Wheel Woman” provokes such thought and, in doing so, illustrates the distinctive effectiveness of museum theater in teaching otherwise-marginalized historical perspectives.

The performance’s adaptability is one of the greatest strengths of “The Wheel Woman.” Garner is practiced in attracting and holding audience attention, in finding connections to their personal experiences, and in allowing them to disengage when they are ready. Garner remained in character as she redirected audience members who were pushing her off the program’s scope. The conversational nature of the performance assists with flexibility and allows visitors agency. While some historians might find the fluidity inherent in a theatrical performance unsettling, audience members can opt in or out according to their comfort level. The adaptability of performances such as Garner’s means that museum theater can access the broadest possible audience spectrum, a sensible approach in the context of a large national museum.

“The Wheel Woman” is an excellent public history program, providing a valuable addition to the museum’s collections and enriching visitors’ experience. Especially impressive is the program’s ability to create a dialogic and intimate interaction in an architecturally intimidating space. Although the performances could be better supported by the surrounding physical space, audiences are engaged by the personal conversations, the intriguing surprise of new information, and the entertaining time irony inherent in pretending to be from 1898 in 2016. It accomplishes a key goal of historical education by reminding people that things they take for granted, such as the bicycle, were once new and different—allowing them to rediscover the wonder of the creation. Both theatrical performance and public history hope to capture the attention of, provoke thought in, and engage in dialogue with their audiences, and each can inform the other. “The Wheel Woman” illustrates the great potential for further collaboration between these disciplines.

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“Life and Death on the Border” powerfully documented the persecution and resilience of ethnic Mexicans (Tejanos) on the Texas-Mexico border between 1910 and 1920. The most compelling stories in this exhibit are the kind whispered by family members to successive generations, not those usually told in a state’s official history museum. Displayed on a balcony overlooking the museum rotunda, this exhibit provided a counternarrative to the valorous, mostly Anglo narratives below. The Bullock Texas State History Museum developed the exhibit in collaboration with the Web project Refusing to Forget (https://refusingtoforget.org/), which aims to develop public memory about Texas- and
U.S.-sanctioned violence toward ethnic Mexicans. Although the exhibit was in place for less than three months, the American Association for State and Local History awarded the museum its prestigious 2016 Leadership in History Award for the display.

The exhibit design conveyed a broader scope than the single decade of the title. The wall panels and stand-alone glass cases were arranged chronologically and contained documents and artifacts from more than one century before and after the 1910s. This ambitious design intended to contextualize the traumatic events of one decade by locating them in the panorama view from seventeenth-century Spanish colonialism to the resurgence of Tejano culture in the late twentieth century. Yet the heart of the exhibit remained the emotionally wrenching depiction of shameful state-sponsored violence, local vigilantism, and political cover-up during the focal decade. For viewers, this exhibit did for south Texas what portrayals of African American lynching have done for the U.S. South.

Scholars’ painstaking work to deconstruct racist and sexist public records and reports is all too familiar to those who study African American history, Native American history, and women’s history. Few of the atrocities committed by state and federal militia ever received prosecutorial justice, let alone archival accounting. Oral histories, memoirs, personal artifacts, and intergenerational family stories, often kept alive by amateur family historians, provided alternative narratives about murder victims recorded only as “bandidos,” criminals, Mexican revolutionaries, and thieves. Clothing, personal items, family photographs, postcards, letters, and other artifacts transformed a heretofore sanitized historical account into a multilayered ethnic, gendered, and deeply personal story of ethnic life and death on the Texas border.

The earliest history of the Texas-Mexico border is one of Spanish settler-colonialism. Based on land grants to Spanish families beginning in 1716, ethnic Mexicans owned and ruled most of the Rio Grande Valley through the nineteenth century. The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ending the Mexican War established the Rio Grande River as the U.S.-Mexico border. Two-thirds of that border is with Texas, slightly more than 1,200 of the 1,900 miles. Unimpeded border crossings between the two countries continued until late into the twentieth century.

