

Fall 2016

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Anupama Arora

University of Massachusetts Dartmouth

Laura K. Muñoz

Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi

Sandrine Sanos

Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi

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Recommended Citation

Arora, Anupama, Laura K. Muñoz, and Sandrine Sanos. 2018. "A History of Their Own: A Conversation with Vicki L. Ruiz." *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 11 (Fall): 6-15. <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/jfs/vol11/iss11/3>

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A History of Their Own: A Conversation with Vicki L. Ruiz

Anupama Arora, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth

Laura K. Muñoz, Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi

Sandrine Sanos, Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi

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Vicki Lynn Ruiz

Vicki Lynn Ruiz—the granddaughter of a unionized, immigrant coal miner—grew up listening to stories told by her mother Erminia Pablita Ruiz Mercer and her grandmother María de la Nieves Moya. Her understanding of Mexican American women’s history emerged from their kitchen-table remembrances. In her book, *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America* (1998), Ruiz recounts, “My mother and grandmother would regale me with tales of their Colorado girlhoods, stories of village life, coal mines, strikes, discrimination, and family lore.” Similarly, Ruiz’s first book, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives* (1987), emanated from the stories of union leader and civil rights activist Luisa Moreno, who invited Ruiz into her Guadalajara, Jalisco, home one summer while Ruiz was completing her graduate coursework. The bonds that grew between Ruiz and all three women, whom she describes as her first mentors, set her on a pathbreaking journey that made invaluable contributions to the fields of Chicana studies and Latina history.

To say that Ruiz’s work centers these academic fields and that her intellectual impact extends broadly across academia, nationally and internationally, is no overstatement. Awarded a 2014 National Humanities Medal by President Barack Obama, Ruiz served as the elected president of the American Historical Association (AHA), the American Studies Association (ASA), the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians, the Organization of American Historians (OAH), and the Pacific Coast Branch of the AHA. She is also a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Such accolades, commitment, and service to the profession have been built earnestly and painstakingly over four decades and at five universities in the American borderlands, where she has taught and provided administrative leadership since 1987. Over the decades, Ruiz has made invaluable interventions in a variety of disciplines—such as social history, American history, Chicana history, women’s studies, and labor history—and notably by directing 25 PhD dissertations and bringing new cohorts of scholars into the profession, including the filmmaker Virginia Espino.

Ruiz has made it her life’s work to recuperate stories that tell the rich history of Chicanas in the making of America. In the introduction to *From Out of the Shadows*, Ruiz writes, “As farm workers, flappers, labor

activists, barrio volunteers, civic leaders, and feminists, Mexican women have made history. Their stories, however, have remained in the shadows” (xiii). Making Chicanas visible as part of the United States, and writing them indelibly into the nation, has been Ruiz’s ongoing political project, one that—through placing colonialism, migration, and gender as central—seeks to decolonize history and higher education. Drawing on a variety of sources—primarily oral and personal narratives, but also pamphlets, popular culture (including advertisements), newsletters, songs, poems, and even missionary reports—she brings “out of the shadows” the stories of Chicana and Chicano arrival, settlement, and survival in the United States, and most importantly their various contributions—as historical actors, as resistant subjects—to the social and cultural landscape of the US, whether through their unionizing work for good working conditions and better wages, their intra- and interethnic networks and coalitions, or their protests against racism. For instance, through focusing on the cannery workers in southern California, Ruiz’s first book *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives* (1987) provides a rich portrait of women’s work culture and Mexican women as leaders in labor activism in the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA).

Ruiz’s important article, “Nuestra América: Latino History as United States History” (2006), exemplifies the kind of penetrating inquiry she demands of historians and academia writ large. She provides a different chronicle of three canonical moments of American history: 1848 (the end of the Mexican–American war), 1898 (the Filipino–Cuban–Spanish–American war), and 1948 (post–World War II and an important moment in the desegregation of US Latinos). She suggests that we disrupt conventional narratives by examining what happens to US history when we tell it as a story of US imperialism. The narrative threads of imperialism, decolonization, and transnationalism are woven across Ruiz’s scholarship. Her coedited anthology (with Ellen Carol DuBois), *Unequal Sisters* (1990)—a collection of thirty essays—is now required reading in many history and women’s studies courses; and it uses a multicultural framework, “one in which many pasts can be explored simultaneously to organize a genuinely national, a truly inclusive, history of women” (xiii). Other projects too accomplish Ruiz’s career-long goals. Works such as the collection *Latinas in the United States: A Historical Encyclopedia* and the digital *Latinas in History: An Interactive Project* (with biographies, timelines, and lesson plans) provide rich and invaluable resources for educators and the larger community.

