

## Book Review:

**Romo, David Dorado. *Ringside Seat to a Revolution: An Underground Cultural History of El Paso and Juárez: 1893-1923*. El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press, 2005.**

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Born and raised in El Paso, Texas, a dominant image that sticks out in my mind is a view from Interstate-10, a common route for commuters. Whether heading east- or west-bound, the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) is, at one point, visible from the freeway, and if one takes a second look, an interesting juxtaposition presents itself: a reminder of the *borderlands* where this Texas city is nestled up against one of the most violent cities in Mexico—Ciudad Juárez. Here, visible on one side of the border is a setting of higher learning with its Bhutanese architecture and the Sun Bowl football stadium and on the other, one of many “*colonias*” (translated as “colonies”) comprised of dirt roads and make-shift housing upon desert hills in Juárez. Divided by the natural border of the Rio Grande, as well as man-made fences, images of higher education and shanty town life are visible in stark contrast, each facing the other as a reminder of its existence.

For many, living on the U.S.-Mexico border encompasses rich experiences of cultural hybridity (i.e., language and other forms of cultural practices) and a sense of blurred borders. Granted, you will become aware of the very concrete and material forms of *borders* by signs of the Border Patrol—*la migra*—and heavy surveillance at the ports of entry. The sister cities of El Paso and Juárez are known to many throughout the United States as sites of a constant flow of immigration, labor, and capital, transnational business, drug trafficking, femicide<sup>Mark</sup>, and of course, the increasing violence of the drug cartels spread throughout parts of northern Mexico and into El Paso.

What may not be as dominant of a characteristic is the region’s rich history related to its role during the Mexican Revolution in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century—a major social and political upheaval characterized by several movements, such as agrarian, socialist, populist, and anarchist. David Dorado Romo’s 2005 book *Ringside Seat to a Revolution: An Underground Cultural History of El Paso and Juárez: 1893-1923* is an important contribution to this significant part of Mexican and U.S. history. The book is a thorough historical and visual account, with numerous photos and other cultural artifacts, of what life was like in the *borderlands* during the revolution. As stated by Romo in his prologue, “[El Paso and Juárez] probably did more to spark the

Mexican Revolution than any other city in either Mexico or the United States. Yet their stories are still untold” (Romo 2005, 11).

Raised in both Juárez and El Paso, Romo notes that he spent a large part of his life trying to get as far away from both of the cities as possible—not an uncommon desire for many young El Pasoans, many of whom have referred to the city as “Hell Paso.” Like many of us who grew up in the region, it was easy for him to take it for granted. While he found himself from an early age wanting out and determined not to live on the border (“on the edge of the world”), Romo asserts, “. . . something kept drawing me back to this desert, this place that so many consider nothing more than a vast cultural wasteland. . . If geography is destiny, as they say, then I felt I had to come to terms with my own geography” (Romo 2005, 3-4).

He began the project by searching for any material remnants of Pancho Villa in the region. Villa has been viewed historically as a key figure in the revolution, and in many ways, as what occurs often throughout history, his image overshadows other instrumental figures and circumstances during this time. Thus, as Romo continued to search for hints of his presence, he became not only increasingly aware of the damage time and modern society has done (“. . . the Roma hotel had been torn down to make space for a Burger King. Pancho Villa was definitely not there any more”) but also aware of voices silenced in past histories of the revolution, specifically in regard to this region (Romo 2005, 7). Romo explains,

Pancho Villa took me to places where I never expected to go. But although Villa is everywhere in this book, it’s ultimately not about him. He’s merely my tour guide.

