

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Race and Identity across American Borders

Eric V. Meeks

Northern Arizona University, US

Eric.Meeks@nau.edu

This essay reviews the following works:

The Strange Career of William Ellis: The Texas Slave Who Became a Mexican Millionaire. By Karl Jacoby. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016. Pp. xxvii + 304. \$27.95 hardcover; \$16.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780393239256.

Jalos, USA: Transnational Community and Identity. By Alfredo Mirandé. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014. Pp. ix + 221. \$27.00 paperback. ISBN: 9780268035327.

How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts. By Natalia Molina. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014. Pp. ix + 207. \$27.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780520280083.

Latinos in the United States: Diversity and Change. By Rogelio Sáenz and Maria Cristina Morales. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2015. Pp. vi + 265. \$26.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780745642727.

Indian Given: Racial Geographies across Mexico and the United States. By María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016. Pp. ix + 336. \$26.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780822360148.

Mestizaje and Globalization: Transformations of Identity and Power. Edited by Stefanie Wickstrom and Philip D. Young. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2014. Pp. ix + 284. \$55.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780816530908.

In the prologue to *The Strange Career of William Ellis*, historian Karl Jacoby explains that the subject of his biography—a former slave and a “once famous figure” of mixed racial heritage who frequently crossed national and racial borders as he rose to wealth and prominence—has largely “slipped through the fault lines of our ways of imagining the past” (xix). To bring his story into focus, Jacoby bridges the gap between national historiographical traditions in the United States and Mexico and between African American and Mexican American history. His and the other books reviewed in this essay interrogate and/or transcend academic fissures by examining divergent national racial projects in the Americas, *mestizaje* (most broadly translated as cultural and/or biological mixing), transborder migration, globalization and its reactions in the form of nationalism and immigration restrictions, and diversity within populations that we often homogenize as Latino, white, black, and mestizo. By reviewing these books together, this essay also bridges disciplinary fault lines between historians, sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, and others who too often remain unaware of each other’s innovative research.

Social scientists have come to a broad consensus that race is socially constructed but nevertheless has very real implications for people who live in racially ordered societies.¹ Since a wave of independence movements

¹ Classic theoretical musings on the social and cultural construction of race include the sociological perspective of Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994); the cultural perspective by Stuart Hall, “Gramsci’s Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity,” in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 411–441; and the historical perspective by Barbara J. Fields, “Ideology and Race in American History,” in *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward*, ed. J. Morgan Kousser and James McPherson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 143–177.

in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, nation-states throughout the Americas adopted a variety of official racial ideologies. Some were based explicitly on racial exclusion and separation (e.g., the United States, Argentina, and Chile), while others purported racial and cultural inclusion through *mestizaje* despite persistent racial inequalities (e.g., Brazil, Mexico, and Cuba). With such diverse racial systems, the authors of the books under review here also agree that one's racial status and identity can change when crossing borders between nations, or in some cases, when crossing from one region to another within a single nation.

Most of these books focus on the themes of race and identity in Mexico and the United States and the relationships and divisions between them. These differences come into sharpest relief in Jacoby's and María Josefa Saldaña-Portillo's books. Jacoby introduces the topic by quoting Langston Hughes: "It was strange to find that just by stepping across an invisible line into Mexico, a Negro could buy a beer in any bar, sit anywhere in the movies, or eat in any restaurant, so suddenly did Jim Crow disappear" (xxii).² Mexico's colonial predecessor, New Spain, had its own history of enslaving Africans and indigenous peoples and of constructing an oppressive caste system.³ But by the early twentieth century, when Hughes crossed the border, Mexico touted itself as a *mestizo* nation—a national identity with roots in its War for Independence a century earlier, when Mexico had abolished the caste system and ceased tracking racial categories. Mexico elaborated an official ideology of *mestizaje* in subsequent decades, especially during and after the Mexican Revolution, when intellectuals like José Vasconcelos touted Mexico as vigorous precisely because of its history of racial and cultural mixing, rather than despite it (Jacoby, 195; Saldaña-Portillo, 126–127; Wickstrom and Young, 108, 166; Molina, 63).

The United States, on the other hand, doubled down on its identity as a white nation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by limiting full citizenship and equality through explicitly racist immigration and naturalization laws; segregation policies sanctioned by the Supreme Court with *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896; and a multiplicity of local laws, policies, and customs that disenfranchised people of color. Perhaps nothing highlights the distinction between US and Mexican racial ideologies better than the laws passed by many US states in this period against "miscegenation" (interracial marriage) versus the idealization of *mestizaje* in Mexico and many other Latin American countries (Jacoby, 196; Molina, 31–31, 86; Wickstrom and Young, 6; Saldaña-Portillo, 26–27). At the same time, most Mexicans had all but forgotten Mexico's importation of some two hundred thousand African slaves, and they elided or were unaware of the African heritage of much of Mexico's population (though Vasconcelos embraced this heritage in *la raza cósmica*) (Jacoby, 13, 19).

