

# BLURRED BORDERS FOR SOME BUT NOT "OTHERS": RACIALIZATION, "FLEXIBLE ETHNICITY," GENDER, AND THIRD-GENERATION MEXICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY

JESSICA M. VASQUEZ  
*University of Kansas*

**ABSTRACT:** *How are the lives of middle-class third-generation Mexican Americans both racialized and gendered? Third-generation Mexican Americans in California experience a racialization process continuum that extends from "flexible ethnicity," the ability to be considered an "insider" in different racial/ethnic communities, to racialization as nonwhite that is enforced through the deployment of negative stereotypes. Using interview data, the author finds that women are afforded more "flexible ethnicity" than men. Accordingly, men are more rigorously racialized than women. Women are racialized through exoticization, whereas men are racialized as threats to safety. Lighter-skinned individuals escaped consistent racialization. These findings have consequences for the incorporation possibilities of later-generation Mexican Americans, as women and light-skinned (often multiracial) individuals are more frequently granted "flexible ethnicity" and less strongly racialized than men and dark-skinned (often monoracial) individuals. Even among the structurally assimilated, contemporary racial and gender hierarchies limit the voluntary quality of ethnicity among third-generation Mexican Americans.*  
Keywords: Mexican American; race; Latino/a; gender; racialization; third generation; identity; assimilation

Globalization and migration trespass the U.S.-Mexico border and create a distinct border culture.<sup>1</sup> Mexican-origin people in borderland zones are conceptualized as "juggling cultures" and having "plural personalities" (Anzaldúa 1987). How, then, do third-generation Mexican Americans in these territorial and symbolic borderlands navigate their "plural" identities? How is this process both racialized and gendered? This article explores the dynamics of third-generation Mexican Americans' social position. Mexican Americans live in a "borderland" that is both racialized and gendered. Race and gender remain "foundations for systems of power and inequality" and have "overlapping and cumulative" effects on people's experience

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Address correspondence to: Jessica M. Vasquez, Department of Sociology, Fraser Hall, 1415 Jayhawk Blvd. Room 716, Lawrence, KS 66045-7556; e-mail: vasquez@ku.edu.

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(Anderson and Collins 2007:5). Third-generation Mexican American men and women confront specific racialized and gendered stereotypes. As third-world feminists have long argued, race is critically important in understanding the social construction of gender (hooks 1992; King 1988; Saldivar-Hull 2000; Zinn and Dill 1996:321). Perceived by others as exotic or docile women and/or villainous men, third-generation Mexican Americans are subject to “controlling images” against which they are challenged to define themselves. “Controlling images” demarcate the boundary of belonging and are “major instrument[s] of power” in that they create and maintain race, class, and gender oppression (Collins 1991:68).

Mexican Americans in the Southwest exist within a vast geo-political and socio-cultural borderland. The physical space, part of Mexico prior to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848,<sup>2</sup> extends along a 2,000-mile land border where distinct cultures, economies, and “widely disparate standards of living” (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002:24) converge. The Mexican-origin population in the United States—including immigrants and their descendents—has nearly doubled in size in every decade except for 1930–1960. In 1910, the Mexican-origin population was 385,000 as compared to the 2000 population of 20.6 million. Considerable differences exist between the generations of the Mexican-origin population. Generational status affects self-labeling practices, acculturation processes, and life outcomes (Buriel 1987; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Rumbaut and Portes 2001; Smith 2003, 2006). Currently, nearly seven million people are third-plus-generation Mexican Americans (Macias 2006:6), yet the complexities of their borderland identities and experiences are rarely addressed. To date, the relationship between structural assimilation (education, occupations) and the absence of prejudice and discrimination has been inadequately studied, a hole that my research on middle-class third-generation Mexican Americans fills.

Using intensive interviews with third-generation Mexican Americans living in California, I argue that two poles of a *racialization process continuum* shape the identity experiences of third-generation Mexican Americans: “flexible ethnicity” and racialization. The term *racialization process continuum* acknowledges that “Latinos are simultaneously subjected to processes of whitening and racialization” (Davila 2008:12) as a nonwhite racial category. The *racialization process continuum* encapsulates the terms “flexible ethnicity” and racialization (which I use here to refer to enforcing a nonwhite racial status) in a larger context of racialization dynamics. Racialization, in the broad sense, includes the possibility of whitening, being identified and treated as non-Hispanic white. “Flexible ethnicity” is predicated upon being “whitened,” that is, racialized as non-Hispanic white. As supporters of racialized assimilation assert, Latinos can be racialized as non-Hispanic white, Hispanic/Latino, or non-Hispanic black (Golash-Boza and Darity 2008:901).

“Flexible ethnicity” refers to the ability to deftly and effectively navigate different racial terrains and be considered an “insider” in more than one racial or ethnic group. “Flexible ethnicity” differs from “situational ethnicity” (Okamura 1981; Root 1996) by acknowledging that people may background or foreground certain identity features in different contexts but there is not a 100 percent correspondence between how people *want* to be perceived and how they *are* perceived. “Flexible ethnicity” is also different from “strategic ethnicity,” or “the utilization

[of ethnicity] towards a purposeful goal" (Stanczak 2006:186), such as organizational diversity or mobilization around pan-ethnic issues. "Flexible ethnicity" acknowledges that although actors may assert racial/ethnic identities, their intended audience may not accept these claims. Although "flexible ethnicity" may enable individuals to access resources and privileges, it cannot always be wielded to attain specific ends. "Racialization" refers to the process of imposing racial assignments on others and linking those racial ascriptions with differential expectations and value assessments. To borrow from Omi and Winant (1994:64), racialization, a fundamental categorization process, is "the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship or group." Racialization of Mexican Americans as nonwhite or "off-white" (Gómez 2007) anticipates and enforces difference, creating and reproducing social distance and unequal power dynamics.

In this article I argue that although many third-generation Mexican Americans exhibit "flexible ethnicity," racialization hampers their efforts to define the terms of their own race/ethnicity. U.S. society racializes Mexican American men more stringently than Mexican American women; also, women are allowed greater degrees of "flexible ethnicity." The gendered stereotypes to which Mexican Americans are subjected have major implications for their structural assimilation: men, figured as violent gangsters, encounter a more rigid barrier to mainstream acceptance than women, who are typecast as exotic.

This article proceeds by introducing relevant literature in the next section, followed by a discussion of this study's research design and methodology. The results section is subdivided into analyses of racialization and "flexible ethnicity." I organize each of these two analytic categories by first presenting data on monoracial men and women, followed by a discussion of multiracial men and women.

### Literature on Racial Identity and Gender

Racial identity is both relational and situational. Similar to Anzaldúa's (1987) notion of "plural personalities," Clara Rodriguez (2000:xi-xii) asserts: "One has a 'plurality of selves,' each of which surfaces in a particular situation." Yet how Latinos<sup>3</sup> elect to racially or ethnically classify themselves is often at odds with how they are perceived and treated by others (Rodriguez 2000). Latinos agree that they have myriad racial/ethnic classification options and that "the terms of identification vary according to the context" (Zavella 1994:200). Generation in the United States, phenotype, class position, linguistic ability, size and accessibility of one's cultural or national-origin group, and relative size of other groups all influence one's racial identification choice (Rodriguez 2000). Racial identity as contextual or "situational" (Jiménez 2004; Okamura 1981; Root 1996; Zavella 1994) suggests that people can amplify or downplay aspects of their identity. I underscore that this volitional nature of racial identity has its enforced limits, such as phenotype and surname (Bettie 2003; Jiménez 2004). As Julie Bettie (2003:85) argues, "one's race performance [is] *expected* to correspond to a perceived racial 'essence,' marked by color and surname."