Regional isolation initially resulted in historic Mexican families blending unremarkably with Anglo families. That changed when the first passenger train of the St. Louis, Brownsville, and Mexico Railroad arrived in Brownsville in 1904. The ability to link the local economy to the nation swelled Anglo migration. Warm weather, soil suitable for vegetable and fruit farming, and cheap labor impelled the development of industrialized commercial agriculture. Pictures of huge tomato and lettuce harvests document rapid economic changes in the 1910s. As the cost of land skyrocketed, Tejanos increasingly were unable to prove land rights to the satisfaction of American courts; many became fieldworkers instead of land owners. Letters to the governor and in newspapers portrayed ethnic Mexicans as “enemies of civilized progress.”

Prejudice and intimidation occurred well before the 1910–1920 period, when tensions exploded. This decade, the exhibit argues, produced “some of the worst state-sanctioned racial violence in U.S. history.” A murderous campaign by Anglo vigilantes, the Texas Rangers, and U.S. troops resulted in ethnic Mexican deaths estimated in the thousands and permanently upended traditional economic and political power in the Rio Grande
Valley. Local Tejanos pushed back with ethnic organizations, demonstrations, robbery, murder, and even revolutionary plans of their own.

The Mexican Revolution and World War I gave cover to the deadly violence against ethnic Mexicans. In northern Mexican provinces along the border, a revolution was brewing. An exhibit broadside satirized local grievances in verse: *El Mosquito Americano* (the American mosquito, ca. 1913) blames Mexico president Porfirio Díaz for American incursion into Mexico. Armed men “burned railroad bridges, killed farmers, robbed stores” at the same time that Texas Rangers and vigilantes engaged in extralegal reprisals. Their 1910 lynching of a Mexican citizen in Rocksprings, Texas, provoked damage to dozens of American businesses in Mexico City and in border towns. A poster of Uncle Sam sweeping up the Mexican Revolution into an “International Rubbish Can” illustrates the U.S. position. Inflaming the tense situation, the Plan de San Diego, discovered in 1915, called for a general uprising of Mexican Americans, African Americans, American Indians, and Japanese citizens against the U.S. government.

Mexicans fleeing the revolution sought refuge in Tejano communities. Governor James Ferguson sent ill-trained Texas Rangers to “quell the violence,” but they imposed a reign of terror on all “Mexicans,” ethnic and nationals alike. One graphic postcard shows three Texas Rangers posing with lassos around the bodies of four “Dead Mexican Bandits, 1915.” Even U.S. Army personnel petitioned the governor to stop rangers from taking matters into their own hands. Eventually, the governor felt compelled to issue a formal order for rangers to “prevent the execution of all Mexicans except by due process of law.” The exhibit included examples of letters, edicts, and Texas Ranger memorabilia.
For loyal ethnic Mexicans, this toxic environment was deadly. The 1915 murders of Jesus Bazán and his son-in-law, Antonio Longoria, provide an excruciating example of their dilemma. Victims of a violent Mexican raid, these prominent Hidalgo County Tejanos could either stay silent and be branded as Mexican collaborators or report the crime against them to the Texas Rangers and risk the lethal fate of many compatriots. Since the men were wealthy landowners, public officials, and well-regarded citizens, they opted to complain to the later-venerated Texas Ranger Henry Ransom. Bazán and Longoria were shot in the back as they left the meeting; their rotting bodies were left as an omen for the fate that awaited “Mexicans.”

Some of the most jarring photos in the exhibit showed U.S. soldiers marching shoulder-to-shoulder down the main street of Brownsville. On June 18, 1916, Woodrow Wilson ordered 110,000 National Guard troops to patrol the Texas-Mexico border. The militia stayed during World War I as part of Wilson’s Americanization campaign. The display included a translated copy of the 1917 Zimmerman telegram from the German foreign secretary offering support to Mexico in exchange for siding with Germany. Governor William Hobby appointed three new “loyalty rangers” to every Texas county to monitor “disloyal” acts, usually ascribed indiscriminately to Tejanos. Exhibit photos showed pictures of the Flores family, who witnessed the 1918 Porvenir massacre by the Eighth U.S. Calvary and Texas Rangers in far west Texas.

