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Reviews

Book Review: *From Back Alley to the Border: Criminal Abortion in California, 1920-1969*

By Bshara Alsheikh

From Back Alley to the Border: Criminal Abortion in California, 1920-1969, written by Alicia Gutierrez-Romine, was originally published in 2020 and republished in 2023 by the University of Nebraska Press. The book examines the world of what Gutierrez-Romine refers to as “providers of illegal abortions” in California through the early to mid-nineteen hundreds. Gutierrez-Romine specifically chooses this term because it is inclusive and neutral in regards to the practitioner of the procedure’s level of professionalism and includes everyone, from doctors who conducted abortions for additional money to professionals in abortion who lack medical qualifications and to unlicensed and inexperienced abortionists.¹ Amongst these providers, Gutierrez-Romine details the Pacific Coast Abortion Ring (PCAR), a notorious illegal abortion operation founded by Reginald Rankin (1888-1949) that provided safe abortions outside of the law across the West Coast during the Great Depression (1929-1939). The PCAR was forced to close via the 1937 case of *People of the State of California v. Reginald L. Rankin et al.*; Gutierrez-Romine details how this case intensified the persecution of illegal abortion providers and recipients, such as Laura Miner, before abortion was

¹ Alicia Gutierrez-Romine, *From Back Alley to the Border: Criminal Abortion in California, 1920-1969*, (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2023), 4-5.

first decriminalized in 1969 and eventually legalized with *Roe v. Wade* in 1973.²

The 1937 trial was sensationalized into a media circus, which brought attention to not just the case but to individual women who were forced to testify before the court, often about deeply intimate information before the glaring eyes of the media. However, through these testimonies, the women challenged the common narrative that abortion recipients were unduly promiscuous, unwedded young women and proved that, in reality, most of the women who historically sought abortions were married women who already struggled to provide for the children they had. Ironically, these women were only able to testify before the court due to the fact they had survived the safer procedures PCAR offered and had not died, as many women did, in botched “back-alley” abortions. The abortion expertise the PCAR cultivated and developed significantly decreased the number of deaths related to the procedure.³ Additionally, due to the court case, abortion recipients, who were previously anonymous abstract victims without physical form, now had the opportunity to express their own perspectives before the court - even if they were reluctant to do so. The media circus compelled these women to publicly testify about their abortions before a court, jury, and audience of strangers, instead of sharing information about their abortions with women in their personal social networks, as women historically had.

In a further ironic twist, due to the increased specialization and decreased fatalities, it became more common for women to face public scrutiny after having an abortion. Even though the PCAR demonstrated that abortions can be conducted in a safe manner in court proceedings, California’s state law enforcement intensified efforts against abortion providers in the aftermath of the case, which streamlined the procedure to prosecute abortion as a criminal offense. This shift in approach significantly impacted the

² Gutierrez-Romine, *From Back Alley to the Border*, 6.

³ Gutierrez-Romine, *From Back Alley to the Border*, 6.

circumstances for both women seeking abortions and those involved in providing illegal abortions.⁴

One such abortion provider detailed in the book is Laura Miner, an abortion provider based in San Diego who found herself working for a doctor who exclusively performed abortions.⁵ Miner joined and became integrated into the Pacific Coast Abortion Ring (PCAR) as it expanded to San Diego around 1936. She prospered in the abortion profession, becoming financially independent and able to support her children. Miner was sympathetic to the plight of women who sought abortions due to her and her own mother's experiences receiving abortions.⁶ Initially, she started her role at the San Diego PCAR facility, which featured a total of nine rooms, as both the office receptionist and nurse.⁷ Miner was able to curate a network of women to help other women in need of an abortion and ultimately gained the trust to carry out all of the procedures in the San Diego facility herself. In short order, she employed her own nurse and receptionist. Miner would even be routinely requested by name from women seeking assistance in the San Diego PCAR facility and was quickly promoted to the managerial position of the San Diego branch.⁸

Miner's abortion business was an open secret in San Diego, a business that was thriving with a loyal set of customers who had no intentions of turning her in to the authorities.⁹ Despite Miner's efforts to alter her methods after PCAR was dismantled in the wake of 1937's *People of the State of California v. Reginald L. Rankin et al.*, by meeting potential patients elsewhere and sometimes asking them to come back to her office at different times, she did not escape legal repercussions. Prosecutors were still able to get convictions against abortionists, even in cases where there were no patient fatalities or problems, and they used evidence

⁴ Gutierrez-Romine, *From Back Alley to the Border*, 6.

⁵ Gutierrez-Romine, *From Back Alley to the Border*, 108.

⁶ Gutierrez-Romine, *From Back Alley to the Border*, 108-09.

⁷ Gutierrez-Romine, *From Back Alley to the Border*, 109.

⁸ Gutierrez-Romine, *From Back Alley to the Border*, 109.

⁹ Gutierrez-Romine, *From Back Alley to the Border*, 150.

obtained during raids, such as speculums, patient cards, and names.¹⁰ In 1948, Miner was convicted by a jury and thereafter served an imprisonment of about two years at the California Institution for Women in Tehachapi. Following her discharge, she abstained from performing abortions indefinitely.¹¹ Of note, in November 2022, California Governor Gavin Newsom (b.1967) posthumously pardoned Laura Miner in the days before California voters approved Proposition 1, which guarantees reproductive freedom for Californians. This pardon came after Gutierrez-Romine worked with Governor Newsom's parole and clemency team in the preceding months—further highlighting this history, its relevance to today, and how historians can use their work to enact change.¹²

Gutierrez-Romine does a stellar job showcasing the power and agency of women who were implicated in the *People of the State of California v. Reginald L. Rankin et al.* case. Her book challenges the previous commonly held notion that public discussions around abortion were scarce from 1880 to 1960.¹³ Further research conducted by Gutierrez-Romine indicates that women were not passive and that they did not solely communicate discreetly within their social circles. Conversely, women oftentimes found themselves engaging in candid discourse during trials and when being questioned by investigators. Undoubtedly, these women possessed constraints on their agency.¹⁴ The majority, if not all, were compelled to provide testimony in favor of the prosecution. Nevertheless, once they took the witness stand, these women articulated their own ideas and opinions, which

¹⁰ Gutierrez-Romine, *From Back Alley to the Border*, 151.