Borderland identities, or mixed race (mestiza/o) people who hail from Indian-Mexican-Anglo heritages, represent "racial, ideological, cultural, and biological

cross-pollination" (Anzaldúa 1987:99).<sup>4</sup> While Mexicans are already hybrid identities—descendents of Spanish, indigenous, French, and Germanic influences—offspring of non-Hispanic whites and Mexicans are more commonly considered to be "mixed race." Mexican Americans are "mestizaje," a racial and cultural intermixture (Macias 2006), who live a "distinctive . . . third way of life . . . rather than simply an amalgamation of Mexican and American cultures" (Keefe and Padilla 1987:7).

Racial group boundaries are subjective, and racial identities are fluid, meaning that people can both be perceived *and* self-identify differently under varying circumstances (Brown, Hitlin, and Elder 2006:624; Harris and Sim 2002; Nagel 1994). Despite this fluidity, the heterogeneous Latino community is homogenized through externally driven labeling processes (Oboler 1995). Latinos in the United States predominately self-identify as "Hispanic" and/or "Latino" *in addition to* their national origin, but they do *not* self-identify as "American." Undergoing a process of "racialized assimilation," Latinos are not viewed by other U.S. citizens as "unhyphenated Americans" but as, specifically, "Latino and Latina Americans" (Flores-Gonzalez 1999; Golash-Boza 2006).<sup>5</sup> Despite increasing identification with Anglo-American culture, Mexican Americans do not lose their identity as a distinctive ethnic group as did many Euro-American immigrants by the second or third generation (Alba and Nee 2003; Buriel 1987:152). Sustained inter-ethnic boundaries are due in part to continuing immigrant flows from Mexico—or "immigrant replenishment"—which heightens the salience of race in the minds of immigrants and native-born alike (Jiménez 2008; Jiménez 2010). Thus, Herbert Gans' (1979) notion of "symbolic ethnicity"—the proposition that as acculturation takes place ethnic involvement will revolve around the use of ethnic symbols—does not necessarily apply to Latinos, which he acknowledged (Gans 1996:453, 457). Similarly, Mary Waters' (1990) finding that white ethnics experience an ethnicity that is voluntary or "optional" and essentially meaningless in the way it structures their lives, except for ways in which they choose to engage it, does not extend to Latinos. Indeed, scholarship on Mexican Americans argues that this particular ethnic identity is not voluntary but externally imposed (Ochoa 2004).

Race, class, and gender are manifested differently, depending on their configuration (Anderson and Collins 2007). Congruous with Collins' notion of "controlling images" are the norms of "hard" masculinity and "soft" femininity (Carter 2007). "Hardness," or males' "coats of armor" against economic and social oppression, is seen as aggressive and threatening. Alternatively, females' "softness" is seen as "compliant and nurturing" (Carter 2007:192). Latina women, as opposed to men, are perceived as less threatening and more capable of adopting mainstream cultural norms (Carter 2007:194). Further, "controlling images," or racialized and gendered cultural representations disseminated via various media, powerfully affect the beliefs of those who lack knowledge of the group represented (Ferguson 2000; Rivadeneyra 2006).

Like gender, phenotype significantly contributes to various life outcomes. Phenotype, in particular skin color, acts as a sorting mechanism: lighter skinned people are advantaged over darker skinned people in schooling, household income, and occupational prestige (Espino and Franz 2002; Murguía and Telles 1996; Telles and Murguía 1988). In work that examines skin color stratification among Mexican

American and African American women, Hunter (2002) argues that skin color stratifies these minority women, with light skin predicting higher education and income for both groups. If "skin color modifies outcomes and produces advantages for the light skinned" (Hunter 2002:190) along these outcome measures, the question remains regarding how gender and skin color mediate life experiences in the realms of ethnic identity and racialization. My research intervenes at this juncture, examining how race and gender intersect in the lives of third-generation Mexican American monoracial and multiracial men and women.

Regarding the focus on the third generation, the literature largely assumes that third-generation Mexican Americans are sufficiently assimilated so as to not merit direct scrutiny. However, my previous research suggested that later-generation Mexican American identity is fraught with questions of belonging (Vasquez 2005; Vasquez and Wetzel 2009). I argued that Latinos find ethnic validation in college courses that focus on Latino-authored literature (Vasquez 2005) and that Mexican Americans leverage ethnic traditions and moral discourses to forge an esteemed collective identity (Vasquez and Wetzel 2009). This article extends and elaborates that work by bringing a racial and gender lens to third-generation Mexican Americans in order to investigate the diversity of experiences and identities. It also systematically analyzes gender and multiracial/monoracial status (whether one is a descendent of one or two Latino parent(s)). This article advances understanding of how gender and race intersect in the lives of a U.S.-born minority group that is legally indistinguishable from the native-born non-Hispanic white citizenry. Third-generation Mexican Americans have heterogeneous existences, with axes of gender, multiracial/monoracial status, and phenotype dividing how this generation experiences racialization, access to opportunities, and freedom of self-definition.

My work also advances previous scholarship by focusing on a later-generation Latino ethnic group population and demonstrating how race and gender interact to limit the "optional" or "symbolic" nature of ethnicity. Gender influences the ways in which Mexican American men and women are racialized. Men and women are subject to different "controlling images," which circumscribe their liberty concerning interpretations of their "presentation of self" (Goffman 1973). The case of Mexican Americans qualifies Gans' (1979) and Waters' (1990) work by demonstrating that racialization limits the voluntary nature of race/ethnicity for those who are perceived and treated as nonwhite.<sup>6</sup> With one in forty people identifying as multiracial and two-fifths of Latinos out-marrying (mostly with whites) (Lee and Bean 2004:228), the distinction between monoracial and multiracial Mexican American respondents is a valuable comparison.<sup>7</sup> This comparison reveals that monoracials who are dark-skinned are more racialized, whereas lighter-skinned multiracial are granted more latitude or "flexibility" in their racial/ethnic identity choices and enactments.

## METHODOLOGY

This article is based on interviews with twenty-nine third-generation Mexican Americans.<sup>8</sup> For this study I conducted interviews in one large metropolitan area in Northern California and another large urban region in Southern California. I

located my research in California because it is the state with the largest Hispanic population and the highest numbers of in-migration from Mexico. According to U.S. Census Bureau estimates about the California population in 2007, 36.2 percent were of Hispanic origin, compared to the national average of 15.1 percent. With a total population of 36.5 million people, California's 13.2 million Hispanic residents (the majority of whom are Mexican-origin) is the largest absolute number of Hispanics of any state (U.S. Census Bureau. n.d.). I employed a theoretical sampling strategy, such that theoretical considerations for locating respondents guided the construction of my sampling frame and the selection of research participants. I continued with snowball sampling, asking respondents for referrals. I worked through Hispanic Chambers of Commerce, Catholic Churches, and high schools in order to make contact with families that fit my racial, ethnic, and generational profile.

Thirteen women and sixteen men comprised my interview sample. Seven individuals were multiracial and twenty-two were monoracial,<sup>9</sup> multiraciality in my sample meaning that a respondent has at least one non-Hispanic European-descent parent.<sup>10</sup> While the tendency in my sample was for multiracials to be phenotypically ambiguous and/or bear similarity to whiteness, I do not intend to conflate multiraciality with light skin and European-like physical features or monoraciality with dark skin and indigenous somatic characteristics. Where appropriate, I refer to skin tone, and thereby acknowledge the range of skin colors that both multiracials and monoracials can possess. I always use pseudonyms with reference to my interviewees to protect their anonymity. Pseudonyms are assigned to correspond with interviewees' Hispanic or non-Hispanic first and last names.

The age range of respondents is from seventeen to forty-five years old, with twenty-eight as the median age.<sup>11</sup> The vast majority of respondents were at least college-educated or, if high school students, were on an educational track to college. Among the non-full-time students, virtually all held white-collar jobs, such as an architect, teacher, college counselor, police officer, and sales associate. By measures of individual or household income, educational level, and occupation, all respondents were middle-class<sup>12</sup> and structurally integrated into U.S. society.