Thus, whether it is her scholarship on Mexican women and their unionization in the California food processing industry in the 1930s and 1940s, or her initiatives within institutions and professional organizations (such as Humanities Out There), all of Ruiz’s work provides a model of civic engagement, one that is governed by an ethical impulse toward social justice and change.

In the interview that follows, Ruiz offers her thoughts on a variety of topics such as race and activism in the academy, the importance of collaborations and conversations, and feminism.

The Politics of the University

Anupama Arora, Laura K. Muñoz, and Sandrine Sanos (JFS): We want to begin with what has been on our minds and part of many discussions across the academe: the challenge a lot of us faculty face to do what we want to do, and keep true to what we want to do, but also learn to preserve ourselves.

Vicki Ruiz (VR): You want to do good work. And also things that *you* want to do. Sometimes you feel you have to be on committees to try to move the needle forward, to make the academy a more humane and accessible place. I feel great when I’m able to contribute and help a junior scholar or a student, to watch them grow into themselves. When I was dean, one of the things I am most proud of was making sure that

embattled women assistant professors, who were facing tenure battles that shouldn't have been battles as they had clear-cut cases, got tenure. And, as dean, that was incredibly gratifying to me. But some battles that I participated in thirty years ago that I thought, by now, would be gone—they're still there! That's what's so frustrating.

JFS: Why do you think that is? Many of us are committed to the work. It reminds us of a theme in your work: the idea of “fictive kin.” To think of transgenerational communities is also a feminist principle, like you were saying; for example, supporting those who are junior to us, the mentoring of students. And yet, institutionally, that is still such a fraught space. We still have to battle so hard.

VR: I think that some of the issues are the same, but I also think that, in a way, it's harder today because of the increasing corporatization of the university, the increasingly private public university. And the headlong rush into STEM, particularly in public universities, troubles me as it frequently means a devaluation of the humanities. The proposals that float—higher tuition for students in engineering, in the physical and biological sciences, as opposed to the humanities or the social sciences (what are we—the cheap degrees?)—to me, run counter to the mission of the university. I feel very strongly our mission in state schools is to reflect the demographic realities of our country. We need funding to make activities and resources available for underrepresented students, for faculty of color. But, for example, if you're some sort of administrator of diversity, then you are seen as the diversity police, rather than seeing a commitment to diversity as a collective responsibility.

And then there is the issue of funneling of money into STEM, into centers of innovation to help faculty commercialize their research, particularly for colleagues in engineering, biosciences, physical sciences. How about putting these resources into undergraduate and graduate education writ large? And then, for me, it's not just dividing the campus but [promoting] a growing chasm of inequality.

JFS: And maybe even reproducing inequality for underrepresented students, for first-generation students, first-generation faculty.

VR: Absolutely. Why is the University of California Irvine's Student Outreach and Retention center (called SOAR) also the site of the food pantry? Shouldn't a food pantry and issues of food security be center stage? Shouldn't [the pantry] have its own office? Shouldn't we have more social workers? I do understand the priorities at a Research 1 university, an AAU university—the emphasis on research—but we can't forget our educational mission, and our educational mission to *all* students. Speaking about research universities, we often have not been good neighbors.

JFS: What do you mean?

VR: At times, universities are very isolated; they're not an integral part of the community. People don't see the institution as a place for partnerships. I also think in terms of community partnerships rather than community engagement. What is the difference? We have to differentiate between initiatives that really partner with neighborhood groups, associations, constituencies, and the programs that are based on a charity model, which say, look, we are here; our students are going to do this and that. Not that I think there's something wrong with that, but it's more of making our students feel good. Instead we need to think about how we can leverage the resources of the university, and how we can leverage our networks to improve the lives of people in our neighborhoods, of our neighbors.

JFS: And this sort of emphasis on community partnerships has been a theme in your work. We noted that in your article “Citizen Restaurant” you said that “our obligations as agents of change do not end at the campus parking lot” (Ruiz 2008, 2). You emphasize the meaning of what we do in the classroom and

how it must expand beyond the classroom. How do you think we could reimagine that especially for first-generation students in the university?

