Introduction

Chicana/o Studies and the Whiteness Problem; or, Toward a Mapping of Whiteness on the Border

Example 1. A novel, Cormac McCarthy’s Cities of the Plain: John Grady Cole travels across the border, falls in love with a fourteen-year-old epileptic Mexican prostitute, and dies on the streets of Juarez at the hand of a knife-wielding pachuco pimp who declares, “Your kind cannot bear that the world be ordinary. That it contain nothing save what stands before one. But the Mexican world is a world of adornment only and underneath it is very plain indeed. While your world . . . totters upon an unspoken labyrinth of questions. And we will devour you, my friend. You and all your pale empire.”

Example 2. A country song, Roger Creager’s “Long Way to Mexico”: “I know about this out-of-the-way place. / You can disappear without a trace. / Leave the world behind if only for a while. / You could just get rolling see the winding road / Unfolding feeling better with every passing mile. / Even the getting there makes me smile. . . . / It’s a place of señoritas and where mariachis sing. / I know happiness abounds there. / It’s a place where I’ll soon be.”

Example 3. A protest, April 2010: Several thousand gather in Houston, Texas, to protest Arizona’s recent anti-immigration bill SB 1070 and the rise in anti-immigrant and anti-Latina/o discourse. They carry U.S. flags. Their signs read “We are all immigrants,” “Immigrant Rights = Human Rights,” and “Do I look Illegal?” A small counterdemonstration of approximately thirty anti-immigration activists lines the streets periodically. At one corner, a middle-aged couple, white and bedecked in red, white, and blue signifiers of patriotism, yell “Go back home!” A young Latina—a child of immigrants herself and armed with a voice—responds “I am home! I was born here!” For a second, the couple looks dumbstruck, then repeats “Go back home!” and other tautologies such as “Illegal is illegal!” A protest organizer intercedes: “Don’t engage them. It’s what they want.”
At first glance, these three moments may appear as isolated incidents with little cohesion. McCarthy’s all-American cowboy crosses the border and falls in love, only to die at the hands of his Mexican nemesis. Backed up by accordions and Mexican *gritos*, Creager croons about the trip to Mexico, leaving his workaday life behind for a temporary escape where Mexican women, music, and tequila can replenish him. Anti-immigrant protestors ascribe foreignness to Latina/o immigration activists, brown skin rendering them questionably American if not perpetually foreign. While these examples emerge from distinct moments and from different contexts, upon closer inspection they share common dynamics resulting in what I call “whiteness on the border.”

Whiteness on the border is a discursive and ideological constellation in which representations of Mexico, Mexicans, and Mexican Americans are deployed to construct white identity, or more accurately white identity as American identity. These narratives, tropes, and beliefs work in tandem to order lived experience and naturalize whiteness. Notably, this is nothing new. These examples share a long legacy that is part and parcel of American history. The Mexican Other, real and more often imaginary, has played a significant role in the fashioning of a white identity and U.S. expansion since at least the early nineteenth-century contact narratives of Anglo-American settlers immigrating into the frontier lands of colonial New Spain. In part due to this legacy, these discursive practices have achieved a remarkable and ubiquitous presence, seemingly everywhere as they fly below the critical radar. From these examples and countless others, this critical endeavor engages two interrelated questions: How has whiteness been forged against a Mexican Other embodied in representations of Mexico, Mexicans, and Chicanas/os? How has the Mexican American positioning within the U.S. racial order and dominant imagination enabled and limited the United States to fashion the nation-state as a racial state?

The historical weight of this discursive and ideological constellation gives shape and substance to the nativist protestors’ reactions. That is, these anti-immigration activists were merely drawing upon a rich discursive tradition. Despite several centuries of heritage in what is now the United States, including over a hundred years in midwestern cities, Mexican-descent people are all too often rendered “perpetually foreign.” Representations of Mexico, Mexicans, and Mexican Americans,
however, are scripted as more than simply alien. Indeed, cross-border, cross-cultural imaginings are charged with various, sometimes competing, symbolic meanings such as the escape of romance (often in the arms of a Mexican woman), an ever-encroaching threat to national identity and security (echoes of which reverberate in the words of McCarthy’s pachuco pimp), or the potential for unbridled violence and the need for paternalistic protectionism. From the nineteenth century onward, Mexico and Mexican-descent people have become a prosthetic imaginary, a frontier made anew through cultural production at the expansion of and death of the West. Thus, this project widens the gaze beyond the Anglo-American depictions of the Mexican Other to the ways in which these renderings construct whiteness andAmericanness, or more aptly whiteness as Americanness.

This broad, ever-sprawling discursive and ideological constellation stretches between and connects lived and textualized experience. Its roots go back to the early nineteenth century, yet it thrives today. Whiteness on the Border draws together and advances three critical interventions. First, U.S. whiteness is constructed against a Mexican Other. For example, McCarthy’s knife fight functions as a competition of racialized masculinities, and the potential affections of Creager’s “señoritas” are constructed solely to fulfill the needs of white male desire. Second, Mexicanness is also juxtaposed to and fashionsAmericanness. This results in not simply imagining whites to be American but the converse as well: to be American, one must be white. Each of the examples above illustrates a conflation of ethnoracial and national identities wherein whiteness isAmericanness and that which is Mexican is rendered Other. Finally, whiteness on the border signals how the ideological and discursive characteristics of whiteness andAmericanness are coterminous. Against the Mexican Other, whiteness andAmericanness become mutually reinforcing. As such, the innocence, benevolence, fears, anxieties, fantasies, and desires of whiteness may be expressions of not simply a racial imagination but also a nationalist one.

Despite its regional inscription, whiteness on the border pervades the nation. Indeed, the discursive repertoire of cross-border invasions, replete with iconic imagery, has found fertile ground in the anti-immigrant politics of the U.S. heartland. For instance, discourses of borders, security, and invasion permeated the discussion of the 2005 Sensenbrenner
anti-immigration bill (HR 4437) in the local politics of the Midwest. Gilberto Rosas has argued that through policing of brown bodies, the border and borderlands have “thickened.” Likewise, I contend that the expanded impact of border policing corresponds to a symbolic thickening wherein local demographic changes are ascribed to dynamics of U.S.-Mexico border policy. In this way, whiteness on the border fashions a national fantasy with a localized flare, imagining the geopolitical territory into a racial state. Whether in anti-immigrant polemics of the right or popular country music that imagines Mexico populated with beautiful señoritas who are “hotter than the Mexican sun,” the representation of Mexico, Mexicans, and Chicanas/os fashions and reinforces notions of whiteness, often tied to hegemonic structures of nationalism and masculinity. And, as is the case with cultural imaginings, particularly those fashioned and codified by the culture industry, these are not expressions without consequence. The fashioning of the Mexican Other is a critical fulcrum in the machinations of U.S. foreign and domestic social policy. This discursive and ideological constellation undergirds U.S. racial logics, and thus it bears very real, material consequences for the lived experiences of all involved.

Significantly, however, whiteness on the border has not gone without response. Since the first contacts onward, people of Mexican descent have actively positioned themselves in the U.S. racial system and national imagery. At various times claiming whiteness, indigeneity, and mestizaje, Mexican Americans have shaped the discourses of whiteness on the border and their positioning in the U.S. racial imagination. Thus, beyond identifying and theorizing this legacy of the U.S. racial system, this project builds upon these Chicana/o responses in order to make whiteness strange, dislodge it from its normative positioning, and expose it to critique. As Richard Dyer has suggested, such is the critical step in dismantling whiteness from its naturalized center of racial power. Ultimately, I contend that representations of Mexico, Mexicans, and Mexican Americans have been used in various ways, from a threatening menace to a community that must be protected, all of which express national fantasies as racial fantasies, and vice versa. Moreover, Mexican Americans have no simple positioning in the U.S. racial order. Thus, exploring successful and unsuccessful Chicana/o attempts to grapple with white supremacy will contribute to the ongoing scholarly and activist
efforts of antiracism and toward the abolition of whiteness. This book explicitly addresses the ways in which U.S. nationalism and the U.S. racial imagination function through anti-Mexican forms of racialization.

