

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

The Melting Pot that Wouldn't: Ethnic Groups in the American Southwest Since 1846

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1d49f92k>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 1(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Fontana, Bernard L.

Publication Date

1974-03-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

THE MELTING POT THAT WOULDN'T: ETHNIC GROUPS IN THE AMERICAN SOUTHWEST SINCE 1846

Bernard L. Fontana

In 1846, General Stephen Watts Kearny and about three hundred dragoons of his "Army of the West" rode into Santa Fe to lay claim to New Mexico on behalf of the United States, a claim legalized two years later, in 1848, by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Along with it went most of what is now the southwestern United States, enlarged to its present boundaries through the ratification in 1854 of the Gadsden Purchase.

Kearny and his men were Johnnies-come-lately, and most of us who live in the Southwest today, who are the more-or-less direct beneficiaries of this military and political conquest, are not the descendants of southwestern pioneers, explorers, and discoverers. The New Mexico and Arizona of the mid-nineteenth century had been discovered and thoroughly explored at least twelve thousand years earlier by American Indians. When manifest destiny caught up with the region's real pioneer inhabitants, they numbered in the many thousands; they spoke more than twenty languages, many of which were mutually unintelligible and totally unrelated; they lived in compact pueblo villages or in temporary camps characteristic of seminomads; and, depending on environmental or other factors, they farmed, hunted, gathered, and engaged in extensive foreign trade as means of earning their livelihoods.¹

In 1846, moreover, northwestern Mexico was occupied also by native-born speakers of Spanish, some of whom were the direct lineal descendants of late-sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century colonists of ultimate European origin, but most of whom were more genuinely Mexican. That is, they

were a *mestizo* population, comprised of a mixed American Indian and Spanish genetic and cultural heritage. They were sufficiently hispanicized that their cultural modes of operation, including their language and their view of the meaning of life, differed considerably from those of their genuine Indian neighbors.²

General Kearny, representing the long, westward-reaching arm of a white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant United States, added new ingredients to this societal stew but did not help blend a smooth cultural batter. Since the mid-nineteenth century, in the Southwest we have witnessed the steady simmering of a sociological mixture but almost never the creation of a regional social, political, or economic compound. To borrow a phrase from a colleague of mine, in the last ten years the only thing that's melted has been the pot.

Everywhere are signs of separateness in our composite society. I am an Anglo; a WASP; a whiteman; a honkey—or worse; a gringo; a *gabacho*; an "enemy" to many southwestern Indians; or, more politely, an "American," as distinct from the descendants of aboriginal inhabitants.

Gente de razon, Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, Spanish-speakers, spics, greasers, hispanos, hispano-Americans, *manitos*, *mexicanos*, and Chicanos are labels, some new and some old, applied to that segment of our population—not to mention Spanish or Spanish-American (regarded by Chicanos as the ultimate copout) or terms of internal division (and derision) like *vendido*, *coyote*, or *Tío Tomás*.

There are as many labels for Indians as there are tribes but, almost universally, Indians, or native Americans, or first Americans, or Amerindians, or the aboriginal inhabitants, refer to themselves by a term that translates, ethnocentrically enough, as "the people." Others are usually labeled either "enemies" or "friends." An Indian whose values appear to be those of the dominant society is an "apple": red on the outside, white on the inside.

The inventory of names for blacks, or Negroes, is equally long and dreary; and we do not need to say more than that we also have Jews, Mormons, Italians, Greeks, Orientals, and Texans as subvarieties of the larger, ill-defined, dominant society in the Southwest.

The labels used to distinguish "us" from

From a paper presented at a symposium of the Western History Association on the History of Western America, Santa Fe, New Mexico, October 15, 1971. By permission.

"them" are not the only signs of cultural diversity. Red power and brown power, especially, are manifested in such new institutions as the Navajo Community College and the Rough Rock demonstration school, in neighborhood Indian centers, in La Raza Unida and the Aliancistas, in the Teatro Campesino and Teatro Barrio, and among those whose slogan is *Viva la Huelga!* in the grape fields of California. There are Indian newspapers, newspapers in Spanish, and a wide spectrum of journals originating in the black community.

In recent years in Ysleta del Sur, a barrio of El Paso, Texas, a group of Tigua Indians has reemerged whose forefathers arrived in 1680 in the wake of the Pueblo Revolt in New Mexico. Long since thought to have become extinct, these people, who insist on their Indian identity, have successfully fended off nearly three hundred years of attempts by the larger culture to assimilate them, and they now have reservation-like status under the administration of the state of Texas.³ Their relatives in nearby Tortugas, just south of Las Cruces, New Mexico, own their own village in corporate status, own and maintain various community and religious structures (including a kiva), and each December 12 they celebrate the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe in a blend of European-introduced and Indian-like observances.

