

There is No There There: Women and Intermarriage in the Southwestern Borderlands



Borderlands are fuzzy, slippery, ambiguous places. Whether imagined as a geographic region straddling an international border, “the contested boundaries between colonial domains,” or simply zones of intercultural contact where state or imperial power is weak, borderlands are spaces where social boundaries are unstable and social conventions appear more flexible. Cooperation and accommodation characterize the borderlands as much as conflict and violence. Historians often point to centuries of racial mixture to help explain the cultural fluidity and hybridization that prevail in the borderlands.

Tales of liaisons that transgressed racial boundaries (beginning with the relationship between Hernán Cortés and Malíntzin Tenépal) are so common in histories of the Southwestern borderlands that they function as a kind of creation story for the region and its peoples. Here, men exchanged women—as captives or wives—to establish, bolster, or consolidate economic and social relationships. Indigenous women not only provided sexual companionship and domestic labor, but also served critical roles as translators, guides, and cultural mediators in colonial encounters between Europeans and native peoples. Whether consensual or coerced, mixed unions figured prominently in the borderlands economy and culture.

We have imagined intimate unions between local women and immigrant men as a time-honored frontier practice that continued through the nineteenth century because it served a strategic purpose: establishing economic and social ties that bound newcomers to local elites in a mutually advantageous relationship. We have assumed that these marital connections helped elite borderland families solidify their social status and class position and provided a measure of security in a rapidly changing political and economic landscape after the U.S. conquest of northern Mexico. For immigrant men, marriage to local women provided access to land ownership and trade networks, as well as entrée into the political and social world of the landed gentry. Many scholars have maintained that these marital alliances—and the offspring they produced—also provided an opportunity for cultural exchange, which not only facilitated acculturation and assimilation, but also helped mute ethnic hostility and reduce violence (a similar story is told about mixed marriages in many other parts of North America).

According to the standard narrative, the social fluidity that promoted intermarriage didn't last forever. As Anglo-Americans consolidated their power in the borderlands and U.S. officials gradually imposed control over the border

itself, mixed unions declined dramatically. What was permissible—or even celebrated—in an earlier period, was no longer tenable after national identities and racial lines hardened in the wake of the Mexican Revolution of the 1910s and Great Depression. Or so the story goes.



“Territories of New Mexico and Utah,” map published by J.H. Colton & Co. (ca. 1855). Courtesy of the Map Collection, the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Most examinations of interracial intimacy in the borderlands are told from the perspective of men. By that, I mean that the questions that drive these narratives tend to privilege the male (and the white) experience with mixed unions. How many immigrant men intermarried and why? What about local women (besides biology) made them appealing marriage partners to newcomers? How did changing rates of intermarriage reflect shifts in power relations between different ethnic groups in the Southwest? What broader social or economic purpose did the strategic exchange of women by men serve? Questions like these promote analyses of intermarriage that can often be reduced to stories of fathers betrothing daughters to immigrant white men and the benefits for patriarch and groom that ensue.

The male-centered approach is a practical one from the historian’s perspective. Anglo-American men are much easier to identify, locate, and trace through the historical record. Anomalous names like Bent, Carson, and Maxwell shine like a beacon through the sea of Bacas, Lopezes, and Romeros when you are scrolling through microfilm copies of marriage registers and court records. In addition to being highly visible, they are also a small and therefore methodologically manageable group. What is more, once the common law doctrine of coverture (which held that a woman’s legal identity and property rights were subsumed under that of her husband upon marriage) was extended over the region after the U.S. war with Mexico, husbands enjoyed a civic identity—and thus, a presence in

the historical record—that was denied to their wives.

It is exceedingly difficult to trace women, but particularly non-elite women of color, through the sources that are available. Few left manuscript collections. Fewer still have had their stories preserved by pioneer organizations and heritage societies. Many who do appear in the record are identified by nothing more than their first name or their relationship to the head of the household in which they lived. How, then, do we place women at the center of our examinations of intermarriage without merely highlighting the experiences of a handful of exceptional women who possessed enough wealth, or status, or notoriety that the details of their lives have been preserved? How can we get at the experience of intermarriage as lived by women in the Southwestern borderlands?

