



[Hill on Adams, 'Murder and Intrigue on the Mexican Border: Governor Colquitt, President Wilson, and the Vergara Affair' and Crandall, 'These People Have Always Been a Republic: Indigenous Electorate in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands, 1598-1912' and Herná ...](#)

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John A. Adams. *Murder and Intrigue on the Mexican Border: Governor Colquitt, President Wilson, and the Vergara Affair.* College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2018. xiv + 211 pp. \$40.00

(cloth), [ISBN 978-1-62349-584-8](#).  **Maurice Crandall.** *These People Have Always Been a Republic: Indigenous Electorate in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands, 1598-1912.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. 384 pp. \$32.50 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4696-5266-5. **Sonia Hernández, John Morán González, eds.** *Reverberations of Racial Violence: Critical Reflections on the History of the Border.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021. 328 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), [ISBN](#)

[978-1-4773-2268-0](#). 

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Borderlands history was largely birthed by historians studying the area straddling the US-Mexico border. While borderlands concepts and methodologies have since been applied to regions around the globe, in North America borderlands histories still tend to focus on the American Southwest and Mexican North. As these three books demonstrate, the region has a treasure trove of history yet to be unearthed, examined, interpreted, and presented to audiences. As these three books also demonstrate, however, the quality of much of that research inevitably will be of varying quality.

These People Have Always Been a Republic, by Maurice Crandall, examines how the Pueblos, Hopis, Yaquis, and Tohono O'odhams used their traditional systems of tribal and intertribal governance to navigate interactions with Spanish, Mexican, and US officials in the three centuries after European contact. Crandall argues that "during all three colonial periods Indians absorbed and adapted colonially imposed forms of electoral politics and exercised political sovereignty based on localized political, economic, and social needs" (p. 4). Over time, the absorbed and adapted methods became so well engrained into the four Indigenous societies Crandall examines that they became Indigenous.

Crandall's approach reminds readers that democracy is not an American invention; it existed in times and places well outside of the scope of the United States. Further, by focusing on Indigenous groups that have lived on the same lands since before European contact, Crandall's analysis serves to decenter the importance of the nation-state in favor of an approach that centers around the nation.[1] "Through all these changes," writes Crandall, "the element that remained constant was *the desire by*

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the Pueblos, Hopis, Yaquis, and Tohono O'odhams to protect their rights as sovereign Native Nations. It remains so today" (p. 289; emphasis in the original)

In *Murder and Intrigue on the Mexican Border*, John A. Adams, Jr., explores the 1914 murder of Clemente Vergara, a Mexican American rancher from southern Texas, by supporters of Mexican president Victoriano Huerta. In particular, Adams attempts to place Vergara's murder in a broader international context, examining not just how the abduction and killing of a US citizen by Mexican citizens affected relations between the two countries, but how it also affected US relations with European countries.

Adams seeks to demonstrate how the failure of the Wilson administration to adequately respond to the killing of more than five hundred Americans by Mexican soldiers and revolutionaries between 1911 and 1920 eventually led to an exaggerated international response by the United States that included sending American military forces to Veracruz in 1914 and northern Mexico in 1916. In fact, not only was Wilson's response to violence along the border too long tepid and naïve, argues Adams, but Wilson's refusal to clearly support one faction over the other during the years of the Mexican Revolution exacerbated violence in the border region and put the lives and property of American citizens and corporations in greater jeopardy. The murder of Vergara served as a catalyst for American action not because Wilson believed action was needed, but rather because Texas governor Oscar B. Colquitt threatened to deploy the Texas Rangers in response to the rash of murders in the border area.

Adams writes that the Vergara murder "exploded into an international incident" but fails to show an explosion (p. 1). Yes, the incident garnered some attention, but Wilson hesitated to act in any meaningful way and no other international power responded in decisive fashion. In fact, Adams later writes, "With the outbreak of war in Europe the 'Mexican problem,' as it was referred to in Washington, took second place in the attention of Americans and the president" (p. 137) While valuable in adding context to the tumultuous relations between the United States and Mexico in the early twentieth century, the Vergara affair seems to be a historical footnote.

Reverberations of Racial Violence is a collection of essays edited by Sonia Hernández and John Morán González that takes the 1919 investigation led by Texas Representative José Tomás (J. T.) Canales into allegations of violence leveled against the Texas Rangers between 1910 and 1920 as its jumping-off point. Part of a larger public history project that included an exhibit at the Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin and efforts to create public memorials throughout Texas, Hernández and González claim that "in contrast to Texas and U.S. historiographies that overly emphasize consensual nation-building, this volume highlights the constitutive place of state and state-sanctioned racial violence in the making of the modern United States" (p. 2).

