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Review/Reseña

Tutino, John, ed. *Mexico & Mexicans in the Making of the United States*.
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Mexico, the United States, and the Border that Never Really Was

Timothy J. Henderson

Auburn University—Montgomery

In contrast to many academic works, the contributors to this volume insistently remind readers of the relevance of their project to the United States of today. A powerful and enduring current in U.S. thought holds that the United States was created by and for Protestant Christians of Northern European stock, and the many “Others” who alighted on these shores either as slaves or as immigrants have been progressively sullyng the nation’s purity and perverting its purpose for generations. A number of trends in recent decades—the unprecedented volume of unauthorized

immigration from Mexico and Central America; the Census Bureau's 2009 announcement that Hispanics had overtaken blacks to become the nation's largest minority; the heightened profile of Hispanics in politics, entertainment, and sports—has tended to energize nativists and racists who loudly charge that the country is somehow being lost to unworthy interlopers. By contrast, *Mexico and Mexicans in the Making of the United States* makes the important case that Hispanics have been doing their bit to shape life and culture in North America since long before the Mayflower.

John Tutino opens the book with his chapter, "Capitalist Foundations: Spanish North America, Mexico, and the United States." The tone of the chapter stands in sharp contrast to the others in the book, for it focuses on macro-economic trends involving the entirety of North America, while other authors are concerned with more local and particular themes. Tutino argues that the "history of North America cannot be understood without recognizing the roots of capitalism in New Spain and their enduring legacies across the continent" (36). New Spain's silver mines, discovered in the 1540s, became the engine of a globalizing capitalist economy, driving settlement northward and imbuing the region that would eventually become the U.S. Southwest with a Hispanic culture characterized by "patriarchy" and "ethnic amalgamations." Mexico's war for independence destroyed the silver mines and fragmented the economy, leading to growing weakness and instability that was exploited by the United States in the great land grab of 1848. In the wake of that war, Mexico found itself with little hope of reemerging as a major player in the global economy; instead it "increasingly engaged the world through the United States," (68) becoming essentially an economic satellite. But its colonial legacy remained strong in the U.S. Southwest, comprising what Tutino sees as a "third tradition" that is routinely overlooked by U.S. historians, who see only the competing cultures of the British colonial North and British colonial South.

For Tutino, the latest chapter in this saga of transnationalism begins in earnest with the Bracero Program of 1942-1964. He characterizes that program as a "binational labor draft," which he likens to the colonial era *repartimiento*. This is a curious assertion, since participation in the

Bracero Program was entirely voluntary and, in fact, there was much competition for Bracero contracts. Granted, most participants were driven by harsh economic circumstances, but it is nevertheless misleading to call the program a “draft.” This does not necessarily undercut Tutino’s point that the burgeoning movement of low-paid Mexican workers northward was a matter of “transnational symbiotic exploitation.”

Like most edited collections, this one is spotty in its chronological coverage, and it brings together scholars with greatly divergent interests and approaches. These range from literary study to ecological history to contemporary sociology. Despite their divergent methodologies and interests, however, the contributors do a fine job of hewing to the volume’s key themes, all demonstrating in their own way that Mexico and Mexicans are not outliers, but rather integral elements, of U.S. history and culture.

Andrew Isenberg explains how the coming of the Europeans profoundly altered the flora and fauna of western North America, forcing indigenous peoples to adapt by shifting from cultivation to pastoralism (mostly sheep), a specialization that left them vulnerable to Mexican and American conquest, as well as to the environmental toll taken by overgrazing. The story repeated itself when some Indians turned to equestrian nomadism, hunting herds of wild bison, which also exposed them to the caprices of man and nature and eventually led to their incorporation into the pastoral economy of the West as dependent laborers (i.e., cowboys).

Shelley Streeby takes a literary approach, analyzing the portrayal of Mexico and Mexicans in literary works of several historical periods. She finds that Mexicans were somewhat admiringly depicted in works that appeared in the era of Mexican independence, but the glorification of the revolutionary patriot soon gave way to a more predatory view of Mexicans as effeminate and inferior, potential obstacles to American territorial aggrandizement. The disparaging portrayal of Mexicans in literature bolstered the egos of white “USAmericans,” who found in it a justification for their imperial ambitions.