VR: Well, I think that, often, first-generation students are certainly closer to the ground on these issues. We have two very dynamic and active undocumented student groups on campus; and undergraduates are working one or two jobs, but their advocacy, activism, and their community projects are integral to what they do and who they are. However, unlike students of my generation or an earlier generation where people majored in social movements to the detriment of their studies [laughs], these students have a really good sense of balance. The students that I have met and worked with here, at Irvine, over the last 15–16 years, have a really good sense of that balance of trying to negotiate all the demands on their time.

Last quarter, I had a young Armenian American woman who commuted on Metrolink from Glendale (about fifty miles away), switched trains at Union Station in downtown LA, taking the Orange Line to Irvine (about a two-hour train trip), and then had to wait for a bus to take her on a twenty-minute ride to campus. That is a lot of coordination, and she was doing it! The day she had classes, she was up at 5:30! She's an A student who wants to be an attorney and go into family law. I had another student (white male) who was driving in from Redlands, which is at least an hour and a half away. There's a sense of appreciation of their education; it's not just a goal or, I'm going to get a degree and that's it. They really value the undergraduate experience.

Race, Politics, and the Public

JFS: Continuing in the same vein, in June 2015, you sent a letter in the name of the American Historical Association (AHA) to the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia to protest their decision to deny undocumented students access to top-tier universities in the state (AHA 2015). This policy by the Board of Regents is an example of the “renewed politics of exclusion” that you have discussed in your writing.

VR: Yes, and I never received a reply, by the way. They never acknowledged it. They don't have to.

JFS: Was it covered by the local news?

VR: Not that I know of. In fact, at the AHA's annual meeting in Atlanta, one of my presidential plenaries, “Students on the Front Lines: The Fight to Desegregate Public Higher Education in Georgia from the 1960s Atlanta Student Movement to the Undocumented Student Movement Today,” featured the [Executive] Director of Freedom University, Laura Emiko Soltis; Charles A. Black, former chair of the Atlanta Student Movement; and current [Freedom University] student Melissa Rivas-Triana (Ruiz 2015). And while our session was well attended, there was no media coverage.

JFS: That's very symptomatic of the unwillingness to address those issues. So then, what do we do? How do we continue to further decolonize higher education?

VR: We need to continue to try to heighten the consciousness of students and colleagues. I haven't been successful at op-eds, but I know people who are really successful. To me, Héctor Tobar is a wonderful public intellectual. He's a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist; he's a PEN [award] winner and now an assistant professor at the University of Oregon after a long career at the *Los Angeles Times*. He's educating through the way he writes, particularly [by] placing materials on Latinos in East Coast publications like *The New Yorker* or *The New York Times*.¹ Not everyone has that talent, but we should nurture and get people to try. To me, learning to write for a larger public should be part of a graduate seminar that all students in the humanities and social sciences should take.

JFS: Yes, it is important to learn to imagine different publics and to think about the different constituencies of people one is speaking to.

VR: A couple of years ago, I gave a talk at the Rotary Club here at Irvine, and then this year I gave a talk at the Santa Ana Kiwanis Club. I was able to engage people in conversation. No one person was hostile; it wasn't the sort of poisonous environment of anonymous comments on the Internet. We had a really nice discussion. Not everybody agreed, and that was OK. It gives me hope for civility. Making those connections is important. We can only change the kind of things we can and always encourage conversations. And bring injustices out into the open that many people don't acknowledge. For example, one of my mentees, Julian Bugarin, is a born organizer. With earnestness and a touch of charisma, he, as the student government labor liaison, has made his peers much more aware of the differentials in wages and benefits between custodial workers and gardeners employed by our campus and those employed by subcontractors. He has done so by organizing events that bring workers and students in conversations with one another. He is one among many social justice-minded undergraduates seeking to raise awareness as well as [promote] actions on campus. These are undergraduates and *their* initiatives.

JFS: What you're saying also echoes what's been in your work all the way through. It's not just working at the national level, it's also taking seriously what's local, what are our immediate local communities or those micro-level narratives that rarely get heard but that you should make your business to know.

