THE MARYVILLE SYMPOSIUM:
Conversations on Faith & the Liberal Arts

Frontiers, Borders and Citizens:
Membership in American Society

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There are few issues in American society more volatile than those about people in our midst who have come to this country illegally, or, as some would prefer the less pejorative term, undocumented. But by whatever term, our nation has long had a double consciousness about migrants and who belongs here. Right from the beginning of the nation the two sides were represented. President Washington said “let all liberty-loving people come here.” However, in the second Administration, that of John Adams, there was the other side, apparently saying “Oh, we didn’t mean you.” The Alien Law was passed in 1798, raising the term of residence necessary to become a citizen from five years to fourteen.

This oscillation between open and closed attitudes came out in full force when large numbers of Catholics from Ireland began to arrive after the Famine in the 1840s. Indeed, the early generations in this college, Protestant Irishmen as they were, joined in coining a novel ethnic-identity name – the Scotch Irish – in order to distinguish themselves from “those” Irish. This double-mindedness in the nation continued for the next hundred years, when the United States received more immigrants than any other nation. But at the same time it worked hard at restricting the flow of immigrants from supposedly unacceptable places like Asia and Southern Europe.

Yet, for us to say our current divide is not new does not make less compelling the questions of our own time. We here at Maryville College thought it the right thing to direct the concerns
of this year’s Symposium to such topics. As we say on our web page, quoting the late, great scholar, Ernest Boyer, “the academy must become a vigorous partner in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic and moral problems.” And, we hold this Symposium to offer opportunities for discussion in a respectful manner on these issues about which we may not agree.

Over these next days we will have two book ends, so to speak, of broad-ranging papers. First, Dr. Will Katerberg will show how the American narrative looks when put it in global focus, and last, Dr. Paul Spickard will show how patterns of meaning about who belongs here tend to shift over time. In between, in the second and third sessions, we will have two case studies, about events and life on the border with Mexico, tonight California (Dr. Barbara Wells’ revisionist paper) and tomorrow Texas, screening the video El Inmigrante. Finally, Dr. Bill Trollinger will assess where we’ve been and where we might go on all this.

So, why does a small liberal arts college bother to host a scholarly conference like this, under the heading of “Conversations on Faith and the Liberal Arts?” and then to disseminate The Proceedings widely in the Southeast? The short answer is this: it springs from the twin pillars of Maryville College’s identity, that is, a liberal arts consciousness formed in a church-related context.

Maryville College and this Symposium take a determinedly moderate approach in this. We are not unaware of the tensions and contradictions that this conjunction – faith and the liberal arts – might leave us with. But we embrace the tensions involved, and acknowledge that the seeming paradoxes are hard to resolve. There are many other colleges in North America already committed to this moderate approach – what has been called a third way. It was President Gibson’s hope, and now President Bogart’s hope, that we might catch up with those who have been leading the discussion, and join that on-going discourse of the third-way scholars. We hope that our Maryville Symposium might play a modest part in that discussion.
Globalizing American Creation Stories
William Katerberg
Calvin College

Introduction

We are a nation of immigrants, Americans often say, built by people leaving their Old World homes for freedom and opportunity here, in the New World. American Christians often have harked back to the Puritans, calling their nation a promised land, God’s “New Israel,” and attributing to the United States a special role in the Almighty’s providential plan. Whether more secular or religious in the telling, our mythic-history is a story of new lands, new people, new history. But what if you’re Native American?

Native Americans have found it difficult to find their place in the U.S. creation story, especially Christianized tellings of it. Robert Allen Warrior, a member of the Osage Nation, explains: “The obvious characters in the story for Native Americans to identify with [in the Bible] are the Canaanites, the people already living in the Promised Land.” Stories of promised lands of freedom overlook “the Canaanite side of the story,” the people for whom this land has been home from time immemorial. “Especially ignored are those parts of the story that describe Yahweh’s command to mercilessly annihilate the indigenous population.”

It’s a rare Fourth of July parade, no doubt, that delights in the plagues, massacres, wars, betrayals, and apartheid-like reservation system that all but destroyed Native Americans and their ways of life. But even if we seldom dwell on it, the destruction of “our” Canaanites is essential to the familiar
American creation story. How must this story look to those on the wrong side of it?

And what does the American creation story say to people in other parts of the world, in its insistence that the U.S. and its founding, expansion and mission are the pivot point of human history? In this story, the U.S. is an exemplar, a city on a hill, a shining light for the world to emulate. All along, though, claims of the nation’s providential mission justified the conquest of North America. In the late nineteenth century, the twentieth, and now our own, this tale likewise has justified overseas empire, American-led globalization, and military bases and adventures, to spread the gospel of “the American way of life” around the world.²

The advent of America the superpower—in the past 20 years, the sole superpower—has only heated up claims of America’s “singular greatness” and destiny. In the 2012 election cycle, more than ever, President Obama and Mitt Romney have had to affirm “American exceptionalism,” the idea that the U.S. and its history are singular and beyond compare. Obama has gotten in trouble merely for suggesting that other nations believe in their own exceptionalism too. Whether dutifully, or with guileless fervor, Obama said in May at the Air Force Academy that the U.S. “has been, and will always be, the one indispensable nation in world affairs. It’s one of the many examples of why America is exceptional.” Obama may be the first sitting president to use the phrase, but the ideas behind it have been common for over 200 years.³