The authors of *Reverberations of Racial Violence* examine much of the same time period as Adams. Unlike Adams, the volume's authors pay almost no attention to the social and political conflict ravaging Mexico at the time, and choose instead to focus almost completely on the racial prejudice of the Texas Rangers, despite early acknowledgements that economic factors, such as mining and agrobusiness corporations, had unsettled Mexico and its citizens. Concerns about violence and crime raised by early nineteenth-century white Texans are shunted aside in favor of explanations based solely upon the racism of the Texas Rangers.

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On the other hand, Adams fails to examine how the Texas Rangers terrorized and murdered hundreds, perhaps thousands, of innocent Mexican Americans during these same years. The failures of these volumes—for one the failure to recognize concerns beyond race and for the other the failure to acknowledge the violent acts of the Texas Rangers—raise interesting questions historians perhaps need to spend more time contemplating. Neither book is completely right; neither is completely wrong. This recognition is not an argument in favor of a postmodern, there-is-no-truth-only-power reading, but rather a pondering: Does the current focus on identity detract from studies of historical periods in which people conceived of and valued identities differently than we do? Additionally, we might wonder if the relative ease of access to many sources—made possible by digitization and rapid travel—is in fact overwhelming, resulting in histories that dive deep but fail to cut wide. Or does our training and conditioning to produce argument-based history create an all-or-nothing environment in which scholars feel the need to overemphasize the importance of their argument at the expense of other scholars' arguments?

Present-day access to archives, facilitated by digitization, and calls for multilingual, multicultural, transnational, comparative histories—viewed as a minimum for a work to be considered high quality—have no doubt deepened our understanding of the past and broadened our horizons when considering future projects. This is good! But one cannot help but wonder if we have perhaps entered into Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, where access to too much information deadens the human desire to seek for or engage with the truth. Are historians truly asking big questions anymore? Or has the cultural turn cranked out scholars concerned more with winning arguments and exploring the minutiae of answers to questions to which we already broadly know the answers? Did Texas Rangers kill unnumbered Mexican Americans in the south Texas borderlands? Of course. Scholars like Andy Graybill and James A. Sandos have well documented Ranger atrocities and depredations. Other than providing a space for nonhistorians to express how they learned about and have responded to the knowledge that the Texas Rangers are not the sanitized heroes of mid-twentieth-century Westerns, what has *Reverberations of Racial Violence* really added to the discussion?

Similarly, US intervention in Mexico during the 1910s is also well documented. Certainly the Vergara murder served as one incident among many that eventually led to Woodrow Wilson ordering US troops to intervene in the affairs of Mexico. But it was not a match in a tinderbox. It was part of an escalation that eventually boiled over. But without better putting the Vergara affair in the context of the time, what has *Murder and Intrigue on the Mexican Border* really added to the discussion for nonspecialists?

All that being said, when read together, and especially with James A. Sandos's *Rebellion in the Borderland: Anarchism and the Plan of San Diego, 1904-1923* (1992), these two books provide their reader with a very good understanding of the violence, chaos, and fear that engulfed much of the US-Mexico borderlands in the early twentieth century. That fear was felt by all: Euro-American, Mexican, Mexican American, African American, and Native American. Whether the fears people felt seem justified to us nearly a century later is irrelevant; that fear was real and invasive in the moment.

And perhaps that is the most important reminder to take away from these works: no one book or project is perfect and tells the entire story. Someone's voice is always missing. This is why historians must read broadly and deeply, analyzing works according to what the author sets out to accomplish, not what the reader would like to see accomplished. Questions left unanswered are not necessarily

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ignored or unimportant; often times they simply could not be answered at that time by that scholar for any number of reasons. Unanswered questions do not mean a work is necessarily inferior. All works are merely part of a longer, ongoing, and unceasing conversation.

For as good as *These People Have Always Been a Republic* is, it too is not the final word, but only a part (an admittedly important part) of a longer conversation, stretching from Eugene Bolton to David Weber to Ned Blackhawk to Pekka Hämäläinen and on to young historians in training and those yet to begin their training.

It is incumbent upon us, the current gatekeepers (for better and for worse), to encourage those to come to bravely enter into important discussions and advance discussions further than we might hope to ever do on our own.

Note

[1]. Perhaps the most well-known exploration of the nation is Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 2006). More useful, however, are Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983); and Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

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