The interviews were semi-structured, conducted in English, and typically lasted for two hours. I first asked respondents to complete a brief biographical data form and then inquired about their family history and life experiences relating to their Mexican American background. I asked how respondents experienced their social identity in various settings, attending to three distinct levels of social life: (1) the institutional (family, school, religious organizations, government agencies, workplaces), (2) the social or interactional (face-to-face or other micro-level exchanges that occur in daily life), and (3) social-psychological (cognitive and emotional processes that constitute one's subjectivity or "psychic reality") (Chodorow 1999). I tape-recorded and transcribed all interviews. I wrote field notes after each interview, attempting to capture personal affect that gets lost in written transcripts. I recorded a physical description of each respondent. I used an inductive, grounded theory approach to analyzing the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Lofland and Lofland 1995; Strauss 1987). I utilized ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software program that allows researchers to code sections of interview material based on keywords and themes. Working with the data inductively, I analyzed the verbatim

transcripts and coded emergent themes represented in my respondents' accounts. Coding categories were not mutually exclusive; hence, any passage could be coded as more than one theme. To ensure measurement validity, I asked several differently worded questions targeting the same topic, and then assessed the agreement or disagreement among respondents' answers. I coded all of the interview material myself, eliminating the concern of inter-coder reliability.<sup>13</sup> During the analysis and writing phases, I cross-checked thematic codes with respondents' gender and multi- or monoracial status, building my arguments from the coded interview data.

In the spirit of qualitative methodology, the aim of my research design was to access depth and nuance regarding respondents' perspectives on how their race and gender intersect in their everyday lives. Drawing on insights of feminist standpoint theory, which "rejects . . . the 'god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere' in favour of situated knowledge(s)" (Sudbury 1998:26), this work investigates the complexity of Mexican American men's and women's lives. While generalizability is a concern for qualitative studies with small sample sizes, within the sample there were systematic differences between men and women and monoracial and multiracial people that I explore in this article. Since this sample is not nationally representative, I do not attempt to generalize to the larger population, although the findings presented here should be a launching pad for future studies.

## RESULTS: RACIALIZATION AND "FLEXIBLE ETHNICITY"

Third-generation Mexican Americans experience a *racialization process continuum* that runs the gamut from racialization, an outsider-imposed racial identity, to "flexible ethnicity," an identity that effectively crosses and engages both Mexican and American social circles and communities. In both racialization and "flexible ethnicity," there can be a mismatch between asserted and ascribed identity, limited by enforcement of racial boundaries. In what follows, I present a section on racialization, succeeded by a section on "flexible ethnicity." Both data sections are organized identically: I present the experiences of men and women who are monoracial, and then I turn to an analysis of multiracial men and women.

### Racialization: Forced and Enforced Racial Identity

"All ethnicities are not equal, all are not symbolic, costless, and voluntary" (Waters 1990:160). Indeed, the "symbolic ethnicity" or "ethnic option" that white ethnics enjoy—they may practice elements of their ethnicity with no detrimental effects—is not available to members of all groups. Racialization prohibits racial minorities, marked as nonwhite and thereby devalued, from having a symbolic or optional race/ethnicity. Racialization refers to the expectation that "differences in skin color, or other racially coded characteristics, explain social differences. . . . Temperament, sexuality, intelligence, athletic ability, aesthetic preferences, and so on are presumed to be fixed and discernable from the palpable mark of race" (Omi and Winant 1994:60). Racializing and gendering processes intersect such that Mexican American women are considered exotic and provisionally acceptable, whereas Mexican American men are perceived as low-status violent criminals.

Ongoing immigration from Mexico creates a particular social context for later-generation Mexican Americans in California to negotiate. At times, Mexican Americans sympathize and bond with Mexican immigrants, and at other times, they distinguish and separate themselves from the newcomers "... (Gutiérrez 1995; Ochoa 2004; Jiménez 2010). A motivation for maintaining social distance from the new arrivals is the threat that stereotypes against immigrants will adversely affect Mexican Americans born in the United States (Liebersohn 1980; Macias 2006:8). Mexican immigration, coupled with the inability of mainstream society to notice differences between immigrants and natives, complicates the situation of Mexican Americans. In many respects, as Mexican immigrants are racialized, so too are Mexican Americans.

In a context of sustained Mexican immigration where "dark skin becomes a frequently invoked indicator of foreignness" (Jiménez 2008:1548–9), natives assume that people of Mexican descent are foreign *and* unauthorized. This often-erroneous assumption provokes nativist fears of the "browning" or "Latin Americanization" of the United States and engraves inter-ethnic boundaries, often drawn and guarded via discrimination. A gendered stereotype—or "controlling image"—that ensnared dark-skinned monoracial men most often was that of the potentially violent Latino male.

Rick Torres: I think when people look at me they see my scars and the moustache . . . a lot of times people get the impression that I'm a gangster or a *cholo*. That really bothers me because that is just totally what I'm not about.

Moises Ramos: This lady saw me [in a bar with friends] and she said out loud, "oh, he's mean looking." I was thrown by it. For some reason I just smiled and she was like, "oh my god, he has a dimple." We started talking and she asked what I did and I told her [a high school career counselor]. "Oh my God, I never would have guessed." I was like, "obviously you shouldn't judge a book by its cover." She had this image of us—Mexicans—[as] bald and mean and involved in gangs.

These men's identities were misconstrued due to judgments based on their physical appearance. Asserting a self-identity contrary to preconceived notions requires emotional labor and mental energy. Navigating this racialized and gendered borderland that is replete with stereotype landmines remains part of everyday life of U.S.-born Mexican Americans.

Racialization can occur even if one's race is incorrectly perceived. "Multiple passing," where an individual "can easily pass and blend in and out of their cultures and ethnicities, as well as others not associated with their background" (Guevarra 2003:84), can lead to "cross discrimination" (Feagin 1991:111), when a minority may suffer from discrimination aimed at a *different* minority group. This happened to Tom Acevedo, a slim monoracial teenager who has dark skin, black hair, and dark brown eyes, and is sometimes mistaken for an Arab. The worst instance occurred several months after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks when Tom was thirteen years old and was stopped by a police officer as he was walking home from school:

Tom: I got stopped because I was carrying a suitcase with my trumpet in it. I kinda looked like I was Arab—the cop said so. He pulled me over . . . and questioned me. . . . And this is after September 11<sup>th</sup>, too, so they got a little more suspicious about that.



JMV: What did you think was going on there?

Tom: I believe he thought I had a bomb in my hands. [Laughs] But I told him "nah." I opened up the suitcase . . . and I showed him the trumpet. . . . He's like, "OK, I see." I told him, "I'm not a terrorist or anything, sir, so don't take me for that."

JMV: How did you respond to that internally?

Tom: That kind of freaked me out, because you know, most of my friends they do kind of look Arab but they are actually Mexican. It just freaked me out. He might think I actually have a gun and he might not trust [me]. He might take me to jail. . . . *I didn't want to get arrested for being Mexican.* [Laughs] [my emphasis]

Tom believed that police mistook him for an Arab during a time of heightened efforts post-September 11 to rein in terrorist activity. As a Mexican American who felt he was mistakenly identified as an Arab, Tom was subject to the racialized and gendered "controlling image" of dark-skinned, dark-haired young males as being threats to the country, either as immigrants, terrorists, gang-bangers, or undesirables.

In contrast to Mexican American monoracial men, Mexican American monoracial women were included by mainstream institutions until their Mexican heritage was discovered. At this point, they were excluded, experiencing withdrawal of access to resources, support, or jobs. Phenotype, surname, and "cultural toolkit" (Swidler 1986) (such as language, dress, and cultural knowledge) are markers of difference that people use to target others for discrimination.<sup>14</sup> It is easy to see the process of racialization at work in situations when a Mexican American initially "passes" as non-Hispanic white and is later "outed" as Mexican American. The change in how people are defined racially often leads to a corresponding change in treatment—loss of jobs, withholding of support or friendships, or withdrawing of resources.