Jacoby explores this complex history of race and identity across borders by tracing the remarkable life of William Henry Ellis, who was born a slave in Victoria, Texas, in June 1864. William's father had been born in Kentucky to an enslaved black woman and a white overseer with the surname Ellis before his slaveholding family, the Weisigers, moved William and some of his relatives to Victoria. Their forced migration was part of the "second middle passage" in which southern whites transplanted over a million slaves westward from the Atlantic seaboard as the cotton economy expanded toward Texas (5). Victoria sat in the borderlands between the US Southwest, recently taken from Mexico, and the US Southeast, characterized by a plantation economy and binary, black/white race relations. The Weisigers purchased a plantation from a Tejana landholder and raised cotton through the forced labor of William's family and their other slaves until their emancipation in 1865.

Eventually Ellis's relatively light complexion, along with some formal education and his ability to speak Spanish, allowed him to "switch racial codes" and avoid the perils of being black in Jim Crow Texas (61). William's family appears in the 1870 and 1880 censuses as mulattoes, as did many African Americans in Victoria, which Jacoby views as a "subtle reminder that even as white Americans debated the perils of Mexican 'mongrelization' during Reconstruction, race-mixing had in fact existed in the United States for generations" (48). William learned Spanish while living among Tejanos in and around Victoria and while working for an employer who dealt in agricultural products on both sides of the border. By 1890 he had moved to San Antonio and set up shop as a Tejano merchant named Guillermo Enrique Eliseo. Over several decades, he built on his earnings and social capital from this enterprise to invest and conduct business in Mexico, exploiting Mexican president Porfirio Díaz's decision to court American capital. He lived at various times in metropolises of globalization such as Mexico City and Manhattan, among other locales, frequently

² Jacoby quotes Langston Hughes, *I Wonder as I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 91.

³ A very recent treatment of the enslavement of indigenous peoples in the West Indies and the North American continent is Andrés Reséndez, *The Other Slavery: The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016).

switching his persona in order to navigate a complex patchwork of regional racial orders. Indeed, at different times he declared himself a Mexican, Cuban or Cuban American, or a Hawaiian businessman.

The centerpiece of Jacoby's book is Ellis's project to colonize over eight hundred African Americans from the US South to a hacienda in Tlahualilo, Durango, in 1895. Ellis and a partner offered black colonists from Alabama and Georgia economic opportunity as cotton growers in Mexico and an escape from rigid racial segregation and exploitation in the Jim Crow South. Once in Durango, however, the families found themselves in two-room residences without peripheral windows on a corporate-owned hacienda. Hacienda managers carried weapons during the day and armed guards took up posts around the perimeter at night. Some colonists reasonably perceived themselves to be imprisoned, and rumors spread that the Tlahualilo Corporation intended to re-enslave them. As colonists began to leave the hacienda, an "unknown microbe" infected many of those who remained. Over forty died, prompting others to join the journey northward (110). While trying to cross the border, however, they found themselves quarantined, first by Mexican officials who diagnosed fifteen of them with smallpox, and again north of the border, where Texas officials confined them, and federal authorities imposed "military rule" (113). In the end, fifty-one colonists died while quarantined—an unusually high mortality rate of 29 percent, which Jacoby attributes to poor treatment by government officials. Not until October were the rest permitted to leave.

When I first reviewed Jacoby's essay on Ellis's colonization plan over a decade ago, I suggested that the colonists' experience contradicted his argument at the time that "the border line" could serve as "at least a partial solution" to oppression and discrimination in the United States.⁴ "How," I asked, "should one man's [Ellis's] successes be weighed against the disastrous results for hundreds of others?"⁵ But in his new, more nuanced telling, Jacoby implicitly addresses this critique. He empathizes with Ellis's decision to use the tools at his disposal to "pass" in order to avoid severe restrictions on his freedom, civil rights, and economic opportunities if identified as black. He argues that Ellis was sincere in his belief that his colonization plan would improve the lives of southern blacks, not unlike other African Americans who supported emigration projects (to Liberia, for example). He acknowledges that Ellis also rejected an emergent pan-Africanism, despite several trips to Ethiopia (a fascinating story too complex to summarize here). Ultimately, though, Jacoby's goal is not to judge Ellis. Rather it is to illustrate the wide disparity between regional and national racial systems; how they affected one man's options, decisions, and identity; and perhaps most importantly, to reveal the tragic absurdity of race. He achieves all of these goals admirably.

While Jacoby's book opens with William Ellis's literal border crossing, Saldaña-Portillo begins with a literary one. She describes how Jack Kerouac's fictional alter ego in *On The Road*, Sal Paradise, and his sidekick, Dean Moriarty, cross from Laredo, Texas, to Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, to find a human and environmental landscape that looks "exactly like" the Mexico they had imagined. As Saldaña-Portillo puts it, "The sharp edges of the Indians' high cheek-bones and slanted eyes cut and divide Mexico from the United States just as decisively as the Rio Grande, and just as 'naturally' their racial differences give Mexican geography its meaning" (2). Sal perceives a sharp distinction between Laredo and Nuevo Laredo, though Saldaña-Portillo suggests that in the 1950s the towns were more similar than different, with the same architectural and colonial heritage, the same arid environment, and similarly diverse "mestizo, Indian, and light skinned" populations (3). She asks "how this conventional iteration of the racial difference between the United States and Mexico enters as if naturally through the senses: the United States as nonindigenous space atop Mexico as indigenous space" (5–6).⁶ She is especially interested in the persistence of the *indio bárbaro* trope (the savage or barbarous Indian) through several centuries of North American history, and in demonstrating how perceptions of difference between the two nations are reproduced "through historical, social, and racial relation with indigenous subjects" (6).

