
In Inventing the Fiesta City: Heritage and Carnival in San Antonio, Laura Hernández-Ehrisman recounts the history of San Antonio’s Fiesta, the annual commemoration of the battle of San Jacinto that won Texas’s independence from Mexico in 1836. By the mid-twentieth century, Fiesta was a days-long civic celebration that featured parades, street fairs, carnival rides, beauty pageants, and a debutante ball. As Hernández-Ehrisman convincingly demonstrates, Fiesta was far from a frivolous occasion for urban revelry; rather, it was always at the center of “changing power relations between women and men and Anglos and Mexicanos in defining the city’s public culture” (p. 14).

The gender component of Fiesta is Hernández-Ehrisman’s first theme. For the elite white women of San Antonio who started the Battle of Flowers Parade in 1891 and thus gave birth to Fiesta, the commemoration provided a small degree of cultural authority. As descendants of the heroes of Texan independence, these women—members of what Hernández-Ehrisman terms the Anglo “heritage elite”—became the moral guardians of Texas history and patriotism, claiming a role in San Antonio’s civic life at a time when women’s horizons were circumscribed by domesticity (p. 15). As the celebration grew, however, women struggled to maintain their role as agents in shaping the city’s civic culture. Men of the heritage elite added a debutante ball to Fiesta in 1909, a ritual that checked both the influence of female organizers and the sexuality of its young participants. In an effort to democratize Fiesta in the post–World War II years, organizers inaugurated a Miss Fiesta beauty pageant that welcomed female contenders from San Antonio’s middle class. Although its queen served as critique of the elite debutante’s emphasis on family lineage, her role was largely symbolic. Still, the upper- and middle-class white women who participated in Fiesta as event organizers, debutantes, and beauty queens never completely lost out. At its core, Fiesta was a celebration of Anglo racial superiority secured through white women’s custodianship—and embodiment—of the history of Texan independence from Mexico.

The racial component of Fiesta is Hernández-Ehrisman’s other major focus. San Antonio’s Mexicanos found their status eroded in the early twentieth century with the coming of the railroad, commercial farming, and the closing of the range. Using history as its ballast, the heritage elite made Fiesta “a symbol of a united, white, non-Hispanic elite of the present,” further marginalizing Mexicanos (p. 28). Yet whites were nevertheless attracted to Mexicanness and
used Fiesta as an opportunity to “‘play Mexican’” (p. 67). One Fiesta parade in 1915 featured the Duchess of Chili Con Carni and her court—an example of both “gendered and racial cross-dressing” (p. 70). Playing Mexican was a fluid practice, however. As Fiesta became more inclusive in the postwar years, the heritage elite’s emphasis on ancestry lost its salience. Unable to claim lineage from the heroes of Texan independence, San Antonio’s burgeoning white middle class embraced Mexican play as “a powerful performative language for expressing [a] new sense of civic equality and unity” (p. 125). Everyone could belong, in other words, if they donned a Mexican costume for a day. Accompanying this shift was a concerted effort to reach out to the Mexican middle class, which had achieved greater political and economic power after decades of grassroots activism. In 1980 Rey Feo, a Mexican king, was added, among others, to the pantheon of previously all-white Fiesta royalty.

Inventing the Fiesta City occasionally suffers from organizational problems. This issue is most pronounced in the last few chapters, where Hernández-Ehrisman has a tendency to compress time, moving back and forth between decades and thus losing a sense of chronology. This flaw aside, her book is well researched and provides a thorough examination of one of the South’s most famous civic celebrations.

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