Further evidence of the bewildering diversity of traditional belief systems in the Southwest can be found in our schools. Our universities and colleges have ethnic courses, programs, and even centers of ethnic studies. Schools on all levels compete with one another to recruit qualified members of our larger minority groups. Institutions of higher learning, including colleges of medicine and law, actively seek minority students. The curriculum in elementary and secondary schools appears to be undergoing a slow but inevitable change toward greater accountability to the black, red, and brown communities. Here and there, English is being taught as a second language and textbooks are being rewritten. Preschools for minority members have flourished, and work is afoot to prevent them from becoming what Ernesto Galarza has called "a headstart down a short alley."⁴

To anyone who believed ten years ago in the melting-pot theory, all this interest in

cultural diversity probably comes as a great surprise or even a source of dismay. First, hispanos were unable to obliterate the cultures of most southwestern Indians; subsequently, Anglo-Americans have been unable to bring about the assimilation of either of these groups.

My purpose here, however, is not to examine the reasons for the recent insistence by minority members on their unique cultural identities. Instead, I propose to take a closer look at why this war—and it is a kind of war—is being waged. What does a Chicano mean, for example, when he speaks of his "unique cultural heritage," and where do its parts conflict with those of the larger society? Are Indians and Mexican-Americans seeking land, better-paying jobs, and power in city, county, and state governments merely to gain a larger share of the economic and political pie of the Southwest? I think not. I believe the lessons of history and anthropology suggest that the issues are far more fundamental than these.

The idea of a melting pot, of assimilation, implies a battle for the very minds and souls of men. That, it seems to me, is what the struggle is all about. To understand the refusal of ethnic minorities in the Southwest to relinquish their identities, we might consider three arenas of thought in which the competition is the sharpest and engenders the most bitter feelings. These are the concepts of time, space, and being.

Time

Lewis Mumford tells us that our modern, western conception of time grew out of the collapse of the Roman Empire. Uncertainty and confusion were the rule in the early Middle Ages; the exception, where order, power, and certainty might still be found, lay within the walls of the monasteries of the West. To quote from Mumford:

Opposed to the erratic fluctuation and pulsations of the worldly life was the iron discipline of the rule. Benedict added a seventh period to the devotions of the day, and in the seventh century, by a bull of Pope Sabinianus, it was decreed that the bells of the monastery be rung seven times in the twenty-four hours. These punctuation marks in the day were known as the canonical hours, and some means of keeping count of them and ensuring their regulation became necessary. . . . The monastery was the seat of regular life, and an instrument for striking the hours at inter-

vals or for reminding the bell-ringer that it was time to strike the bells, was an almost inevitable product of this life. If the mechanical clock did not appear until the cities of the thirteenth century demanded an orderly routine, the habit of order itself and the earnest regulation of time-sequences had become almost second nature in the monastery. . . . So one is not straining the facts when one suggests that the monasteries—at one time there were forty thousand under the Benedictine rule—helped to give human enterprise the regular collective beat and rhythm of the machine; for the clock is not merely a means of keeping track of the hours, but of synchronizing the actions of men.

. . . The bells of the clock tower almost defined urban existence. Time-keeping passed into time-serving and time-accounting and time-rationing. As this took place, Eternity ceased gradually to serve as the measure and focus of human actions.³

When I first read this passage it occurred to me that my life, and that of millions of other Americans, has been ordered partly in response to the ringing of bells at regularly spaced intervals. How else could schools, from kindergarten through graduate colleges, operate?

In devising a mechanical means of arbitrarily segmenting the day into regularly spaced units, we have made an artifact of time. To western, industrial man, time is not an abstract idea; it is a thing, a man-made object considered to be as substantial as the chairs in a room—and considerably more important. Thus, we talk of “wasting” time, “saving” time, or “spending” time. We say that “time is money,” and we pay people for their time rather than for what they do or how well they do it. Our notion of time and our methods of time-keeping are the very underpinnings of our entire industrial system. Think of the sweep hand of the clock on the wall or of the numbers on the computer as they count down those final seconds—three, two, one, *blastoff!*—as we send men hurtling toward the moon. Or woe be to the employee of a large corporation whose personnel record shows he has a history of failing to be punctual, which is to say, “on time.” To be caught embezzling the company funds could hardly be a worse stain on one’s escutcheon.

