, in school settings, and even amid the trials and tribulations of time in a war zone. All of these situations Garcia details beautifully and extensively in his work and documents how his Mormon faith served as a bulwark against all manner of depravations and temptations.

The real contribution of *Chicano While Mormon*, however, is Garcia's account of how he has managed to reconcile his affiliation with a mostly "conservative" religious congregation to his activism within various groups of the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s and beyond. There is no doubt that Garcia embraces his Mormon faith, and there is also no doubt that political activism is simultaneously a crucial component of his faith-life. To be a "liberal" Mormon and likewise a "conservative" Catholic (as this reviewer describes himself) does seem to go against important theological and political grains. Garcia verbalizes the key question presented in this book by stating point blank that he was always concerned about whether "being political [was] becoming of an LDS?" (61). As he notes throughout, the author's life experiences and academic career have been an effort to make the spiritual political, and he fully acknowledges the complexities of what many would consider an intellectual and religious high-wire act. Still, it is made abundantly clear that Garcia believes it imperative to be political in order to be a "good" member of the LDS faith.

The religious institution to which he is attached has been based historically, in large part, upon the notion of brother helping brother, and that is at the core of this Chicano's long track record of activism. Garcia clarifies this idea by stating that "believing in the worth of the human soul makes social activism an inherently righteous endeavor" (35). Indeed, it is his religious faith that not only compels his political activism, but it is what makes the endeavor worthwhile, for through such work he fights not only for a righteous cause but makes it possible

to point out to others (both within the LDS fold and outside of it) where they are not living up to crucial tenets of their respective faiths. Continuously reinforced is the notion that not being in favor of certain social welfare programs is deemed as not being truly in tune with the reality of LDS history, culture, and teaching.

In the book's foreword, Eduardo Obregon Pagan goes even further and chastises Garcia's coreligionists (and others of good faith in other sects, it would seem) for embracing a political philosophy—Reaganism, to be specific—that he does not agree with. It is this tone that creates some dissonance in the mind of this reviewer with *Chicano While Mormon*. If members of a particular faith chose to pursue the quest for greater fairness, equality, and opportunity in other ways, does that make them less religious? While the majority of the work beautifully recounts the movement of a religious spirit in the life of Professor Garcia, this judgmental tone is palpable and created for this reader an unnecessary distraction from an otherwise worthwhile, if not heroic, story.

This is an autobiographical work, and of course the author has the right to express his own views, but it is also necessary to understand that the religious beliefs and life experiences of others (be they white, Chicano, or whatever) also influence them. Thus, how a person perceives social issues and vehicles for their possible resolution is dependent on their beliefs and background. An effective example of this can be seen in an interesting incident Professor Garcia describes about a Chicano colleague's run-in with an unnamed Cuban American administrator at Texas A&I Kingsville (now Texas A&M–Kingsville) in the late 1960s. Garcia notes that this activist had a disagreement with the administrator, most likely because the Cubano did not agree with the positive perspective of the Cuban Revolution held by many naïve Chicanos of the time. Perhaps Dr. Garcia's recollection of this event would have benefitted from embracing the argument he makes later in the book when he states, "Reality is much more nuanced than when seen simply through ideology" (199). In summary, I highly recommend this excellent and revealing book to individuals who are interested in Mormon biography and autobiography as well as the broad and expanding topic of Latino/Chicano biography/history. Readers will find much validation of their faith (Mormon or others) within the pages of *Chicano While Mormon*. There will be those, however, who will encounter some cognitive dissonance in reading this work. If you believe yourself to be a person who cares for others and who wishes to make existence in this nation better for

all but who does not embrace some notions of activist government, be prepared for a direct challenge to your beliefs. While this is what good literature is supposed to do, a less confrontational tone would have been beneficial. As Dr. Garcia notes, his worldview came into focus when “I remembered that life was about developing character, being tested by fire, and forgiving,” and that is the true message presented in his life and careers, as well as in this inspiring autobiography.

Jorge Iber is Professor of History and Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Texas Tech University. He is the author of dozens of scholarly articles and reviews and is author, coauthor, or editor of nine books on a variety of Latino historical topics. Currently, he is working on three projects: a study of the Pittsburgh Pirates, an anthology on Latinos and sports, and a history of Latino participation in American football.