For scholars, the theorization and examination of whiteness on the border draw together and work at the intersection of two intellectual and political endeavors: critical whiteness studies and Chicana/o studies. While these fields have undergone rapid growth in recent years and indeed share useful intersections, they have lacked a sustained dialogue. Critical whiteness studies has all too often treated Chicanas/os as either people of color no different from African Americans or white ethnics like Italians, Irish, and other white ethnics before them. Neither of these paradigms is sufficient. In contrast, Chicana/o studies has largely examined the dynamics of Chicana/o legal whiteness and social nonwhiteness, but the field has left underexamined how Chicana/o inequalities and social nonwhiteness foster Anglo-American investment in whiteness. Thus, the next few pages trace the gaps and intersections between critical whiteness studies and Chicana/o studies. Doing so establishes the necessary foundation for mapping whiteness on the border.

Critical Whiteness Studies and the Chicana/o Challenge

While critical whiteness studies has developed as a formalized field of inquiry in recent years, its roots can be traced back to key African American intellectuals such as W. E. B. Du Bois and James Baldwin. These influential thinkers believed that addressing the problem of race required going to the source, understanding the experiences and racial logics that fashion and are reinforced by whiteness. Here, one must think of white supremacy not as people in pointy white hoods or small-town country bigots as is popularly conceptualized, but rather as a system of racial logics and social relations of which we are all inheritors, and that often goes unrecognized as water to fish. Critical whiteness studies has persuasively argued that white supremacy—as structural racial inequality—thrives today not because of the actions and beliefs of fringe, aberrant whites but because of the ideology, actions, and inactions of what Karyn McKinney has termed “everyday whiteness.” That is, racial inequality is secured through “commonsense” logics that deny and undergird the status quo. Indeed, John Hope Franklin and others
have incisively demonstrated how contemporary articulations of color blindness are both seductive to well-intentioned people and a tremendous obstacle to the freedom movements of African Americans and other peoples of color. Here, I would contend that the investments of “everyday whiteness,” color blindness, and aberrant, explicitly supremacist forms of whiteness, are mutually dependent and influencing. Through depictions of aberrant whites (e.g., skinheads and the KKK), everyday whites are able to deny their positioning within a racial system. Likewise, the “possessive investment” of everyday whiteness gives legitimacy and cover to the fears and desires of the more explicit hate groups.

During the African American civil rights movement, critical whiteness studies emerged as part of the curriculum of some freedom schools, rooting the field of inquiry in the struggle for social justice. With the dissolution of the mass movement struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, the rise of Reagan conservatism, and the weakening of social justice gains through politically soft multiculturalism, critical whiteness studies developed along with critical race theory to forge new models of critique. Thus, during the 1990s scholars working with a variety of aggrieved communities—African American studies, labor studies, gender and sexuality studies—began to theorize whiteness in relationship to a wide array of fields. Peggy McIntosh contended that white privilege operates like an “invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which . . . [white people are] ‘meant’ to remain oblivious.” Toni Morrison argued that literary whiteness has long been fashioned out of the imagined blackness in American literature. David Roediger extended the ideas of Du Bois, arguing that whites earn psychological wages for their race loyalty, integrating systems of race and class oppression. Through ethnographic interviews, Ruth Frankenberg exposed how the lives of white women were shaped by the experience of race, from living segregated lives in their childhood and “unwitnessing” the people of color who entered their social geographies to prohibitions against interracial relationships. Noel Ignatiev demonstrated that white was not a stable racial category by exploring how a previously regarded nonwhite people like the Irish became white and were able to deploy its privileges. Richard Dyer, in an examination of whiteness in visual culture, described how the racial logics of white supremacy are disseminated through the technologies and narratives of
the motion picture industry. George Lipsitz forcefully demonstrated how, contrary to popular belief, white people benefit from identity politics. Charles Mills contended that social contract theory and the Enlightenment project that fostered contemporary race-neutral notions of citizenship, history, and personhood are rooted in racial logics that positioned the European and Euro-Americans as the model for the universal man—other peoples subsequently became subpersons. John Hartigan’s ethnography of white Detroit complicated previous notions about whiteness, contending that when numerically minoritized white people are quite conscious of their racialization and that race is experienced by them as a daily reality. Karyn McKinney explored the ways in which college youth negotiate and disavow the privileges of whiteness as part of everyday life. Thandeka contended that as children “learn to be white” they are exposed to a form of abuse that strips away other forms of human relations. Joel Olson demonstrated that whiteness is intricately bound to U.S. notions of citizenship, arguing that there is no contradiction between the constitutional ideal of freedom and the peculiar institution of slavery because the freedom of whites has long been made through the unfreedom of others.

The sprawlingly diverse nature of these works suggests two things: the vibrancy of the field and the near universal reach of white supremacy. That is, over the past two decades whiteness has become a critical analytic, prying open new sites of inquiry within traditionally recognized disciplines. Moreover, the power and effects of white supremacy are not exceptions to the rule. Rather, they are the often-unseen cornerstone of cultural production, legitimizied epistemologies, and the experience of everyday life.

While it developed out of various ethnic, gender, and class studies, critical whiteness studies is strikingly different from these fields. In contrast to efforts that work to examine marginalized communities and provide a corrective to histories of oppression, critical whiteness studies is a complementary force, what one may call a form of privilege studies, looking to how, without conscious recognition, race shapes the experiences and imaginings of whites. This difference between critical whiteness studies and traditional ethnic, gender, and class studies cannot be overlooked. Critical whiteness studies has developed a set of tenets that can work in tandem with the goals of these other fields. Perhaps first
and foremost, whiteness has been positioned as the norm against which other social positions are measured, judged, and often found wanting. For instance, consider how European and Euro-American histories and cultural traditions form the basis for consecrated cultural capital vis-à-vis notions of cultural literacy and standardized testing.\(^{26}\) Significantly, critical whiteness studies has also contended that while whiteness may be highly visible to other racialized communities, it often remains invisible to those who share in its benefits.\(^{27}\) Through a long history and massive accumulation of privileges, white people often consider themselves nonracialized, normal, and merely human. The functional invisibility of whiteness blinds those invested in it from seeing the world as it is, their social locations of privilege, and the lived experiences of others. Charles Mills has argued that such invisibility and blindness foster an “inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made.”\(^{28}\)

This dynamic hinders empathetic connections and coalitionist efforts for liberation. Together, these first two tenets of critical whiteness studies expose how white people both occupy the position as the racial ideal and fail to see themselves as racialized.

Critical whiteness studies actively works to unmask this system, making whiteness visible and strange.\(^{29}\) But as noted earlier, whiteness is not invisible to everyone. Whiteness is entrenched in a legacy of terror and violence, often hypervisible only to its potential targets. For instance, while people of color have policed their behaviors to avoid the violences of white supremacy—lynching, the police and courts, and social geographies—that invested in whiteness are unable to see and recognize how whiteness can be associated with terror. Indeed, as Ruth Frankenberg has noted, whites often deploy discursive repertoires to script people of color as dangerous, a move that elides a very real history of race violence.\(^{30}\) Critical whiteness studies also exposes how whiteness benefits from seemingly race-neutral social policies. For instance, as Gil Scott Heron’s humorous and telling 1974 song/spoken word piece “Whitey on the Moon” exposes, national investments in the space program as opposed to Earth-bound poverty have a disparate economic impact on communities of color wherein wealth is redistributed to the
military-industrial complex and the largely white wealthy and upper-middle class. Meanwhile, the benefits never truly trickle down to the U.S. poor, disproportionately made up of people of color. Ultimately, many critical whiteness scholars have called for the abolition of whiteness as a system of racial meaning and privilege. Together, these innovations form the foundation of critical whiteness studies and in tandem with the study of aggrieved communities provide an analytic framework to foster the struggle for social justice.