Feminism(s) Today

VR: I feel extraordinarily privileged to have interviewed the women I have interviewed, to have worked with undergraduate and graduate students. I owe a tremendous intellectual debt to my graduate students. It's a collective effort. [In fact], there are so many feminisms. But, also, when you decouple gender from the social justice train, it's no longer feminism. Feminism and social justice are intertwined; and social justice is the core of feminist thinking. It's not about leaning in, out, or sideways; it's collective. You have scholars who will pronounce themselves as feminists and yet, in their daily interactions with colleagues and students, they're not practicing what they preach. They don't see the contradiction.

JFS: We agree that practice is really important; what we think about also has to be what we live. Do you see an awareness of feminism, or Chicana feminism, in your undergraduate students?

VR: It's disturbing. With some I do, with some I don't. There is no historical memory. When I took women's history in 1976, it changed my life, and I had a mentor who changed my life; it was Jean Gould Bryant who encouraged me to go to graduate school. There are still students who not only have no knowledge of Latino history, they have no knowledge of US women's history. I know that there is variation, depending on the teacher and the state-mandated curriculum, but it can be very unsettling.

However, I should say that last week I was interviewed by this incredible young Latina eighth grader, Emerson Orozco, for National History Day. She was talking about Chicanas in the movement for her National History Day project. And she had won her school competition, and wanted to interview me and get an idea where she can go for more sources, and I thought, this is great! I thought, here's someone who gets it. This is someone who has a consciousness. When I asked her if she had a knowledge of this history, she asked me if I had watched the film *No Más Bebés* and [said] that her grandmother had been one of the women who had been sterilized and one of the plaintiffs. I told her that it was made by my former student, Virginia Espino, and was based on her dissertation about this topic. So, through the project, this eighth grader was honoring her grandmother's legacy, a grandmother that she never met since she died in 1992.

But her father knew the stories. This was an important part of her personal legacy, and she was doing the project to honor her grandmother.

JFS: It shows the importance of transmitting that memory, of why we do women's history, gender history, Chicana history. We never cease to return to these topics and principles. Our work is so much more important because students don't always have that political awareness or consciousness.

VR: It is important. I want students to be *curious*. For instance, I want all students, whether they are history majors or not, to be able to go to a public history site and be able to evaluate it, to be able to weigh evidence, and think critically.

Conversations and Collaborations

JFS: In your article on Latino history as US history, you write about the ways in which we have to think of Latino borderlands history as something that unsettles the narrative (Ruiz 2006, 2011). In the same way, women's historians have said that it's not just about adding women to the narrative, but that putting women into the picture changes the narrative. You've done that work, but it still needs to be done institutionally and politically. And we wonder if you have any thoughts about how we need to keep on doing that.

VR: I think we should talk more to our colleagues about what we do, and talk about our research and our teaching and not get so involved with some of the petty politics. We spend so much time with the campus politics (the important struggles and the unimportant) that we don't really get a chance to discuss each other's work. And it's sad to say that it's often only the colleagues who are responsible for your merit who actually read your materials.

I feel this is the last department I will chair. The Department of Chicano and Latino Studies at the University of California Irvine is incredibly special. Not counting emeriti, the department is predominantly women, eight women and two men. I appreciate this sense of interconnectivity among the women. And a sense of listening to each other and collaborating, and [that] we will disagree with each other.

There's this common collaboration and talking with one another. At meetings, we disagree, but afterwards we'll have a cup of coffee, or have lunch. Once there was a fairly hot meeting, and I was not happy, and everybody filed out and I stayed there, trying to compose myself, and Ana Rosas came back about five minutes later, and asked me if I was OK. And I said, I will be, give me ten minutes, and I will be. But it's that sort of that level of collaboration that is rare and something that should be nurtured.

JFS: And I think it's especially urgent to foster this in the climate of corporatization of the university that puts so many more demands on faculty.

VR: You're so scared that somebody is going to take something from you that you begin to, sort of, pick on each other rather than join forces. It's not productive. We have to reach out in terms of commonalities [but] respect differences, respect our disciplinary differences.

JFS: That's why interdisciplinary programs such as women's and gender studies have a place because they try to always think in terms of intersectionality.

VR: Yes, it's both intersectionality and the idea of respect. We have to respect each other, and we also have to begin these kinds of conversations. Often the university is, in a sense, like graduate school all over again because we are competing. We should be mentoring each other, and not competing.

