

Desire among the Ruins: The Politics of Difference in American Visions of Porfirian Mexico

JASON RUIZ

Travel to Mexico became instantly faster, smoother, and cheaper for Americans when workers finally linked US and Mexican rail lines in 1884. Following the opening of the international rail connection, Americans went south of the border in droves and produced a wide array of representations depicting Mexico under the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1876–1911, a period known as the “Porfiriato”). Travelogues, picture postcards, stereographs, and magic-lantern slides with Mexican themes all circulated heavily in US popular culture during this time. This essay examines the politics of difference in these representations – chiefly travel writing and postcards – arguing that travelers and other observers played a crucial but overlooked role in popularizing the view of Mexico as a logical field for capitalist (and sometimes territorial) expansionism. By positioning Mexican bodies as both desirable and dangerous, I argue, the creators of travel discourse set the stage for contradictory and ambivalent views of Mexico that reverberate in the United States even today.

Sometime in the first decade of the twentieth century an American named Frank Hamilton sent a picture postcard to Porfirio Díaz, the President of Mexico (Figure 1). On the back of the card he wrote a rather surprising message:

Esteemed Sir:

I have a serious question and favor to ask you. I would like to know where this young woman is from; if it is not possible to locate her, I seek someone resembling her. I love her tenderly and desire to communicate with her; my hope and desire is that she is from a poor family. Many thanks, my best wishes, and sincere gratitude.

Frank Hamilton¹

Standing alone in the famous (and phallic) Salon de las columnas at the ancient ruins of Mitla, the postcard depicted a barefoot Zapotec girl posed against a massive column. Wearing a *rebozo* and simple white shift, she is

Department of American Studies, University of Notre Dame. Email: jason.ruiz@nd.edu. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers arranged by the *Journal of American Studies* for incisive readings of this essay. I am also indebted to Heidi Ardizzone, Aaron Carico, Erika Doss, and Kevin P. Murphy for reading early drafts and providing ideas for its improvement.

¹ Francisco Montellano, *C. B. Waite, Fotógrafo* (Mexico, DF: Grijalbo, 1994) 123.



Figure 1. Frank Hamilton appealed to the President of Mexico for help in finding the girl that Waite photographed in Mitla (Montellano).

dwarfed by the walls that enclose her in the courtyard and by the column itself. She appears to be about ten to twelve years old. Although her face is barely discernible in the deep shadows created by the tropical sun, if one looks very closely she seems to return the camera's gaze. The image tells us very little about this girl, how her image became commodified on the postcard, and why she inspired such a disarmingly earnest response from Hamilton. While the specifics of Hamilton's interest in the girl are not part of the historical record, complex discourses of desire, power, race, gender, and relations between the United States and Mexico collide in his brief message to the President.

When workers linked US and Mexican rail lines in the 1880s, travel between the republics was instantly quicker, smoother, and cheaper. No longer dependent on the steamers that departed from New Orleans and other port cities, Americans could board luxurious Pullman cars in northern cities like Chicago, New York, and Boston, and travel many thousands of miles overland into the heart of Mexico. Thousands of foreigners went to Mexico each year on the new rail lines, whether as pleasure travelers, itinerant traders, migrants looking for new lives, or employees of expanding American and British mining or oil firms.² So many US citizens entered Mexico during this period that

² It is difficult to ascertain exactly how many travelers from the United States entered Mexico during the Porfiriato, partly because the border was much more porous during that period than it is today. While I cannot account for the exact number US citizens who ventured into Mexico, the boom in travelogues and other representations of travel to Mexico – including the countless brochures, timetables, and photographs produced by US-owned rail lines in Mexico – suggests that the Mexican holiday became a popular new option for Americans of means.

some Mexicans – and even some travelers – referred to the Americans that swarmed train stations and popular destinations such as the ruins at Mitla as a “foreign invasion.” Americans who could not make the journey themselves were keenly interested in Porfirian Mexico as well, especially as travelers increasingly published accounts of their journeys. From lantern slides and stereoscopes to magazine writing and the ubiquitous travelogues that allowed armchair adventurers to experience a trip to Mexico vicariously, the United States experienced an explosion in travel discourse that spoke to American concerns about modernity, progress, and Mexico’s relation to the growing power of the United States. American travelers played a powerful but overlooked role in shaping ideas about Mexico in the popular imagination of the United States during the “Porfiriato” (the term for Díaz’s long reign, 1876–1911). By interrogating representational practices of travelers and cultural workers like the photographer who created the picture postcard of the girl at Mitla, this essay explores the intersections of travel, desire, and the politics of “economic conquest” in US travel discourses.

PORFIRIAN MEXICO AND THE POLITICS OF DESIRE

In the years preceding the Porfiriato, popular representations of Mexico reflected American concerns that the nation was simultaneously “very close” and “quite alien” to the US body politic, a geographic and political entity mired in brigandage and the excesses of Spanish colonialism.³ The few who traveled there tended to present themselves as intrepid explorers, exploring *terra incognita* in the aftermath of the US war with Mexico. During the Porfiriato, however, travelers began to note that telegraph and rail lines now ribboned the landscape, as well as architectural wonders like the new Central Post Office and the opulent but unfinished Palace of Fine Arts in Mexico City.⁴ Mexico now had, in the eyes of some, the technological and industrial markers of modernity. Alongside the older views of Mexico, the nation began to look modern and progressive. According to one traveler who published a lavishly illustrated account of her travels in 1897, Mexico was, “in short, the coming country.”⁵

By juxtaposing these tropes alongside one another, as they were with greater frequency as the Porfiriato wore on, Mexico came to be imagined by many

³ I borrow this idea of Mexico as both close and alien from Shelley Streeby, “Joaquín Murrieta and the American 1848,” in John Carlos Rowe, ed., *Post-nationalist American Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 166–96.

⁴ Stories of Mexican brigandage circulated in travelogues, as well as in dime novels and crime magazines, as illustrated by Shelley Streeby in *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

⁵ Marie Robinson Wright, *Picturesque Mexico* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1987), 444.