At the broadest level, her book illustrates the differences and similarities between the racialization of Mexican and US national identities. She argues that Americans long defined their national identity through a narrative most clearly articulated by historian Frederick Jackson Turner: the engagement with wilderness

⁴ Karl Jacoby, "Between North and South: The Alternative Borderlands of William H. Ellis and the African American Colony of 1895," in *Continental Crossroads: Remapping U.S.-Mexico Borderlands History*, ed. Samuel Truett and Elliott Young (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 209–239.

⁵ Eric V. Meeks, "Book Review of *Continental Crossroads: Remapping U.S.-Mexico Borderlands History*," *The Americas* 62, no. 3 (January 2006): 472–473.

⁶ Here and in her second chapter on Spanish colonization of the Rio Grande delta, she would have benefitted from engaging Omar S. Valerio-Jiménez, *River of Hope: Forging Identity and Nation in the Rio Grande Borderlands* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013). Valerio-Jiménez demonstrates how the region's residents molded their own "fluid, and often contradictory identities" in the context of Spanish, Mexican, and US state building and racial projects (16).

and Indian “savagery” resulted in the deaths or expulsion of Indians, but also in the transmission of certain indigenous traits to white colonizers and the transformation of effete Europeans into virile Americans. Alternately, Octavio Paz’s foundational narrative of Mexico and mestizo identity begins with Hernán Cortés’s rape of “La Malinche,” who then became his Native translator. This violent encounter created a new race of mestizos with combined characteristics of “aggression and passivity, culpability and victimage” (13). These two national narratives about the role of imagined “savage Indians” or “*indios bárbaros*” diverge about the origins of “Americans” and “Mexicans”—through marginalization or annihilation versus violent incorporation—with very real implications for the fate of indigenous peoples themselves. Yet they are quite similar in telling a story in which their nations and citizens are “Indian Given”; both nations took—or in the most fanciful imaginations, were granted—indigenous territory, and their citizens adopted certain indigenous traits.

After making these broad points, Saldaña-Portillo traces “racialized ‘ways of seeing’” from the colonial period to the present. She examines early Spanish and British debates about the “quality of indigenous humanity,” racial nationalism in nineteenth-century United States and Mexico, the adjudication of indigenous and Mexican-American rights and identity, and the discourse of the US “War on Terror” and Mexico’s “Narco Wars.” She makes good use of both archives and cultural texts such as journals and advertisements, treaties and treatises, films, and literature to make her case—though at times, such as in her critique of *No Country for Old Men*, her interpretations can be highly subjective and unconvincing. She occasionally describes activism by indigenous groups and other forms of resistance—by Mexican youth, Mexican American writers and Chicana/o activists—but she is clear that her book is primarily about representations of Indians in the context of colonial conquest and national domination. Among her most important arguments is that Mexico’s national ideology of mestizaje and Chicanos’ embrace of the myth of Aztlán, which romanticize a noble but ancient indigenous heritage as the foundation for inclusive national policies in Mexico and resistance in the United States, “paradoxically render[] contemporary indigenous grievance impossible” (14, 226–232). I will return to this subject in the second half of this essay, where mestizaje is my primary focus.

Most provocatively and elusively, Saldaña-Portillo posits the theory of “heterotemporality,” in which “multiple racial geographies” that have been produced over centuries remain “overlain in this ‘multicultural’ border region, informing subject formation and models of citizenship” (24). This concept is intriguing and provides a nuanced alternative to some scholars’ lapses into essentialism or the ethnographic present when discussing identity and race. However, in positing this theory, she makes some critical factual errors and unfairly confuses some recent historians’ studies of process and change over time as “teleology” (85, 126).⁷ Two of the historians whom she criticizes, Pekka Hämäläinen and Brian DeLay, in fact directly challenge the monolithic teleology of American “Manifest Destiny.” They are careful to stress that the outcomes of the nineteenth-century conflicts and negotiations between the United States, Mexico, multiple indigenous groups, and various “communities of interest,” far from being inevitable, were contingent upon many unanticipated factors.⁸