The blonde, light-skinned sister of a woman I gave the pseudonym "Veronica Guzman" was mentored by the high school Vice Principal until she was "discovered" to be Mexican American. Veronica and her similarly brown-haired, dark-skinned brother had markedly different relationships with their high school Vice Principal than did their more Anglo-looking sister:

My sister, she's light skinned, she looks American, but she's a Mexican American. The Vice Principal thought she was white. They [the administration] didn't know that my brother and sister and I were related [despite sharing the same surname]. They would send information for her in English and for my brother they would send it in Spanish. She's blonde and according to them she's a *guera* [white woman] and he's *mexicano*, Mexican. The vice principal treated her differently [better] because she was a blonde, she was a *guera*. When they found out she was Hispanic, she was a Mexican, it wasn't the same anymore.

Veronica concluded that the high school Vice Principal withdrew his protective support of "*la guera*" sibling when her Mexican background was revealed. Enacting "gendered racism" (Sudbury 1998) by ceasing his outreach and mentorship, the Vice Principal imposed an expectation of Mexican female school failure and simultaneously increased the odds of the expectation becoming realized.

Caitlyn Benavidas similarly experienced racialization when she was "found out" to be Mexican American. While Caitlyn often "passes" as non-Hispanic white

or Persian, she becomes vulnerable to racialization at the moment when others realize they have misread her racial identity:

I've had some . . . really uncomfortable situations with people thinking that I was not Mexican. . . . I was hired as a waitress by a Middle Eastern family and they hired me thinking I was Greek or Persian. I started speaking Spanish to the busboys once and they were like, "Why the hell are you speaking Spanish? You can't be Mexican." And basically went off on me about how they probably wouldn't have hired me if they had known I was [Mexican].

The process of racialization occurs here as Caitlyn's Middle Eastern boss made assumptions about her character, competence, and desirability in the workplace based on his incorrect reading of her race/ethnicity. Upon being corrected, Caitlyn is verbally castigated and informed she would have been excluded from employment if her race/ethnicity had been correctly identified.

In contrast to their monoracial peers who routinely experience overt racialization, multiracial Mexican American men are racialized to the extent they are perceived as non-European-descent white. Despite the ability of some to "pass" as non-Hispanic white, the "controlling images" for multiracial men are the same as for their monoracial counterparts: villains and gangsters. These "controlling images" are unevenly applied to the multiracial Mexican American male population; physical appearance and surname are primary markers of a subordinate racial status. Two of the four multiracial Mexican American men interviewed claim that they have never suffered discrimination, both men crediting not looking stereotypically "Mexican" as being a shield (one man also has a non-Hispanic-sounding surname).

Pierre-Mecatl Ramirez, a master's-degree-holding twenty-nine-year-old Mexican American and French multiracial man with a two-adult household income of approximately \$100,000, serves as a prime example of how "'authentic' black and . . . brown identity is imagined as lower-class, urban, often violent . . . and male" (Bettie 2003:48). Pierre-Mecatl, whose pseudonym mirrors his French and indigenous heritage, explains how he feels he was profiled according to a racialized and gendered "controlling image" of a threatening, potentially violent criminal by a police officer when he was a teenager:

I went to a little park downtown. . . . This cop comes up to me, just out of the blue, harassing me, asking me these questions about this piece of graffiti next to me that I hadn't even seen. . . . When I was a teenager, I affiliated with the Gothic subculture, so I was dressed in a velvet blazer and a bowler and this guy's talking to me about this graffiti. "Well this is Mexican graffiti." . . . I caught that he was basically saying, "This is Mexican gang graffiti and your last name is Ramirez." Because [he] had my ID. He gave me back my license and told me to get the fuck out of there.

Despite performing a Gothic identity, Pierre-Mecatl was perceived as Mexican-origin, which made him vulnerable to racialization processes and "controlling images" cast upon Mexican-origin men. Regardless of his multiracial status or any illegal wrongdoing, the white police officer stripped Pierre-Mecatl of his liberty to

enjoy a city park—he was ordered to leave—and imposed a racialized and gendered status that does not correspond to how he elects to perform his mixed race identity. This illustrates that later-generation Mexican Americans—particularly men with dark physical characteristics and Hispanic surnames—experience a racial/ethnic identity that is not “optional” or “symbolic” but instead imposed and imbued with deleterious meanings.

Like multiracial men, multiracial women undergo racialization when they are perceived as non-European descent white. Racialization can involve the assumption that Mexican Americans possess superior and specific cultural and Spanish language knowledge. This pervasive assumption of ethnic cultural and language knowledge obscures the diversity within the Mexican-origin community and reifies a particular version of Mexican ethnicity as authentic. Jillian Rosenberg, whose fictional name reflects her Jewish heritage, experiences a “magnified moment” of racialization when she reveals her Mexican heritage to her college counselor. Jillian’s mother is Mexican American and her father is Jewish; she has light skin and brown hair and is presumed to be non-Hispanic white. In a situation with significant long-term ramifications, a college career counselor told Jillian that the program she was interested in was for minorities only. When she told him that indeed she is Mexican American, he retorted that she would have to “prove” that she is a “real Mexican” on the application. Jillian recounts the conversation:

In college . . . I went to speak with a pre-med advisor about my plans and mapping out my courses. He’s known for being a really big jerk. . . . I asked the counselor about a minority program I heard about. “Oh, that’s just for minorities.”

I said, “Oh, actually I am Mexican.”

“Oh, well, if you want to take advantage of that, on applications—I don’t want to sound un-P.C. [politically correct] here or anything—you are really going to have to prove that you are a real Mexican.”

I was like, “Excuse me?”

“Well, I mean, are you part of any cultural organizations here?”

“No, don’t really agree with a lot of their purposes so I chose not to join them.”

“Well, have you gone to cultural events or organized Latino heritage month?”

“No, like I said, I don’t really agree with their purposes.”

“Well, do you speak Spanish fluently?”

“Actually, it was my first language, but I lost it.”

“Well, are you taking any Spanish classes at least?”

“No, it doesn’t fit into my schedule.”

“Well, you are really going to have to do something here to prove that you are a real Mexican.”

The college counselor’s effort to racialize Jillian is notable: he challenges her authenticity (expressing skepticism about whether she is “really” Mexican), commands her to fit a preconceived and static notion of Mexican American identity, and tries to limit her access to programs for minority students. According to Jillian’s account, the counselor uses cultural knowledge, linguistic competency, and political inclination as his barometer of her authenticity.

Racialization in schools can involve withholding administrator support and information, as seen above, or can entail embarrassing students in the classroom by wrongfully assuming they possess superior knowledge of Spanish. In her Spanish class, Amalia Ruiz, of Mexican and Italian descent, felt she was presumed to be conversant in the language:

I'm not [fluent in Spanish]. In high school . . . I got really pissed off because a teacher asked me a question in . . . second-year Spanish. I just barely passed first-year Spanish. And I didn't know the answer. And in front of the whole class he said, "You know, just because you speak Spanish at home doesn't mean that you don't have to study for this class." What?! I felt so angry and humiliated. First of all, I didn't know Spanish so I don't speak it at home! He assumed that I did. And he scolded me in front of the whole class. . . . He thought I was just . . . a lazy Mexican, basically.

The "controlling image" operative here is that of the "lazy Mexican" who is not inclined toward education. Frustrating for Amalia and other striving students, teachers racialize students as they expect both negative stereotypes and linguistic abilities to inhere in racial group members.

A "controlling image" with which Mexican American multiracial women in my sample were confronted is the gendered stereotype of being exotic, erotic, and sexual. Even if not explicit, "there is a sexual message imbedded in ethnic stereotypes and categories" (Nagel 2003:255). Renata Contreras, a mixed race half non-Hispanic white and half Mexican American woman, feels stereotyped by both Caucasian and Mexican-origin men. She described white men's gendered stereotype of Latinas as sexually attractive or promiscuous:

[From] the Caucasian perspective, being half-Latina is pretty sexy. [She] is more fiery and willing to do things. The perception of "Oh, spicy Latina!" . . . I wonder if that has to do with the stereotype of the servile woman who is willing to do anything. I think that's what the Caucasian guys think about Latin women. . . . Maybe they've seen lots of Latin women with lots of babies so they think they are promiscuous. . . . Or what they see in movies about the way Latinas are played as the seductress. . . .