Americans as both a backwater and a potential “sister republic” that was economically and politically compatible with the United States. This paradox, which treated Mexico as an infernal paradise, piqued the interests of audiences and created a demand among the American public for visual and textual representations of Mexico and its people.⁶ Later, during the Porfiriato and into the Revolutionary period, muckraking journalists like John Kenneth Turner and John Reed would come to Mexico to expose the atrocities with which the Díaz regime was complicit, but, from the 1880s until late in the first decade of the twentieth century, popular representations of travel to Mexico prevailed that painted the nation as simultaneously ancient and modern, both very close and quite alien to the US body politic.⁷ That nation was also, of course, always considered in relation to American ideas about industrial and capitalist modernity in the so-called Gilded Age and Progressive Era.

These perceptions were also intimately linked to broader political and economic relations. By the time Díaz was ousted from office, Americans had invested more than a billion dollars in Mexican industries and infrastructures.⁸ This large-scale economic project was facilitated by Díaz and his *científicos*, a circle of highly educated technocratic advisers who aimed to modernize Mexico through positivist “scientific” means. As a result, people on both sides of the border began to see their economies as interconnected, a process that travelers helped to facilitate. American travelers joined elite Mexicans in suspending their commitment to democracy to accept the Díaz regime as a necessary route to modernization through foreign investment. Díaz, according to a famously hagiographic article by James Creelman, had “converted the warring, ignorant, superstitious, and impoverished masses of Mexico . . . into a strong, steady, peaceful, debt-paying, and progressive nation,” and travelers were eager to report the results of this transformation.⁹ Gleaming new buildings and steaming locomotives were obvious subjects for travelers to use in promoting US economic intervention in Mexico, but Mexican people, who

⁶ For further description of Mexico as an infernal paradise, see Daniel Cooper Alarcón’s *The Aztec Palimpsest: Mexico in the Modern Imagination* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997).

⁷ John Reed, *Insurgent Mexico* (New York and London: D. Appleton and Co., 1914); and John Kenneth Turner, *Barbarous Mexico* (Chicago: C. H. Kerr and Co., 1910). Turner’s exposé of debt peonage is generally credited with turning the tide of American public opinion against the Díaz regime.

⁸ Greg Grandin, *Empire’s Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Owl Books, 2006), 29. Chicano scholar Gilbert G. González describes relations between the United States and Mexico from the 1880s to the end of the first decade of the twentieth century as a “culture of empire,” arguing that American popular culture helped set the stage for America’s “economic conquest of Mexico.”

⁹ James Creelman, “President Diaz: Hero of the Americas,” *Pearson’s Magazine*, 19, 3 (1908), 232.

did not adhere to Progressive Era ideals, were more complicated representational subjects.

Charles Burlingame Waite, an American photographer who traveled and worked in Mexico throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, took the photograph that inspired Frank Hamilton to write to Díaz – as well as thousands of others that documented the contradictions of Porfirian modernity. His photographs blended many of the tropes that Americans had come to associate with Mexico, such as women in “native costume,” churches and ruins, and *peones* bearing huge loads, but they also incorporated elements of reportage. Waite’s view included, for example, street scenes and markets, funerals, bullfights, and celebrations. He established a studio in Mexico City in the 1890s. Over the next two decades, he met many of his compatriots who passed through the capital and traveled the country with several of them. Along with his own thriving sales to tourists and visiting writers, who used his pictures to illustrate their travelogues, various American firms engaged him to record and promote their operations in Mexico.¹⁰ Like many Americans who were impressed with Díaz and who wanted to promote US investment in Mexico, Waite captured diverse views of the modernizing nation: orderly haciendas and factories, grand buildings that seemed to appear out of nowhere during the Porfiriato, and the rail lines that connected disparate parts of Mexico to each other – and to the United States. He also focussed on character studies of Mexican people, attempting to capture and commodify his vision of a Mexican national character. In this sense, Waite’s work echoed that of the other foreign photographers who worked in Mexico during the Porfiriato, often with greater artistic success, such as William Henry Jackson, Guillermo Kahlo, Abel Briquet, and Hugo Brehme.¹¹

Diversity in style and subject matter, along with his seemingly boundless energy for traveling and taking photographs, made C. B. Waite one of the most prolific and successful commercial photographers working in Mexico during the Porfiriato. In addition to the travelogues mentioned above, his images appeared in the pages of Mexican weeklies and were reproduced as cheap picture postcards like the one that Frank Hamilton sent to Díaz. Waite’s images were also sold at the Streets of Mexico exposition at the

¹⁰ Dozens of travelogues produced during the Porfiriato and throughout the 1920s and 1930s acknowledge Waite. Others used Waite photographs without crediting him.

¹¹ Respectively, these photographers hailed from the United States, France, and Germany. While the study at hand emphasizes American visions of Porfirian Mexico, it is important to note that Mexicans developed a rich photographic culture of their own during this time, one into which the Díaz regime tapped to establish and affirm its power. The work of Olivier Debrouse, Mark Overmyer-Velázquez, and other scholars of photography in Mexico shows that scores of Mexican-owned studios operated in the country throughout the Porfiriato.

Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo in 1901 and turned into lantern slides which illustrated traveling lecturers' descriptions of Mexican travel. An artist and businessman, Waite anticipated and profited from an explosion in American popular culture of representations of travel to and life in Mexico. During the 1860s, *cartes de visite* made by French photographers had helped the French public to see and imagine Mexico during their infamous intervention in that country (1861–67); in the 1890s, as the United States became more economically and politically interested in Mexico, a visual culture flourished that pictured Mexico as similarly ripe for exploitation. Waite and other photographers helped Americans visualize the potential of US capitalist investment across the Rio Grande by showing the American public who the Mexicans were and what their country looked like.