In *How Race Is Made in America*, Natalia Molina also examines the racial and territorial borderlands between the United States and Mexico. She traces the rise of a new *immigration regime* in the United States between the watershed immigration acts of 1924 and 1965. Molina argues that this period saw the emergence of “racial categories that still shape the way we think about race, and specifically Mexicans” (1). Reviewing a familiar history, she explains that lobbying by potential employers ensured that the 1924 national immigration quotas did not apply to the Western Hemisphere. These lobbyists argued that Mexicans were “a transitory labor force” with no aspirations for American citizenship. In different situations, the US government and the courts either legally defined Mexicans as white or elided a determination of their race altogether. Still, most Americans did not accept ethnic Mexicans (neither immigrant nationals nor US citizens) as white, and so they faced many forms of de facto, extralegal, and social exclusion and discrimination (see also Sáenz and Morales, 69). Molina then examines the relational formation of race among other immigrant and ethnic

⁷ Among the most significant errors, she suggests that the 1827 state constitution of Coahuila y Téjas “turned the state into a safe haven for those escaping slavery from the United States” (122). In fact, Anglo slaveholders and their Tejano allies prevented the enactment of the constitution’s call for gradual emancipation, and plantation slavery flourished. See Andrew J. Torget, *Seeds of Empire: Cotton, Slavery, and the Transformation of the Texas Borderlands, 1800–1850* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 116–150.

⁸ Brian DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the U.S.-Mexican War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), and Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008). The concept of “communities of interest” is from Andrés Reséndez, *Changing National Identities at the Frontier: Texas and New Mexico, 1800–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

groups, arguing that “race is a mutually constitutive process.”⁹ She pays particular attention to immigration restrictions against Asians and eastern and southern Europeans, racial hierarchies that complicated the dominant US racial binary, and how these exclusions created “racial scripts” that then influenced or “were applied to” Mexicans and other groups (6, 7).

Indeed, Mexicans were not the targets of most anti-immigrant sentiment until the late 1920s. Anglo-Americans had justified the forceful annexation of indigenous and Mexican territory in the nineteenth century by racializing Mexicans as incapable of self-government. But as a small minority at the turn of the century, Mexicans largely slipped out of the national conversation about race.¹⁰ This changed once again as growing numbers of immigrants during and after the Mexican Revolution moved to the United States, especially after the complete exclusion of most Asian immigrants by 1917 and the sharp limitation of southern and eastern Europeans in 1924. Familiar racial scripts that had been applied to blacks, Indians, and Asians now emerged in reference to Mexicans: they were criminal, diseased, unassimilable, hyperfertile, and “likely to become a public charge” (91). Mexican Americans sometimes responded by asserting their whiteness, and in the middle of the twentieth century they often won cases against segregation by doing so. But Molina argues that ethnic Mexicans ultimately remained relegated to a “third flexible racial category (after ‘black’ and ‘white’) of ‘nonwhite’” (44). She bases this argument on a thorough exploration of archives that reveal debates and lobbying that occurred behind the scenes of official proclamations, legislation, and court cases—research that serves as her book’s greatest contribution.

Ethnic Mexicans and other racialized groups did not sit idly by as victims. Molina argues, “*Racialized groups put forth their own scripts and counterscripts*” (original italics) that enabled “seemingly unlikely antiracist alliances to form based on similar, but not identical, experience of racialization” (10). In the case of 1950s deportations, Molina writes about a Los Angeles coalition “that cut across racial and ethnic lines as well as class lines” and defended individuals who were targeted for deportation—not only Mexicans, but others deemed a threat due to their purported communist sympathies and associations, as mandated by the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act (118). This coalition stressed that the Southwest had once belonged to Mexico and that “the United States never fulfilled its promise of full citizenship to Mexicans” (119).

Molina ends with the 1965 Hart-Celler Act, passed during the civil rights movement and the Cold War, when the United States advertised itself to the world as a democratic, postracial society. The law ended national quotas but established the first cap on migration from the Western Hemisphere. Some Americans claimed that the law, combined with concurrent civil rights legislation, proved that the United States was now a colorblind nation. In this sense, the law functioned in a manner similar to official ideologies of *mestizaje* in Latin America, which tended to delegitimize claims of racial discrimination. But in the years that followed the law’s passage, increasing migration from Latin America and Asia spurred another backlash replete with discourse about “criminal aliens” and featuring a new wave of deportations (see also Sáenz and Morales, 38–42, 219).

Molina’s concept of racial scripts provides a useful tool for conceptualizing race and identity formation in a relational manner, and for understanding how racial discourses directed against one group have later reemerged in somewhat different form in the racialization of others (somewhat akin to Saldaña-Portillo’s theory of racial heterotemporality). One shortcoming of this approach, however, is that it tends to narrow her focus to continuities while underplaying significant changes in the workings of race over time. Molina also places the origins of the racial scripts examined in her book almost entirely in the United States. She does not examine the legacy of colonial Spain’s caste system in North America, neither in regions that the United States forcefully took from Mexico nor for Mexicans who migrated to the United States after 1848. She also makes only passing reference to the Mexican nationalist ideology of *mestizaje*, despite its periodic

⁹ Here she acknowledges some of the groundbreaking scholarship on relational racial formation in the borderlands such as Tomás Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), and Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). More recent scholarship includes Katherine Benton-Cohen, *Borderline Americans: Racial Division and Labor War in the Arizona Borderlands* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Julian Lim, *Porous Borders: Multiracial Migrations and the Law in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); and Eric V. Meeks, *Border Citizens: The Making of Indians, Mexicans, and Anglos in Arizona* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007).