Despite the vast growth in the field over the past two decades, critical whiteness studies has faltered in addressing the Chicana/o relationship to whiteness and white supremacy. In part, this stems from critical whiteness studies’ reliance on the black-white binary. Growing out of the intellectual tradition of African American studies, whiteness has been largely theorized and examined as a set of logics and encoded experiences constructed against the specific histories and representations of African Americans. The rigidity of this paradigm has caused a twofold problem for Chicanas/os within critical whiteness studies. First, they have been positioned as people of color without difference from African Americans. Such a move erases the historical specificity of oppression. Moreover, as Juan Perea has argued, subsuming Mexican Americans within the black pole of the dyad elides the tension between African Americans and Chicanas/os as well as other communities of color. For example, as Laura Gómez has demonstrated, in nineteenth-century New Mexico, Mexican Americans owned Indigenous slaves and served on juries when such rights were withheld from Natives and African Americans. Moreover, failing to recognize the differential racialization of African Americans and Chicanas/os hinders analysis of the potentials and limits of coalitionist struggle, as evidenced in the recent spate of innovative research on black-brown relations during the twentieth-century U.S. freedom struggles. Nor can such a conflation account for cases of African American anti-immigrant, anti-Latina/o organizing, such as the Crispus Attucks Brigade. Clearly these examples expose the limits of blanketly applying the black-white binary to all people of color.

In contrast, the black-white binary also fails when scholars all too often position Chicanas/os as off-white or near-white. Simply positioning Mexican Americans as an off-white (but soon to be wholly white) ethnic immigrant community fails in several ways. Notably, not all
Mexican Americans are immigrants or even recent descendants of immigrants. Historically and culturally, they have ties to lands in the United States that predate Anglo-American presence. Scripting them as immigrants perpetuates a key white supremacist narrative that these scholars try to dismantle. Moreover, as Ian Haney López has argued, the immigrant model fails because it assumes a teleology of assimilation. Indeed, after over 160 years as citizens in the United States, Mexican Americans have not simply traded in their ethnic identity for the privileges of whiteness. This notion that Chicanas/os are simply off-white fundamentally ignores the “replenished ethnicity” caused by chain migration, transnational movements across generations, the shared two-thousand-mile border, the history of U.S. imperialism, and the phenotypic markedness of many Mexican Americans. Thus, while critical whiteness scholarship has primarily emerged from the black-white binary, Perea, Haney López, and others have contended that such a rigid system does not account for other communities of color. One cannot simply substitute Chicanas/os, Asian Americans, or Native peoples for black in the calculus of American race relations. Rather than conceptualizing racialization as monolithic and unidirectional, proceeding from blackness to whiteness, it is imperative to recognize that whiteness is multiply constituted, often contradictory, and contingent upon its various Others. Indeed, Charles Park’s work on Asian Americans and the model minority myth illustrates how whiteness is offered, withheld, and constructed through a community’s positioning within consumer culture. Park and Arlene Dávila, author of Latinos Inc., model how white supremacy targets Asian Americans and U.S. Latinos in fundamentally different ways than African Americans. Ultimately, while these communities may share common experiences and elements of representation, they are not without difference. These aggrieved communities experience their relationship to white power in unique ways. Despite this fact, critical whiteness studies has lacked a sustained interrogation of whiteness as constructed against the experiences and representations of Chicanas/os.

Arguably, Andrea Smith has offered the most innovative model for examining the multifaceted nature of white supremacy. In an attempt to rethink organizing by women of color, Smith recognizes the limitations of extrapolating the black-white binary to other communities of color.
However, she simultaneously cautions against a wholesale rejection of this binary as a paradigm. For Smith, diverse communities of struggle owe much to the efforts of African Americans and the lessons from examining oppression and power vis-à-vis the black-white binary. Indeed, Smith argues that to jettison the binary would obscure “the centrality of the slavery logic in the system of white supremacy, which is based on a black/white binary.” Rather, developing a more pliable and productive model, Smith replaces a rigid racial binary (black-white) with a set of three interlocking binaries based not solely on group identities of race but on oppressive tactics. These binaries form the pillars of white supremacy. The pillar of slavery/capitalism positions African Americans as property and labor, always either owned or ownable by plantations in years past or the prison-industrial complex today. The pillar of colonization/genocide describes the relationships of Indigenous peoples to white supremacy. In this pillar, the genocide of Natives and images of the vanishing/vanished Indian underwrite the historic and continuing occupation of Native lands. Smith’s final pillar, Orientalism/war, extends Edward Said’s concept to explore how romantic, barbaric, and timeless notions of Other countries and peoples often undergird U.S. wars of empire. Notably, while Smith’s binaries expose the oppressive workings of white supremacy, the racial roots of these binaries remain apparent, for these systems work and become expressed in specific ways to disparate aggrieved communities.

Smith’s three-pillar model holds much potential for scholar-activists in at least three ways. First, she rightly recognizes that while diverse communities may be oppressed through a system of white supremacy, they are not oppressed in the same ways. The honest recognition of these differences is a critical step for coalition building, for the conflation of oppression may lead aggrieved communities to compete in what Smith has called the “oppression Olympics” or rank their suffering in what Chris Abani has called the “hierarchy of pain.” In such competitions, the only winner can be white supremacy. Second, the three-pillar model illustrates how communities of color may actively participate in the oppression of others through supporting white supremacy of a different pillar. For instance, Smith notes how Native peoples have joined the army to fight in imperialist wars structured through Orientalism. Moreover, African Americans have claimed the proverbial forty acres and a mule without recognizing that the forty acres originally belonged
to Indigenous peoples. While difficult, recognizing sites of complicity aides in fostering a multifront war against white supremacy. Finally, while she does not explicitly explore this dynamic, Smith's three-pillar model rests upon and exposes the linkage between cultural imaginings and the material experiences of oppression. The racial scripts of African Americans as irresponsible and criminal underpin the logics of slavery and the capitalist venture of the prison-industrial complex. Similarly the representation of always already vanishing Indians and exotic “Orientals” secures the racial logics of settler colonialism and wars of empire.

Despite the benefits of the three-pillar model, Smith’s paradigm is also significant for who and what it does not account for. One must simply ask, where do Chicanas/os fit within the three pillars? Initially, because these pillars easily find root in racial binaries, one could easily argue that Chicanas/os have been elided from this model or perhaps (as Smith briefly suggests) have experienced the wars of Orientalism firsthand. However, the strength of the three-pillar model is that it elucidates the tactics of white supremacy, not its targets, who may at times be coconspirators as well. That is, Smith’s model emphasizes how white supremacy operates. Underscoring the means of racial oppression exposes the unique and multifaceted relationship Chicanas/os have historically had to whiteness and white supremacy.