She contrasts this with the reception she often receives from Mexican men: "From Mexican guys' perspective, I think they just see me as, 'Oh, you look like a *gringa* [white girl].' That's attractive too because you are different from our women, like *gringa* is somehow better . . . like it's classier or something." Renata refers to how the lure of marrying into an equal or more prestigious social group has influenced Mexican men's reactions to her. Renata's gendered borderland is impacted by stereotypes from the two racial/ethnic groups to which she belongs. On the one hand, white men see Renata as appealing because she is "spicy" and "willing," and on the other hand, Mexican men see her as a desirable marital partner due to her "classier" non-Hispanic white heritage.

Like Renata, Jillian Rosenberg, introduced earlier, is multiracial. Despite often "passing" as non-Hispanic white, since racialization and "flexible ethnicity" are not mutually exclusive categories, she is subjected to racialized and gendered stereotypes. Growing up in a Southern California town in her youth, Jillian was

ashamed of her Mexican heritage because she felt it carried negative, lower class connotations. It was “dirty” and something from which to actively estrange herself: “I had really awful stereotypes of what Mexican people were like too, like all Mexican people are gardeners and maids. . . . It was always . . . the half of me that I had to hide. . . . I was soiled in some way because I had Mexican blood in me.” In contrast, her peers at Yale University, who were enthusiastically looking for some “uniqueness” to mark them as “not just white,” exoticized her. In her new social context, Jillian experienced an “identity crisis” about the different attributions of meaning to her Mexican origins:

Now, going to Yale, it's a total reversal. I'm having a completely new identity crisis. Because suddenly it's cool to be Mexican, it's exotic, and “I'm of a different race, I'm not just a white kid” [her voice gets breathless and sexualized]. It's a really diverse campus and people definitely put a lot of emphasis on diversity. It's just so funny. Now all the white kids are like, “Oh my god, I wish I were half of something like you are, at least, to make me exotic.” I'm like, I never thought of being Mexican as exotic. I always thought it was gross and dirty and lame and not exotic. “Oh, your eyes are so Mexican, they are so exotic and pretty.” . . . All of growing up I was trying hard to be white and I was too Mexican. . . .

Reiterating a stereotype of Mexican female promiscuity whose origins date to the colonization of the American southwest by Europeans (Gómez 2007), here we see how “race, class, and gender (including sexuality) are experienced simultaneously” (Zavella 1994:199). When Jillian moved to Yale she was racially exoticized, leading to her crisis about the different meanings that Mexican ethnicity can possess. While ostensibly a compliment, this sexualization became another way to “other” her, a way to create social divisions and build dichotomous boundaries of you-me, self-other, normal-abnormal, normal-other.

“Complimentary othering” is a form of racialization or racial alienation that transcends male/female and monoracial/multiracial divides. “Complimentary othering” occurs when people consider select Mexican Americans as exceptions to the racist assumptions of underachievement, intelligence, success, and beauty. This backhanded compliment does not consider the *variance* within any group of people. The implicit suggestion of “complimentary othering” is that the person being complimented does not serve as a positive example of the group but rather needs to be distinguished from the group in order to explain his or her “exceptionalism.” “Othering” occurs here despite the individual-level compliment in that the complimented individual is ultimately demeaned on the group level.

Jillian provides an example of how “complimentary othering” works: “I do think that people, when they find out that I'm Mexican, [think] that I'm an exception to the rule. . . . I definitely feel like I get written off as, ‘Oh well, she's not like most Mexicans.’ . . . I get written off as an exception.” College-bound Lance Morelos had a similar experience in high school: “I even had one teacher say to me, ‘I don't really consider you a Mexican. You don't seem like them.’ Because the Mexicans they knew . . . wear hair back in nets, the little pants, the white tee-shirts, the *cholos*. They didn't see me as Mexican because I didn't look like a *cholo*.” Essentialism precludes people from thinking beyond categories (gender, race/ethnicity, skin

color) that are wrongfully assumed to be monolithic. “Complimentary othering” exempts the person of interest from this essentialism, but only at the expense of devaluing the person’s group.

“Complimentary othering” is based on “ethnic lumping” (Ochoa 2004), wherein people fail to differentiate between newcomer Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans who were born and raised in the United States. In “ethnic lumping,” “Mexican-origin” equates to “Mexican immigrant.” This conflation obscures the acculturation, upward mobility, and structural integration of later-generation Mexican Americans. “Complimentary othering” maintains the status quo of racial hierarchies and allows the majority group an alternative to rethinking and then revising its negative, blanket assumptions about a minority group. “Complimentary othering” avoids confronting ruptured stereotypes and making revisions that could destabilize the extant racial hierarchy and gender order.

Third-generation Mexican American men are racialized as low-status violent law-breakers, and Mexican American women are racialized as exotic. Men reported more instances of racialization than did women: ten of sixteen male respondents (eight of whom were monoracial) reported racialization, whereas seven of thirteen women cited racialization (six of whom were monoracial). While racialization is prevalent in the lives of Mexican American men and women, men issued more complaints. The types of racialization undergone are notable and gendered: four of five respondents who mentioned unprovoked encounters with law enforcement officers were men. Monoracial men and women are consigned to “controlling images” more readily and consistently than their multiracial counterparts. Mixed race Mexican Americans are not exempt from these racialization processes, however, for the aforementioned negative stereotypes ensnare them to the extent they are identified as Mexican-origin.

### **“Flexible Ethnicity”: The Privilege and Predicament of Being “White-xican” and Living in Two Worlds**

Many third-generation Mexican Americans live “between” Mexican and American social worlds. Racial liminality is due in part to the physical appearance of Mexican Americans, particularly those of “mixed race” who are offspring of non-Hispanic white and Mexican American partnerships. Multiracial (and to varying degrees, monoracial) Mexican Americans tend to have pale skin and less stereotypically indigenous features that allows them to be perceived and treated as non-Hispanic white at times. For some, the ambiguity of racial liminality leads to crises, while for others it leads to opportunities. These processes are dynamic, based on social context, and are reshaped over the lifespan. As Harris and Sim (2002:615) found, “racial classifications can differ not only among nations and historical periods, but also in the day-to-day lives of individuals. . . . [E]ach individual can be seen as having multiple context-specific racial identities.”

Many third-generation Mexican Americans display what I call a “flexible ethnicity”—the ability to navigate two different social worlds, that is, mainstream U.S. culture and a Mexican-oriented community. Their U.S. citizenship and their possession of “cultural toolkits” (Swidler 1986) and skill sets marks the third

generation as American, allowing many to play out flexibly their racial background, magnifying or minimizing aspects of their heritage. The volitional aspect of "flexible ethnicity," however, is limited by how others perceive, treat, and racially mark third-generation individuals. Mexican Americans have a variety of experiences along the *racialization process continuum*, with racialization as nonwhite and "flexible ethnicity," which involves whitening, at the poles.

"Flexible ethnicity" was a modal experience for both men and women. Twenty-three of all twenty-nine respondents (79 percent) reported experiencing elasticity of their racial/ethnic heritage. Women reported "flexible ethnicity" at a slightly higher frequency than men: eleven of thirteen women (85 percent) reported experiencing "flexible ethnicity," whereas reflecting their more stringent racialization, four of sixteen men (25 percent) reported exclusion from "flexible ethnicity." Given my small sample size, I cannot claim a direct relationship between monoracial or multiracial identity and "flexible ethnicity," although evidence suggests that lighter-skinned people (be they mono- or multiracial) were most often allowed "flexible ethnicity." To the extent that light skin is a cue for access, six interviewees (five monoracials and one multiracial) claimed never to have experienced "flexible ethnicity."