JFS: Absolutely, but it's hard to remember this, you know, when in Arizona ethnic studies are cut or when women's and gender studies departments have their resources curbed. That is the hardest to remember when there's a feeling of being embattled.

VR: Being embattled, it sets up, temporarily, a sense of us against the world. But you can't maintain that; it has to be something deeper than that. It's not about retreating, it's about amplifying your visibility. I am the biggest cheerleader for the department. If a colleague or student gets an award, I immediately send it to the communications office in the School of Social Sciences because I want my colleagues to know.

JFS: In part, explaining to others what *we* do is a way to build bridges. At the same time, the mood is so bleak. What do you think are the challenges and possibilities? For instance, we are thinking of the collection, *Presumed Incompetent*, on female faculty of color in the academy (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. 2012).²

VR: Yes, we are presumed incompetent. I'm actually on this committee right now for the Vice Chancellor for Advancement, basically a fancy name for the chief fundraiser. I was in a meeting, and a donor who I had never met was sitting next to me, and he was talking about the candidate's desired attributes for the job description. And he kept going, *he* should do this, *he* needs to be that. And I kept going, *she*, *she*. And he just sat glaring at me, and he said, well, *the person*. And it's one of those things where I hate doing this, but I made a point of announcing that "well, not all of you know me, but some may know that I'm a recovering dean. I was dean of the School of Humanities." I just felt that I had to let him know, and I felt bad that I had to do that. I also felt bad that I was the only woman faculty member in the room, and none of the women staff members and certainly none of my male colleagues said anything, and I thought that I had to do what I had to do myself. It's not going to be a fun committee! I came back home afterwards, and my husband asked me, "How'd it go?" I said, "Oh, I just played feminist bitch for the last hour," and he said, "Oh, I bet you enjoyed it." I'm sorry, but this is 2016, and you just don't say "he" to refer to a candidate. Then, the donor also said *this person* has to have gravitas. I said, excuse me, but "gravitas" reeks white male privilege. He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "It reeks white male privilege. Period." I said, "I've known a number of women and men from underrepresented groups who have applied for higher education jobs and have been told that they didn't get positions because they were perceived as lacking gravitas!" The donor asked me, "What would you use instead of gravitas?" I said that we could use a variety of words such as "stature," "respect," "poise," "confidence."

JFS: Yes, one has to constantly push back against this coded language that makes the unspoken culture.

VR: And there's an increasing allowance for this type of intolerance, to say exactly what you mean, in the public culture. You see it in actions all over the country—against women's rights, against people of color, against religious minorities. When did we become the 1920s? It is a scary time, and it's what I try to tell my students, that you have to be involved; you can't retreat into your own private social media world.

Activism, Social Justice, and the Academe

JFS: Continuing in this same vein of activism, the news has recently (and rightly) focused on the work of Black Lives Matter. Thinking about the ways in which state violence manifests itself, how might we broaden the political critique of Black Lives Matter?

VR: Black Lives Matter is exceptionally important. And important for undocumented students. "Black Lives" is not only a political issue for me but also a personal issue. It's about basic human decency and dignity; and the stripping of people's humanity, whether it's by the authority of the state—whether it's ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] or a cop on the beat.³ It's this authorial exercise of power. It's dehumanization of people of color. I've been asked, "So, why don't you say Latino Lives Matter?" To me, that's an appropriation, but certainly there can be coalitions that develop. I mean, that's part of what I've

done as a historian, to look for and find those moments of coalition. I would not want Latino Lives Matter to be perceived as appropriation, not that it necessarily would be, but that might be the perception.

JFS: So it's not so much that we need to hashtag Latino Lives Matter but to build coalitions that are the hardest to build, especially in politically difficult times.

VR: Yes, and these coalitions have to emerge at the grassroots level; [they're] not going to emerge from the top down. And these coalitions are fragile. Mary Wolford, who works on the rural land rights movement in Brazil, talks about coalitions and how it's the banalities that undermine coalitions, not really state authority (Wolford 2010). It is the petty tensions that bubble up, and the problem of what she refers to as the banalities, the day-to-day stuff that takes away from the larger common goals.

