



La Sierra History Prof's Dissertation Discovery Leads to Major Book Deal



It started with a mistake. Alicia Gutierrez-Romine arrived at the California State Archives in May 2015 to research her dissertation topic, but discovered she did not have the required authorization for certain records.

A couple of years prior to Gutierrez-Romine joining [La Sierra's](#) faculty as an assistant history professor she was pursuing a doctorate in history from the University of Southern California. She aimed to spend a week looking through archived material in order to begin work on her dissertation investigating the experiences of physicians of color in Southern California during the post-World War II era. She wanted to delve into the inequities they suffered and analyze the juxtaposition of racism within the medical community and its ethical obligation to do no harm.

She had acquired funding from USC to glean historical information from the California State Board of Medical Examiners documents and physician license revocation files in the state archives. But she had not realized that she first needed permission to access files that were processed less than 75 years ago. The permission protocol would take a couple of weeks to complete.

So she decided to make the most of her 436-mile journey from her home in Riverside to the archives' facility in Sacramento and began looking through revocation files that were old enough to be publicly available. What she found led Gutierrez-Romine down a pathway that illuminated details about a little-known sector of western medical history and its societal impacts. The window she opened into the byzantine and secretive world of criminal abortion along the West Coast and across the Mexican border during the early to mid 20th century and its impacts on California law culminated in the production of her first book. Titled "From Back Alley to the Border: Criminal Abortion in California, 1920 - 1960," the work was published last November by the University of Nebraska Press and is noted as the first scholarly foray of its nature on the topic.

Her academic odyssey resulted in two appearances on C-SPAN public affairs television, one an interview with the network's American History TV and the other the filming of her history class last year.

The seeds of her research pivot were planted within the first hours of reading through files at the state archives. She came across documentation of an organized crime ring of 32 physicians who were performing medically safe illegal abortions all along the West Coast. During the era of the Great Depression the so-called Pacific Coast Abortion Ring



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doctors were earning the modern-day equivalent of millions of dollars a month. Gutierrez-Romine found that virtually nothing had been published about this group save a small footnote in another scholar's book. As she walked back to her hotel that evening, she emailed her dissertation advisor, William Deverell, Professor of History, Spatial Sciences and Environmental Studies at USC and asked whether he knew anything about the group of physicians she had discovered. "He said, 'I've never heard of this before, you need to find out everything you can,'" she said. At that moment Gutierrez-Romine's dissertation topic changed.

Deverell recalled the moment his student contacted him about the information she'd found. "If any student encounters something in their research that the advisor has no knowledge of, the directive is easy. Find out. And with Professor Gutierrez-Romine, I knew that her drive and discipline would kick in and that, before long, she'd be the one to turn to for insight into this mystery," he said.

Gutierrez-Romine's book is an important contribution, Deverell said, describing his former student as a "fierce investigator" who aims to "research and write history that is important beyond the classroom, beyond the tests and the lectures and the scholarly articles."

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