Instead *Ringside Seat to a Revolution* is about an offbeat collection of individuals who were in El Paso and Juárez during the revolution. Many of them crossed Pancho Villa’s path at one time or another. More often than not, they were both spectators and active participants during one of the most fascinating periods in the area’s history. (Romo 2005, 10)

Romo’s attention to detail with regard to the time Villa spent on the border, as well as attention to his personality and tastes (“Villa’s musical tastes: he enjoyed ‘El Corrido de Tierra Blanca,’ ‘La Marcha de Zacatecas,’ ‘La Adelita,’ and ‘La Cucaracha’”), is just one example of a major strength in this text (Romo 2005, 10). Tracing the steps of the military leader, Romo’s focus on Villa leads to more detailed findings related to those voices that have been overshadowed by more well known figures. Therefore, Romo’s methodology takes shape as a microhistory in the form of interviews and extensive archival research. As Romo notes, “Ultimately, microhistory is a method of study that focuses more on the mysterious and the poetic rather than on the schematic” (Romo 2005, 14).

The bulk of *Ringside Seat to a Revolution* includes detailed accounts of these figures, as well as specific events and circumstances that help shaped life on the border during the time leading up to, during, and after the revolution. The text is divided up into four sections: “Journalists, Radicals, and a Saint,” “The Revolution as Spectacle,” “A City Divided,” and

“Dying on the Border.” Each section includes a multitude of stories, all connected by their proximity to the El Paso-Juárez region, but covering a vast array of aspects of the revolution. In the first section (“Journalists, Radicals, and a Saint”), specific historical figures are discussed in detail and often connected to each other, such as: Terresita Urrea (the 22-year-old miracle worker who was and is still viewed as a saint, as well as a cultural symbol of revolution), Lauro Aguirre (unconventional revolutionary, editor, and agitator), Victor Ochoa (“the first Mexican American to launch a revolutionary movement from El Paso” and “inventor, editor, spy, smuggler, and science fiction writer” (Romo, 2005, 33-34)) and anarchists like Ricardo and Enrique Flores Magón, who, between 1906 and 1912, led an anarchist movement that attempted four separate uprisings from El Paso (Romo, 2005, 52).

There are also stories related to those who witnessed the revolution from a spectator’s perspective, as well as those affected more closely in the most violent ways, such as massacres. Many of these stories provide a complex view of this great social upheaval while taking into consideration issues of race, class, and gender. The section titled “The Revolution as Spectacle” includes some of the following chapters: “Cheap Tickets to the Battle of Juárez,” “Folk Hymns to Death, Marijuana, and Pancho Villa,” “Women and Young Girls Go to Juárez 1000 Nightly,” “Pancho Villa & the Greasers: Fronterizos in Film,” “Police Stop Woman at the Juárez Bullring,” and problematic articles from the *El Paso Times* about bulls being pitted against lions and buffalos for the sake of entertainment. The third section, “A City Divided,” presents considerations of segregation, racism, and xenophobia on the border in the sections, “A Racial Geography of El Paso” and “The Bath Riots.”

The last section, titled, “Dying on the Border,” concludes with death and execution and in what seems to be a sense of closure to this part of history. The last chapter in the section details the assassination of Pancho Villa. However, in the epilogue, Romo proclaims that after searching for years of his “psychogeographical explorations” in El Paso and Juárez, he finally bumped into Pancho Villa (Romo 2005, 261). Romo describes an evening where he followed a group of musicians into a Juárez bar where he sees an illusion of Villa on the bandstand playing the bajo sexto. Caught up in the illusion and the people dancing, he ends the book with, “When they stopped dancing, Pancho Villa had disappeared” (Romo 2005, 261). This almost seems to emphasize that the search continues and these glimpses of history will remain fluid, rather than complete and understood.

Much like other border studies texts, *Ringside Seat to a Revolution* emphasizes the complexity of the *borderlands*, not only in regard to geographical considerations and physical border crossing, but also in regard to cultural and identity politics. The text presents instances where notions of citizenship are complicated, as well as a consideration of the complexities of “truths” and “facts” in telling these stories. For the most part, the structure and content of Romo’s book provide important considerations of how knowledge about history is produced. Romo states early on, “This book is about a historical perspective that has been driven underground, buried underneath racist mythologies found in those ubiquitous books about the so-called Wild West...Although there are always two sides to every history, it’s usually only one

side that gets told in these accounts” (Romo 2005, 11). In a way, this book not only tells the stories related to revolution and struggles for social justice. Its emphasis on uncovering these untold stories and providing a sort of space for the voiceless to speak for themselves also lends itself to another form of “justice” related to bearing witness. It also provides another layer to a more dominant history of social change in U.S. history and interrogates the grand narratives of these histories. Romo elaborates,

