

RICE UNIVERSITY
Center for the Study of Women, Gender, and Sexuality

THE POLITICS OF VULNERABILITY: SUBJECTS, BODIES, COMMUNITIES

Friday, March 26, 2010

12pm - 1:00pm, Kyle Morrow Room, Fondren Library 3rd Floor

3rd Annual CSWGS Graduate Symposium Keynote Address:

Monica Perales, Assistant Professor of History, University of Houston

'Who has a greater job than a mother?': Defining Mexican Motherhood on the U.S.-Mexico Border in the Early 20th Century

This paper explores the multiple meanings assigned to Mexican motherhood in El Paso, Texas in the early 20th century. Using writings by both American educators and reformers and women's advice columns in local Spanish-language newspapers, this essay explores the kinds of messages and lessons Mexican mothers received, and the ways in which each side attempted to craft an ideal of Mexican motherhood to address specific racial, gender and class anxieties within their respective communities. Lessons in childcare, childrearing, and the proper management of the home also contained important messages about appropriate gender and family relations, notions of respectability, and racial, class and national boundaries. For Anglo instructors, improving the Mexican home through its mothers also reinforced the image of Mexican woman as domestic laborer, and ultimately a definition of motherhood that hinged on race and citizenship. On the other hand, local ethnic Mexican newspapers and journals cultivated notions of domesticity and respectability and promised to help elevate and redeem the image of Mexican working families in a border setting. In the end these writers agreed on the importance of motherhood as an important site wherein the very boundaries and meanings of what it meant to be "American" or "Mexican" were defined.