Arguably, Chicanas/os have been positioned in each of the three pillars of white supremacy. One may question such an assertion, arguing that Chicanas/os did not undergo the particular brutalization of chattel slavery. However, Smith’s model links slavery to capitalism through the ownership and control of workers’ bodies either in the private sector or in the ever-expanding reach of the prison-industrial complex. Historically, Chicanas/os have experienced the force of this pillar as exploited laborers in factories, fields, and company towns. Moreover, one should not overlook the enslavement of poor, Indigenous Mexicans in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century regime of Porfirio Díaz, a brutal venture that grew the wealth of American investors such as William Randolph Hearst. In the twentieth- and twenty-first-century United States, Chicana/o bodies occupy a disproportionate presence in the prison-industrial complex. Moreover, with the ongoing criminalization of immigration, Mexican and Central American migrants fill detention centers across the United States today. As much Chicana/o stud-
ies scholarship would suggest, Chicanas/os have also experienced the second pillar: colonization/genocide. During the nineteenth century, the Texas Revolution, the U.S.-Mexico War, the influx of squatters, and the impact of functionally corrupt legal system stripped away Mexican Americans of their lands and rights in the U.S. Southwest. Beyond these formal acts of conquest, Mexico also faced many filibustering expeditions by Anglo-Americans. Clearly, it must be recognized those lands belonged to Indigenous peoples prior to Mexican colonization. However, we must simultaneously recognize Chicana/o ancestry includes Indigenous peoples from both sides of the current U.S.-Mexico border. The third pillar, Orientalism/war, hardly needs discussion in its relationship to Chicanas/os today. Romantic depictions of Mexico and a legacy of nativist discourse have combined to depict Mexico as a prosthetic frontier and Chicanas/os as perpetually foreign.

Placing Chicana/o history in relation to these three pillars, if imperfectly so, does not suggest that Chicanas/os have been oppressed greater than other aggrieved communities in the “oppression Olympics.” Nor does this mean that Smith’s three pillars are insufficient because they do not fully account for Chicanas/os. Quite the contrary: Smith’s model exposes the complexity of Chicana/o relationship to white supremacy. Historically, Chicanas/os have had a unique, multifaceted, and complex relationship to whiteness: recognized as legally white yet considered socially nonwhite, claims to both immigrant and native heritages, experiencing multiple pillars of white supremacy. For these reasons and others, I propose a sustained dialogue between Chicana/o studies and critical whiteness studies to map out the reaches and particularities of whiteness on the border. But first we must account for Chicana/o studies and the whiteness problem.

The Challenge of Whiteness in Chicana/o Studies

While critical whiteness studies has faced a theoretical, paradigmatic problem in the form of the black-white binary, Chicana/o studies has encountered a set of historical, material issues that have complicated Chicana/o positioning vis-à-vis white supremacy. Until recently, these factors have worked together to hinder the examination of whiteness within Chicana/o studies. First, the wide-ranging racial heritage of Mexican Americans and phenotypic diversity has complicated Chicana/o
Historically, Mexican Americans have claimed a varied racial ancestry, including mestizo, Indigenous, African, and Spanish lineages. Moreover, they are a phenotypically diverse community. Arguably this varied physical appearance has contributed to Chicanas/os being positioned as nonwhite, off-white, and white depending upon the historical, theoretical, and political exigencies. Indeed, for a minority of the community, the acquisition of appropriate forms of capital and the often dubious claim of pure Spanish ancestry have led to strategic positioning of whiteness both in the mid-nineteenth century as well as today. Critical and observant readers will immediately note that other aggrieved communities are phenotypically diverse and that the legacy of passing in the African American community may be a parallel to the Mexican American “Spanish myth” or “fantasy heritage.” I do not completely disagree. However, the ability of Chicanas/os to be simultaneously positioned as and position themselves as white, off-white, and nonwhite has fomented challenges for the community in responding to white supremacy. Moreover, such phenotypic diversity has created challenges in analysis. This is evidenced in Tomás Almaguer’s groundbreaking multiracial study of the history of white supremacy in nineteenth-century California. In his effort to account for the group positioning of Mexican Americans, he foregrounds them as a racial group. However, the disparities in experience are quickly apparent:

The treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo enabled Mexicans to obtain U.S. citizenship rights in 1849. Citizenship carried with it suffrage, which empowered Mexican elites to politically challenge Anglo control in areas of Mexican concentration. The citizenship rights Mexicans came to enjoy, though often circumvented, nevertheless protected them from the more onerous discriminatory legislation enacted against other racialized groups.

The claimed European descent of the Mexican ranchero elite, the so-called gente de razon (literally, “people of reason”), also facilitated the assimilation of segments of the upper class into European American society. . . . In sharp contrast, the Mexican working class was generally viewed like other racialized groups. Their degraded class status, combined with their inability to claim “pure” European ancestry, contributed to Anglo perceptions that they were unassimilable and certainly unworthy of intermarrying.
Note how Almaguer’s analysis treats U.S. Mexicans as an ethnoracial group in the first paragraph and then quickly explains in the following paragraph that members of this community bore disparate relationships to white supremacy. This is not a limit of Almaguer’s analytical thinking, for he clearly understands that differences in physical appearance and economic ability caused darker-skinned working-class Mexican Americans to be treated differently than lighter-skinned, landed Californio elites, who were otherwise their dispossessed countrymen. Despite his repeated recognition of these disparities, one can readily see the tension in Almaguer’s language. Deploying “Mexican” as a national-cum-racial category simultaneously seeks to and fails to encapsulate the vast array of experiences within the group.

A second but related factor, Mexican Americans are inheritors of at least two racial systems. In the United States, race is often conceptualized through a system of hypodescent wherein the category of white occupies the position of purity. Even a modicum of nonwhite ancestry makes the individual part of the nonwhite community. This racial logic is popularly referred to as the one-drop rule. The U.S. racial order relies on a fiction of purity and rigid classification that allows little room for mixed-race peoples and interracialism. Simultaneously, Chicanas/os are the direct or indirect inheritors of the racial system of colonial New Spain and Latin America. In contrast to the United States, Mexico has long recognized racial and cultural mixture through the concept of mestizaje. As Martha Menchaca, Douglas Cope, and others have noted, New Spain maintained an elaborate caste system to account for race mixture in the colonial era. While such a system offers a broader range of possibilities for identification, it is not necessarily more egalitarian. From the caste system of the colonial era to today, whiteness as lightness is still privileged in Mexico and the rest of Latin America. Indeed, beyond just inheritors of two racial systems, Chicanas/os have been historically marked by two trajectories of racial formation. As inheritors of these two systems, Chicanas/os face the challenge of white privilege within and outside of their community. That is, Chicanas/os have historically negotiated and contested the U.S. system of white supremacy. However, the Chicana/o community has also been marked by the history of light skin privilege. Complicating matters further, as suggested by the writings of nineteenth-century California writer María Amparo Ruiz de
Burton, Mexican Americans entered the U.S. racial order at the same time whiteness was codified with its modern meanings.