By 1919 the atrocities perpetrated on ethnic Mexicans became embarrassingly public. José Tomás Canales of Brownsville, the only Tejano in the Texas legislature, finally received the investigation he had sought for years. The report did result in fewer Texas Rangers, but no one was prosecuted for the revealed crimes, and many rangers later worked for the border patrol and in other policing units. Public rebuke also did not end discrimination against Tejanos. Signs patterned after Jim Crow began to appear in Texas: “We Serve White’s only. No Spanish or Mexicans.” The Ku Klux Klan marched in the Rio Grande Valley in 1920.

Like immigrants elsewhere in the United States, ethnic Mexicans organized for self-benefit and protection. The exhibit documented early Tejano benevolent and civil rights organizations. In a gathering proposed by the Idar family in Laredo, the first Mexican Congress in 1911 organized the Gran Liga Mexicanista de Beneficencia y Protección (Great Mexican League for Benefit and Protection) and Liga Femenil Mexicanista (League of Mexican Women). These groups were the precursors of the influential League of United Latin American Citizens, founded in 1929.

The exhibit concluded with cultural artifacts created from the hybrid cultural traditions emanating from the valley. By the 1930s, writers, singers, and artists began identifying themselves as Mexican American (and as Chicano by the 1960s) and demanding the rights and privileges of citizenship. Border resistance literature from Américo Paredes, music in the form of Musica Tejana, and art inspired by muralists such as Diego Rivera document a rich past. Even as systematic legal discrimination replaced the most virulent activities against ethnic Mexicans, this culture evokes the contested past to inspire a better future.

The Refusing to Forget project intends “Life and Death on the Border, 1910–1920” to be part of additional public outreach venues to tell the dark story of state-supported violence against ethnic Mexicans in Texas. Hurdles remain. The museum expects to organize a traveling exhibit, but no funds are currently available. Negotiating political minefields,
the Texas Historical Commission has approved several historical markers to signify the location of events documented in the exhibit. Curriculum guides are to accompany the unveilings.

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Chicago is known for its ethnic neighborhoods and the long history of its immigrant communities. In the early twentieth century the Chicago school of urban sociology posited an influential model of residential settlement and immigrant adaptation based on observations of researchers in the city’s neighborhoods. To some extent the theories associated with the Chicago school remain influential in urban studies. The city boasts at least fifteen different museums with a focus on the heritage and culture of ethnic communities. The following review is based on a visit to four ethnic museums of Chicago on a single day in July 2016, briefly examining permanent and temporary exhibits at each institution.

I started with the Chinese-American Museum of Chicago, located in Chinatown, where it opened in 2005 and recovered from a 2008 fire. I visited late on a Sunday morning, and the Chinatown neighborhood on the city’s south side was a lively place with many shoppers and diners. Two exhibits were on display at this modest-sized museum. I began on the second-floor theater with a short video introducing me to Chicago’s Chinatown and the city’s Chinese community. In the permanent installation, “Great Wall to Great Lakes: Chinese Immigration to the Midwest,” wall panels and display cases presented information about the city’s original Chinatown on Clark Street (downtown), the somewhat later development of the Chinatown near Wentworth and Cermak Avenues (on the South Side), and the Chinatown near Argyle Street (on the North Side). Considerable information was provided in this exhibit about milestones in the history of the Chinese population in the Chicago area, with an emphasis on the primary Southside Chinatown. Next, I was accompanied by museum volunteers to the first floor where I viewed the fairly recently installed exhibit “Rites of Passage,” focusing on important life events in Chinese culture such as births, weddings, and funerals. The exhibit featured