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# Ignacio M. Garcia, *Chicano While Mormon: Activism, War, and Keeping the Faith*

Reviewed by Rudy V. Busto

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her sex. Betrayed by her husband, her humanitarian ambitions stymied by powerful male church leaders, her life could be seen as modern tragedy. In any case, her efforts were heroic and deserving of the full history that Hall has written to revive her legacy.

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THE *WHILE* IN THE TITLE OF IGNACIO GARCÍA'S MEMOIR is an interesting, if ambivalent, word choice. Written by an accomplished and well-regarded BYU professor of Western American and Latino history, *Chicano While Mormon* is the first installment of a planned series of self-disclosing volumes, the rare Chicano voice in the vast corpus of Mormon autobiography. Forgoing a more neutral "Chicano and Mormon" as his title, García intends *While* to convey the notion of simultaneity ("Chicano *and at the same time* Mormon"), although his story suggests a contrastive sense ("Chicano *even if* Mormon"). *Chicano While Mormon's* time span covers García's family roots on the Mexican

side of the US-Mexico border through his exit from his political activist years at Texas A&I, in Kingsville, Texas. Although his life story unfolds chronologically, García frequently interrupts the narrative with interesting bits of historical context, political opinion, and, on occasion, sharp sermonizing.

García's narrative is told in eighteen unevenly sized chapters (ranging from six to twenty-two pages) covering three formative time periods. Chapters 1–6 take us from his grandparents in Mexico to family life on the Mexican west side of San Antonio, Texas, and on through high school. García's army career as a medic, including his tour in Vietnam, is treated in chapters 7–11, while chapters 12–17 focus on García's college education and entry into Chicano activism, the period of his life that would influence his future career as an important historian of mid-twentieth-century Mexican American/Chicano politics. The last chapter, prosaically titled "Final Thoughts on This Phase of My Life," is a frank meditation on a life spent negotiating the shifting and rocky path of what it means to be Chicano and Mormon. Six pages of photographs with captions accompany the text.

The foreword by fellow historian, Latter-day Saint, and Chicano Eduardo Pagán helps frame García's narrative by providing a broad context for the overlapping struggles and minoritizing of both Mexican Americans and Mormons in the United States. Of particular interest is Pagán's view that *Chicano While Mormon* sits at the intersection of a long trajectory of Mormon autobiography and Mexican/Chicano self-disclosing narratives. But it is in this space where García's narrative gets trapped between his strong desire to demonstrate fidelity to Mormon authority and the need to assert the essential Chicano content of his life's story. I disagree with Pagán's assertion that "the role of the church or theology in Mexican and Mexican American autobiographies, if present at all, tends to serve more as context than anything else" (p. xiii) for claiming the uniqueness of García's narrative. In fact, two of the most popular and controversial Mexican American self-disclosing narratives, Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory* (1982) and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), locate the church and religion

as central factors in the forging of singular selves. In addition, Reies López Tijerina's allegorical *Mi lucha por la tierra* (1978) can be read as theology and is written as a kind of scripture. It would also be valuable to compare García's memoir with Antonio A. Feliz's mostly forgotten *Out of the Bishop's Closet* (1988), which recounts the writer's struggles with LDS Church authorities as a gay Mexican American Mormon. Both Feliz and García are rooted in immigrant Mexican communities and grew up as outsiders because of their Mormonism. Despite the vast distance between their relationships to the LDS Church today (Feliz was excommunicated in 1985 and founded the Restoration Church of Jesus Christ), both of them became politically aware in the 1970s, served as bishops and in numerous other positions in the church, and have much to say about the treatment of Latinos in the LDS Church.

García tells us in the prologue that he has "two audiences," Mormons and Chicanos (p. xxi). This goal is Olympian, and indeed the narrative's structure and tone reveal much about García's sometimes overlapping but usually divided allegiances. That is, García's careful, almost excruciating, attention to writing for both audiences forces him into a narrative strategy that hides as much as it reveals about him. For example, even as he affirms his devotion to both cultures, he nevertheless sets himself apart from them:

Being a Chicano Mormon intellectual makes me an incredibly rare breed of scholar that rarely fits in nicely anywhere or is fully understood by anyone. I'm a complicated Mexican, more "barrio" than my colleagues who write about it and less so than my friends who live in it. I am more liberal than my Mormon *hermanos* and more personally conservative than my "radical" *compañeros*. . . . I have, in the past, been treated with suspicion by Chicano scholars and Mexican American activists who can't believe that a Mormon would be as committed to positive change for his people as I am. While some Mormons believe that the commitment to my faith must be soft and secondary to a scholarly activism they deem outside the church's traditions. (p. xxi)

In order to communicate across his two target audiences, García is continually forced into providing contexts, and he rarely passes up the opportunity to offer his opinion on a wide variety of religious, political, and cultural topics. Readers will find these ruminations and digressions revealing of who García is today, but the downside to this running commentary is that we are given less information about the people closest to him in his story. The reader wants to know more about his father, Virgilio, and especially his involvement with Rosicrucianism, and it is surprising that we are given only a few impressions of García's wife, Alejandra.