¹⁰ It should be noted that in certain regions, such as south Texas, racial violence against Mexicans actually reached a peak in the 1910s. See, for example, David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans and the Making of Texas, 1836–1986* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), and Benjamin Heber Johnson, *Revolution in Texas: How a Forgotten Rebellion and Its Bloody Suppression Turned Mexicans into Americans* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

reemergence in the United States, especially as a resistant racial script within the Chicano movement of the 1960s (Molina, 62–63; Saldaña-Portillo, 153, 196–214).

This criticism calls for a closer examination of *mestizaje*, a concept that I have thus far addressed only in passing. The thirteen essays in the edited volume *Mestizaje and Globalization* explore the concept most directly, though the authors define the title's terms differently. At the simplest level, some define *mestizaje* as literal biological and/or cultural mixing. Most, however, critique *mestizaje* as a hegemonic, nationalist ideology in many Latin American countries. Only a few explore its role as a resistant, counterhegemonic discourse. As for *globalization*, the book's editors, Stefanie Wickstrom and Philip D. Young, suggest that in its broadest permutations it refers to the expanding flow of goods, capital, and people that began with the European invasions of the Americas in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. But they also note that many social scientists—including many in their edited volume—restrict the term's usage to an accelerated period of social, political, and economic change in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The authors do not attempt to reconcile these conflicting definitions, nor do they “pretend to present a unified theoretical perspective” (ix).

After acknowledging these divergent perspectives, Wickstrom and Young argue that on the eve of Spanish colonization of the Americas, because of the demographic diversity of early modern Spain and animosity toward Jews and Muslims, “Spain was obsessed with biological *mestizaje*” and sought to maintain Spanish purity in part by tracking and ranking various racial mixtures. By the nineteenth century, however, some independence movements touted *mestizaje* as resistance to colonial caste systems and/or racial hierarchies. Ironically, in the postindependence and postrevolutionary context, *mestizaje* morphed into nationally imposed ideologies with troubling repercussions for blacks and Indigenous peoples (the authors intentionally capitalize *Indigenous* throughout). These ideologies romanticized Indigenous heritage while often failing to recognize the problems facing contemporary, living and breathing Indigenous people with distinct cultures and histories. National elites who embraced *indigenismo* as integral to *mestizaje* thus paradoxically argued that *Indigenes*, as equal citizens, had no basis to protest or to seek distinct rights *as Indigenes*, despite centuries of violence, oppression, and the theft of their homelands.

Among the essays that address this theme most effectively is Mariella I. Arredondo's “Born Indigenous, Growing Up Mestizos: Schooling and Youth in Arequipa, Peru” (77). Arredondo explains that Peru's second largest city “has long been represented, from within and without, as a place of diverse racial and ethnic mixing.” Peruvians imagine *mestizaje* to have occurred primarily between “heterogeneous Europeans with heterogeneous *Indigenes*” who produced a “unique mestizo culture.” Federal officials, too, embraced a mestizo national identity beginning in the 1940s, when they (inconsistently) stopped officially tracking race.¹¹ Arredondo demonstrates that today, students at elite private institutions, with whom she conducted a series of interviews and surveys, often embrace a mestizo identity and claim to harbor no racist beliefs. However, while they tend to romanticize Indigenous groups who live in distant, rural homelands, they describe those in the cities as uneducated, uncouth, ignorant, and dangerous “*cholos*” (89).

While national mestizo ideologies have historically served to delegitimize indigenous claims for rights in Peru, Mexico, and other countries, Paulo Alberto dos Santos Vieira argues that in Brazil, mestizo nationalism and a mythical “racial democracy” have obscured the injustices endured by the black population. Afro-Brazilians who long experienced racial inequities and discrimination formed a “black movement” in the 1970s to fight for racial justice, and eventually the government responded with affirmative action policies largely modeled after those in the United States. Still, like some other Western Hemisphere countries such as Cuba—or even the United States in recent decades, where claims of a “post-racial” or “race-blind” society have eroded support for affirmative action (Sáenz and Morales, 70)—“affirmative action policies are criticized as paradoxical” because many Brazilians perceive them to favor Afro-Brazilians over whites and *pardos* (mixed-race people) alike (105).¹² (See also Angela Castañeda's essay, 180.)

¹¹ Arredondo (on p. 77) quotes historian Jeffrey Gould's assertion that in Nicaragua, in subsequent decades there was a marked “shift away from strong self-identification with the indigenous culture,” as national elites promoted a “myth of cultural homogeneity ... as a standard part of the repertoire of nation-building.” Jeffrey L. Gould, *To Die in This Way: Nicaraguan Indians and the Myth of Mestizaje, 1880–1965* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 10.