Waite toured Mitla in 1901, where he took pictures of the ruins and of local women in equal measure. Mitla was a popular daytrip for tourists who ventured into the southern state of Oaxaca in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially from 1901 to 1902, when the famous Mexican archaeologist Leopoldo Batres uncovered and restored many important buildings at the site. Images of the archeological zone illustrated countless travelogues and scrapbooks during this time, and posing one's traveling companions or anonymous natives among the columns was almost obligatory for professional and amateur photographers alike. Waite's trip to Mitla generated hundreds of images, some of which he published in the magazine *El Mundo Ilustrado* or sold as postcards in various outlets in Mexico City, including the National Museum, where American tourists could buy them for a few pesos. Frank Hamilton might have been such a tourist, or he might have received the card from a friend or relative who went to Mexico, or he might have been one of the countless American collectors who were swept up in the postcard craze of the early twentieth century.¹² Regardless of how he came across Waite's card, Hamilton's message suggests that the picture, like other representations of travel to Mexico that circulated within the United States during the Porfiriato, served as a powerful site of contact and desire between the United States and Mexico.

Feminist scholars have perhaps most provocatively explored the intersections of desire and social difference. As critic bell hooks argues, popular culture often exploits the fact that "there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgment and enjoyment of racial difference." "The commodification of Otherness," hooks continues, "has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and

¹² Hal Morgan and Andreas Brown, *Prairie Fires and Paper Moons: The American Photographic Postcard, 1900–1920* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1981).

seeing.”¹³ Hooks refers to contemporary mass culture, but the large and varied corpus of travel discourse that emerged during the Porfiriato suggests that American producers and consumers of popular texts took great enjoyment in acknowledging Mexican racial difference. The makers of travelogues and postcards, among other travel materials that now reside in archives, libraries, and personal collections on both sides of the border, marveled at the exotic “racial types” that they saw in Mexico (most commonly the “Indian” and the *mestizo*), even if they could not agree upon what Mexican racial difference meant for American prospects. Some argued that Mexicans were on the whole too distinct from American racial ideals to ever assimilate into a modern state (especially one that many Americans wished to shape into a state that more closely resembled their own), while others downplayed the dangers of racial difference to suggest that Mexicans could integrate into a modernizing labor force in the way that some immigrant groups, such as the Irish and Italians, had done in the United States. Regardless of their political aims, however, the white middle-class Americans who wrote about their trips to Mexico often inadvertently wrote their views on race and sexuality into their travel narratives.

Depicting Mexico as a racialized and sexualized space was not strictly the domain of randy photographers and lonely American bachelors. Female travelers also played important roles in imagining Mexico through representations that were richly – if subtly – imbued with racial and sexual tones. Harriott Wight Sherratt of Rockford, Illinois was among the many women who published accounts of their journeys south of the border during the Porfiriato. Her travelogue, *Mexican Vistas Seen from the Highways and Byways of Travel* (1899) detailed a journey taken with her husband Ahasuerus. Sherratt was, to borrow Cynthia Enloe’s term, among the cadre of the “Victorian lady travellers” who “set out upon travels that were supposed to be the preserve of men.” According to Enloe, these women “defied the strictures of femininity by choosing parts of the world which whites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries considered ‘uncharted’, ‘uncivilized’. . . . These Victorian lady travellers wanted *adventure*.”¹⁴ Like many of her fellow women writers during the Porfiriato, Sherratt prided herself in having access both to the upper echelons of Mexican society in the capital and to the exotic “byways” that took her to remote towns and villages. For Victorian ladies, Mexico was a place where the well-connected visitor could meet the President and his pretty wife (as commonly claimed by the authors of

¹³ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1994), 21.

¹⁴ Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Sense of Feminist International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 23, original emphasis.

British and American travelogues) and the multitudes of Indians that they saw – or barely glanced at – everywhere in the country.¹⁵

Sherratt's book was traditionally feminine but hinted at the shifting terrain of gender that female travelers experienced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sherratt, whose husband escorted her on the trip, described how to search for the prettiest handicrafts in markets and how the discriminating traveler might best appreciate the sumptuous interiors at Chapultepec Castle. Like many foreign women who went to Mexico during the Porfiriato, Sherratt's Mexico was one of lavish parties held by expatriate Americans and Europeans. On the other hand, the author was not satisfied to see Mexico through the windows of a Pullman car. She traveled obscure byways and explored remote Indian villages. Sherratt presented herself throughout *Mexican Vistas* as part of the action rather than as passive viewer, both among high society and in remote villages and backwaters. Her brisk prose further marked her as a Victorian lady traveler. Along with other notable travelogues by women, scores of which were published during the Porfiriato,¹⁶ Sherratt's book suggests to the contemporary reader as much about the author's self-construction as a New Woman as it does about the places that she visited.

Denied full citizenship rights throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, some women used foreign travel as a way to claim full status as modern white subjects. Representing racial "otherness" was one strategy for doing so. Neither Sherratt nor Tweedie could vote back home, for example, but their highly spirited travelogues represented them as active agents in the grueling work of travel to Mexico. They not only lived but thrived as feminine versions of what Theodore Roosevelt called the "strenuous life" in his famous 1899 speech. Mexico was a place for the New Woman to exercise her independence, but such freedoms also raised questions and reservations about proper relationships between female travelers and non-white men. These anxieties were prevalent in American popular culture of the era. *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), for example, famously glorified the violence of white supremacy against the excess of black male sexuality.¹⁷ According to the logic of that film, and so many other cultural productions during the Progressive Era, protecting women from the libidinous black gaze helped define white

¹⁵ I use the term "Indian" throughout this essay in an effort to mark (and not to reproduce) the erasure of ethnic diversity in Mexico in travelers' accounts and the collapsing of ethnic differences into a generic, monolithic category.

¹⁶ For particularly illuminating examples of travelogues by women see Mary Elizabeth Blake and Margaret F. Sullivan, *Mexico: Picturesque, Political, and Progressive* (Boston: Lee and Shepard Publishers, 1888) and Marie Robinson Wright, *Picturesque Mexico* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott and Company, 1897) in addition to those mentioned in this essay.

¹⁷ *The Birth of a Nation* (dir. D. W. Griffith, Epoch Film Company, 1915).

manhood and white womanhood alike.¹⁸ White women who traveled to Mexico frequently wrote about their encounters with non-white men.

