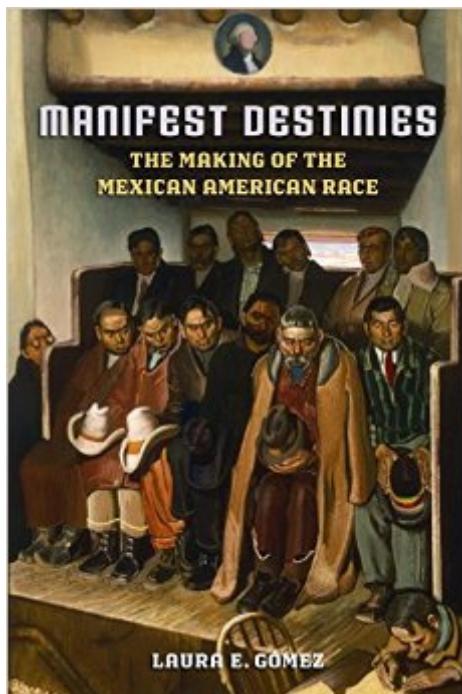


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Manifest Destinies: The Making Of The Mexican American Race



Synopsis

Watch the Author Interview on KNMEIn both the historic record and the popular imagination, the story of nineteenth-century westward expansion in America has been characterized by notions of annexation rather than colonialism, of opening rather than conquering, and of settling unpopulated lands rather than displacing existing populations. Using the territory that is now New Mexico as a case study, *Manifest Destinies* traces the origins of Mexican Americans as a racial group in the United States, paying particular attention to shifting meanings of race and law in the nineteenth century. Laura E. Gómez explores the central paradox of Mexican American racial status as entailing the law's designation of Mexican Americans as "white" and their simultaneous social position as non-white in American society. She tells a neglected story of conflict, conquest, cooperation, and competition among Mexicans, Indians, and Euro-Americans, the region's three main populations who were the key architects and victims of the laws that dictated what one's race was and how people would be treated by the law according to one's race. Gómez's path breaking work "spanning the disciplines of law, history, and sociology" reveals how the construction of Mexicans as an American racial group proved central to the larger process of restructuring the American racial order from the Mexican War (1846-48) to the early twentieth century. The emphasis on white-over-black relations during this period has obscured the significant role played by the doctrine of Manifest Destiny and the colonization of northern Mexico in the racial subordination of black Americans.

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Customer Reviews

Laura Gómez' work on "The Making of the Mexican American Race" is an effort to engage law, sociology and history (7 - 8) in an effort to create "a coherent national story to be told about Mexican Americans." (8) Her efforts, however, to use New Mexico's history as a focal point through which such a broader (and not localized) narrative can be created falls apart, in part due to her failure to address the very historical and regional variation which she seeks to subsume in her larger vision. Her weakness in familiarity with regional variation (i.e. Texas and California) and historical antecedents (in the Spanish colonial period) limit her ability to make effective arguments. Gómez fails to explore the different modes of Spanish-colonial interactions with Indians on the frontier of the empire, assuming, rather, a somewhat monolithic and oversimplified narrative of the "brutality of Spanish Colonialism towards Indians" (79). In overly broad and simplistic assertions such as: "both the Spanish and American colonial enterprises were grounded in racism" (10) she falls into the well-worn recapitulation of the Black Legend, neatly reiterating her North American academic predecessors' (white, English, and Protestant) views of the Spanish-Catholic imperial enterprise. Gómez employs an ambiguous (alternating between synonymous and dichotomous) use of the terms "native" and "Mexican". In describing Ignacia Jaramillo's race, Gómez describes her as both "Mexican" and "a native woman" in the same sentence (24), leaving her readers to ponder what distinctions Gómez makes, if any, between New Mexico Indians and Mexican mestizos (both of which she conflates in her accounts of the Santa Fe and Taos uprisings of 1847).

My dad, god rest his soul, used to wryly say, "Tu que sabes tanto, y entiendes menos," (You who know so much and understand so little.) The fact is, more often than not, we do know more than we understand. I'll leave the technical evaluation of Laura Gomez' work to those who know more than I do. I don't agree with all of her conclusions but I give her work five stars for the understanding it has given me of things I already knew, things I had already experienced. It never occurred to me for example that race was not something immutable but instead was a social construct, the category assigned by the dominant group. When I was a kid, we were taught that there were three races: white, black and yellow (figure me that). We weren't Chinese and we weren't Negroes (that was what we used back then) so we had to be white, Caucasian. My mother and her blue-eyed brothers could make the argument, I suppose; more difficult for my dark-skinned father, indiado (I never heard the word "mestizo" growing up; don't know where that word came from). But no matter how

my mother squirmed and squawked, "You're not Mexican (nobody wanted to be Mexican), you're Spanish," or alternatively, "You're not Spanish-Americans, you're Americans," it didn't change the fact. We were what the Anglo had already said we were and it certainly wasn't white. Maybe not even Americans, no matter how many uncles or siblings we had lost in the wars. So when Laura Gomez explained that race was assigned, a little light bulb came on in my head. "Ahhh, so that's what it was all about." I find her recitation of the history of the social, political and legal machinations surrounding the analysis and assigning of racial categories in American society endlessly fascinating. I just didn't realize.

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