If we wish to explore intermarriage through the perspective of women of color more broadly, our starting point can't be the actions of immigrant men. Instead, we must begin by uncovering the general practices of the local population. This approach requires a fine-grained examination of a particular locality over a broad period of time.

I chose Las Vegas, New Mexico, as the site of my investigation. Las Vegas is about sixty miles east of Santa Fe, and was established by the Mexican government in 1835 to shield communities farther south from raids by Plains Indians. As the new port of entry into Mexico, the town quickly became an important site on the Santa Fe-Chihuahua trail. Just over a decade after the town's founding, General Stephen Watts Kearny first claimed possession of New Mexico on behalf of the United States from a rooftop overlooking the plaza in Las Vegas. The construction of Fort Union less than thirty miles to the northeast in 1851 was a boon to the local economy, but paled in comparison to the arrival of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad in 1879 and that company's decision to make Las Vegas a division center.

I turned to the manuscript census returns for a comprehensive view of domestic arrangements, family structure, and residential patterns practiced by the population at large. All of the statistics that follow are derived from a line-by-line analysis of the population schedules of each of the extant decennial censuses between 1850 and 1900 (most of the 1890 census was lost in a fire). I recorded demographic information—including age, sex, marital status, and "race"—for every resident of Las Vegas who was fifteen years old or older when the census was taken. In this essay, I refer to native New Mexicans of Hispanic or mestizo descent as "nuevomexicanos" (a self-referent in common use during the period) and I follow the contemporary convention of using "Anglo" as a convenient shorthand for nineteenth-century European and American immigrants to New Mexico and their descendants. The term thus includes Irish, Jewish, French Canadian, Italian, Eastern and Southern European peoples, as well as Anglo-Saxons.

Census records are not without limitations. They are likely to undercount the

population. They are prone to human error and distortion. Enumerators were at times unreliable, and occasionally (as we will see) simply made up their own categories. The information that enumerators were instructed to collect changed over time, making comparisons across census years a challenge in some cases. And translating census data into socially constructed categories like race can be tricky, particularly during a time when the definitions of the racial categories being applied were changing. Nevertheless, census returns provide a snapshot of the population at a particular moment in time. As a human inventory of each household in a community, they reveal informal relationships that escape (or evade) church sanction and civil ceremony. Of all the available sources, census returns provide the most complete picture of mixed marriage and cohabitation in this relatively small outpost in the Southwestern borderlands during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Among their many directives, enumerators were instructed to record the color of each individual they encountered. In 1850 and 1860, they were given three options in this regard: white, black, and mulatto. These categories left J.D. Robinson, the enumerator of the first federal census of Las Vegas, unsatisfied. He chose to leave the race column blank for all but a few individuals: one man he recorded as black, two children he listed as mulatto, and six people he identified as Indians—a category of his own choosing, rather than one prescribed by the census. Why he chose not to mark *nuevomexicanos* or Anglos by race is unclear. Perhaps he saw their whiteness as so patently obvious it required no comment. If so, he would have been rather exceptional given the racist vitriol that had so recently rationalized and justified the United States' conquest of the region.

Census enumerators had a wider array of racial categories from which to choose in the 1870 and 1880 censuses. Officials could now designate individuals as Chinese or Indian, in addition to white, black, and mulatto. This trend was reversed in 1900, when the heading "color or race" replaced the expanding list of categories that appeared on previous forms.

These shifting labels made little difference in Las Vegas. Except for the anomalous behavior of J.D. Robinson in 1850, all other census enumerators recorded *nuevomexicanos* and Anglos alike as "white." I relied on surname and place of birth to distinguish between the two groups through the 1870 census—an imperfect method of cataloging race, but an effective scheme for sorting out local residents and newcomers. Differentiating between *nuevomexicanos* and Anglos became easier with the inclusion in 1880 of the place of birth of each individual's father and mother, and the additions in 1900 of immigration date, number of years in the United States, and naturalization status.