In one telling scene from *Mexican Vistas*, for example, Sherratt described the novel experience of being carried to an isolated mountain village by a local man:

I seated myself in the chair, the Indian porter knelt, placed one of the two bands around his forehead, and the other around his shoulders, rose slowly like a camel and trotted off with me. The motion was delightful – much like the easy canter of a pony – and many a sly nap I took under my white canopy as the day wore on.¹⁹

Like many male travelers, Sherratt prided herself on visiting the remotest places in Mexico, but also depended on the strength and knowledge of local natives to get her there. This type of encounter between a self-described “progressive” white woman and a Mexican Indian is one of many that American travelers reported in Mexico, where locals served alternately as the objects of derision, fascination, desire, and necessity. Perhaps above all, women travelers from the United States implied that native Mexicans were natural servants, a fact that is heightened in this scene by multiple comparisons between the Indian porter and animals. Sherratt marveled at the comforts afforded to the foreign visitor in Mexico, lazing under the canopy and suggesting that the Victorian lady traveler could trek away from civilization and yet maintain her composure.

However, encounters between travelers (regardless of gender) and native servants were more complicated than travelers’ narratives suggested on their surfaces. Sherratt’s description of being carried up a mountain defined her status as a white woman and foreigner in Mexico. Perhaps readers who were nervous about the new connectedness of Mexico and the United States were assuaged by the fact that racial distinctions remained intact. Despite the fact that many travelers expressed concerns about racial mixing in Mexico, their encounters with native people reinforced racial hierarchies; by appearing over and over as nameless, faceless servants – even comparable to animals, as they were in Sherratt’s description – they helped to convince readers and potential travelers that the racial system by which those readers and potential travelers defined themselves could be retained even as they crossed into *terra incognita*. If the Indians would carry the traveler up the mountain while she napped under a white canopy, they could not disrupt how she structured her whiteness in relation to her racial Others.

¹⁸ Michael Rogin, “‘The Sword Became a Flashing Vision’: D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*,” *Representations*, 9 (1985), 150–95.

¹⁹ Harriott Wight Sherratt, *Mexican Vistas Seen from the Highways and Byways of Travel* (Chicago: Rand McNally and Co., 1899), 224.

Such encounters provided multiple opportunities for travelers to think and write about Indianness. Turning her attention to the men who carried her, Sherratt noted,

There were four chairmen who relieved one another at stated intervals. They were all strong, robust Indians accustomed to burdens of at least two hundred and fifty pounds, so that my conscience did not reprove me, although I must confess that I had all the time the feeling that I was making a human soul a beast of burden. The beasts of burden, however, bore their load cheerfully; for the first one carried me, in spite of my protests, straight up the mountain five miles without stopping.²⁰

In this brief scene, Sherratt expounded upon the racist schema of travel to Mexico: because the Indian's status as a human was questionable, he or she could be rendered merely a mode of transportation or picturesque object for the touristic gaze. The Indian was strong, useful, and productive, and could also serve as a source of pleasure for the traveler. Perhaps to allay any suspicions that this was too close an encounter between the traveler and the native (she had, after all, been enjoying the motion of the ride), she reminds the reader that her husband was at her side throughout the trek. Sherratt was part New Woman, no longer restricted to "proper" modes of travel, and part Victorian lady traveler, protected from the threat that the locals posed to her propriety. The representational trick for Sherratt was to tell an exciting story while reminding her readership that she was still a Victorian Lady.

DESIRE AND THE IMPOVERISHED CHILD

The trope of the impoverished Indian was one way in which the men and women who went to Mexico insulated themselves from the locals in depictions of their journeys. Abject poverty was depicted in every popular medium that represented Mexicans for American audiences, and children appeared especially frequently as the markers of Mexican poverty. One image, from a personal album collected by a resident of the "American colony" at a Mexican mine in the first decade of the twentieth century, demonstrates that Americans in Mexico took snapshots of the poverty that they saw and pasted these images into their scrapbooks.²¹ The photograph ([Figure 2](#)) depicted a young girl standing with her brother in a barren landscape. The girl is fully covered in shabby clothing, but the boy, whose hand is clasped tightly in hers, is completely naked. Both of the children look at the same point outside the photograph's frame, as if they are taking direction from a parent or photographer's assistant.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Mexico Album (c.1905), DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University (Ag2002.1412).

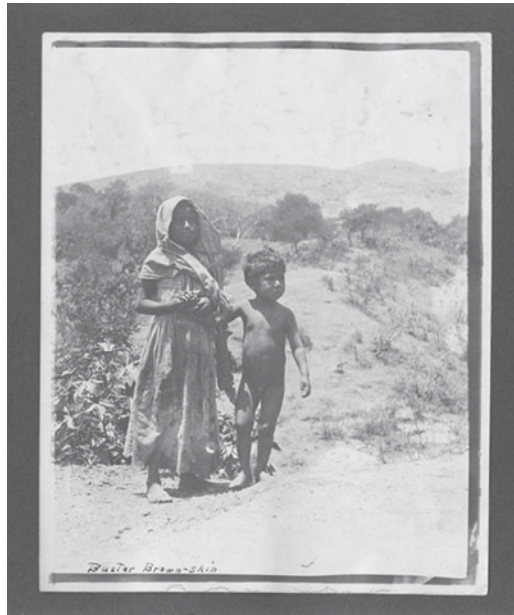


Figure 2. "Buster Brown-skin." DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University.

This is a typical image of Indian poverty, but its meaning is deepened by a handwritten caption. Playing on the popular character from the comics that appeared in American newspapers beginning in 1902, an American observer wrote "Buster Brown-skin" under the photograph. The joke, of course, is that the boy depicted in the photograph is antithetical to the well-to-do rascal with the blonde pageboy haircut from the funny pages. This boy and the fictional Buster Brown were racially different (hence the emphasis on corporeal difference, e.g. "brown-skin") but the caption elucidates what many images of impoverished children merely imply: the broader social and economic differences between the Mexican child and the children of Americans who went to Mexico or engaged with travel discourse. Travelers often described feeling sympathy for the poor children that they saw throughout Mexico, but they also used them to exemplify the material and cultural differences that the US–Mexico border was supposed to mark. Here, one scrapbook maker even poked fun at these differences.

