



A Moving Micro-Perspective on 20th Century Mexican and U.S. Social History

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Review of *The Life and Times of Alberto G. Garcia: Physician, Mexican Revolutionary, Texas Journalist, Yogi*. By Brad Rockwell. Austin, TX: Alegria Press, 2020.

The *Life and Times of Alberto G. Garcia...* is at once a richly detailed biography of a remarkable individual and a saga of life in northern Mexico and south Texas in the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries. Lucidly written, even mesmerizing, and extensively footnoted, Brad Rockwell interviewed Dr. Garcia's family, friends, and associates and draws widely on published and unpublished sources from libraries and archives in Texas, Michigan, California, and Mexico, from the Library of Congress, and from English and Spanish language books and newspapers.

Alberto Gonzalo Garcia's life (1889-1962) overlapped critical periods in U.S. and Mexican history spanning the devastating revolution that established Mexico as a constitutionally governed nation; rapidly advancing urbanization and industrialization in both countries, albeit at very different rates; and the consolidation of bioscience and biomedicine to achieve epistemological hegemony.

The monograph's author, Brad Rockwell, is an attorney specializing in environmental advocacy and Texas history. Quite by accident he learned about Dr. Alberto G. Garcia, Austin's first U.S.-trained Mexican American physician, who had successfully performed open-heart surgery as early as 1913. Looking deeper, Rockwell discovered that Garcia had an amazing life: An early proponent of the health-enhancing benefits of yogic practices, he was also fascinated by occult knowledge and the healing power of crystals, colours, and light. Volunteering to fight in the Mexican revolution, he worked as a surgeon under hero and subsequent President Venustiano Carranza. With his wife Eva, Garcia went on to found *La Vanguardia*, the first Spanish language newspaper

Editorial

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in Austin to publicly denounce the Texas Ku Klux Klan, a powerful force of the day. A true iconoclast, he published other socially unpopular opinions and throughout his life was at the forefront of struggles for the civil rights of U.S. minority groups.

Alberto G. Garcia was born in 1889 into great poverty in Zacatecas, a city known for its rich silver and mineral deposits in north central Mexico.

During his early years, leading an itinerant existence, his parents grew disillusioned by the hypocrisy and corruption of the Catholic Church and converted to Methodism, an unconventional choice at the time. Back in Zacatecas, at the age of nine, Alberto met an American Seventh Day Adventist missionary couple who were taken with the boy's intelligence, perspicacity, and ingenuity. They proposed to his parents that he be permitted to move into the renowned Seventh Day Adventist orphanage in Battle Creek, Michigan created and run by Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, advocate of the Progressive Movement and an early proponent of holistic health regimes.

Alberto quickly adapted to and thrived in this new environment. By 1910, when he was 19, he had graduated from the American Medical Missionary College with a degree in medicine. In quick succession he enrolled in the Tulane University School of Medicine and was awarded a second medical degree in 1914.

One year later, posted as a medical missionary to the central Mexican city of Guanajuato and the Western Sierra Madre, Alberto was introduced to values and healing practices that sharply differed from those he'd been taught during his formal medical education. He met and became inspired by the work of Doña Cera, an exceptional lay healer

(curandera) who, like Alberto's parents, had converted to Protestantism, but was stigmatized by her community for having done so. Doña Cera treated patients regardless of their ability to pay. Her favoured healing modalities were plant-based (phytophic) medicines, Protestant prayer, and the "power of mind."

The power of mind in the service of humanity happened also to be a core tenet of new metaphysical approaches becoming popular in the U.S. and Mexico, such as Rosicrucianism, Freemasonry, and Theosophy. Alberto found himself particularly drawn to Spiritism, a 19th century philosophy based on the precept that communication with the dead and other spirits through mediums was possible. Spiritism also posited the existence of a spiritual body, spiritual illnesses, and reincarnation. In the early 20th century, spiritism was embraced by many elites in Mexico and the U.S., including Mexican president Francisco I. Madero (1911–1913), who believed that spirits had guided his successful political career.

The Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) was a protracted bloody conflict in which around 900,000 died. It was fought for return of the lands appropriated from peasants and indigenous Mexicans during the Porfirio Diaz dictatorship, to limit the immense power of the Catholic Church, to constitutionally secure rights to education, health, fair labor practices and the like, and to establish state control over natural resources, including Mexico's vast deposits of oil.

Alberto Garcia's service from 1913 to 1914 as a surgeon with General Carranza further exposed him to occult philosophies with teachings that differed dramatically from mainstream Christianity and deeply influenced his ways of thinking and being in the world. Foremost was the profound importance of charity as meaning benevolence toward all, indulgence in others' imperfections, and forgiveness. These principles guided Dr. Garcia throughout his life and were manifest in his medical career.

In 1915, Alberto and Eva Garcia and their young family migrated permanently from Mexico to Austin, Texas. As is the case today, the border was fraught with racial violence. In addition, elements on both sides wanted to return what became the states of Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas to Mexico. Austin was saturated with blatant racism. The Garcias overcame resistance when they chose to buy a house in a segregated white neighbourhood, and by 1920, Dr. Garcia had opened a private practice in Austin's downtown and hosted free clinics in his own home. True to his Spiritist teachings, he was generous toward ethnic minority patients and he never turned away anyone too poor to pay for medical care.

From the time the Garcias arrived in Texas, they engaged in political activism, advocating for equality for Austin's Mexican Americans. There was much work to be done: The Ku Klux Klan found Texas so hospitable that by 1922, Austin Klan members controlled key aspects of city and county government. Klan-perpetuated violence was common not only in Austin but also throughout the state. But once again, the Garcias were not intimidated. Dr. Garcia was known for caring for individuals who had been tarred and feathered by the K.K.K. or who were otherwise victims of racist violence. Because prominent Austin newspapers were openly or covertly sympathetic to the Klan, the Garcias established their own newspaper, *La Vanguardia*, to report on Mexican American concerns and document and denounce K.K.K. race-based violence.

Alberto Garcia sought to raise awareness and evoke positive social change not simply close to home. Writing eloquently in *La Vanguardia* in 1920 Garcia warned of the corroding effect of U.S. imperialism: "...[w]e see American magnates interested in monopolizing oil, the trade of countries that have undeveloped industries, etc. And, when they do not achieve this by peaceful means, they seek the political and military intervention of the United States to accomplish their ends. This is the origin of imperialism.... Imperialism offers visions of the military expansion of the country that covers all the Americas and the entire world. It offers powers, riches, glories, submissions from other nations and races. And in the soul of some the illusion overwhelms the love of freedom, paralyzing the current that has always given force and virility to this country (pp. 141-142).

To sum up, I strongly recommend Brad Rockwell's biography of Dr. Alberto Gonzalo Garcia, a man who overcame great poverty to become a brilliant and compassionate physician, a dedicated student of esoteric philosophies (at a time when they were virtually unknown in the U.S.), and a committed and passionate advocate for civil rights. Garcia's life coincided with important years in the country of his birth, Mexico, and in his adopted one, the United States. His vast dedication led him to help shape some of those singular events.

This book warrants a broad readership including for advanced undergraduate and graduate-level classes in twentieth century Mexican-U.S. history, civil rights studies, the history of Texas/the U.S. southwest, Mexican American studies, and studies in eastern mysticism, astrology, and other ancient philosophies and esoteric knowledge.