The 1880 census also made it easier to identify married couples. That was the first year officials recorded marital status (options included single, married, or widowed/divorced). More significantly, it was also the first year enumerators identified the relationship of each individual in a home to the head of household. Familial relationships can only be inferred before the

addition of these specific categories. Still, enumerators were instructed to document residents of each household in a particular order: head of household, his wife, children from oldest to youngest, extended family members, boarders, and servants. Most officials followed these instructions consistently prior to 1880, so by exercising some caution it is possible to reliably infer familial relationships throughout the period. In this manner, I identified 3,155 likely marriages or informal unions in Las Vegas during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Census material can only tell us so much, however. While we can glean an impression of domestic life and gather a great deal of important demographic data from census returns, most women appear identified only by their first names and their relationship to the head of household. Consequently, examining intermarriage through the eyes of nuevamexicanas is primarily a statistical exercise—although it is an eminently useful one. Still, evidence of the experiences of these women is difficult to find in the pages of the census records.

Looking at mixed unions from the perspective of Anglo men gives the impression that interracial relationships were remarkably common in Las Vegas until the arrival of the railroad brought increasing numbers of Anglo women to the territory. In 1850, for example, seventy-nine percent of the Anglo men who were living with women in Las Vegas were married to (or cohabitating with) women of color. That number remained high (seventy percent in 1860 and seventy-four percent in 1870) until 1880, when the number plummeted: only fourteen percent of white men were intermarried. In 1900, the intermarriage rate for married Anglo men had declined even further, to just seven percent. These statistical trends conform to our general understanding of intermarriage on the frontier—in early periods of contact, immigrant men form unions (both formal and informal) with local women with great frequency. Once women from their own group arrive in the region, however, the frequency (and appeal) of intermarriage declines precipitously.

If we shift our point of view from the perspective of Anglo men to that of the local population, however, we see a much different trajectory. Rather than a boom followed by a dramatic decline in the late nineteenth century, the numbers of intermarriages are remarkably low and stable when viewed through the eyes of the much larger nuevomexicano community. Mixed unions consistently represented only a small fraction of overall marriages in Las Vegas. At no time between 1850 and 1900 did exogamous unions of any kind exceed ten percent of the total number of marriages. The figures are even more striking for Anglo-nuevomexicano unions specifically. Only three percent of marriages and informal unions in Las Vegas during the second half of the nineteenth century were between nuevomexicanos and Anglos.

The distance between seventy-four percent and three percent is dramatic to say the least. We can attribute part of the problem to lies, damn lies, and statistics. The numbers are bloated to begin with, not simply because they

focus on Anglo men. Those studies of mixed unions that make claims about high percentages of intermarriage do so because they consider how many *married* men chose to intermarry. If we use the total number of Anglo men (rather than the number of married Anglo men) as the baseline, the rate is much more modest. Take, for example, the figures from the census with the highest percentage of intermarriage. In 1850, seventy-nine percent of *married* Anglo men were intermarried, but seventy-five percent of the Anglo men in Las Vegas remained single. If we begin with the total number of Anglo men (seventy-five), we find that only twenty percent of them (fifteen) formed mixed unions. Why this was the case is difficult to say. Did seventy-five percent of the Anglo men in Las Vegas find single life to be more appealing than a mixed marriage? Or were seventy-five percent of the Anglo men in Las Vegas unable to convince any woman to accept a marriage proposal?