JFS: It's the hardest to build transnational coalitions. The discourse over undocumented students echoes the discourse on refugees that is both European and American; and for those who are subject to violence and vulnerable, for them to nonetheless try to organize is the most challenging.

VR: It's historical memory. Cherríe Moraga said it best: "The right to remember is a political act, one that counters our erasure from historical records."

JFS: Well, thank you so much for your time. And congratulations on getting the National Humanities Medal from President Obama.⁴

VR: Thank you. When I stepped on the stage, I thought about my mother and all of my students. In fact, Daniel, my youngest son, who was there, said to me, "You were thinking of Grandma up there, weren't you?" And I said, "Yes, I was!" And her spirit was certainly present.

Notes

1. Two examples of Tobar's recent pieces are "Latinos' Slow-Burn Anger" (*The New York Times*, March 9, 2016) and "The Trump Affront to Latinos" (*The New York Times*, July 20, 2016).

2. See also the Facebook page for *Presumed Incompetent*, which is followed by over 14,000 people.

3. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is a federal law enforcement agency under the Department of Homeland Security, which is charged with detaining and deporting immigrants.

4. Vicky Ruiz was one of ten recipients of the 2014 National Humanities Medal, which was conferred in a White House ceremony on September 10, 2015.

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Excerpt from Vicki L. Ruiz’s *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America* (1998)

When I was a child, I learned two types of history—the one at home and the one at school. My mother and grandmother would regale me with tales of their Colorado girlhoods, stores of village life, coal mines, strikes, discrimination, and family lore. At school, scattered references were made to Coronado, Ponce de León, the Alamo, and Pancho Villa. That was the extent of Latino history. Bridging the memories told at the table with printed historical narratives fueled my decision to become a historian.

From Out of the Shadows focuses on the claiming of personal and public spaces across generations. As farm workers, flappers, labor activists, barrio volunteers, civic leaders, and feminists, Mexican woman have made history. Their stories, however, have remained in the shadows.

Race, class, and gender have become familiar watchwords, maybe even a mantra, for social historians, but few get beneath the surface to explore their intersections in a manner that sheds light on power and

powerlessness, boundaries and voice, hegemony and agency. This book addresses issues of interpreting voice and locating power between and within communities, families, and individuals. Women's lives, dreams, and decisions take center stage.

Women of Mexican birth or descent refer to themselves by many names—Mexicana, Mexican American, and Chicana (to name just three). Self-identification speaks volumes about regional, generational, and even political orientations. The term Mexicana typically refers to immigrant women, with Mexican American signifying US birth. Chicana reflects a political consciousness borne out of the Chicano Student Movement, often a generational marker for those of us coming of age during the 1960s and 1970s. Chicana/o has also been embraced by our elders and our children who share in the political ideals of the movement. Some prefer regional identification, such as Tejana (Texan) or Hispana (New Mexican). Spanish American is also popular in New Mexico and Colorado. Latina emphasizes a common bond with all women of Latin American origin in the United States, a politicized Pan American identity. Even racial location can be discerned by whether one favors an Iberian connection (Hispanic) or an indigenous past (Mestiza or Xicana).

As part of her stand-up routine, lesbian writer and comic Monica Palacios articulates her multiple identities as follows:

When I was born
I was of Mexican-American persuasion
Then I became Chicana
Then I was Hispanic
Then I was a Third World Member
(my mom loved that)
Then I was a woman of color
Now I'm just an Amway dealer
And my life is happening.

Literary critic Alicia Arrizón refers to Palacios's work as "one of challenge where humor becomes the tool of reconstructing ways of understanding the self." Poet and novelist Alicia Gaspar de Alba conveys the image of the Chicana writer as "the *curandera* (medicine woman) or the *bruja* (witch) ... the keeper or culture, the keeper of memories." The exploration of identities, the conservation and creation of cultural practices and traditions, and the reconstruction of historical narratives are not without political intent. In the words of Sonia Saldívar-Hull, "The Chicana feminist looks to her history ... to learn how to transform the present."

Focusing on the twentieth century and the Southwest, this book surveys women's border journeys not solely in terms of travel, but of internal migration—creating, accommodating, resisting, and transforming the physical and psychological environs of their "new" lives in the United States. These are journeys of survival, resiliency, and community. They reveal, to quote Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "the material politics of everyday life, especially the daily life struggles of poor people—those written out of history."