A man I assigned the pseudonym "Auscencio Dos Santos," a monoracial child of two Chicano activist parents, finds "flexible ethnicity" an advantage as well as a source of identity struggles. He tells a story about living in a borderland where he is both Mexican *and* American. Auscencio is a heavy-set twenty-eight-year-old man with light skin and short dark hair. He has deep brown eyes, a short goatee, and wore a modern shirt reminiscent of a *guayabera* with intricate threadwork embroidery. In describing himself, Auscencio said he is "as much hamburger as taco," thus portraying himself as living in the middle of a cultural borderland. Auscencio, who goes by Ceño among friends and family, reviews his bicultural, borderland status:

I think it's clear that I'm probably more Americanized than I think I would like to admit. I've got my Internet. . . . My whole lifestyle is pretty American. But I do feel, at times . . . when I read history books or I see the horrible things that this country has done, I'm like, "Oh, man, I'm so glad I'm not 100 percent American." I don't feel I fit in anywhere. I'm right in between—and it's okay. Especially here in California. I think my attitude would be very different in somewhere like Nebraska. Or Montana. Your environment dictates who you are, and almost how you act. . . . It depends where I am too, because when I was living in El Paso, Texas . . . I felt much more Mexicano there than I did American. Because I was "Ceño" and my friends were Julio and Oscar. I would go to the store and the woman would swipe my card and say, "Thank you, Mr. Dos Santos" [correct Spanish pronunciation]. I'd be like, "Yeah!" . . . There is something to be said for being completely accepted and understood.

This rich passage touches on a number of important themes. First, Auscencio begins by reluctantly "admitting" his acculturated status, suggesting that gaining in "Americanization" may result in a deficit in his Mexican cultural moorings. This hesitance challenges the assumption of traditional assimilation literature that immigrants' families aspire to assimilation and that integration is an unquestioned

desirable outcome. Second, Auscencio envisions his attachment to Mexico as a way to distance himself from the imperialist history of the United States. Third, he notes the importance of California as his social context where he is amongst many others who share his in-between status. Finally, he describes the “situational ethnicity” (Okamura 1981) he felt when residing in a border town in Texas with a large Mexican population where his Mexican identity was both endorsed and reinforced. Yet even while Auscencio has a “flexible ethnicity,” as a monoracial man he encounters racializing limits. He feels connected *to Mexico* in Texas rather than a part of the social fabric of the United States. To use classic assimilation terms, Auscencio is “structurally assimilated” (education and occupation), “linguistically assimilated” (language), but not “identificationally assimilated” (identification) (Gordon 1964). In essence, Auscencio is “in” mainstream culture yet he is not “of” mainstream culture. Note that Auscencio distinguishes between being “an American” and being a “white American.” Auscencio resists the “fusion of race and nationality” (Oboler 1997:32) that suggests that the American “imagined community” (Anderson 1991) exists exclusively of non-Hispanic white Americans.

Reflecting the process of “racialized assimilation” (Flores-Gonzalez 1999; Golash-Boza 2006; Golash-Boza and Darity 2008), monoracial men were more inclined than any other category to affiliate themselves with Mexico. “Flexible ethnicity” can be an uncomfortable social space. Dillon Castillo, a tall, slim, lanky monoracial seventeen-year-old with dark hair and light skin, wards off the discomfort of “flexible ethnicity” by making efforts to *racialize himself*: “I’m usually perceived white. So I hear all the jokes. That’s not an advantage.” As a coping mechanism, Dillon wears his heritage around him, displaying a Mexican *zarape* (blanket) on the seat of his low-rider car and *la Virgen de Guadalupe* (patron saint of Mexico) on his window. Here, attempts to racialize one’s self are attempts to disarm racist comments that are regularly aired when individuals are assumed to be non-Mexican American.

Women did not explicitly mention attempting to racialize themselves. A common female response is expressed by monoracial Samantha Diaz, who exists in a liminal racial space, neither “Mexican Mexican” nor “American.” Samantha has medium-brown skin and long, straight, black hair: “I see myself as Mexican, but a little more whitewashed. I’m part of the generation that is a little lost. Some people consider me not Mexican enough but I’m not American enough. So I’m really stuck in the middle.” Samantha considers how she can morph into different social contexts because of her “flexible ethnicity” and her biculturalism: “When I’m around my Mexican friends, I’m Mexican. When I’m around people at work [Anglo dominant law office], I’m less Mexican. Honestly, I slip into it when it’s convenient. When I have to fit whoever I am around my personality changes.” Samantha is more outgoing among Mexican-origin peers and more restrained among non-Hispanic whites. While Samantha can call on her “plurality of selves” (Rodriguez 2000:xi–xii) to “fit” a number of different social situations, the voluntary nature of personality or cultural shifts should not be overstated because, depending on the situation, her flexibility can be limited by racialization. For example, one day when Samantha left her high school, she found a racist epithet spray-painted on her car because she was perceived as racially “other.”



Alternatively, demonstrating the significance of skin color and physical features, Carmina Dos Santos, who is monoracial with light hair, light skin, and green eyes, tells me about the privilege of "passing" for non-Hispanic white:

It's an advantage. I have the privilege of blend[ing] in. . . . I think there are certain privileges to looking not stereotypically Mexican. Things I take for granted like not being followed in a store, not being labeled as somebody who doesn't have money. . . . The other thing is that . . . because I am so light I see things and I hear things that other people say just assuming that I'm on their side.

Carmina claims she does not experience public discrimination or the presumption that she is lower class because she does not look "stereotypically Mexican." She is accorded white privilege due to her pale features, yet this white "insider" status is a double-edged sword as it lets her in on conversations people have when they assume they are in all white company.

Multiracial men find "flexible ethnicity" to be both uncomfortable and advantageous. All multiracial men interviewed found they were "an insider to jokes about Mexicans," and they would confront the speaker if s/he "mattered" to him. Andrew Rosenberg noted that being both Mexican and Jewish in racially tracked high school classes was distinctly disturbing, asking rhetorically, "There was always a divide between the white kids and Mexicans—what was I supposed to do?" Feeling conflicted about his nebulous position in a racially stratified high school, he commented, "It's scary because you don't know where you fit in." Yet despite these emotional challenges, Andrew delights in belonging to two cultures: "It's kind of fun, though, because you get a little bit of both. So even though it's been hard it . . . it's cool." Being in "two worlds at the same time" allows for some benefits such as "helping him to understand other people."<sup>15</sup> Andrew lives at the crossroads of borderland, American, and Mexican cultures—his flexibility providing insight into race relations by allowing him to "see two completely different cultures, but seeing them get along, at least in the context of his family."

Multiracial men were reflective about their experience of ethnic flexibility, but they did not express the same heightened self-consciousness about emphasizing or de-emphasizing their racial/ethnic identity as did the females. Multiracial women made calculated decisions about the identity they wished to project. Renata Contreras, easily perceived as non-Hispanic white because of her blonde hair and pale skin inherited from her Caucasian mother, makes thoughtful decisions about her racial claims depending on her social context:

If it's the Junior League or something like that I . . . probably would put white and ignore the Hispanic part. Because I just feel like the people there would judge me, "Oh, a Hispanic, how nice, what diversity" [sticky sweet and sing-song voice]. In high school I played tennis a lot and we'd go to the tennis club in Montecito [high-class neighborhood], I wouldn't highlight the Mexican part. . . . I don't need that kind of judgment. In those situations, I'd probably just put white. Then white-slash-Mexican American probably for job applications or [if] I feel like people really would have an open mind or encourage diversity.

Because of her light, European-looking physical characteristics, Renata reports "passing" as non-Hispanic white. Unlike monoracial Samantha Diaz discussed above, Renata did not report instances of racial discrimination because she possesses a skin color advantage which is apt to yield advantages (Espino and Franz 2002; Hunter 2002; Murguia and Telles 1996; Telles and Murguia 1988). Aware of her freedom, Renata weighs the positive and negative consequences of claiming one or both parts of her half white and half Mexican American background.