In any case, the actual number of intermarriages remained low throughout the nineteenth century. Census records reveal only forty unions between Anglo men and nuevamexicanas from 1850 to 1870 combined. The fact that only twenty-five Anglo women were enumerated in Las Vegas during the same period lays bare the reality of the marriage market for Anglo men: those choosing to marry were much more likely to marry a woman of color than another Anglo. And while some chose to do so, the vast majority of Anglo men in Las Vegas remained single throughout much of the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Without question, the marriage market was different for nuevamexicanas than it was for Anglo men. Yet, the figures suggest that nuevamexicanas had an overwhelming preference for marrying within their community, as many also made the choice to remain single rather than marry outside their group. From the perspective of nuevamexicanas living in Las Vegas, Anglo men were not much more appealing marriage partners than Mexicans, African-Americans, or Indians.

The rarity of mixed marriage in nineteenth-century Las Vegas is revealed by simply inverting the lens through which we view it. By shifting our angle of vision from the experiences of Anglo men to that of local women, the implicit question that drives many studies of intermarriage is turned on its head. From the perspective of nuevamexicanas, the question is not why were there so many mixed unions, but *why were there so few?*

Population figures provide a partial answer. Prior to 1880, the adult population of Las Vegas was overwhelmingly nuevomexicano. Only after the arrival of the railroad did non-nuevomexicanos constitute even a tenth of the population. With such a small pool of non-nuevomexicano men, it is not surprising that few nuevamexicanas intermarried.

The sex ratio was a factor as well. While Anglo men outnumbered Anglo women by more than ten to one in 1850 and still by just over three to one in 1880, the sex ratio in the total population was much more equal. Again, this points to the small size of the Anglo community in Las Vegas during much of the period. It does not explain, however, why fifty to seventy-five percent of Anglo men

chose not to marry when between thirty-six and forty percent of nuevamexicanas over the age of fifteen remained single.

The two groups shared much in common that should have promoted intermarriage. As a number of scholars have demonstrated, the gender and marriage systems operating in Spanish/Mexican and Anglo societies were fairly compatible. First and foremost, both were patriarchal and Christian. Each society also prized female virginity before marriage and demanded fidelity afterward. Likewise, they shared a double standard of sexual behavior, requiring sexual purity in women while rewarding sexual prowess in men. This double standard of sexual behavior was also racialized; both societies esteemed whiteness and sought to protect the purity of white women, while condoning or even encouraging the sexual exploitation of women of color by white men. In this fashion, both groups professed an aversion to racial mixture despite well-documented histories of its practice.

Spanish colonial society recognized a wide variety of mixed race peoples, but also maintained a stringent hierarchy between them. The racial system included not only *españoles* (Spaniards) and *indios* (Indians), but also people identified as *asmestizos* (Spanish and Indian), *mulatos* (Spanish and African), *castizos* (Spanish and mestizo), *castas* (racial mixture), *color quebrado* (literally, "broken color"), and *genízaros* (Hispanicized Indians). One's racial classification was determined not only by ancestry or phenotype, but also by occupation or class, and could change over time according to one's circumstances.

Race and legitimacy were intertwined in colonial New Mexico, as many associated mixed unions with illegitimacy and illicit sex. Consequently, many marriages—particularly among the elite—were arranged, in order to ensure matches with someone of equal status to preserve family honor. Simply put, the state's acknowledgment of mixed race people did not alter the association of racial mixture with dishonor. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, New Mexicans increasingly moved away from the nuanced racial hierarchy in place during the colonial period toward a more rigid racialization of two categories: Spanish and Indian.

In the years preceding the U.S. War with Mexico, Americans' understanding of race and racial difference also hardened. The idea that the world was made up of distinct races, each with their own innate traits and separate origins, was commonplace by the 1840s. The inherent and unchanging characteristics of each race determined their position in society and the world. Thus, the natural order preordained that some races would rule over others. In the hierarchy of superior and inferior races, Anglo Saxons occupied the highest rung and, alone among races, had the capacity for self-government.