David Montejano uncovers a little-known episode of the U.S. Civil War, a conflict that, in the traditional telling, seldom involves Mexicans or

Mexican Americans. The Union was barred by treaty from blockading commerce on the Rio Grande, an international river, so much of the commerce that sustained the Confederacy ran through Mexico. What came to be called “Mexican cotton” was actually Confederate cotton that was marketed by way of Mexico, a commerce that was dominated by Mexican merchants and teamsters. Montejano notes that Mexicans plied this trade not out of sympathy for the Confederate cause, but simply to make profits.

Two particularly fascinating chapters follow, both of which deal with more-or-less the same area at more-or-less the same time, though with differing emphases. Katherine Benton-Cohen attacks the image of the border as a rigid line dividing two separate peoples—“the border as a racial line is a fiction” writes Benton-Cohen, “and always has been” (172). Benton-Cohen makes a point that is made by several other contributors to the volume, namely that racial categories themselves contain elements of invention and ambiguity, and they are, moreover, historically contingent and malleable. The term “Mexican,” for instance, homogenizes a vastly diverse array of peoples, as do terms like “Indian,” “American,” “Asian,” etc. According to Benton-Cohen, “Anglos” and Mexicans cooperated nicely in the Arizona borderlands so long as they faced a common enemy in the Apaches. In an especially enlightening segment, Benton-Cohen sheds new light on the iconic “gunfight at the OK corral.” It turns out that the gang of miscreants known as the “Cowboys”—the villains of that fight—made a habit of crossing into Mexico to prey upon Mexicans, which not only offended the sensibilities of Anglos in southern Arizona but also threatened the increasingly warm relations between the United States and Mexico during the early Porfiriato. In what seems today an ironic twist, the year 1881 witnessed calls for vigilantism directed against “white Cowboys, whose attacks were mainly against Mexicans” (184). But 1881 was also a turning point, according to Benton-Cohen, since it was around that time that the Apache threat was neutralized, which in turn eliminated the principal incentive for Anglo-Mexican cooperation. Mexicans and other immigrants were increasingly constructed as “others,” inferior to whites. The most dramatic evidence of that shift in race relations was seen in the

1917 mass deportation of non-white, IWW-affiliated mineworkers at Bisbee.

In what seems almost a companion piece to Benton-Cohen's, Devra Weber looks at the participation of indigenous citizens of Mexico in the transborder revolutionary milieu of the early twentieth century. Indigenous Mexicans were active in the Mexican Liberal Party (PLM) headed by the anarchist Flores Magón brothers, as well as in its U.S. counterpart, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the only major U.S. union that openly admitted Mexicans. The IWW, of course, was made up largely of immigrants who were ruthlessly exploited in the rough and tumble economy of the turn-of-the-century West. Indigenous Mexicans like Fernando Palomarez and Primo Tapia are seldom mentioned in histories of that syndicate, but they were crucial, fully international figures in that history.

The volume concludes with a couple of forays into contemporary sociology. José Limón bemoans the contempt that intellectuals—particularly those of a Marxist persuasion—have traditionally heaped upon the middle class. Chicano historians have tended to neglect the Mexican American middle class, focusing their attention on “urban barrio dwellers” and farm workers. While apparently few were paying attention, a large and vibrant Mexican American middle class emerged. These folks tend to lean heavily Democratic, since in recent years the GOP has blatantly pandered to anti-immigrant forces. Ramón Gutiérrez also notes the alarming rise of bellicose nativists, who, he maintains, are fighting a rearguard action in a nation that is “quickly becoming AmerRica” (262). Gutiérrez argues that New Mexico has played a signal role in changing the American concept of race: Instead of seeing racial categories as essential and fixed, he argues, Americans are increasingly inclined to see race as a series of “gradations and intervals,” (270) though the transition is far from complete and could yet circle back to the view of race as a matter of “sharp dualities” that, according to Gutiérrez, characterize Asian immigrants to the U.S. Northwest. Although Gutiérrez point is plausible, the pivotal role he assigns to New Mexico in this story is rather mysterious.

These authors are not the first to note the symbiotic quality in U.S.-Mexican historical development—a symbiosis that has, more often than not, worked to Mexico’s disadvantage. Nor are they the first to emphasize the fluidity inherent in notions of race, gender and nationality—an idea that seems to inform most works in the “transnational” genre. Nevertheless, this volume succeeds in convincingly fleshing out these themes, providing insightful case studies that challenge conventional histories. It is unfortunate that this, like most academic works, will probably be read by only a handful other scholars. One wishes that many of the points it makes could somehow overtake the American mainstream, a place where Mexico is still viewed very much as a foreign nation whose history and culture are, and shall likely remain, “alien.”