Contrasted with this artifactual time, whose symbol is the clock, is what we might call “natural” time. This is time regarded as a kind of flowing continuum; time geared to the rising and setting of the sun and to the length of daylight and darkness hours;

time that changes with the motion of celestial bodies in our universe. Thus it differs according to the seasons of the year and depending upon where one happens to be. It is in tune with such time that seeds germinate and take root, stalks grow, and corn ripens for harvest; the farmer’s milk cow is not in harmony with “daylight savings”; and the crowing of a rooster or the moonlight crying of desert coyotes may be heard instead of the bell of an alarm clock or of a village tower.

Natural time is rural time; artifactual time is industrial time. If one is a southwestern American Indian, particularly one who has been reared in the essentially rural environment of a reservation, the sense of time he has internalized is that of nature. For him, to be “on time” is simply to plant in early summer, to cultivate in mid- and late summer, and to harvest in late summer and fall; it is to sleep out-of-doors when the weather is hot, to sleep under a roof and near a fire when it is cold. To be punctual means to meet the obligations he has to meet in order to live according to the standards of his cultural prescriptions: the punctual Navajo Indian knows when to shear his sheep and when to count his lambs.

We joke with Indians and they joke among themselves about arriving “on Indian time.” This means that a village meeting is likely to start this evening sharp, that is, if it doesn’t start a little later—or a little earlier. Many Indians lead such lives that natural time fulfills their cultural requisites. What difference does it make whether the meeting starts at seven, eight, or nine o’clock? The meeting will be held, and it will continue until everyone has his say.

Those of us who have grown up with the regular ringing of bells have internalized the regular, seasonless intervals of the clock. We can awaken a minute before the alarm goes off, or promptly at six a.m., even without a clock. We admonish our children to hurry, or they will be late for school; we worry if we are fifteen minutes late for anything; we tell our secretaries they will have to “make up” time on Saturday for taking too long lunch hours during the week. In a society such as ours, punctuality geared to the clock is a virtue, and if we are to continue our flights to the moon and to expand our gross national product—it is, indeed, a necessity.

Between these two extremes, the Anglo and

the Indian, lies the Chicano, whose rural background is only slightly more remote than that of the Indian. He, too, has refused to accept without question the Anglo's sense of time. It is only a small exaggeration to say that the American clock runs, the Mexican clock walks (*el reloj anda*), and the American Indians had no need for clocks at all.

Space

If different ethnic groups in the Southwest have conflicting definitions of time, they also have conflicting concepts of space.

We Anglo-Americans, for instance, have done with space what we have done with time: we have converted an abstract idea into a concrete reality. Thus, we Anglos are uncomfortable in the face of a great, open space: we want something we can weigh, measure, or count; we feel compelled to fill "empty" space with man-made objects. This compulsion might explain what we euphemistically call "land development," as if land were something that could indeed be developed by man. We talk of conquering space, as if it were some kind of opponent. In Alaska, in the Matanuska Valley, where I once lived, my farmer neighbors referred to the great stands of virgin birch and spruce as "uncleared land." They bulldozed the trees, piling trunks and limbs into rows to be soaked in diesel or crude oil and put to the torch—often to smolder for weeks—while the bulldozed land was planted with potatoes to be fed to the soldiers of Ft. Richardson and the sky warriors of Elmendorf Air Force Base.

It is in the nature of western civilization that most of us who are its products are incapable of thinking in any but finite terms. *Alpha* and *omega* are more than just the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet; they are the symbols of western man's belief that everything has a beginning and an end—Einstein and his Theory of Relativity notwithstanding. (Who besides astronomers, physicists, and mathematicians are really capable of contemplating the meaning of infinity?) Most of us say that the great void beyond the earth "has to end somewhere."

To ensure that everything ends, we reduce space to measurable units. To ensure our control of space, and thereby promote what we consider our proper, exalted place in the universe, we build tramways to the top of Sandia Peak; we contemplate bridges or cable

cars over the Grand Canyon; we dam the waters of the Río Grande and erect a city near Cochiti Pueblo; we carve statues of our heroes on the face of Mount Rushmore; we bulldoze streets in the wilderness and put up signs bearing the names of Indian tribes at every intersection. We have, in short, taken to heart the biblical admonition to subdue the earth, often forgetting we are also asked to replenish it. Space, whether land, sea, or air, has been ours to conquer.

The southwestern Indian who still bears his cultural heritage, feels no need to "develop" the land. It is already developed. He feels no need to impose his architecture on the landscape so that it cannot fail to be seen by passersby. A house, a ramada, or a summer arbor can better grow out of the earth upon which it rests: the architecture is better organic than otherwise.