Creation stories are never just stories. They shape how people understand themselves and act. They carry moral weight. This afternoon I want to explore the U.S. creation story from perspectives people at its borderlands and beyond. How does “our” story of a new people and new land look from the viewpoint of people already living here—Natives, Mexicans? How does U.S. history compare to nations like Canada, Argentina, Brazil, South Africa, Australia—new lands with their own frontiers. And with these perspectives in mind, what might a globalized American creation story look like? How might it change who “we” think we are?
Creation Stories

Creation stories are a mythic form of history. By “mythic” I don’t mean bad history or bad science as opposed to factually accurate. I mean a sacred story that tells a people where they come from, where they are going, why they matter, the source of their problems and the world’s problems, and the solutions to these problems. Such a story can be told poetically. It can be wildly inaccurate from a factual, evidence-based point of view. And it can be based on facts and evidence. The issue is less about factual accuracy and more what the story does, how it shapes a people’s sense of who they are as a community. Mythic. Such a story helps people feel connected to the past, it belonging to them, and they belonging to it.4

“We declared independence in 1776,” my American students say in my world history classes when we get to the great era of revolutions. The worldlier also say something about how the American Revolution inspired other revolutions in the years and centuries ahead. None of this “we” business strikes them as odd. Most of them descend from peasants living in Europe in the late 1700s, an ocean away. Those with ancestors living in the British colonies in the 1770s weren’t even a twinkle in their ancestor’s eyes. And yet, “We declared independence.”

Benedict Anderson calls this kind of identification an “imagined community.” A nation, he explains in his book on nationalism, is “imagined” in that people feel a kinship, a shared identity, community, with millions, hundreds of millions, of people they’ll never meet, both living and dead. This kind of community is “imagined,” but still very real, in that it is based not on face-to-face, intimate, local community, but on common cultural experiences, in growing up watching the same TV shows, movies, and sports, reading the same books in school, hearing similar things in church, visiting the same kind of museums and national parks, and the like.5

In helping to shape nations as imagined communities, creation stories don’t just unite, they also exclude. “We” are American, not Canadian. “They” rejected the revolution. Anglo-
Canadians agree. “We remained loyal to Britain,” Canadians say. “They rebelled.” Creation stories also often marginalize or exclude internal minorities, for religious or racial reasons: Native peoples, African American slaves, the wrong kind of immigrants, and Mormons among others. And creation stories often include women and men in different ways. In short, mythic-histories put people in their “proper” place within the nation or place them outside of it.⁶

Finally, by way of background conceptual issues, we should note the relationship between ideology, on the one hand, and creation stories (mythic-history, heritage) on the other. By ideology I mean ideas and values that we can define abstractly: liberty, equality, rights, virtue, self-interest, and so on. Creation stories convey these things poetically and in stories. In religious texts, it’s the difference between stories about Jesus, or the parables of Jesus, on the one hand, and the theological writings of the apostle Paul, on the other hand; stories vs. philosophy, theory, and theology. Stories move us more subtly, even unconsciously, and emotionally; ideology is more cognitive and intellectual.⁷ We argue about both, of course.

**American Creation Stories**

The American creation story emphasizes our nation’s uniqueness in world history. The Great Seal of the United States, designed in 1782, proclaims "Novus ordo seclorum," a new order of the ages. The founding of the U.S. was a return to Eden, the Great Seal suggests, starting history afresh in a New World without the inequities and burdens of the Old World—the weight of traditions, the accumulated power that forced people into social classes, ranked by status (as aristocrats, peasants, or free-born city dwellers)—all things that prevented people from being individuals in charge of their own fate.⁸ That they inherited their revolutionary ideals from the Old World—“no taxation without representation” being a British ideal—did not give them much pause in asserting this narrative of starting over. Nor did the European roots of the idea that the Americas were a New World, a place to establish utopias, as in Thomas More’s novel, strike them as ironic. The experience of severing ties from Britain and starting a new republic, doing so with the world watching, and
with revolutions in France, Haiti, Mexico, and South America in the years that followed, confirmed their belief, their mythic sense, of starting history over again, not just for the new American republic, but for the world as a whole.⁹

As Americans began to look back on the Revolution, in the 1810s and 1820s, with the founding generation dying and memories of the Revolution turning to heritage and history—John Adams and Thomas Jefferson both dying on July Fourth, 1826, fifty years after the Declaration of Independence—biographers, historians, politicians, and pundits began telling the story of a Providential starting over of history in the U.S., a story eventually captured in the phrase Manifest Destiny.¹⁰ The story of Manifest Destiny is so familiar to us as to be a cliché, albeit an unusually powerful and enduring one. But it is worth retelling here briefly.