¹² In Cuba, too, a mestizo ideology has cast struggles for equality as racist, and therefore not a “permissible assertion for Afro Cubans.” See Rebecca J. Scott, “Fault Lines, Color Lines, and Party Lines: Race, Labor, and Collective Action in Louisiana and Cuba, 1862–1912,” in *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Postemancipation Societies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 102. For a provocative article about *pardos* who are contesting judgments of their racial status by tribunals who assess skin color, head shape, etc., see Cleuci de Oliveira, “Brazil's New Problem with Blackness,” *FP Magazine*, April 5, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/04/05/brazils-new-problem-with-blackness-affirmative-action/>.

A few of the essays demonstrate that *mestizaje* can be the foundation for resistance in certain contexts. Jennifer Whiteman argues that the Cheyenne of the North American plains combined the persistence of certain rituals, such as the Sun Dance, with significant cultural adaptations “to evolve into a hybrid of their earlier selves, creating a new cultural synthesis—a kind of *mestizaje*” (135). Iván Pizarro Díaz demonstrates that in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Chile, a modernizing elite cast the nation as a “country without *mestizaje*, as the whitest or most European” country in Latin America (71). In this context, cultural practices such as La Chaya, a *mestizo* celebration connected to Carnival with significant indigenous and African influences, discursively challenged a hegemonic, Eurocentric national identity. And in Argentina, according to Sabine Kradolfer, national elites constructed a white identity based on the myth that *Indigenes* had been eradicated, pushed out of the national territory, or assimilated into marginal peasant communities (173). In this context, Indigenous Argentinians have organized with other Native groups across international boundaries and collaborated with nongovernmental organizations to advocate “*estados plurinacionales*” (plurinational states). In the process, *Indigenes* have altered their own political institutions and have adopted *mestizo* cultural forms. The Mapuches, for example, incorporated “punk, heavy metal, and rap rhythms” into their musical expressions as a part of a flexible yet resistant identity, “very modern and traditional at the same time” (177–178).

These essays articulate a point left unexamined by most of the other essays in *Mestizaje and Globalization*: in countries that historically rejected *mestizo* nationalism in favor of maintaining color lines and European-dominated melting-pot mythologies, *mestizo* has sometimes served as a resistant, counterhegemonic identity. The book thus embodies a rift in social scientists’ understanding of how *mestizaje* functions in the Americas, reflecting the distinct contexts in which each scholar conducted research. There is very little dialogue *between* these scholars, who might otherwise have directly engaged each other in a nuanced conversation about the complexities of *mestizaje* throughout the Americas. As it stands, readers must make sense of the fascinating discrepancies between their uneven studies on their own.¹³

The final two books under review focus on the experiences of Latino migrants and US citizens rather than on racial nationalism and government policy. *Latinos in the United States*, by Rogelio Sáenz and Maria Cristina Morales, is a sprawling sociological overview that will serve as an excellent reference about the current status of the US Latino population. It is dense with synopses of various theoretical perspectives and many insightful observations based on statistical data, which cannot be adequately summarized in a review essay. Instead, I will focus on a prominent argument in the book that speaks to the other books under review most directly: that Latinos make up an exceptionally diverse population that defies easy classification. Latinos’ experiences vary greatly depending upon their country of origin, the manner in which they became US residents, the amount of time they have spent in the United States, education, socioeconomic status, language, and phenotype, among other factors. The authors point out that as a result, Latinos do not have the same level of cohesion or a sense of a “linked fate” as do African Americans, which manifests in their somewhat unpredictable political alignments and low voter turnout (72–73, 77, 80–81).

Mexicans still made up a large majority of Latinos in the United States in the 1960s, along with a small Puerto Rican and even smaller Cuban population. Among Latinos, Puerto Ricans and Mexicans are the only two groups that were originally incorporated into the United States through violent territorial acquisition. Both groups’ socioeconomic status continues to be lower than most other Latinos, which Sáenz and Morales attribute to a legacy of violent incorporation and subsequent loss of economic and political power. Today Mexicans still account for two-thirds of the US Latino population, but increasing numbers of Latinos have immigrated from the Caribbean and from Central and South America. Many of these groups migrated to escape violence and warfare in which the United States had a hand, whether through resource and labor extraction, support for right-wing dictatorships, or direct military aid. The ensuing violence included a socialist revolution in Cuba, civil wars in Central America, violent dictatorships in South America, and cartel wars in Colombia. Intriguingly, despite a history of *mestizaje* in Latin America and a far greater African influence than many countries acknowledge, in the 2011 American Community Survey “nearly two-thirds of Latinos identify themselves as white with more than a quarter considering themselves ‘other.’ Only 4% classified themselves as multiracial and 2% selected the black racial category” (5). This could in part be because

¹³ Scholars who focus on *mestizaje* in South and Central America might also benefit from more dialogue with scholars of North America (certainly the reverse is also true), where whites often deemed *mestizaje* dangerous, and *mestizos* have implicitly or explicitly challenged imposed racial binaries. For example, see Michel Hogue, *Metis and the Medicine Line: Creating a Border and Dividing a People* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Theda Perdue, “Mixed Blood” Indians: *Racial Construction in the Early South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003); and Meeks, *Border Citizens*.

“Hispanic” is not a racial category in the US census; more profoundly, it may indicate an understanding of white privilege. It may also reflect ideologies, identities, and resources that Latinos brought with them from their countries of origin.