A third complicating factor in examining whiteness in Chicana/o studies, Mexican Americans have been treated as an ethnic and a racial community. Indeed, scholars have actively debated which paradigm more accurately applies. While both are socially constructed, racial categorization relies on a set of arbitrary biological, phenotypic features (skin tone, hair texture, etc.). In contrast, ethnicity is determined through cultural features (belief systems, cultural practices, traditions, etc.). Although these identity categories seem simply defined, Mexican Americans can be positioned in both. Indeed, one can trace the tension between ethnic and racial categorization in the above example of Almaguer’s work. Ultimately, however, this goes well beyond the effectiveness of analytical discourse. In relationship to whiteness and dominant systems of power, these paradigms and their differences are critically important. The ethnic paradigm allows for transformation through assimilation wherein Mexican Americans are off-but-soon-to-be-white. As Michael Omi and Howard Winant have suggested, there are significant drawbacks to the ethnicity model. For instance, such a paradigm undergirds calls for community “uplift” via assimilation and pulling oneself up by the proverbial bootstraps. Race, as a biological category, is treated as an immutable fact rather than the social fiction it is. Such a paradigm suggests that Mexican Americans are not and never will be seen as white regardless of phenotypic markers. Significantly, since the rise and fall of the U.S. civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, racial essentialism has been largely repackaged as cultural difference. Mapping the effects of historical racial discrimination onto a cultural paradigm undergirds what Haney López has termed the “immigrant analogy” and its failures, for “under this conflation . . . group differences in social standing and economic success are explained as a function of group attributes or failings, not social prejudices or structural advantages and disadvantages.” Significantly, examining Mexican American as a racial or ethnic identity raises the question of how paradigms of whiteness, long fashioned against a racial Other, become translated for ethnically othered communities. Arguably, since Mexican Americans fit into racial and ethnic categorization imperfectly, Mexican Americans can be othered in both ways, thus suggesting that whiteness is not simply about racial differences.
Finally, during the mid-nineteenth century, Mexican Americans were legally classified as white but rendered socially nonwhite. This nonalignment between legal and social race classification has fostered unique challenges for Mexican Americans working against white supremacy. At times, being classified as legally white secured privileges unavailable to other racialized communities. However, as Ignacio García and others have suggested, contrary to expectations being legally white also foreclosed access to race privileges and citizenship rights in other ways. The Mexican American legally codified equality reinstated de facto segregation and social injustice. For instance, in early twentieth-century Texas, Mexican Americans were often excluded from jury service, a key component of full participatory citizenship. State and local officials argued that because Mexican Americans were white they could not rely on the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, which purported to guarantee rights for African Americans. Moreover, they argued that because Mexican Americans were white they were already being judged by a jury of their peers: non-Mexican whites. All this against a backdrop of racial segregation and social inequality. In contrast, African Americans legal and social race positioning did align. As unquestionably nonwhite, African Americans could deploy the Equal Protection Clause as a strategy for justice. For many years Mexican Americans, legally white, lacked the necessary supporting legal theory to contest their social discrimination. Again, this is not to suggest a heightened form of victimization or oppression. Mexican American status of “white but not equal” complicated Chicana/o strategies for justice because of their unique relationship to white supremacy. Notably, legal whiteness and attempts to follow a “whiteness strategy” fostered divisions between African Americans and Mexican Americans engaged in civil rights struggles. Perhaps such legal positioning and its resultant divisions is one reason for why many scholars have identified Mexican Americans as off-but-soon-to-be-white. Combined with phenotypic diversity of the community, this is quite a complicating factor.

Clearly these factors do not form an all-inclusive set that shapes Mexicans’ and Mexican Americans’ unique relationship to whiteness in the United States. One could also consider the impact of varying immigration generations and citizenship claims. Together, these factors obfuscate a simple analysis of Mexican American positioning vis-à-vis white
supremacy. It is not enough to say that Mexican-descent peoples have had the benefits of legal whiteness when their social nonwhiteness has so evidently undercut such standing. Moreover, it is insufficient to say that Mexicans and Mexican Americans have historically been targets of white supremacy without also recognizing Mexico’s own system of white supremacy. However, these factors are not merely a problem, a hindrance to the examination of white supremacy’s effect on the lives of Mexican-descent peoples in the United States. Rather, they also signal an opportunity. The intersection of Chicana/o studies and critical whiteness studies is a dynamic place, a crossroads that marks myriad ways in which a community has been targeted by and negotiated white supremacy.

Despite the interplay of these complicating factors, Chicana/o studies has a long history of examining and contesting white supremacy. Indeed, the previous pages would not have been possible without such efforts. However, only a limited range of works have explicitly theorized or addressed whiteness, let alone whiteness as an ideological formation. Arguably, Chicana/o studies has engaged in several distinct strategies to deal with the challenges of white supremacy and whiteness. Notably, prior to the formalization of Chicana/o studies as a field, resistive cultural production from the early twentieth-century heroic border corridos to the cultural nationalist rhetorics of the movement years and beyond have worked to actively make legible and contest white supremacy. For instance, consider how the narrator of Corky Gonzales’s well-known Chicano movement poem “I Am Joaquin” resists the forces of Melting Pot assimilation. He refuses to dissolve “into the melting pot / to disappear in shame” for he ultimately proclaims, “I SHALL ENDURE! / I WILL ENDURE!” Moreover, “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán” rejected the foundational white supremacist narrative of Manifest Destiny by articulating historical precedence through claiming a Chicano-Aztec lineage. These texts and others worked to raise Chicana/o cultural consciousness, yes, but as a means of undoing the psychological colonization of white supremacy located in the schools. Such a reading does not suggest that core Chicana/o studies texts are part and parcel of critical whiteness studies, a truly appropriative move. Rather, such texts may be used to develop the archaeological foundations for later intersections between the two fields. Moreover, one may notice that these
examples emerge from the artistic and activist work of el movimiento and not traditionally recognized academic scholarship. Here, one may suggest that Chicana/o studies grassroots origins may have been ahead of professional critics.

At another potential intersection between the fields, many Chicana/o studies scholars have sought to examine machinations of white supremacy against the marginalization of Mexican Americans. Whether concerned with material and social relations like in Neil Foley’s *White Scourge*, David Montejano’s *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas*, and Tomás Almaguer’s *Racial Fault Lines* or turning to the realm of the symbolic such as Arnoldo de León’s *They Called Them Greasers* and William Nericcio’s *Tex[t]-Mex*, these works all deploy at least one common conceptual move: they treat Mexican-descent peoples as undeniably nonwhite, the Mexican Other to the white economic and social policies as well as the white imagination. Because it emerges from and seeks to examine the function of social nonwhiteness, this approach depicts white supremacy as something that one stands outside of and must resist. In this way, Mexican-descent peoples are figured as the objects of oppression. With the exception of *Tex[t]-Mex*, these studies do not engage the thornier strategies of white supremacy that rely upon romantic depictions or benevolent attitude toward Mexicans. For obvious reasons, this is a crucial paradigm for decoding the hegemony of whiteness. However, it fails to make intellectual room for more complex Mexican American negotiations of whiteness and white supremacy.

A departure from previous approaches, some scholars have forged an intersection with critical whiteness studies through analyses of the historic positioning of Mexican-descent peoples as legally white. These works do not elide the ascription of social nonwhiteness. Rather, these efforts have sought to tease out the tension therein, exploring how the legal categorization as white has simultaneously offered forth and restricted access to rights and privileges. For instance, Ian Haney López’s *White by Law* notes that Mexicans were able to apply for U.S. citizenship when other socially minoritized communities were not. Legal scholars such as Michael Olivas and historians such as Ignacio García have unpacked the significance of *Hernandez v. Texas*, wherein Mexican Americans challenged their exclusion from jury service, arguing that while they were white they were “a class apart.” Olivas, García, and
others built upon and advanced earlier efforts that took as a point of departure the social nonwhiteness of Mexican-descent peoples, a crucial move away from and complement to the previous approach to whiteness within Chicana/o studies.

The final approach emerging from the intersection of Chicana/o studies and critical whiteness studies is evidenced in the scholarly works situated in Chicana/o studies that actively engage and theorize whiteness not solely as a social or legal position but also as an ideological and political category. Here, whiteness is recognized for shaping its practitioners’ abilities to know and act within the world. Notably, works that deploy this approach seek to identify and uproot the ideological, symbolic, and material machinations of whiteness. A model of this can be found in Angie Chabram-Dernersesian’s “On the Social Construction of Whiteness within Selected Chicana/o Discourse.” Chabram-Dernersesian examines a select group of Chicano movement and post-movement texts to demonstrate how Chicana/o cultural workers have depicted whiteness on the “other side” (read: outside) of the community to make legible the history of white supremacy. Her essay ultimately underscores how the internal colonial paradigm’s deployment of us/them logic sought to name and hold accountable a history of racial oppression. Moreover, Chabram-Dernersesian incisively explores how the specter of whiteness as constructed on the “inside” of the Chicana/o community was used to police possible political identities. In another effort to explicitly place critical whiteness studies and Chicana/o studies in dialogue, Edén Torres has explored how many contemporary Chicana/o students have become depoliticized in the post-movement years. For Torres, many students who have taken advantage of the gains of el movimiento become invested in the logics that undergird whiteness. While engaging and extending the work of the first three approaches outlined here, Whiteness on the Border is most firmly situated within this final intersection illustrated through the work of Chabram-Dernersesian and Torres. In the vein of critical whiteness studies, this project recognizes that whiteness is more than phenotype or social categorization. Whiteness is also an ideological and discursive formulation, one that must be made legible if it is ever to be dismantled.