The appearance of "Buster Brown-skin" is especially poignant considering the appearance, several pages later in the album, of some photographs of a young blonde girl, presumably the daughter of a mine employee, who appears to be around the same age as the naked boy. One, sent as a postcard from Mexico to Mrs. S. H. Reed of Raton, New Mexico, playfully asks, "Have you seen anything of a little girl who looks like this? I am missing one here."

Other images suggest that the American girl lives a privileged and pampered life in Mexico, as if her parents have perfectly replicated their comfortable lives there – despite (or is it because of?) the presence of Buster Brown-skins. Many of the albums of American employees stationed in Mexico during the Porfiriato feature similarly striking contrasts between Mexican and white American children.

But the trope of the impoverished Indian did more than simply insulate Americans from Mexicans. It also brought them closer, as poverty served as a source of both fascination and derision. Although the Indian was frequently presented as merely an abject Other, there are also places in the words and images produced by American travelers to Mexico where poverty intersected with sexual or romantic desire. In fact, we must ask if this state of poverty actually at times worked to make indigenous people *more* desirable to American writers, photographers, and audiences. Scholars of empire have established that the cultural production of the desirable and conquerable colonial subject was an important tenet of the colonial process.²² Photography helped audiences in colonizing cultures, including everyday people who were far removed from the work of colonialism, to imagine not only the rightness of the colonial project but also the desirability of “exotic” populations.²³ Frank Hamilton’s hope that the object of his affection was from a poor family suggested that the poor native girl, and not the mestiza or the well-to-do Mexican lady of European descent (who were sometimes, though rarely, depicted in travelogues), was an especially desirable companion for Anglo-American men.

Another arresting image that appeared around the same time depicts two indigenous Mexican girls in the same straightforward compositional style employed by Waite (Figure 3). Barefoot, dusty, and dressed in tattered clothes that contrast with their dark brown skin, the prepubescent girls return the camera’s gaze. The seated girl holds a basket containing chipped pottery. The look on her face suggests that she was sad or frightened by the man who pointed his camera at her, but she nonetheless looks directly into the camera.²⁴ The standing girl wears a self-confident smile on her face that contrasts sharply with her poverty, her dress so torn that part of her chest is visible. The girls

²² Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978); and Ann McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

²³ See Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

²⁴ The photograph is attributed to “Scott” on the print held by the Benson Collection. The catalogue information at the archive describes it as “Photo 2672 by Scott of two young girls.” However, the image appears similar to many of those produced by C. B. Waite and appears alongside several other Waite images in the collection (Black Photograph Album no 1363B). Other images known to have been produced by Waite are marked “Scott” among the photos held at the Benson Collection.



Figure 3. Two girls return Waite's gaze. Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries.

appear to have been posed against the wall of an ancient edifice, photographed much more intimately than the children mentioned above. While we do not know if these girls inspired romantic interest like the girl at Mitla, they are, like that postcard, early iterations of the stereotype of the needy Latina who is desirable partly *because* she is in need of rescue. At the same time as Mexico was a place for the New Woman to exercise her independence, as argued above, it also provided some Americans with an alternative vision of gender, sexuality, and desire. As feminist scholars have argued, this vision of female *latinidad* persists in American popular culture even today, seen especially in a recent spate of US films in which white characters' devotion for Latinas/os is negotiated through intersecting class and racial differences.²⁵

²⁵ Some examples include such fare as *Maid in America*, *Spanglish*, and *Quinceañera*, which revises this trend by presenting a working-class queer Latino as the object of desire for his upwardly mobile gay white neighbors. I am especially inspired by Felicity Shaeffer-Grabiel's recent work on Latin American "cyberbrides" in my effort to understand the needy, desirable Latina. See Felicity Shaeffer-Grabiel, "Flexible Technologies of Subjectivity and Mobility across the Americas," *American Quarterly*, 58, 3 (Sept. 2006), 891–914.

REVERSALS OF DESIRE

At the same time as male and female Anglo-American travelers subtly expressed sexual fascination with Mexico, Mexican sexualities – especially female sexuality – served as a dangerous foil to American-style capitalism and modernity. In 1889, J. R. Flippin, an American who lived and worked in Chihuahua for nearly five years, published *Sketches from the Mountains of Mexico*, a combination travelogue, memoir, and treatise on the commercial prospects for Americans south of the border.²⁶ Among the many arguments that he made regarding the natural inferiority of Mexico's native people, Flippin presented the romantic and sexual union between black men and Indian women as an abomination. Flippin's problem with such pairings was not the seemingly obvious white anxieties regarding black male sexuality like those that coalesced a couple of decades later in *The Birth of a Nation*, but the supposedly predatory and degenerate nature of the Indian woman. After describing black men in Mexico as "strangers in a strange land," he offered the following description of their romantic prospects:

Some few of them intermarry with the *peon* population, and, as it ever is, he soon descends to her level, for the husband seldom lifts up the wife; but the wife drags the husband down to her social scale. The negro is courted by this [Indian] class of the Mexican population. And by the rest of her associates, fortunate is she considered who can bind in matrimonial chains this sable son of Adam. She is regarded as marrying *up*, and not *down*, as some would suppose.²⁷

Contrary to dominant discourses surrounding fears of miscegenation in the United States after the Civil War – and the author's presumption of his readers' de facto racism – Flippin suggested that Indian women threatened the civilizable nature of their black partners. With the culture of protectionism of white women out of play, which, along with white supremacy, was at the heart of antimiscegenation sentiment in the US (think of Sherratt's husband vigilantly riding alongside her as she was carried up the mountain), some American observers presented Indian female sexuality as a threat to Mexican civilization. This was especially true earlier in the Porfiriato, before travelers began to envision a more civilized and desirable Mexican female sexuality to support economic intervention. After the turn of the twentieth century, depictions of native and mestiza Mexican women began to soften as travelers worked to convince their readers that all classes of Mexican men and women had the potential to transform into manageable capitalist subjects. Photographers such as Waite began to present the Indian woman as more overtly desirable. They also began to picture Indian women as productive in

²⁶ J. R. Flippin, *Sketches from the Mountains of Mexico* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 1889).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 39, emphasis in original.

the capitalist sense, as images of indigenous women working in factories and haciendas began to appear in travelogues and in the pages of magazines like *National Geographic* late in the Porfiriato.