Indians do not feel they have to do anything about space. Certainly they do not think of conquering it. Space and all that it contains in nature are fused portions of a larger cosmos into which man must fit himself and find his proper, and humble, niche. Space need not be measured. It is simply there, all the way to the stars, all the way to that line where land and sky come together. No traditional Hopi or Navajo viewing Black Mesa ever conceived the need for an electric railroad to grace its surface.

The traditional Indian view of space is that space is that which contains all things. One of these things is man himself. Man is no more, no less than other animals, plants, or other objects. Although various Indian religions express this view differently, among most of them, as a Navajo has explained it, "There is a sky-mother and the earth-mother, and we are all children of that . . . We are in a family with the world, in a family with the earth . . . Whatever grows in the mother is to be respected, not to be manipulated in your self-interest, or whatever you may want to do with it."⁶ It is not the job of man to subdue the earth or to conquer space; it is—in this Indian view—his job instead to see how he fits into it.

Being

Finally, and this is the most fundamental difference of all, members of southwestern minorities and Anglo-Americans have quite different notions of who they are. Our iden-

tification of self and how we think of self in relation to the rest of the world, to life, and to the universe determines in large part how we carry on the business of living from day to day.

In a fascinating article, "The Historic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," the historian Lynn White, Jr., traces the development of the exploitative attitude of western man.

In the days of the scratch plow, fields were distributed generally in units capable of supporting a single family. Subsistence farming was the presupposition. But no peasant owned eight oxen: to use the new and more efficient plow, peasants pooled their oxen to form large plow teams, originally receiving (it would appear) plowed strips in proportion to their contribution. Thus, distribution of land was based no longer on the needs of a family but, rather, on the capacity of a power machine to till the earth. Man's relation to the soil was profoundly changed. Formerly man had been a part of nature; now he was the exploiter of nature. Nowhere else in the world did farmers develop any analogous agricultural implement. Is it coincidence that modern technology, with its ruthlessness toward nature, has so largely been produced by the descendants of these peasants of Northern Europe?⁷

White then tells us how men of the Middle Ages in Europe began to coerce the world around them, and how the notions of man and nature came to be divided, with man as master. He argues that Christianity, which he calls the most anthropocentric religion in the world, established a dualism of man and nature and insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends. In the Old World, Christianity destroyed animism—which is the traditional American Indian religion—and thus opened the door to the indifferent exploitation of natural objects.

Western man has come to believe in his preeminence in the universe. We are its masters, perhaps second only to God—or, for some of us, even ahead of Him. We believe that what man can imagine, man can do. Nothing is impossible, especially in the face of our impressive science and our advanced technology. And, science to the contrary, it is surprising how many of us still believe with Copernicus—in our hearts if not our minds—that the sun revolves around the earth.

Another aspect of our identification of self sets us off from American Indians, Chicanos, and perhaps other southwestern minority peoples as well: in western industrial society, man is perpetually in a state of becoming.

We are never in a state of being or in a state of having been. We never *are*; we always *will be*. As children, we are taught to live for the future. We are driven by discontent or frustration from what we are, and we are forever planning to become something else. We look forward to being richer, smarter, or more learned; to being residents in a bigger house, or the owner of two cars instead of one; to being the mayor, the town councilman, or the most respected citizen in the community. Dissatisfaction with ourselves enables us to defer immediate pleasures in order to achieve what we call long-range goals. These goals are always defined in terms of becoming something or someone other than what or who we are.

It is usual for us to consider others who appear to be what we would like to become as "having it made." In truth, however, none of us Anglos ever has it made, and we will never become the person we have imagined for ourselves. Howard Hughes and Winthrop Rockefeller and Richard Burton, to say nothing of Doris Duke, Grace Ranier, and Mrs. Burton, at this very moment—provided they are awake—are planning on becoming something other than what they are. The rest of us inheritors of modern western civilization are doing likewise, and we shall continue to do so until our last breaths have been drawn and the undertakers go to work on our mortal remains.

Our very educational institutions—our schools, colleges and universities—are academies for the promotion of becoming. It is the role of the teacher to instill discontent in the pupils to spur them toward what we call "improvement" and, thereby, to become something other than what they are. Discontent is another name for what teachers call "motivation." When we speak of "motivating" the culturally disadvantaged child, we are really saying we want to assimilate members of the minority group. Above all, we want these children to share our deep anxieties, our compulsion to become, our disaffection with the state of being. What is ambition but the desire to change oneself?

