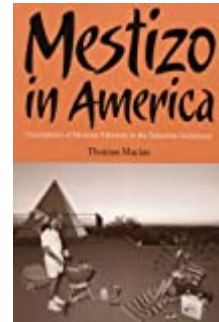


**Thomas Macias.** *Mestizo in America: Generations of Mexican Ethnicity in the Suburban Southwest.* Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2006. x + 200 pp. \$19.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8165-2505-8; \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8165-2504-1.



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## Revisiting *Mestizaje* (and *Chicanismo*) in a Transnational Context

This book, *Mestizo in America: Generations of Mexican Ethnicity in the Suburban Southwest*, examines Mexican ethnicity in Arizona, a process the author finds to be “in large part determined by things much greater than our personal volition” (p. xiii). Thomas Macias is a third-generation Mexican American from Phoenix—one of over seven million individuals of Mexican descent going back to the third (or further) generation. Macias’s underlying goal is to understand “how *mestizaje* persists in the present-day among third-plus-generation Mexican Americans.” He argues that “social forces related to ethnic concentration, social inequality, and identity politics have combined to make ethnicity for Mexican Americans more fixed across generations than it has been for other groups with multiple-generation histories in the United States” (p. 7). This line of inquiry addresses a topic of considerable potential sociological and historical interest.

Macias’s qualitative sociological approach involves weaving some fifty interviews of respondents aged twenty-five and older into a cohesive narrative. Unfortunately, neither the conceptual approach nor the research

design succeeds in providing useful ethnic portraits. The lackluster interview instrument, which does not seem to have allowed for pointed follow-up questions, encourages unimaginative analysis. The responses reveal insufficient information even to illuminate local dimensions of ethnicity, falling short of the author’s claim to shed light on the neglected suburban components of Mexican-American ethnicity. The various topics into which he grouped his interview questions—personal and family history, the ethnic context, cultural practices, and ethnic identity—prove even less compelling and somewhat incongruent in the book’s six wide-ranging chapters.

Perhaps of more concern than a weak methodology is the lack of context with regard both to Mexican-American identity as a living construct and to larger social and cultural trends of Latino migration and ethnicity in the United States. *Mestizaje* is invoked, presumably, as a surrogate term for a separate Mexican-American identity, but it becomes unclear when subsumed within general assimilation theory and the Chicano movement.

Interspersed discussions of the legacy of the Chicano movement—which in retrospect has proved to be

largely a “generational” affair among native-born Mexican Americans—reflect a tendency of some writers to overemphasize the 1960s era. That particular Chicano “identity” in its time, however, was an active one, embracing an irreverent mix of irredentism, the search for identity, and participation in civil rights struggles. Notable especially during its formative years, is the fact that some components of *La Lucha* exhibited a tacit resistance to the economic and social incorporation of migrants from Mexico, a competing threat that could deflect the fledgling movement’s emphasis on conditions among Mexican-Americans in the U.S. Southwest toward a more diffuse international one. This certainly proved to be the case with Cesar Chavez’s early organizing efforts with the United Farm Workers (UFW), which were only later expanded—through the influence of Dolores Huerta and others—to reach out to a broader constituency of Mexican-born workers as well.

My own historical bent leaves me wanting greater coverage and deeper analysis of the Mexican-American experience in Phoenix. Occasional references are made to San Jose, California, perhaps to give a broader context, but these are not clear beyond the fact that, like Phoenix, Latinos there constitute a significant percentage of the metropolitan region’s total number of inhabitants. It is not clear why Phoenix interviewees bring more to the table than, for instance, third- or fourth-generation Mexican Americans in Chicago, Milwaukee, or Dallas. A superficial discussion of Mexican Catholicism (pp. 29-30) informed by “good” vs. “bad” (i.e., non-observant) Catholics, reflects merely the formalized responses from interview data. No greater insights obtain from discussions of “traditional gender roles” or a discussion of the work of sociologist Milton Gordon, and references to some of the relatively recent sociological works on “inequality” similarly lack energy and purpose while leaving pressing contemporary issues of identity unanswered.

One can speculate on one theme of interest to this immediate audience—that of childhood, especially as a cultural construct. Had Macias more thoroughly elaborated on the texture of Mexican-American families—their formation, migration, and levels of acculturation—then the impact of changing ethnic identity on children might have been advanced into new areas. One can only lament the vast amount of scholarly work that needs to be done

on waves of migrating families from Latin America, as well as those situated in the United States.

For a broader view, themes involving continuing ties with the homeland—such as transnational religion and hemispheric civil rights movements—need to be carefully introduced. Among recent Mexican migrants extensive transnational organizing and community-building—rooted both in the United States and in the homeland—has helped to create multiple identities in contemporary migrant communities, which innovatively engage ancient Americanization and assimilation processes. Within this context, *mestizaje* (both biological and cultural) serves as a useful marker for identity, whose current impact might well be contrasted with the impact of the arrival of darker complexioned immigrants into previously all-white venues in earlier generations. But *mestizaje* as articulated in chapter 6, for example, where the author relies on the Chicano activist emphasis on the indigenous as an “overt expression of mestizo identity” (p. 122), is not really usefully employed as a tool for understanding families, communities, and other “generational” categories over time and across regions.

Macias’s interpretive focus should have been expanded to engage the emerging social science literature on transnational migration. How, for instance, do contemporary urban migrants interact with older generations of Phoenix Mexican Americans—politically, socially, and economically? Certainly this would tell us something about changing patterns of ethnicity and the ongoing “negotiation” of identity that occurs even within members of the same ethnic group. As is, we see little of the current struggle, tensions, or dynamics either among individuals or communities.

There is also the question of the identities of Mexican Americans with historical homelands in Sonora and throughout northern Mexico (including those portions which are now part of the United States), whose ancestors became displaced “territorial minorities” in Tucson and surrounding areas during the nineteenth century with the arrival of Anglo settlers. Are these all to be conflated with the Great Migration-era immigrants of the 1920s and their offspring? If not, where do the generational demarcations lie for “old” vs. “new” Mexican Americans? And how do these clarify our understanding of their ethnicity—in Arizona and elsewhere?

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