Even so, stereotypes like those advanced by Flippin persisted late into the Porfiriato, alongside the depictions that imagined the Indian as desirable – or at least innocuous. Traveler W. E. Carson depicted abject Indian femininity in accordance with the deficiencies of Indian men near the end of Díaz's rule:

The Indian man has a fitting mate in the Indian woman, who is not a wholesome-looking person. Nearly all of the women are small, plump, and slatternly, with tousled hair, their dresses torn and dirty, their general appearance being reminiscent of gypsies. Some of the girls are handsome enough; but the hardness and monotony of their lives make them old women before their time, and an Indian maiden of thirty is often simply a bent and wrinkled hag... Like their husbands, the women are invariably dull-witted and unprogressive.²⁸

Like the men whose capacities for work almost redeemed them to many of the travelers who wrote about them, Carson suggested that the Indian woman's only salvation might be her work. "They have few virtues save their devotions to their husbands and children," Carson wrote, "but many of them are not unskilful [*sic*] in fancy work, being able to follow the most elaborate designs, doing also really delicate and pretty work on handkerchiefs and linens."²⁹ Flippin and Carson, along with other travelers who lingered upon the image of abject Indian femininity, illustrate Said's theory that the production of the Other was gendered so that "women are usually the creatures of a male power fantasy" in which they "express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing."³⁰

This brand of gendered colonialist thought renders native women incorrigible. Flippin, for one, went on to claim that black men would eventually recover from Indian women's wiles and realize that she stunted his hopes for "progress":

when his head is cool, and his heart is colder, [he] rightly calculates, "that she is not fit for any gentleman of color." These paint colors don't mix well, and nature rebels against the blending of such colors. The alliance is unnatural, and therefore unequal. In intelligence, progressiveness and moral status, he is far her superior... To some of my readers this will appear incredible; but it is nevertheless the truth. He is capable of improvement, and putting himself upon a higher plane of civilization, of better business capacities, and even comprehending the theory of government. Of such things neither she nor her forebears have ever heard or dreamed; but cemented in her abject stupidity and superstition, she will live and die.³¹

The author acknowledges but revises the racial hierarchy that many of his readers took for granted, claiming forthrightly that the black make subject,

²⁸ W. E. Carson, *Mexico: Wonderland of the South* (New York: Macmillan, 1909), 192–93.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 193.

³⁰ Said, 207.

³¹ Flippin, 40.

unlike the abject Indian woman, “is capable of improvement.” But like antimiscegenation thought in the United States, which often depended upon biological arguments for keeping racial groups “pure,” he employs the theme of nature to argue that black men and Indian women do not “mix well.” Again, ruins are an apt metaphor for describing American visions of *mexicana* sexuality, but in this context ruins connote danger. In these discourses the Mexican woman is ruined, and the sexual threat that Indian women posed to white and non-white men alike suggests that the sexual gaze with which some travelers framed Mexico during the Porfiriato had its limits.

If, as Gail Bederman argues, civilization was seen in increasingly evolutionary terms during this period in the United States, the civilizable subject had to be protected from those too “stupid” and “superstitious” to evolve.³² Read in this context, Flippin’s argument about black men and Indian women situates black men closer to “progressive” American ideals and Indian women as too foreign to adhere to these ideals. I have shown here that there was not one, but many, often contradictory, ways in which indigenous people in Mexico were imagined in relation to “civilization.” In late Porfirian Mexico, travelers began to imagine the *mestizo* subject as civilizable, but were still uncertain what to make of the indigenous people of Mexico.³³ To be sure, the Indian-as-docile-servant retained a place in the new modern Mexico but also threatened the modernization projects envisioned by Mexican elites and foreign capitalists. Concurrent with Hamilton’s enthrallment with the girl at Mitla, there were forces at work in American popular culture that claimed that no less than civilization was at stake in insulating Americans from the *return* of the libidinous gaze. Hamilton and his ilk could look at and even lust after the Mexican image, but writers like Flippin were careful to detail the threat involved if the Mexican looked back.

CONCLUSION: HUMAN RUINS AND PORFIRIAN NOSTALGIA

These contradictory discourses were sharply reversed by the Mexican Revolution in 1911. Travelers continued to venture into Revolutionary Mexico, far beyond the well-documented border tourism that brought tourists with their picnic baskets to watch skirmishes from across the river. Whether to

³² Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

³³ In the book manuscript upon which this essay is based I discuss at length the emergence of the “manageable *mestizo*,” which some writers argued more adequately reflected the needs of American capital in Mexico. Some travelers even argued for the *mestizo* as an *end* to Indian difference, suggesting that if *mestizo* people would “associate” with “the white side of their family” (in a sort of armchair eugenics), the Indian could be eradicated in just a few generations and Mexico would be less racially distinct from the United States.

document the violence, satisfy their curiosity, or continue the tradition of American economic prospecting in politically and socially volatile environments, travelers followed the rail itineraries established during the Porfiriato, but revised the discourses that had shaped Porfirian Mexico in the American imagination. In the aftermath of the Spanish–America War, American journalists and photographers went to the Philippines to help American readers understand their “new possessions,” racially distinct but rich in potential.³⁴ Similarly, travelers to Mexico in the 1910s suggested that it was the right and duty of their compatriots to establish order in that nation, and to profit from the new industries and markets created in the process.