In total contrast, it makes no sense to inquire of an Indian child what he wants to be when he grows up. An Indian child, and, I suspect, Chicano children as well, already are. They are children; they are elder brothers and sisters; they are players of whatever

games children play. They do not have to wait to be; they are right now. And so it is through life: one is what one is; one is continually in a state of being rather than of becoming. One will, of course, become other things, but these are narrowly prescribed by one's unique culture and are very little the result of one's individual effort. A medicine man works long and hard at perfecting his skill, but normally his pursuit of that specialty has come to him in a dream or a vision. The power is initially offered to him, as if he were being selected for the dangerous and onerous task. One does not strive to become a shaman. One strives only to improve his skill in that role after the power has been offered to him and he has chosen to accept it, with the attendant responsibilities.

To one who is in a state of being, it is impossible to do nothing. Simply to be is to do something. It is only for those who are driven to become, that to do nothing is possible. When we say of another, "he doesn't do anything," we are merely saying he is not striving to alter his state of being.

What we have considered here is the composite society of the American Southwest. We have discussed peoples with unique cultural heritages. These heritages are expressed in the languages we speak and in the differing habits of daily and seasonal life. Most importantly, however, they are rooted in the differing conceptions we have of our very selves and of space and time. The world and self-view of the occidental, urban, industrial Anglo-American is fundamentally at odds with the world and the self-view of nonwestern, rural, agrarian American Indians.

It is difficult to imagine how these views might be reconciled, especially when it appears that the combatants in this war of attempted assimilation seek no reconciliation. All the sides involved are convinced of the rightness of their views. A certain amount of change will occur in the cultures of southwestern ethnic groups, but it would surely be a mistake to believe that all of this change will be toward assimilation. As more Indian and Chicano voices are raised in protest, the better the chance that acculturation will be a more genuine two-way process than it has been in the past. A few Anglo youths are already investigating the belief systems of

these other cultures to see what they may find of value for themselves. And if we Anglo-Americans in the Southwest will learn to lower our voices a bit and be more willing on occasion to be taught, rather than always to teach, we may be able to help fashion a more egalitarian composite society than we presently have. And surely, with all men, we would stand to gain.

Hindsight tells us that the experiment of the "melting pot" in the Southwest, which began in 1846, was foredoomed to failure. But in that failure may be a victory yet to emerge, a victory of the exciting right of all human beings to their many differences.

What otherwise might have become a barren and gray-colored plain—one ill-befitting the region of which we speak—has a chance to become a many-colored kaleidoscope of reasonably compatible human activity. Surely, if the saguaro cactus of the desert, the snow-covered peaks of the Sangre de Cristo, and the lavender cliffs of Canyon de Chelly can find a common home in the reaches of the Southwest, man, in complementing this symphony of nature's variety, should be able to do as well.

NOTES

1. An excellent analytical ethnohistory of southwestern Indians is found in Edward H. Spicer, *Cycles of Conquest* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1962). Overviews of the contemporary Indian scene in Arizona can be found in Thomas Weaver, ed., "The Arizona Indian People and Their Relationship to the State's Total Structure," *Research Report of the 18th Arizona Town Hall* (Phoenix, Arizona Academy, 1971), and in New Mexico in Anne M. Smith, "New Mexico Indians," *Research Records of the Museum of New Mexico*, No. 1 (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1966).
2. A plethora of recent books exists concerning Mexican-Americans. A few are: John H. Burma, *Mexican-Americans in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman Publishing Company, Inc., 1970); Ernesto Galarza and others, *Mexican-Americans in the Southwest* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: McNally and Loftin, 1969); Leo Grebler and others, *The Mexican-American People* (New York: The Free Press, 1970); and Julian Samora, ed., *La Raza: Forgotten Americans* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966). A bibliography of sources, though already outdated, has been compiled by Barbara H. Mickey, "A Bibliography of Studies Concerning the Spanish-Speaking Population of the American Southwest," *Miscellaneous Series of the Colorado State College Museum*, No. 4 (Greeley, Colo., 1969).
3. Nicholas P. Houser, "The Tigua Settlement at Ysleta

- del Sur," *The Kiva* (Tucson: Arizona Archaeological and Historical Society) 36, No. 2 (Winter), 23-29.
4. Ernesto Galarza, "Mexicans in the Southwest: A Culture in Process," paper presented at the Conference on Plural Society in the Southwest, Patagonia, Arizona (August 1970).
 5. Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York and Burlingame, Calif.: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963), pp. 13, 14.
 6. Herb Blatchford, in *Indian Voices; The First Convocation of American Indian Scholars* (San Francisco: Indian Historian Press, Inc., 1970), p. 45.
 7. Lynn White, Jr., "The Historic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Machina ex Deo* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: M.I.T. Press, 1968), pp. 83-84.