Over the course of its history, Chicana/o studies as a field has implicitly and explicitly worked against the ideological underpinnings of white
supremacy as manifested in the Mexican Problem and other narratives of the U.S. racial project. Since the early twentieth century, and arguably before, the Mexican Problem has scripted Mexican-descent peoples as indolent, unassimilable, and disloyal. Indeed, in 1949 leftist author and activist Carey McWilliams argued that “in the vast library of books and documents about ethnic and minority problems in the United States, one of the largest sections is devoted to ‘The Mexican Problem.’” Responding to the scholarship of Manuel Gamio, Robert Redfield, and Paul S. Taylor and its resultant social policy, many early practitioners of Chicana/o studies sought to trouble the epistemological foundations that defined Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and Mexican immigrants as a problem. Whiteness on the Border advances those efforts beginning with a paraphrase of the African American writer Richard Wright and an intellectual exercise: I contend that “there isn’t any Mexican Problem; there is only a white problem.” If the Mexican Problem is recognized as an outgrowth of whiteness and white racial hegemony (i.e., white supremacy), what might be found?

Working at the intersection of Chicana/o studies and critical whiteness studies turns the critical gaze away from the Mexican Problem and toward the social order that imagined it into existence. Here, it may be useful to place my paraphrase of Wright in conversation with the work of Gloria Anzaldúa. In an underexamined moment in her widely influential Borderlands/La Frontera, Anzaldúa links the construction of whiteness to the functions of Mexicans in the dominant imagination. In a direct address to white readers, she states, “We need you to make public restitution: to say that, to compensate for your own sense of defectiveness, you strive for power over us, you erase our history and our experience because it makes you feel guilty—you’d rather forget your brutish acts. . . . Admit that Mexico is your double, that she exists in the shadow of this country, that we are irrevocably tied to her. Gringo, accept the doppelganger in your psyche.” Anzaldúa’s observation brings an undercurrent of previous Chicana/o studies scholarship to the surface. Instead of focusing on the representations of Mexican-descent people and how these have contributed to the psychological colonization of Chicanas/os, Anzaldúa contends that these representations are a function of whiteness. Taking this as a point of departure, I contend that cultural imaginings of Mexico, Mexicans, and Chicanas/os function as
an Other to solidify notions of whiteness as Americanness. Let us return to the examples that opened this introduction. In the case of McCarthy’s *Cities of the Plain*, after the death of the West, all-American cowboy John Grady Cole must venture south of the border to enter a frontier space that will allow him to enact chivalric ideals and confront the clear enemy, the knife-wielding pachuco pimp. In Creager’s song, like so many others, the narrator’s whiteness and masculinity—expressions of his Americanness—find escape in Mexican women, music, and tequila. On the streets of Houston, when anti-immigrant/anti-Latina/o protesters tell a young woman to go back home, they are dumbstruck to find that she is a citizen by birth. They can only repeat their command to go back home. These examples gesture toward the triangulated relationship between whiteness, Mexicanness, and the imagining of the U.S. nation-state as a racial state. While the first two instances demonstrate how whiteness is secured, the final encounter, the young woman on the streets of Houston—whom I should acknowledge as my life and intellectual partner, Sujey Vega—clearly demonstrates that such articulations of whiteness are not without contestation. And with that, we turn to a mapping of whiteness on the border.

**Mapping Whiteness on the Border**

When I first began working on this book years ago, one scholar asked if the whiteness under study was in any way unique or if there was just one form of whiteness. This has been a useful question that has propelled me in the following years. And as is often the case with such dichotomous questions, the answer refuses a simple taking of sides. While one could very well argue that white supremacy and whiteness are pervasive and demonstrate a global reach, this is far from suggesting that all manifestations of white supremacy and whiteness resemble each other. As Steve Garner has suggested, treating whiteness as an analytic as well as a set of power relations opens for scrutiny social dynamics in a variety of locations marked by their own historical contexts, from the United States and England to Latin America and the Caribbean. In each of these cases who and how one is considered white vary along with the potential meanings of whiteness. *Whiteness on the Border* extends Garner’s observation inward, arguing that a diverse, multiracial society with its own
regionally specific histories may evidence diverse forms of whiteness. However, this is not to suggest that whiteness constructed against the Mexican Other is cut out of whole cloth with nothing in common with that of the black-white binary. Rather, as Smith argues, in a multiracial society, white supremacy (and whiteness) is manifested in a myriad of ways depending upon the racialized Other as well as the historical context and political exigencies. Importantly, however, these manifestations are all part of a larger fabric or system of racial hegemony. Thus, whiteness on the border is indelibly marked by representations of, treatments of, and engagements with Mexican-descent people, but it is also simultaneously inseparable from the broader national, racial projects. Therefore, we return to the two interlocking questions that mark the form and content of whiteness on the border as well as propel the inquiry at the heart of this book: How has whiteness been forged against a Mexican Other embodied in representations of Mexico, Mexicans, and Chicanas/os? How has the Mexican American positioning within the U.S. racial order and dominant imagination enabled and limited the United States to fashion the nation-state as a racial state?

Following the 2010 census, a spate of articles appeared noting that more Latinas/os self-identified as white. The media inquired as to what this could mean for Latinas/os and the future of the United States: Are Latinas/os assimilating? Was the Mexican Problem (now the Latina/o Problem) nothing but a chimera? These questions of Latina/o whiteness form the complementary opposite to those that have long lamented the unassimilability of U.S. Latinas/os. Importantly, this type of article is not new. An extension of those that suggest Latinas/os are the future of the Republican Party, they are little more than what Arlene Dávila has so aptly termed “Latino spin,” the myriad practices through which “Latinos are inserted into numerous debates and into contemporary institutions are in fact racially implicated and coded and, more often than not, implicated in furthering normativity.” And it must be recognized that many Latinas/os critiqued these articles, pointing out that Latina/o ethnoracial identification is much more complicated. While understanding how and why Latinas/os forge their social identities is critical, something else lurks below the surface of these “Are Latinas/os White?” articles. Whether Latinas/os are rendered an unassimilable problem or a whitening ethnic group, the question itself, its framing,
and the positioning of Latinas/os as the cultural variable occlude and reinforce whiteness as the normative to which Dávila gestures. That is, if Latinas/os are not assimilating, it is into whiteness that they do not melt. If they are becoming white, Latinas/os are then rendered as achieving the normative position. Such logic functions as an enthymeme, a silent argument reliant upon an unstated premise, whiteness is American-ness. Only by extension, Latinas/os must be measured as assimilating, whether they be immigrants of multigenerational U.S. citizens. This is the logic of whiteness on the border.