Of all the groups surveyed in their book, Morales and Sáenz demonstrate that Cuban and Colombian immigrants and their American-born children have achieved the greatest economic success and highest social status. Cubans who immigrated at midcentury tended to be relatively wealthy and have lighter skin. Their whiteness had helped them to achieve success and status within Cuba’s (corrupt) capitalist system under Fulgencio Batista’s dictatorship, which was bolstered by the United States. In turn, they had reason to fear retribution by Fidel Castro’s revolutionary forces. Many escaped to the United States, where they were welcomed as refugees. Even many of those who migrated during the 1980 Mariel boatlift, who were mostly less affluent and had “darker skin,” were able to integrate into well-established Cuban communities, cashing in on the social capital of community networks (11). Similarly, Colombian migrants who were able to flee the cartel wars tended to have lighter skin and greater social and economic capital. Today, on average, Cuban and Colombian Americans therefore have “more favorable socio-economic standing” and higher education levels, higher wage jobs, and higher life expectancy, among other indicators (98, 162–163, 220).

Sáenz and Morales only occasionally attempt to answer *why* such substantial disparities in socioeconomic status, culture, and identity persist among US Latinos. Clearly, the US valuation of wealth and whiteness play significant roles. But it also seems clear that the distinct racial systems and ideologies in Latin American countries continue to resonate in the United States. This becomes most clear when their book is read in dialogue with scholarship about race in Latin America, such as *Indian Given* and *Mestizaje and Globalization*, which reveal the legacies of colonial caste systems and racial hierarchies, mestizo nationalisms, and immigrant melting-pot myths. Research about these distinct racial systems might also further nuance Natalia Molina’s already multifaceted study of race and immigration in the United States. Migrants do not enter the United States as *tabulae rasae*, cleansed of racial baggage and their own prejudices, to be subjected for the first time to racism. This understanding might clarify why in border towns such as El Paso/Ciudad Juárez, Mexicans interviewed by sociologist Pablo Vila described newcomers from Mexico City as rude and arrogant “Chilangos,” and those from Central America as crude and ignorant Indians—a characterization that echoes the way elite students in Arequipa, Peru, speak about indigenous *cholos* in their city.¹⁴ And it helps to contextualize anthropologist Lynn Stephen’s observations of similar disparagement by ethnic Mexicans toward indigenous Oaxacan migrants in California and Oregon.¹⁵

While Sáenz and Morales offer a broad statistical overview of Latinos’ experiences, sociologist Alfredo Mirandé provides a much more intimate portrait of a transborder community in *Jalos, USA*. Mirandé focuses on a community whose members variously spend time in two towns: Turlock, California, and Jalostotitlán, Jalisco—or Jalos for short. He suggests that he is working toward a new theory of “transnational identity,” building on scholarship such as that of Lynn Stephen. Ironically, though, Stephen decidedly rejects the term “transnational” in favor of “transborder,” and Mirandé might have been well advised to do the same.¹⁶ What resonates most in his rich oral interviews is a story of a *bi-local* community and identity—albeit two localities situated on either side of the border. Turlock and Jalos residents do not seem to perceive themselves as global citizens transcending nation-states but rather as members of a close-knit community firmly grounded to two similar *places*.¹⁷ Without doubt, there are larger, transnational forces that spurred their migration, including US economic expansion into Mexico and the Bracero Program (1942–1964) (8). But what emerges from the interviews are stories about the social networks that brought growing numbers of Jalos residents to Turlock, and the circular migration, kinship connections, rituals, and memories that keep them connected to their town of origin (9, 14).

What Turlock residents seem to long for—and largely achieve, according to Mirandé—is a sense of belonging that is threatened by globalization and migration. Many naturalized or were born as citizens in the United

¹⁴ Pablo Vila, *Crossing Borders, Reinforcing Borders: Social Categories, Metaphors, and Narrative Identities on the U.S.-Mexico Frontier* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000); Pablo Vila, *Border Identifications: Narratives of Religion, Gender, and Class on the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).

¹⁵ Lynn Stephen, *Transborder Lives: Indigenous Oaxacans in Mexico, California, and Oregon* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

¹⁶ Stephen, *Transborder Lives*.

¹⁷ For an interesting rumination on the tensions between the study of globalization and transnational movement, on one hand, and the study of rootedness, place, and reactions against globalization, on the other, see Jeremy Adelman, “What Is Global History Now?” *Aeon*, March 2, 2017, <https://aeon.co/essays/is-global-history-still-possible-or-has-it-had-its-moment>. Adelman suggests that “historians cheered globalism with work about cosmopolitans and border-crossing, but the power of place never went away.”