G. L. Morrill, a Baptist preacher from Minneapolis and prolific travelogue writer, took great pleasure in detailing what he saw as degeneracy throughout the trip that he took with his wife and son in the early 1910s. *The Devil in Mexico*, his travelogue published in 1917, was an eccentric and erratic rant and a thinly veiled attack on Mexican sovereignty. The Foreword to the book forcefully situates the author’s view of Mexico, and the prospects for US empire there, in relation to recent American interventions in the Pacific and Caribbean:

God has blessed Mexico as one of wealthiest and most beautiful countries in the world and man has cursed it. The country has gone back to the days before Porfirio Diaz. Mexico is the white man’s burden – a burden of famine, fever, poverty, ignorance, bankruptcy, war, and superstition . . . We were our brother’s keeper in the Philippines and Cuba and our responsibility includes intervention in Mexico wherever it may be necessary. This Tropic of Cancer country is a tropical cancer, and it may be that the only cure is Uncle Sam’s sword.³⁵

The frontispiece of the book is a photograph of a hanged man in a desolate field. The caption simply calls this a “Mexican Landscape,” as if this scene stood in for the entire nation during the Revolution. Morrill’s view of Mexico exemplifies what I call “Porfirian nostalgia” in travelers’ depictions of the Revolution, for like many travelers he lamented the reversal of Díaz’s mode of modernization. After 1911, travelogue writers frequently compared what they saw in Revolutionary Mexico to how the nation looked and felt to them before the ouster of Díaz. Morrill made it clear that this nostalgia for the Porfiriato was tinged with violent fantasies of intervention.

Claiming to see degeneracy and sin everywhere in Mexico, Morrill reserved special venom for Veracruz. The port city has served as a synecdoche for the

³⁴ See Trumbull White, *Our New Possessions* (Chicago and Philadelphia: International Publishing Co., 1898); see also Allan Punzalan Isaac, *American Tropics: Articulating Filipino America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); and Paul Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

³⁵ Morrill, unnumbered Foreword.

foreign invasion of Mexico for centuries. Cortés first landed there in 1519, founding a city that served as his entry point to “New Spain” and, by extension, as the staging ground for Spanish colonialism in the Americas. The United States launched its campaign for Mexico City there in 1847. The French began their intervention in Veracruz in the 1860s. More recently for Morrill, the US military again occupied the city in 1914. In a section titled “Wharf Rats,” Morrill claimed,

The arrival of a Ward Liner at Vera Cruz draws beggars as molasses does flies. The old and young, from baby to grandma, dirty, half-dressed, horrible hags and pretty girls . . . They beg for bread, clothes, money, or anything that that the sailors or passengers may give them. Begging and thieving is their profession . . . The girls greedily grabbed cigars [sic] thrown them and smoked them. Sailors at the port holes looked on, laughed, leered, and threw buns, bones, fruit, and garbage at them, making it seem like a country fair pastime where visitors throw eggs at the coon’s head target in the sheet. Some beggars were busy picking coal cinders, others heaps of ashes left by the wharf switch engines that ran alongside unloading the freight from the ship. Wharf rats rolled over and over and fought for the filthy food flung them, attempting to hide it in their rags, or steal it from each other. This is the submerged tenth; the scum that flows down from the city to the sea; the human dirt waiting to be swept off by disease into the dust-bin of the grave.³⁶

In this grim scene Morrill constructs the fallen Mexican woman as a spectacle for the US American gaze. This is the case throughout *The Devil in Mexico*, for Morrill, like many of the writers described above, consistently put Mexican femininity on display for his readers. Elements of sexual humiliation are heightened in the “Wharf Rats” scene, as the sailors leer and laugh at the destitute women, markers of Revolutionary excess who are easily and cheaply humiliated.

While Flippin depicted Indian women as threats to black men, Morrill expanded upon their degeneracy, suggesting that Mexican women were threatening to all men – even visiting American men. “In Vera Cruz, the city of the “True Cross,” the author claimed, “the principal male pastime is talk about girls and not of God . . . Even Americans who stay here very long fall into the same habit.” According to Morrill, “V C in Vera Cruz stands for Venereal City,” and “L A in Latin America stands for licentious animals.”³⁷ Is this meant to horrify or titillate the reader? Morrill seemed to have a libidinal investment in the women that he represented throughout *The Devil in Mexico*, but the politics of representation had changed when the Porfiriato ended. With the onslaught of the Revolution, the regulations enforcing how travelers could represent desire were in flux, and Morrill could not present Mexican female sexuality without couching it in abject terms.

³⁶ Gulian Lansing Morrill, *The Devil in Mexico* (Chicago: M. A. Donohue and Co., 1917) 104–5.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 117.

Stunningly, Morrill again sets Mexican women among ruins, but with a very different set of intentions and consequences. The author used Veracruz's reputation of sexual degeneracy to speak to Americans' fears that the Revolution would deindustrialize the nation. His chapter goes on to transpose the image of the fallen woman and the image of decaying industrial equipment:

Turning our eyes from these human remains, we glanced at the mechanical ones at the dock. Hoisting cranes that might have lasted fifteen years with care were rusting away in five. Only a few were in use. Once all were busy day and night, now during the war there were just a few and only when the boat arrives. Other ruins we saw were those of ship-skeletons on the shore when we entered the harbor. They were old enough to be the remnants of the Cortez fleet, scuttled and sunk that his followers might not escape.³⁸

The ruins of Mexico's shipping industry and the women at the wharf come to stand for the same thing: the excesses of the Revolutionary state. Like the cranes, the women at the wharf are objectified as the remnants of the Porfiriato to represent the lost promise of Mexican modernity and the horror that many American observers experienced in witnessing the undoing of the economic conquest. They are human ruins.

Morrill was a tourist, but some Americans continued to live and work in Mexico throughout the Revolution. Many of these expatriates compiled photo albums during this period that consisted of snapshots, photographs that they bought from photographers, or both. These photographers depicted the physical markers of Revolutionary chaos, such as the stalled construction of the Palacio de Bellas Artes (Fine Arts Palace), with its unfinished dome. The *decena trágica*, a particularly bloody episode in the Revolution that culminated in a *coup d'état* and the assassination of President Francisco I. Madero and Vice President José María Pino Suárez, provided especially compelling photographic material during this period. Photographers surveyed the aftermath of the fighting, including countless ruined monuments and buildings. The streets of Mexico City were full of morbid curiosities, including one that was so tempting to photograph that it became a trope of its own: the dead body. Enterprising photographers even traveled to the outskirts of cities and battlegrounds to take pictures of bodies that were unceremoniously burning in huge piles.³⁹ They then sold these images to newspapers and individuals looking to commemorate the events of February 1913.⁴⁰

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 105.