As a phrase and a conceptual paradigm, “whiteness on the border” draws together and makes use of several meanings. At the most basic level, it suggests a linkage between the U.S.-Mexico border region and imaginings of U.S. national racial identity. While it describes a region marked by its own histories and racial dynamics, the border also occupies a key position in the national imagination. Thus, the border invoked is simultaneously material and symbolic, lived and textualized. Of course, the U.S.-Mexico border is a modern creation. The Border Patrol, the wall, and other iconic images are twentieth-century innovations of the U.S. racial national project. However, as will be elucidated in the next chapter, a racial border existed in the minds of U.S. whites long before the formalization of the U.S.-Mexico boundary line. This racial border predates and charges with meaning the national border. Moreover, drawing upon border theory, I deploy this phrasing to elicit notions of construction, policing, and transgression. Despite the wide array of popular and political claims to the contrary, borders are not fixed, natural entities demarcating in clear lines an us from a them. However, as Alejandro Lugo has explored, with borders come border inspections. Placing this meaning of border in conversation with whiteness evokes the ways in which whiteness is constructed, policed, and transgressed beside and against the Mexican Other. Finally, the border elicits the edge, the limit. In this way, “whiteness on the border” signals the precarious lines against which whiteness exists but that might also be its end. This signification gestures toward the vulnerabilities of whiteness, those that mark its potential for abolition. Together, these disparate meanings intersect to give significance to “whiteness on the border” and mark the trajectories of inquiry throughout this book.
While its approach is not all-encompassing, *Whiteness on the Border* excavates the relationship between whiteness, Mexicanness (as embodied in Mexico, Mexicans, and Chicanas/os), and diverse claims to and imaginings of Americanness. Here, Joel Olson's theorization of whiteness and citizenship provides both a foundation and a point of departure. Olson contended that the subordination of African-descent peoples gave material advantage and symbolic meaning to whiteness as a political category of citizenship: “In the formative years of American democracy, citizenship was in a very real sense proof that one was not and could not become a slave. Given the racial character of chattel slavery in the United States, its antitheses, citizenship, was also racialized.” For Olson, African Americans functioned as the critical anticitizen against which white citizenship could be manifested. A similar yet distinct argument can be made for Mexican-descent peoples. Raymond Rocco and Mae Ngai have argued that despite immigration status or generation of U.S. ancestry, Chicanas/os are scripted as “perpetually foreign” and “alien citizens.” Robin Dale Jacobson further documents this inscription of foreignness in her analysis of anti-immigrant rhetorics. As Jacobson demonstrates, not only are immigrants racialized, but through what she terms the “association bridge” all Mexican-descent people are viewed as undocumented immigrants. Taking direction from Olson, one must recognize that such rhetorical maneuvers do not simply fashion Mexicanness as Other, but simultaneously construct whiteness as unquestionably American, accruing and securing material and symbolic advantages in the process. However, a difference must also be elucidated. The proximity to Mexico and its accrued symbolic meaning reinforces the lie that Mexican-descent people are always already from a nearby elsewhere. This renders not simply Mexicans and Mexican Americans as anticitizens but also Mexico as an anti–United States.

Here, it may be useful to explore a single cultural artifact as a manifestation of whiteness on the border. Produced by D. W. Griffith and written and directed by Christy Cabanne, 1915 *Martyrs of the Alamo: The Birth of Texas* is the first filmic rendering of the infamous siege. Released a few years after the historical restoration of the Alamo began, *Martyrs* articulated the key racial-national components of whiteness on the border. One could easily say that *Martyrs* did for Texas what Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* did for the United States—it emplotted a national narrative...
in stark racial terms. One must wonder why Martyrs has received so much less attention by cultural critics when compared to Birth: does this suggest a blindness to the U.S. racial project beyond the black-white binary? Unsurprisingly, Martyrs fashions American whiteness through a binaristic contrast to the film’s Mexicans. Mexicans are cruel; Americans are benevolent. The Mexican army dresses and prepares for battle with a formal pomp; the Americans—nearly all bedecked in coonskin caps—embody rugged individualism and masculinity. Reminiscent of the sexual anxieties in Birth of a Nation, Anglo women are subject to the harassment of Mexican soldiers. “Chivalrous” by nature, Anglo men such as the film’s Silent Smith become the protectors of white womanhood. Notably, this racial-sexual dynamic continues throughout the film. After the siege, the brownfaced and thus swarthy Santa Anna takes Silent Smith’s blonde love interest prisoner. When the Texas rebels defeat Santa Anna’s troops at San Jacinto, they do not simply liberate the land but also secure white womanhood signified in Smith’s blonde lady friend.92

Beyond these clear manifestations of whiteness being forged beside and against a racialized Mexican Other, a more subtle discursive maneuver is at work. The film deploys the unstable, anachronistic terms of Mexicans and Americans to structure the conflict. This is, perhaps, no surprise. One could point out that Tejanos fought alongside Anglo-Texan troops against Santa Anna, a common critique of Texas’s nationalist amnesia. However, something else is also at play here. By rendering the Texas fighters as Americans, the film occludes their positions as immigrants, settlers, rebels, and Mexican citizens. National terms are inscribed upon an already oversimplified racial depiction of the conflict. But this logic goes beyond suggesting that Americans are white and Mexicans are not. Describing Texas rebels as American relocates San Antonio and the Alamo from Mexico to the United States. These Americans are no insurgent forces defying their national government and military. They are armed protectors of the United States, even when they are technically outside of the nation. This logic is underscored by Annette Marie Rodríguez’s observation that the film’s depiction of the siege—Mexicans storming the walls and sneaking through tunnels—becomes the precursor to more contemporary images of immigration as invasion.93 Of course, Mexico cannot invade itself. Thus ascribing
Americanness to Texas rebels makes the Alamo—like Silent Smith's blonde love—a site of national vulnerability, a trope that we will see again. Ultimately, Griffith's iconic positioning in many historians' interrogations of white supremacy and the fact that his filmic oeuvre details encounters with both African Americans and Mexicans in the nationalist imaginings of the United States underscore that whiteness is constituted by Mexicanness as well as by blackness.

Of course, *Martyrs of the Alamo* would not be made with such earnest, straightforward racism today. Things change even as they stay the same. However, by recognizing the discursive shift of the late twentieth century, one may not find the end of or disinvestment in whiteness on the border but rather its remarkable continuity and entrenchment. Nativist cultural workers continue to draw upon the age-old tropes of Mexicans and Mexican Americans as unclean, lazy, and disloyal. Lest some think that this exists only as a fringe element, these discursive practices have become part (or stayed part) of mainstream politics. Moreover, from fiction like Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy to television shows like *Border Wars*, Mexico and the borderlands are still depicted as a lawless frontier in need of civilization. Indeed, the image of the sensual Mexican woman yearning for the love of an all-American (white) man (cowboy) remains a dominant trope in popular culture today.

However, as noted earlier, claims to whiteness as Americanness are not without contestation. One may read Ray González’s “Ghost of John Wayne” against the racial logics at play in *Martyrs*. In González’s short story, many white residents of San Antonio embrace the possibility that John Wayne’s ghost haunts the Alamo’s grounds, yet they hostilely reject the possibility that the ghosts of Mexican soldiers who actually died there may wander eternally as well.94 Such an intervention troubles the notion that the site is sacred ground for one nation or one race only. Moreover, the residents’ reactions to the possibility of Mexican ghosts suggest that the conflict at the Alamo is far from over—the fighting has just taken a different form. Indeed, there is a palpable, sad irony in how residents would reject the souls of actual soldiers only to embrace the ghost of a movie star.

The long-standing and pervasive practice of deploying the Mexican Other to fashion whiteness and Americanness presents significant challenges for scholars and activists working to examine and dismantle it.
As many will note, contemporary professional historical monographs rarely attempt to cover such a vast period of time. Therefore, with the exception of the following chapter, this book exclusively examines manifestations of whiteness on the border in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries because like the ghosts of Mexican soldiers in González’s story, many today refuse to acknowledge, let alone counteract, anti-Mexican racism and its resulting whiteness unless it takes the form of something explicit or unless it is located in the past like that of Martyrs. Consider two brief examples. Would the 1990s Taco Bell Chihuahua or the popular 1960s Frito Bandito—with his refrain of “Ai, yi, yi, yi! I am the Frito Bandito. I like Fritos corn chips. I love them, I do. I want Fritos corn chips. I’ll get them from you”—be looked upon favorably if they did not deploy a Mexican accent? Would anyone go to a restaurant if it were not named “Los Bandidos” but rather “The Thieves?”