Of course, every self-disclosing narrator chooses which events to tell and how to frame them, and so García's memoir is saddled with having to tack between his Mormon readers and his Chicano readers. For example, in chapter 14 he recounts his entry into the complicated world of Chicano politics. Addressing his LDS readers, García discusses nuances in Mexican American politics on and off the college campus, coalition politics, ideological partisanship, and regional race relations. Turning to his Chicano readers, García includes a fascinating reflection on how one of the first, and certainly most important, Chicano intellectuals, Octavio Romano, "provided a meaning to my Mexican Mormonism" (p. 172). It is Romano's arguments about Chicano peoplehood that sparks García's thinking, allowing him to make a crucial link between his political activism and Lamanite history in the Book of Mormon.

Still, despite the hooks he offers his readers to help them enter these different worlds, there is stiffness in the writing that I suggest is related to his profession as a historian. That is, while García is very good at giving us background and setting up how and why he moves in the world, a barrier remains between him and his readers. His dedication to clarity in how he presents history precludes, for the most part, a more lyrical and textured story. Note, for example, his invitation to Chicano activism through ethnic studies professor Jose Reyna at Texas A&I:

Reyna must have seen my passion for what I was learning because he took a particular liking to me and one evening he mentioned

that there were some students and community people involved in activism and asked me if I might be interested in meeting them. “Sure,” I said, though I’m not sure I knew exactly what he meant either by “activism” or “meeting them,” but a few days later he brought Raul Villarreal to speak to the class on La Raza Unida’s activities in Kingsville and also at the university. Afterward, Reyna introduced me to Raul and then left us to talk for about an hour after class, at which time Raul invited me over to his house across from the university where we spent another several hours discussing Chicanismo. (p. 173)

Now compare the above excerpt with an account of the same incident in his 1997 academic book, *Chicanismo*:

It was after an ethnic studies night class in the fall of 1974 that Reyna approached me. He knew I was a journalism major, and so he asked me to look into the university’s employment practices as they related to the maintenance workers, most of whom were Chicano. As an already-motivated student of his ethnic studies class, I jumped at the opportunity. He quickly referred me to the aforementioned house, and that night I spent hours listening to Raul Villarreal and Jorge Guerra talk about university employment practices, protest politics, Chicano history, the Mexican Revolution, and working-class culture. Much like many young people of my generation, I became fascinated by the new interpretation of Mexican American history, by the bold defiance, and by the excitement of embarking on a social movement.

The contrast between these two accounts is striking. The autobiography casts the young García as naive to the world of Chicano politics, with his introduction to activism functioning as a conversion moment. In contrast, the *Chicanismo* version, written for a Chicano reader, contains in one paragraph a wealth of additional details, feeling, and movement. Here we gain a better sense of a young, eager, “already-motivated” García. Other events in the memoir present a similarly callow Ignacio whose innocence and openness are either led by mentors into awareness and action or, faced by racist or rigid authority, are turned into anger

and confusion. For the most part, the reader is shut out of the young García's interior life. But this is neither García's failing memory nor his unwillingness to let us in. Rather, this "surface" portrait of the youthful Ignacio is characteristic of the memoir genre, in which the mature narrator's purpose is primarily a didactic one. Despite its focus on the first twenty or so years of his life, García's text forgoes autobiography's traditional *bildungsroman* motivation, allowing him to freely comment and render judgment on the state of Chicano politics and identity, church policy and culture, and university intrigue and administration.

And yet García's experience as an army medic in Vietnam is riveting. He is assigned to an airfield deep in the jungle where he encounters the tragedies of injury and death daily. Here García's restraint as a professional historian serves to balance the wildly shifting emotional ordeals of confronting field injuries, racial tension, and violence among the soldiers; Vietnamese civilian casualties; and an obligation to missionize for the church. Enduring the horrors of his tour, García finds solace and love with a Vietnamese woman working in the dispensary. The outcome of his relationship with Nguyen Kim Huong is a tragic and difficult episode in the book. García struggles, unsuccessfully, to convince his readers that he has yet to come to terms with what happened between them or that he has moved beyond regret.

Mormon autobiographies, according to Steven Sondrup, tend toward presenting lives as confident and "remarkably secure in their position." This description might adequately explain García's voice that, at times, transforms a well-earned self-confidence into moralizing, or what Sondrup calls "a tone of condescending stuffiness" (p. 76). However, the fact of García's identity as so fundamentally Chicano, *alongside* his skirmishes with LDS Church authorities, periods of spiritual anomie, and slights against him from white Saints, rescues *Chicano While Mormon* from self-righteous shrillness.

The Chicano reader will find much that is familiar here, from the nostalgia of the barrio to political awakening and the passion and exhaustion of identity politics. Chicanos will find the Mormon content compelling, if not at times puzzling, in its glimpse of the labyrinthine

and hierarchical character of LDS Church administration. I imagine that Mormon readers will be sobered by García's travails with the church but hopeful in the steely-eyed steadfastness of his love for the Mormon faith. And it is at this intersection—this magnetic pull toward divergent, at times contradicting, identities and allegiances—where *Chicano While Mormon* operates in the interstitial zone the Aztecs referred to as *nepantla*: the “middle place” that forces ongoing negotiation between distinct cultures, languages, religions, and selves.

*Chicano While Mormon* will help many readers understand the intersectional nature of American ethnic and religious identities, and García is to be applauded for sharing this necessarily complicated story. García's book is a welcome addition to the emergent literature by Latinos outside traditional religious (read Roman Catholic, Evangelical, Pentecostal) affiliations. It is, therefore, all the more unfortunate that *Chicano While Mormon* is prohibitively priced (\$75 hardback), effectively putting it out of the reach of many of García's intended readers. The reader will also be surprised at more than a handful of typographical errors.

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