

María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo. *Indian Given: Racial Geographies across Mexico and the United States.* Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2016. 352 pp. \$26.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8223-7492-3.

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In *Indian Given: Racial Geographies Across Mexico and the United States*, María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo argues that the empires and nation-states that claim(ed) what is now the US-Mexico borderlands constructed “racial geographies” as a vehicle for the conquest and colonization of the region. In how they perceived indigenous humanity and in how they defined indigenous occupation of the landscape, Europeans, Mexicans, and Americans justified and shaped their own occupation of that same landscape. Saldaña-Portillo’s study covers the sixteenth through twenty-first centuries, ultimately asserting that modern Mexican and American senses of national self and national space still rely on inherited colonial and post-colonial perceptions of indigeneity—“that the racial geographies of these two countries are indeed Indian given” (p. 11).

Saldaña-Portillo first examines how the Spanish Empire created colonial space by bestowing European understandings of rationality and sovereignty on indigenous communities in order to make the landscape intelligible to them. Ultimately, the Spanish came to perceive the inhabitants of the New World as rational souls in self-governing communities. As such, they were capable of receiving both Christianity and Spanish civilization—both of which the Spanish were compelled to offer them. The needs of Indians, then,

justified Spanish colonization and did much to determine how and why Spain occupied its New World holdings.

In exploring the British Empire’s creation of colonial spaces, Saldaña-Portillo makes the important observation that the image of the vanishing Indian—“the Indian who occupied the territory, but did not own it”—was not the first English racial geography imposed on the New World (p. 54). Instead, early settlers saw a landscape filled with Indians who not only owned land in the same sense they did, but who were competent to enter into European-style contracts necessary to exchange ownership of that land. Thus, rather than naked conquest, English settlers understood their colonization primarily as a change in ownership. Yes, Indians would disappear from the landscape, but not before granting legitimate ownership to colonists.

In this portion of the book, Saldaña-Portillo makes an interesting and compelling argument that this particular understanding of the American landscape as a space filled with Indian property rights that could be transferred to settlers fueled much of the revolutionary generation’s sense of their own freedom. American freedom meant, in part, the freedom to purchase Indian lands, which could in turn be legitimately given. It was not until after American sovereignty and power

were secure that the image of the property-owning Indian began to give way to that of the wandering or vanishing Indian. Scholars of late-colonial/early national Indian policy would benefit from utilizing her arguments here.

Saldana-Portillo then moves forward in time to explore how the nation-states of Mexico and the United States utilized their inherited colonial racial geographies. It is in her examination of how Mexico utilized, yet transformed the old Spanish category of “indios barbaros” and how this category correlated (though not perfectly) to the US image of the “wild savage” that Saldana-Portillo’s transnational approach sees its greatest pay off.

Ironically, Mexico’s attempt to incorporate indigeneity into its national self-understanding actually led to an extended period of conflict with those northern tribes with whom the Spanish had achieved a relative peace over the previous few decades. While most interpretations of these conflicts in the existing historiography cite political instability in the interior of the nation and the breakdown of gift-giving to the nomadic tribes, Saldana-Portillo offers a compelling additional angle of examination. She argues that Mexican liberalism, with its deliberate rejection of the Spanish racial caste system, was actually more fully committed to assimilation of indigenous populations than Spanish colonialism. Whereas a Spanish racial geography was flexible enough to accept a landscape filled with both Spaniards and semi-autonomous, nomadic indigenous communities (at least temporarily), the racial geography of Mexican liberalism insisted that any such public distinctions disappear—that the nation as a whole must be a landscape simply inhabited by Mexicans. Privately, Indians could continue to be Indians to a great extent, but distinctly Indian communities could no longer occupy the political and economic space of the nation.

At the same time, the United States was determined to define national belonging largely in terms of racial categorization, unlike their neigh-

bor to the south. In particular, the United States had inherited a colonial racial geography that excluded Indians from the category of citizen. When northern Mexico became the southwest United States, former citizens of Mexico found themselves in a nation determined to define “Mexican” as a racial, rather than a national category. Lighter-skinned Mexican nationals could possibly redefine themselves (or be redefined) as “white,” and therefore potentially enjoy some of the benefits of citizenship. Meanwhile, other, darker-skinned Mexican nationals found themselves redefined in terms of African or Indian heritage. While both the Mexican and US nation-making projects imagined the borderlands as a landscape devoid of indigenous people, some former Mexican citizens suddenly found themselves reimagined as savages—the very “indios barbaros” with which their former nation had come into conflict. Saldana-Portillo then traces the consequences of this imposition of the American equivalent of “indios barbaros” on both Mexican nationals and indigenous populations living above the new, post-1848 border through a series of seminal court cases dealing with issues of both land ownership and citizenship. Though many of these cases will be well known to most readers, Saldana-Portillo’s reading of the cases in the service of her thesis offers many fresh and valuable insights.

The last portion of *Indian Given* looks at the impact of these inherited colonial and postcolonial racial geographies on the late twentieth/early twenty-first century. Chapter 5 argues that the Chicano/a movement owes much to these inherited racial geographies in how it incorporates its sense of indigeneity. Saldana-Portillo also asserts that thinking of this colonial and postcolonial inheritance in terms of a racial *geography* helps to explain why the obstinately precolonial homeland of Aztlan conforms to postcolonial borders. Chicano/a scholars will find much in her interpretation worth considering. In the conclusion, Saldana-Portillo asserts that Americans still utilize the category of “indios barbaros” to understand

the “other”—in particular Middle Eastern terrorists and Mexican narcos.

Saldana-Portillo marshals a vast array of primary and secondary sources. Her work in the Spanish archives is particularly fruitful, bringing to light valuable colonial records with which most readers will not be familiar. She also relies on modern memoirs and films in order to advance her argument that the legacies of colonial and postcolonial racial geographies still affect how the US-Mexico borderlands are understood today. Furthermore, *Indian Given* demonstrates a mastery and synthesis of the literature of multiple fields. Not only does this make Saldana-Portillo’s arguments stronger, but it ensures that scholars across a wide variety of disciplines will find *Indian Given* very useful in their own work. Saldana-Portillo’s monograph makes critical contributions to the fields of indigenous studies, borderlands studies, American studies, Mexican studies, Chicano/a studies, gender studies, transnational studies, western legal studies, and Southwest studies—just to name a few. *Indian Given* truly has the potential to help set the agenda in multiple disciplines.

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