Most respondents who experienced "flexible ethnicity" were women and/or multiracials (or light-skinned monoracials), though they too were subject to racialization. Recall that while "flexible ethnicity" was a common experience, two women and four men claimed not to experience the phenomenon. Mexican American women experienced more "flexible ethnicity" and less racialization than men. Mexican American women, viewed as "soft" (Carter 2007), desirable, docile, and sexual, are seen as less threatening, and therefore more acceptable than Mexican American men who are viewed as violent, aggressive, and threatening. While men attempted to racialize themselves and affiliate with Mexico, reflecting racialized assimilation, women did not vociferously claim connection to Mexico. This suggests a gender division regarding a feeling of comfort, inclusion, and acceptance in mainstream America. In answer to a question on respondents' relationship to what they consider "mainstream American society," all respondents except one man said they felt a part of mainstream culture. Exemplifying their racialized, borderland status, nine men and three women qualified this affirmation by asserting their bicultural status. Of those who asserted their bicultural status, ten were monoracial and two were multiracial Mexican Americans. Those who were granted flexibility circulated in the U.S. mainstream, suggesting that the dominant racial group is more tolerant of women than men and multiracials than monoracials.

## CONCLUSION

Since "each group speaks from its own standpoint and shares its own partial, situated knowledge" (Collins 1991:236), we learn about racialized and gendered borderlands by examining the narratives of third-generation Mexican Americans. This study on how third-generation Mexican Americans experience the *racialization process continuum* qualifies the large-scale applicability of "symbolic" or "optional" ethnicity, concepts developed to explain the experience of white ethnics (Gans 1979; Waters 1990). Using assimilation language, among middle-class third-generation Mexican Americans, we observe structural and cultural assimilation without seeing evidence for "attitude receptional assimilation" and "behavior receptional assimilation" (absence of prejudice and discrimination, respectively) (Gordon 1964:71). Receptional barriers to integration suggest that those members of the third-generation who self-identify or are identified as Mexican American do not experience an "optional" or "symbolic" ethnicity (Gans 1979; Waters 1990) but instead are undergoing "racialized assimilation" (Flores-Gonzalez 1999; Golash-Boza 2006; Golash-Boza and Darity 2008).

These third-generation Mexican Americans who are middle-class and structurally integrated into U.S. occupations, institutions, and mainstream culture live at an identity and cultural "crossroads" (Anzaldúa 1987:195). Being both Mexican and American, yet not entirely either one, the image of a nimble and pluralistic "mestiza consciousness" (Anzaldúa 1987) holds true for some third-generation Mexican Americans. Respondents who are either part European-descent or have lighter skin and hair colors have "flexible ethnicity," traversing multiple racial terrains with dexterity. Some found this "two world" perspective to be an advantage of being bicultural, in part because their experiences of cultures meeting on equal ground in their homes and families facilitated an openness and comprehension of other cultures (Guevarra 2003:82). Others, however, were beset with identity crises or a "struggle of borders" (Anzaldúa 1987:100) that were neither positive nor voluntary. While "flexible ethnicity" affords individuals room to negotiate a variety of racial identities, this is not entirely an agent-centered process or state of being. "Flexible ethnicity" posits that a variety of ethnic scripts or presentations of self are available to actors, but that the array of options is constrained by racialization.

Limits to "flexible ethnicity," or racial liminality, include phenotype and surname that people interpret as signifiers of nonwhite or Latino status. Thus, racialization delimits and defines the racial/ethnic identity possibilities of later-generation Mexican Americans. As Telles and Ortiz (2008:234) found in their longitudinal study of Mexican Americans, "darker persons were less likely to identify as white, more likely to be perceived as Mexican, and more likely to experience stereotyping and discrimination." Personal identification choices can hit a wall of racialization; "Mexican ethnicity is in large part determined by things much greater than our personal volition" (Macias 2006:xiii).

I found no significant differences in Mexican Americans' experiences on the racialization process continuum between my Northern and Southern California field sites. Current literature informs us that residential assimilation among the Mexican-origin population is slowly occurring and that social distance from non-Hispanic whites decreases with generations-since-immigration (Telles and Ortiz 2008).<sup>16</sup> In accordance with these survey findings, my respondents lived in middle-class, racially heterogeneous or white-dominant neighborhoods due to intergenerational spatial integration. The only notable variation between my Northern and Southern California field sites was the greater endorsement and use of the term "Chicano" in Southern California. This is due to more Chicano Movement activity in Southern California; a number of third-generation Mexican Americans born in Southern California reported a parent's involvement in or sympathy with the Chicano Movement's "pro-brown" ideology. This positive understanding of the term "Chicano" led more third-generation Mexican Americans in Southern California to adopt it as a self-referential label. Despite this distinction, men's and women's experiences with racialization and flexible ethnicity were comparable between the two field sites.

Gender is operative in the lives of third-generation Mexican Americans: it interconnects with race and produces racialized and gendered "controlling images" through which Mexican Americans are interpreted. Race and gender interact to

permit easier entrance to the U.S. mainstream for Mexican American women than men, with structurally integrated third-generation Mexican American females outperforming their male counterparts in various realms (Waters and Eschbach 1995). Women are seen as more desirable to incorporate than their men counterparts. As Carter (2007:192) found, "soft/hard and feminine/masculine dichotomies continue to reproduce boundaries between [females] and [males]" that maintain different gendered outcomes. While both Mexican American men and women have experiences of racialization and "flexible ethnicity," women were more often able to effectively enact "flexible ethnicity" than men. The "controlling images" of Mexican American women ("spicy Latinas," exotic, promiscuous) are "softer" than the "harder," "controlling images" of Mexican American men (violent gangsters, villains). While both sets of racialized and gendered stereotypes are problematic, the "controlling images" for women are seen as less threatening to mainstream society, making women more "desirable" (double-entendre intended) to accept than men. In this way, we see women encountering less resistance to incorporation than men. The integration options for men are more strongly impeded due to the imposition of "hard" racialized and gendered stereotypes. "Hard" masculinity, as reproduced and enforced by male-oriented "controlling images," is antithetical to tenets of upward mobility (Carter 2007:191). Racialized and gendered stereotypes therefore create obstacles for Mexican American male acculturation and assimilation. While we see male resistance to these images, it is the persistence of "controlling images" and the public attention they receive that buttress this incorporation barrier.

I found that society racializes monoracial Mexican Americans more frequently and intensely than multiracial Mexican Americans. The social categories of race and gender intersect here, suggesting that multiracial women lie at the acceptable end of the "flexible ethnicity"-racialization spectrum and monoracial men lie at the marginalized and excluded end.<sup>17</sup> The racialization process continuum offers myriad possibilities for how people experience their racial/ethnic background in any given context. Multiracials are afforded "flexible ethnicity" more easily than monoracials for numerous reasons. The association between whiteness and respectability (Carter 2007:191) and the probability of multiracials being phenotypically ambiguous (DaCosta 2007:128) or bearing similarity to whites grant multiracials more lenience in how they are racially coded. Furthermore, in terms of structural integration, phenotype correlates with both income and educational levels (Murguía and Telles 1996; Telles and Murguía 1988). More readily permitted to escape racialization (though also subject to it), mainstream society is more willing to embrace light-skinned than dark-skinned Mexican Americans. This finding supports the conclusion that skin color is imperative to being deemed an "honorary white" (Bonilla-Silva 2004) within the Latino group, even among the middle-class. On the "hierarchy of relatedness," that is, a "continuum defined by poles of proximity and distance" that are "refined along multiple axes of differentiation" (DaCosta 2007:145), gender and race interact such that women and multiracial Mexican Americans are seen as relatively similar, and therefore less threatening, to mainstream society than men and monoracial

Mexican Americans. Of course, there are many degrees between wholesale acceptance or exclusion and this is where most third-generation Mexican Americans found themselves.