Whiteness on the Border is not an all-inclusive study of how whiteness has been fashioned against representations of Mexico, Mexicans, and Chicanas/os or how Chicana/o cultural workers have negotiated this terrain of whiteness. This work is a point of departure. While whiteness is an ideological and discursive formation, as noted before it often slips by unnoticed by its practitioners, rendered normative, invisible, the way things are, the way things should be. Thus, in order to work against whiteness on the border—the coterminous overlay and mapping of whiteness onto Americanness—scholars and activists must make expressions of whiteness legible. This book takes up that charge by demonstrating how deployments of the Mexican Other foster expressions of white benevolence, fear, fantasy, and desire. Notably, these are not merely emotions located within an individual’s psychology. Rather, taking direction from Du Bois and Roediger, Whiteness on the Border looks to the symbolic, epistemic, and psychological wages of whiteness for the group. These expressions consolidate belonging and foster the “cognitive dysfunction” essential to maintaining less readily visible forms of white supremacy. The question, then, emerges: where does one locate whiteness on the border and its myriad expressions?

Arguably, the power of whiteness on the border rests on its existence in a variety of social locations. Cultural workers across a range of political positions have long relied upon and deployed diverse tropes of the Mexican Other to meet their own ideological needs. Moreover, the en-
durance of whiteness on the border is also supported by the vast array of discursive locations from which it is regularly articulated. One can easily find the fashioning of whiteness against Mexico, Mexicans, and Chicanas/os, in film, literature, music, museums, historical texts, political speeches, and video games. The vastness of the locations and their corresponding differences in conventions and contexts suggest the flexible and diffused nature of whiteness on the border. However, the pervasiveness of this discursive constellation presents a methodological challenge. As a cultural critic, how does one read a political manifesto beside and against popular music or a film alongside the testimony found within an educational audit? These cultural manifestations are characterized by diverse genres, audiences, and conventions. Here, this book engages two strategies. First, the following chapter argues for and provides a model of reading tropologically. By focusing on tropic manifestations of white supremacy, the chapter traces both the continuity and change in the Mexican Other across a vast historical sweep. However, tropes also provide common sites of analysis where multiple texts can be opened in conversation. Second, after chapter 1, the remainder of the book turns to post-1945 articulations of whiteness as Americanness against the Mexican Other. These chapters emphasize historical and discursive contextualization as they each engage specific expressions of whiteness as Americanness.

Chapter 1 draws together a recent, growing body of scholarship that has broken critical ground in exploring the representations of Mexico, Mexicans, and Chicanas/os. Yet this is much more than a review of scholarship past. This chapter actively works against claims that white supremacy has softened in recent years as well as assertions that anti-Mexican attitudes are a relatively recent phenomenon divorced from the longue durée of the U.S. racial project. By tracing tropes of the Infernal Paradise, the Erotic, Exotic Mexicana, Mexican Lawlessness, and others across the nineteenth-century contact and conquest narratives, early twentieth-century film, and current manifestations, this chapter maps the various manifestations of the Mexican Other across time. Forging a genealogy of the Mexican Other demonstrates that while specific exigencies shape these representations, history is driven through with both continuity and change. After the genealogy, this chapter proposes that antiracist scholarship and education work against
the amnesia that white supremacy requires by developing a practice of reading tropologically. The chapter then moves from a broad view to the specific forms that the Mexican Other may take. This working taxonomy of tropes of the Mexican Other explores their logics, illustrates examples across history, and theorizes their roles in constructing whiteness. With the genealogy and taxonomy established, this project turns to how these manifestations of the Mexican Other fashion specific aspects of the whiteness.

Chapter 2 examines how the Chicano nationalist discourse of Aztlán has been appropriated by anti-immigrant, anti-Latina/o activists since the late 1970s. This “nativist Aztlán” emplots fears, fantasies, and anxieties into a Chicano-identified narrative. Not only does the Aztlán-reconquista plot give narrative shape to anxieties of a cultural and political takeover in a way that appears nonracist, but it also fosters a sense of racial solidarity disguised as national solidarity. Critically, this chapter exposes how anti-immigrant discourses are bound to and shape anti-Latina/o practices as well. Building upon analyses of Patrick Buchanan’s *State of Emergency*, Dave Arendt’s *Reclaiming Aztlan*, and the 2008 Absolut Vodka controversy, this chapter locates the nativist Aztlán in Arizona’s banning of ethnic studies in primary and secondary education.

While seeing whites as naturally just, innocent, and good has long been a component of the white racial frame, after the mid-twentieth-century racial break white Americans strove to see themselves as benevolent agents against injustice at home and abroad. Chapter 3 explores the logics of white saviorism in order to expose how seemingly antiracist or humanitarian acts may appropriate the oppression of Mexicans in order to assert whiteness and the United States as inherently good, all the while leaving the structures that allowed racial injustice to remain intact. This chapter interrogates how white saviorism operates and its dynamics are made legible through several historical and textual moments over the past seventy years. Analyses of the iconic diner scene from the novel and film *Giant* along with an examination of a historical case on which the scene may have been based illustrate the popular investment in white and American goodness vis-à-vis saviorism. Read with a critical eye, these moments expose how broad-based racial inequality was maintained as explicit and individual forms of bigotry were rejected as unjust
and un-American. Turning to the 1960 film *The Magnificent Seven*, I contend that the logics of white saviorism are evidenced in and reinforce American exceptionalism and its imperialist impulses. Finally, the chapter turns to a contemporary moment wherein the state enacts and narrates a form of saviorism. Border Patrol rescue narratives cast the United States and its agents as benevolent, humanitarian actors fighting smugglers and saving migrants. The result of this savior narrative is the elision of economic and governmental policies that have fostered and exacerbated immigration and placed migrants' lives in danger. In all of these cases, representations of Mexicanness are deployed to fashion a robust benevolent whiteness that reinforces dominant narratives of American exceptionalism. Moreover, through tracing the troubling logics of white benevolence, this chapter illustrates how American exceptionalism shares many of benevolence's ideological precepts. Thus, white benevolence and American exceptionalism are triangulated against the Mexican Other, making legible how through notions of the national or individual good whiteness is made Americanness.

Chapter 4 interrogates perhaps the most challenging expression of whiteness on the border: white desire. Drawing upon the rich tradition in film, music, and literature of white Americans “loving” Mexico and Mexicanas, this chapter excavates the nationalist and racial logics at play in these acts of desire. While previous chapters establish how whites are positioned as American and above Mexicans in a racial hierarchy, chapter 4 illustrates that white desire presents a greater challenge because of the way it romances and “positively” renders the Mexican Other. However, analyzing a common dynamic found in Texas country music as well as the rhetorical work of cross-border matchmaking epitomized by “Cowboy Cupid” Ivan Thompson demonstrates that white desire is far from love. Rather, it is an expression of the U.S. racial project in sexual terms. Ultimately, this chapter draws on feminist theorizations of the politics of love to map other, antiracist engagements with Mexico, Mexicans, and Chicanas/os.

Prior to an interrogation of whiteness on the border, one must trace how Mexicanness has been imagined through the longue durée of the U.S. racial project. One must identify the disparate ways Mexicanness has been rendered in the white imagination. Here we turn to a genealogy and taxonomy of the Mexican Other.