Mexicans, which included nuevomexicanos in the eyes of Anglos, were relegated to one of the lowest positions in the racial hierarchy. The mixed-blood progeny of Indians and Europeans, Mexicans were particularly debased because they were

a "mongrelized" race. Neither purely European nor purely Indian, Mexicans were simultaneously semi-barbarous and semi-civilized. They retained none of the virtues that their Spanish fathers may have possessed when they arrived in the New World, and retained only the negative attributes of their indigenous mothers. These notions did little to encourage Anglos and nuevomexicanos to join together in the bonds of matrimony.

The two groups could agree, however, on the need to protect white women from the ravages of racial amalgamation with a third, more dangerous group: black men. Nuevomexicanos and Anglos in the territorial assembly (all men, of course) came together in 1857 to pass a miscegenation statute forbidding marriages between "any negro or mulatto" and "any woman of the white race." Ministers who performed such marriage ceremonies would be fined, and white women who violated the law were subject to the same punishment as their black partners. The law was gender specific, preventing only the pairing of black men and white women. Designed to control the sexual behavior of women, the statute reflected and reinforced the racialized double standard of sexual behavior the two groups shared.

The miscegenation law does not explain why so few nuevamexicanas intermarried, however. It was repealed in less than a decade, and the men who passed it were not concerned with marriages between Anglos and nuevomexicanos in the first place. Both groups were legally white, after all. Who was socially white or was recognized as an honorable match was a different matter, and that was, perhaps, all that mattered in the end.

Unions between Anglo men and nuevamexicanas did not challenge either the Spanish colonial order or the prevailing social mores that were being imposed after the U.S. conquest. Yet they were remarkably rare. No more than three percent of nuevamexicanas were partnered with Anglo men at any point between 1850 and 1900. The rate of intermarriage did not ebb and flow with the changing demographic tide; it remained unwaveringly low.

Few people were willing to transgress social boundaries by marrying outside their group. Those who did were cultural outliers rather than agents of assimilation. If intermarriage could, in fact, mute ethnic hostility, there were simply too few mixed unions in Las Vegas to make much of a difference. Mixed marriages provided neither a cultural bridge nor economic security; intermarriage between Anglos and nuevamexicanas was neither central to colonialism nor a common strategy of accommodation. These notions simply fall apart when we place local women at the center of our analysis. Mixed marriages were rare, messy, and marginal. Our familiar narratives of racial and social fluidity in borderlands regions, it seems, are more imagined than real.

Racial boundaries in this borderland were not particularly fluid or blurry or permeable. The nineteenth century was not some golden era of racial accord, accommodation, and goodwill that would be permanently ruptured by the Mexican Revolution. Racial boundaries were firm, rigid, and durable in the New Mexico

borderlands. Nevertheless, the infrequency of mixed unions in Las Vegas during the latter half of the nineteenth century was not the result of state prohibitions of intermarriage. Instead, it was the product of sharp racial boundaries constructed and maintained by the people themselves—by nuevomexicanos as well as Anglos—in their everyday lives and without the need for state intervention.

Further Reading:

For the definition of borderlands as “the contested boundaries between colonial domains,” see Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, “From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in between in North American History,” *American Historical Review* 104: 3 (1999): 814-41. On the economic and cultural significance of the captive exchange, see James F. Brooks, *Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands* (Chapel Hill, 2002). For social and cultural histories of marriage and conquest in New Mexico, see, for example, Ramón A. Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500-1846* (Palo Alto, Calif., 1991); Darlis A. Miller, “Cross-Cultural Marriages in the Southwest: The New Mexico Experience, 1846-1900,” in *New Mexico Women: Intercultural Perspectives*, edited by Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller (Albuquerque, 1986); Deena J. González, *Refusing the Favor: The Spanish-Mexican Women of Santa Fe, 1820-1880* (New York, 1999); and Amanda Taylor-Montoya, “‘Under the Same Glorious Flag’: Land, Race, and Legitimacy in Territorial New Mexico” (PhD Diss., University of Oklahoma, 2009). On the racialization of nuevomexicanos after the U.S. war with Mexico, see especially Laura E. Gómez, *Manifest Destinies: The Making of the Mexican American Race* (New York, 2007).

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