This research shows that micro-level interpersonal interactions reveal larger institutional frameworks that structure the lives of third-generation Mexican Americans. The fact that my male and monoracial respondents were more racialized and not granted elasticity beyond their imposed racialized identity unmasks both gender and racial hierarchies operative in the United States. As Mexican Americans perceive and react to various racialized and gendered stereotypes that aim to cement low-status positions, these social interactions unveil contemporary discourses about race, gender, and inequality.

The findings presented here offer new opportunities for future research. The concept of "flexible ethnicity" can be further refined through comparative research studies that involve other racial/ethnic groups. The imposed limits of "flexible ethnicity" suggested here—skin color, phenotype, surname—can be further investigated. Given the small number of multiracials in my sample, a fruitful line of research would be to do a systematic comparison between multiracial and monoracial Latinos. Despite the small sample size, a strength of qualitative work is the ability to explore complexity and meaning, an approach ideally suited for investigating the multidimensionality of later-generation Mexican American ethnic identity. Researchers are welcome to build upon the findings presented here. For example, the novel concept of "complimentary othering" can be examined as to how it functions as an apparatus of gendered racism. Inquiries about the role socioeconomic status plays in the gendering and racializing process of Mexican Americans is another important avenue of research. My sample was middle-class; a natural extension of this work would be to conduct research on other class strata or conduct a study using a class comparison. Finally, since being recognized as an American "requires *desire* on the part of the individual/group and *acceptance* on the part of the mainstream" (Oboler 1997:39, emphasis added), continuing scholarship that uses a generational analysis to investigate race and gender intersections will facilitate the assessment of both the *process* and *progress* of social change.

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## APPENDIX

## Respondent Demographic Information (Pseudonyms)

<i>Name</i>	<i>Multi- or Mono-Racial<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Household Income</i>
Tom Acevedo	Monoracial	17	M	High school	\$120,000–\$150,000
Hector Avila	Monoracial	23	M	Some college	\$90,000–\$120,000
Caitlyn Benavidas	Monoracial	24	F	College	\$90,000–\$120,000
Dillon Castillo	Monoracial	17	M	High school	\$150,000–\$200,000
	(Nicaraguan and Puerto Rican)				
Renata Contreras	Multiracial (Caucasian)	25	F	College	Not reported
Samantha Diaz	Monoracial	25	F	College	\$90,000–\$120,000
Auscencio Dos Santos	Monoracial	28	M	College	Under \$25,000/student
Carmina Dos Santos	Monoracial	30	F	Master's	\$45,000–\$60,000
Marisol Fuentes	Monoracial	21	F	Some college	Not reported
Veronica Guzman	Monoracial	19	F	High school	\$45,000–\$65,000
Michael Jimenez	Monoracial	38	M	College	\$120,000–\$150,000
Antonio Lopez	Monoracial	35	M	GED	Not reported
Reyna Madrigal	Monoracial	35	F	College	\$65,000–\$90,000
Manny Medina	Monoracial	17	M	High school	\$65,000–\$90,000
Tyler Mendoza	Monoracial	41	M	Master's	Not reported
Lance Morelos	Monoracial	45	M	College	\$90,000–\$120,000
Gabriel Ponce	Multiracial (Italian)	36	M	College	\$120,000–\$150,000
Pierre-Mecatl Ramirez	Multiracial (French)	29	M	Master's	\$90,000–\$120,000
Moises Ramos	Monoracial	28	M	Master's	\$45,000–\$65,000
Jillian Rosenberg	Multiracial (Caucasian; Jewish)	20	F	Some college	\$120,000–\$150,000
Andrew Rosenberg	Multiracial (Caucasian; Jewish)	17	M	Jr. high or less	\$120,000–\$150,000
Amalia Ruiz	Multiracial (Italian)	34	F	College	\$400,000 or above
Rex Schultz	Multiracial (Italian)	32	M	College	Not reported
Davina Segura	Monoracial (Puerto Rican)	22	F	College	\$400,000 or above
Cristina Talavera	Monoracial	30	F	College	\$45,000–\$65,000
Ricardo Torres	Monoracial	21	M	Some college	Under \$25,000/student
Araceli Treviño	Monoracial	28	F	Some college	\$45,000–\$65,000
Erica Vargas	Monoracial	31	F	Some college	\$45,000–\$65,000
Daniel Zagada	Monoracial	28	M	Doctoral degree	Under \$25,000/student

<sup>a</sup>All interviewees have at least one second-generation Mexican American parent. This column notes whether an individual has one or two Mexican-origin parents. I record the race/ethnicity of the non-Mexican-origin parent in parentheses.

## NOTES

1. Anzaldúa (1987:3) describes U.S.-Mexican border as "*una herida abierta* [an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. . . . [T]he lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture."
2. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo signed in 1848 signaled the end the U.S.-Mexican War. The United States annexed one-third of the territory of Mexico (all or part of present-day California, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico) and Mexican citizens.
3. I consider Latinos to be a racial/ethnic category that includes the Mexican-origin ethnic group.
4. According to this definition, all Mexican-descent people qualify as being "mixed race," regardless of whether one or both parents are Mexican.
5. Filipino Americans have also been found to feel like "foreigners within" and equate "American" with "white" (Espiritu 2003:159).
6. In defining "whiteness," I defer to legal scholar Cheryl Harris (1993), who argues that whiteness is a type of "status property." Whiteness has been a form of property protected under American law and is used in systems of domination (see also Haney-López 1996). In short, whiteness is the basis of racialized privilege that carries public and private societal benefits (Harris 1993).
7. California, where this study was conducted, is the state with the highest levels of multi-racial reporting and the only state with a multiracial population exceeding 1 million (4.7 percent of the population; 1 in every 21 California residents) (Lee and Bean 2004:236)
8. See Appendix for a list of respondents (using pseudonyms) and demographic characteristics. This respondent pool is from a larger qualitative project examining the experiences of Mexican American families in California across three generations (Mexican immigrants and the following two U.S.-born generations).
9. I use the term *racial* in reference to Latinos tentatively because the literature is divided as to whether Latinos should be considered a race or an ethnic group.
10. Latinos are historically a mixed-origin group, but for the purposes of this article, I classify the offspring of two Latino parents as monoracial.
11. While the age ranges are wide, this is not a significant limitation since my project focuses on generation in the United States rather than age or birth cohort. It is inescapable that demographic issues such as age, period, and cohort all intersect in generations. I do not intend to conflate these terms. Given that I am specifically concerned with generation-since-immigration, I restrict my argument to this dimension. For literature on identity development through the life course, see Phinney (2008).
12. I defined middle-class through a number of different factors, including (1) if household income met or exceeded \$57,000. (This is the average of all median household incomes for all eleven counties of California in which interviews were conducted. These data come from the 2004 American Community Survey [U.S. Census Bureau 2004].) My household income question was fixed-choice, one option of which was \$45,000–\$60,000. I included the respondents who selected this option in the middle-class category. (2) If respondent possessed a college degree or above or (3) if respondent held a managerial or professional occupation. If an individual possessed any of these qualities, I considered him/her middle-class. While there are few dependent teenagers in my sample, they were all college-bound high school students or college students. While these youth did not yet hold middle-class occupations, they had family financial resources at their disposal. As Feagin and Sikes (1994) note, middle-class blacks can wield their financial

- resources to combat discrimination, such as by taking legal action. Middle-class parents can harness their financial resources in defense of themselves and their children.
13. To aid future replications of this study, the interview schedule is available upon request.
  14. Assuming Mexican Americans universally possess a particular cultural toolkit is problematic in that it perpetuates a static notion of race and culture (Barrera 1991).
  15. Being a minority within Anglo-dominant institutions allows for an incisive vision into systems of power (Collins 1986).
  16. There is regional variation to this finding: in Los Angeles, California, residential segregation remains unchanged (or worsened) between 1965 and 2000, the reason being continuous Latino immigration (Telles and Ortiz 2008).
  17. While there is slippage in these crude categories, monoracial women and multiracial men typically were in between the two poles of the spectrum.

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