¹¹ Gutierrez-Romine, *From Back Alley to the Border*, 152.

¹² Maggie Angst, "Gavin Newsom Grants Posthumous Pardon to California Abortion Provider," *The Sacramento Bee*, November 4, 2022, <https://www.sacbee.com/news/politics-government/capitol-alert/article268295972.html>.

¹³ Gutierrez-Romine, *From Back Alley to the Border*, 194.

¹⁴ Gutierrez-Romine, *From Back Alley to the Border*, 194.

showed to the public how intimate and personal of a process it is to obtain an abortion.¹⁵

Gutierrez-Romine argues that this coerced testimony is what compelled many providers of illegal abortions to move their procedures further underground and eventually across the border into Mexico between the 1940s-1960s.¹⁶ After discussing therapeutic abortions—which she describes as those legal abortions that were able to take place within a hospital and which were primarily received by middle and upper-class heterosexual White women—Gutierrez-Romine takes us across the border and back to Reginald Rankin.¹⁷ This portion of her book explains how Californian racialization of Mexican border spaces influenced the California Supreme Court’s 1969 finding that the existing abortion statute was “void for vagueness.”¹⁸ Following Rankin, abortion providers, and California women across the border, the author situates abortion tourism within the existing vice tourism industry that has existed in these border spaces for American consumption since the pre-Prohibition era.¹⁹ In 1969, when the California Supreme Court took up a respected California physician, Dr. Leon Belous’ appeal against his conviction, the realities of abortion criminalization in the state, which forced women to seek potentially unsafe abortions across the border, became clear due to the publicity the case brought. Belous had earlier assisted a patient in acquiring an illegal abortion because he feared she would turn to “butchery” in Tijuana.²⁰ Due to Belous’s 1969 appeal, the courts realized the law that had initially been designed to try to protect women in the days of medical quackery of the 19th century was now making California women unsafe; abortion was then decriminalized in the state.²¹

¹⁵ Gutierrez-Romine, *From Back Alley to the Border*, 194.

¹⁶ Gutierrez-Romine, *From Back Alley to the Border*, 10.

¹⁷ Gutierrez-Romine, *From Back Alley to the Border*, 10.

¹⁸ Gutierrez-Romine, *From Back Alley to the Border*, 190.

¹⁹ Gutierrez-Romine, *From Back Alley to the Border*, 170.

²⁰ Gutierrez-Romine, *From Back Alley to the Border*, 183.

²¹ Gutierrez-Romine, *From Back Alley to the Border*, 190.

Although *Back Alley To The Border*'s initial publication was in November 2020, prior to *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, (2021-2022) the case that reversed both *Roe v. Wade* (1973) and *Casey v. Planned Parenthood* (1992), the book was reissued in November 2023, featuring an afterword that discusses *Roe*'s overturning in 2022.²² Gutierrez-Romine ends her preface with, "Perhaps if I tell this story, we can be motivated enough to prevent a reappearance of the pre-*Roe* days," not knowing her valiant efforts would be in vain.²³ She maintains that *Casey v. Planned Parenthood*, decided in 1992, had already eroded the *Roe* ruling and that repealing it would pave the way for a state to outlaw the procedure completely.²⁴ In the afterword, she mentions that *Dobbs* is "bureaucratizing health care," which is leading to delays and creating barriers that prevent many women from accessing the therapy they require.²⁵ Gutierrez-Romine continues to mention how the prioritization of birth, without simultaneously improving healthcare or welfare services, demonstrates a greater concern for the theoretical, simple existence of a prospective life rather than the well-being of actual children or pregnant individuals.²⁶

Gutierrez-Romine's work is an exceptional demonstration of how stricter abortion regulations, in California and presumably elsewhere in the country, prompted women to seek the procedure across the southern border. This research provides a valuable foundation for future historians to expand on the experiences of Mexican women who helped facilitate the journeys to and from the border. Future research on this topic could also integrate the voices and experiences of Mexican physicians in this ordeal of abortion across the southern border. It is important for historians to give due attention to the experiences of women of color, particularly in how

²² "Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization," Oyez, <https://www.oyez.org/cases/2021/19-1392>.

²³ Gutierrez-Romine, *From Back Alley to the Border*, xiv.

²⁴ Gutierrez-Romine, *From Back Alley to the Border*, 200.

²⁵ Gutierrez-Romine, *From Back Alley to the Border*, 207.

²⁶ Gutierrez-Romine, *From Back Alley to the Border*, 20.

they were affected by the illegality of abortions. A compassionate approach toward understanding their struggles can help us gain a deeper appreciation of the challenges they faced in their lives.

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Author Bio

Bshara is currently in the second year of his History MA program at California State University, San Bernardino. His academic interests include reproductive justice, with an emphasis on obstetric abuse and how it affects women of color. He enjoys gaming on a wide variety of consoles, including PC. He also enjoys musicals, with his favorites being Mean Girls, Waitress, and Hairspray. He plans on earning his M.A. in history from CSUSB in Spring 2025. He hopes to eventually earn a Ph.D. to teach in higher education institutions to spread awareness of reproductive justice to a wider audience and to reach as many students as possible. Bshara's first languages are Arabic and Armenian. He was born in the Middle East and immigrated to the United States in 2014.