Most educated Americans have heard of the Harlem Renaissance. But how many of them are aware of the cultural renaissance El Paso experienced during the Mexican Revolution? The story of Rosa Parks refusing to move to the colored section of the bus has become a central drama of the American experience, and rightly so. But the story of 17-year-old Carmelita Torres, who in 1917 refused to get off the El Paso-Juárez trolley to be deloused, bathed in kerosene and have her head shaved by U.S. immigration authorities, has never been told. Why is her experience also not part of the American consciousness?

On that note, it is possible to say that this text is first and foremost directed to an academic audience and scholars of cultural studies, border studies, and regional studies, for example. *Ringside Seat to a Revolution* is an excellent educational tool. It is heavy on history with only a limited amount of theory. Rather, Romo is dedicated for letting much of the cultural materials and voices from the past speak for themselves. He has compiled the work in a way that is easy to maneuver, with numerous sections that allow for points to stop and return to later. The visual elements add to the richness of the stories, and in a way, add to a more personal dynamic. By being able to see many of these faces—faces of happiness and laughter, faces of hopes and struggles, and faces of death—serves as an effective complement to the written text. Romo’s book can also serve as a counter-history to the sorts of mythologies that have been presented as histories of the “Wild West.”

Furthermore, it is worth noting that Romo’s book is worthy of interest for anyone who grew up in the El Paso-Juárez region. As someone born and raised in the region, reading about and seeing the wealth of history was not only fascinating but also struck a personal chord. Having shown the book to grandparents, it served as a catalyst for conversations that ranged from my paternal grandfather, who grew up in El Paso’s Segundo Barrio (“Second Ward”), pointing out parts of the city that he remembers, some of which are now demolished, to my maternal grandmother relaying stories she used to hear from her mother about Pancho Villa. In other words, a book like Romo’s reinforces the crucial need of knowing where you come from and the struggles and experiences related to your points of origin. The past does not stay put, however, and this is apparent in parts of the book where Romo notes the demolishing of certain buildings. In the appendix of the book, Romo provides a “walking tour” of El Paso and Juárez landmarks. Such information may also provide for a consideration of historical preservation. Many of the buildings in this book have either been demolished or are in danger of such a fate. *Ringside Seat to a Revolution* can, thus, serve as not only an educational tool for these parts of

history that may disappear but also for movements taking place in the city for the preservation of these histories in the face of capitalistic “growth” and “development.”

With this in mind, and while the text is quite strong, the only weakness that could perhaps be worthy of noting is a lack of more connections between the past and the present. In the prologue, Romo begins by locating himself biographically with regard to the project, including his own desire to distance himself from the region that eventually brought him back. While he states, “The first rule of psychogeography is to walk through the streets without preconceived notions; just drift and let the city’s underground currents take you where they will,” this sort of distance could take away from what seems like an overarching theme of the book. Romo obviously sees major importance in these stories and these material remnants of history, and this appears to be a crucial part of the prologue. However, the epilogue seems a bit brief and rushed. While there is a connection back to Villa as a catalyst to these stories and this romantic notion of the search, a stronger epilogue could have made more connections between the past and the present. Perhaps some coherence between Romo’s personal relationship with the region and his geographical fate could have provided for more discussion about issues like historical preservation and struggles against development, which erases the past.

*Ringside Seat to a Revolution* is a valuable text for all reasons listed above. While one book cannot encompass all layers of these complex stories of revolution, Romo’s text does an excellent job of beginning such conversations. By immersing himself in this microhistory of the El Paso-Juárez *borderlands*, Romo states, “I too have found underground trails, forgotten ancestors, lost photographs and music I had never heard before. This subterranean history is slowly becoming the history of all of us” (Romo 2005, 14).