States. Most retain the devout Catholicism they inherited from Jalos, located in a deeply Catholic region of Mexico. While Mirandé suggests that the Church does not satisfactorily support immigrants' needs in contemporary Turlock, the town's residents—particularly women—put forth great effort to maintain popular Catholic traditions. These include the annual celebration of La Virgen de la Asunción and the adoration of a martyr of the Cristero War from Jalisco, Toribio Romo, who is believed to work miracles for migrants. Mirandé's analysis of this "patron saint of migrants" is the closest he comes to demonstrating the emergence of a distinct, and perhaps transnational, migrant identity. But he soon returns to the subject of community rootedness. As Mirandé explains, even those migrants who remain in Turlock and rarely, if ever, visit their hometown in Jalisco "retai[n] a strong, almost primal, identification with Jalostotitlán long after their family's migration. In fact, 'being from Jalos' appears to be a fundamental marker of personal identity that is independent of one's age, place of birth, generation, citizenship, or immigration status, and that continues even among third and fourth generation youth in immigrant families" (163).

Of course the community is not immune to the twin forces of globalization and border policing. The prolonged absence of men from their Jalos families; the difficulty that undocumented migrants face if they wish to return to Mexico for Carnival or to visit family; the isolation that women, especially, feel upon their arrival in Turlock; and the continuous fear of deportation that leaves some Turlock residents living and working in the shadows: all of these factors attest to the power of North American borders. Moreover, the culturally conservative community has not been immune to change. For example, in Turlock there has been a clear move away from "masculine dominance" in marriage towards a "companionate model" and a decline in the paternal approval of courtship (43–46, 62–63). Jalos has also changed, with an uptick in drug use, conspicuous consumption by returning migrants, and the rise of a gang culture that Jalos residents blame on the United States and El Salvador.

Finally, Mirandé's study reinforces, but complicates, some of Sáenz and Morales's findings about race among US Latinos. The latter book largely conflates Mexicans into one national-origin group within the Latino population with a median low socioeconomic status due to a legacy of US conquest, darker skin, and various other factors. But Mirandé's study of Jalos/Turlock suggests that there are Mexican migrants with a significantly different experience, in part due to their lighter complexion and conservatism, somewhat akin to what Sáenz and Morales document among Cubans and Colombians. Mirandé explains that Jalos "is a region that is less indigenous than most in Mexico," and as a result, "a disproportionate number of people from Jalos ... have light skin and blue eyes" (14, 91). While many Turlock residents recall instances of discrimination, most fault their lack of English fluency rather than race. Many have embraced the American dream, believing that individuals are responsible for their own upward mobility (or lack thereof). That said, this is the least-developed facet of Mirandé's study, despite his claim to "conflate the study of immigration and race" (12). He does not engage a well-established body of historical scholarship that has long viewed the study of immigration and race as inextricable, of which Natalia Molina's is only among the most recent.¹⁸

While the residents of Jalos/Turlock have struggled to reestablish a grounded community in a globalizing world, some individuals have thrived by refusing to be pegged down—by continuously crossing territorial, cultural, and racial borders, and by adopting mestizo identities. So I end this essay with the person and the book with which I began. Karl Jacoby writes of William Ellis: "For all its problematic erasure of the Afro-Mexican presence, mestizaje nonetheless allowed Ellis to express an identity that accessed whiteness's legal rights while also recognizing the existence of racial ambiguity and mixed ancestry. ... Moreover, it hinted at the possibilities to be found in expanding mestizaje still further to embrace the totality of the North American experience and acknowledge the continent's centuries-long history of miscegenation, mixing, entanglement, and creolization. Recast from this perspective, Ellis's passing as Mexican represented ... the birth of a truer, more complex self" (199–200).

A few essays in *Mestizaje and Globalization* make similar points, whether or not their authors would agree with Jacoby's assessment of Ellis's decision to "pass" and his optimism about mestizaje's potential. But as many of the black settlers in Ellis's own colonization scheme might attest—not to mention millions

¹⁸ For examples, see David Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Erika Lee, *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigrants during the Exclusion Era, 1882–1943* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*; David Roediger, *Working toward Whiteness: How American's Immigrants Became White; The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2005); and George Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

of undocumented immigrants and refugees in the twenty-first century—racial and territorial borders can remain extremely salient and difficult, if not impossible, to transcend.

Author Information

Eric V. Meeks is associate professor of history at Northern Arizona University. His research and teaching focus primarily on the history of the US-Mexico borderlands and race and ethnicity in North America. His first book is *Border Citizens: The Making of Indians, Mexicans, and Anglos in Arizona* (University of Texas Press, 2007). He has published essays on the history of indigenous peoples, ethnic Mexicans, borderlands, and race, and has garnered several awards, including the Western History Association's Bolton-Kinnaird Award for the best article on borderlands history. He is currently working on a new book on the history of the US-Mexico borderlands from the late eighteenth century to the present, to be published by Yale University Press in cooperation with the Clements Center for Southwest Studies at Southern Methodist University, where he was senior fellow in 2016–2017.

How to cite this article: Meeks, Eric V. 2018. Race and Identity across American Borders. *Latin American Research Review* 53(3), pp 679–688. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.258>

Submitted: 19 April 2017

Accepted: 14 August 2017

Published: 28 September 2018

Copyright: © 2018 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

LARR

Latin American Research Review is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Latin American Studies Association.

OPEN ACCESS 