³⁹ One prolific photographer who took many such images was Otis A. Aultman of El Paso, Texas, who crossed the border many times to photograph dead bodies after border skirmishes.

⁴⁰ Amateur and professional photographers alike produced such images. While my focus here is on commercialized images, many Americans who lived and worked in Mexico made snapshots for their personal albums. See the P. S. Glenn Photograph Album, 1913, Benson



Figure 4. A 1913 street scene. Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries.

In several of the images of the *decena trágica* that prominent American businessman James E. Long compiled in a personal scrapbook, pedestrians gather around charred, rotting corpses lying on the streets of Mexico City.⁴¹ In one photograph of a small crowd of men and women (Figure 4), the women hold pieces of clothing over their noses and mouths. A dead man's body lies in ruins, barely distinguishable as human. It is unclear whether they cover their faces out of shock or because of the stench of rotting human flesh. A dog rushes by, but the people stop to stare at the desiccated body. The dead body becomes a sort of double spectacle, for the viewer of the photograph looks at people looking. The image seems to critique the crowd's curiosity at the same time as it demands that we see the body too, the same process at work when the naked body was held up for display.

Chase Littlejohn, an American mining engineer who worked periodically in Mexico during the Revolution, compiled an album that begins with more than seventy photographs depicting the aftermath of the *decena trágica*.⁴² Like those produced by many expatriates living in Mexico, Littlejohn's album presents an unflinching view of the aftermath. One page seems to illustrate Morrill's description of the "wharf rats" particularly clearly, for it juxtaposes the image of a bombarded building (a mansion?) with a photograph of a smoldering pile of human remains. Similar to the women and girls begging for food

Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin – the Glenn album depicts the bloody aftermath of the battles of Reynosa and Matamoros, including images of dead bodies lying the streets and waiting to be burned en masse.

⁴¹ James E. Long Photograph Collection, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin.

⁴² Chase Littlejohn Photograph Collection, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin.

and cigarettes, these bodies are cast as the human ruins of revolution, unsentimentally and unflinchingly seen as the logical results of turning the American economic intervention on its head. Americans saw similar images in lantern slide show lectures that traveled the country, illuminating images from the *decena trágica*, as well as some that depicted the bodies of dead revolutionaries or *federales* on the streets and in mass graves after other battles.⁴³ Along with debauched women and rusting cranes, the dead body itself stood in for Mexico during the Revolution.

The images from the *decena trágica* that Littlejohn pasted in the first section of his photo album are particularly jarring because of the images that follow. The remainder of the album consists mostly of images of the Littlejohn family in Mexico and at home in the United States. On the reverse of a page featuring a battered building and soldiers on the street, taking aim at an invisible target, Littlejohn's three children pose serenely in a wicker chair.⁴⁴ As if to compensate for the morbid depiction of Mexican bodies during the Revolution, Littlejohn included dozens of snapshots of his first wife posing in her bathing suit on Mexican beaches. Whether Littlejohn consciously contrasted his beloved family members with images of the wages of war is unclear, but the album suggests the dual vision with which Americans looked at Mexico during the Revolution. At the same time as they acknowledged the violence of the Revolution and its cost in terms of human lives – not to mention the horrific scenes that it produced for survivors – they hoped to maintain their insulated comfort as Americans living in or visiting Mexico. The political situation might have shifted, but they continued to argue through their representational practices that the good life that they had lived during the Porfiriato could remain intact.

I mention this final set of images to remind the reader that representational practices during the Revolution sharply – though temporarily – reversed any possibility of the desirable Mexican subject like those images that appeared during the Porfiriato. Mexican bodies, depicted for pleasure during the Porfiriato, now symbolized abject Revolutionary excess. Gone were the days when girls posed among ruined columns and Indian porters elicited unqualified pleasure from the traveler. They would, however, return. When the fighting finally subsided and Mexico became more stable (and friendly again to the casual traveler), Porfirian-style representational practices began to

⁴³ Albert J. Schmidt Lantern Slide Collection, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin. A series produced by the McIntosh Stereopticon Company of Chicago included dozens of photographs of dead fighters from both sides of several conflicts, as well as photographs of leading figures in the war.

⁴⁴ Chase Littlejohn Photograph Collection, Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin, Image 45 (children), Image 46 (building), Image 47 (soldiers).

circulate again in US popular culture. Although economic conquest seemed less viable in the decades following the Revolution, especially after the foreign oil industry was expropriated in 1938, the rise of the beach vacation and interest in pre-Columbian artifacts renewed American fascination with Mexico. Instead of abject sexuality and rotting corpses, Mexicans were again known as picturesque and potentially desirable subjects.⁴⁵ Without the work performed by travelers who went to Mexico after the Revolution and made Mexico desirable again, tourism would not now be the third-most-profitable sector of Mexico's economy.

Turning to ever-shifting American visions of Mexico helps us to understand *latinidad* as an unstable social and cultural terrain – one that always reflects broader political relations. In contemporary usage, *latinidad* is a social force and political tool that, for better or worse, connects people from all over the Americas who live in the United States into a seemingly (though falsely) homogeneous identity group.⁴⁶ But *latinidad* is also a product of the American imagination, and Latinos in the United States must cope with the legacies of cultural relations between the United States and Latin America that for more than a century have cast us as objects of desire and pity. From those early train travelers to the college students who flood resorts during spring break, travelers do much more than seek immediate pleasure in their journeys; they also gather and spread information about Mexico. While most of the producers and consumers of travel discourse during the Porfiriato did not conceptualize *latinidad* as something that might ever exist within the boundaries of the United States (for they could only imagine Mexicans as foreigners), they used travel as a way to negotiate ideas about Latinos that we grapple with today. The politics and objects of economic conquest may have changed since C. B. Waite went to Mitla and Frank Hamilton wrote to President Díaz, but ways of knowing Mexico that date to the Porfiriato remain intact.

⁴⁵ Helen Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican: Cultural Relations between the United States and Mexico, 1920–1935* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995).

⁴⁶ Suzanne Oboler, *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives: Identity and the Politics of (Re)Presentation in the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).