The phrase “manifest destiny” goes back to 1845, when a New York editorialist and Democratic Party tub thumper named John O’Sullivan coined it as part of a campaign to annex Texas and Oregon. “[The] fulfillment of our manifest destiny,” he said that summer, is “to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.” In December he added, “that claim is by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government entrusted to us.”¹¹ The idea was depicted most famously in American art by John Gast, in a painting called “American Progress” (1872), which has an angelic woman representing the nation and liberty. She pulls a telegraph wire and leads pioneers and a railroad across the continent from Atlantic to Pacific, pushing frightened Indians and buffalo out of the way as she goes.

This idea goes back to the Revolutionary era and to interpretations of the New England Puritans. The Pilgrims and Puritans both, the story goes, sought religious liberty and made a covenant with God. The language they used echoed that of God’s covenant with his “chosen people” in the Hebrew Scriptures. If Israel, and in the seventeenth century God’s “New
Israel” in New England, followed the Almighty’s ways in the Promised Land, God would bless them. If they departed from God’s ways, the Almighty would punish them. During the Revolution this covenant took on a political component, one sometimes expressed in secular fashion, with America being chosen by History to have a special destiny, but more often mixing in God’s Providential hand. Thomas Paine said it well in 1876, “We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birthday of a new world is at hand.”

A French aristocrat, Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur, in turn, envisioned Americans as “new men,” a “new race,” who would one day change the world. By the early 1800s these ideas were common enough to be used to promote political policies, express a sense of national purpose, and justify the conquest of Mexican and Native American homelands. As slavery became more and more an issue in the 1800s, dividing North and South, manifest destiny could be used to critique slavery as a sin that threatened the nation’s mission of Christian civilization and liberty. It also could be used to emphasize the need for national unity—as John Quincy Adams did in 1811, in a letter to his father John Adams. Revolutions abroad, in France in 1789 and in other parts of Europe and Latin America in the first half of the nineteenth century, gave the U.S. story a global significance.

But herein lays a contradiction in the mythology of manifest destiny. It says that the U.S. a new nation and Americans a new race, a development so unparalleled as to be a new order of the ages. But how could the U.S. be such a departure from the course of history, and the rest of the world, and at the same time be the leading edge, the exemplar, of human progress more generally around the world?

Historians refer to this notion—that the U.S. and its history are so unique as to be unparalleled and beyond compare—as “American exceptionalism.” Alexis de Tocqueville first described the U.S. as “exceptional” in his famous book *Democracy in America*, meaning it in both complementary and critical ways. The phrase itself, “American exceptionalism,” seems to have communist roots. Joseph Stalin used it in 1929 to criticize American socialists who claimed that their nation’s
history meant that the normal course of human social evolution from a failing capitalism toward communism would not take place in the U.S. American communists repeated the phrase in 1930, arguing that the Great Depression exposed “American exceptionalism” as false. Scholars began using the phrase during the Cold War era, as the idea of American exceptionalism became a question explored by historians, economists, and political scientists. American politicians only began to use it in the 1980s and 1990s, Obama seeming to be the first president to use it while in office.14

This brings us to the frontier, and, indirectly, to borderlands. What makes America exceptional? What is the source of the unique opportunities and freedom to be found in the U.S.? One answer, of course, is the Almighty’s providential blessing. A more specific answer is the land itself, whether given by God to His chosen people, or given to them by History (in more secular tellings of the story). The land makes America’s unique mission, its “manifest destiny,” possible. This idea goes back to late 1700s, at least, as in the writings of Crevecoeur. Novelists like James Fenimore Cooper, in The Last of the Mohicans and the rest of his Leatherstocking tales, and authors of penny fiction who turned Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, Kit Carson, and Buffalo Bill Cody into legends, contributed too. Artists played a powerful role. So too did professional historians at universities—none more so than Frederick Jackson Turner, from the University of Wisconsin and later Harvard, who explained his “frontier thesis” in countless speeches to civic groups.15

Every generation of Americans, from colonial times to 1890s, Turner explained, had the opportunity to start a new life. For adventure, land, or to escape the law or debt, they left behind comforts of civilization for an often harsh, strange environment. “The wilderness masters the colonist,” Turner said. “It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch bark canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in a hunting shirt and the moccasin.”16 At first, then, the frontier changes the pioneers. But with their axes and plows, they transform the wilderness, turning it into farms, and then towns, cities and a new society. A generation later, new pioneers headed out to the
next frontier, further West, to do it again. This cycle of returning to primitive conditions, being transformed by the frontier, and then building a new society out of the “wilderness,” had for 200 years defined the U.S. and made its people less and less European and more and more American. They learned to be practical, give up Old World ways, and find new ways to do things. The American character thus owed it “striking characteristics” to the frontier, Turner said: its “coarseness and strength,” a “practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients,” a “restless, nervous energy”; its “individualism, working for good and for evil,” and the “buoyancy and exuberance” that “come with freedom.” These were the “traits” that the frontier “called out” in America. The frontier thus was the engine that made Americans a new people and made U.S. history fundamentally different from that of the Old World.

For example, people have cited the frontier to explain why, allegedly, there have been little class conflict and little attraction to socialism in the U.S., and why the U.S. did not develop a labor party or socialized health care. The idea is that the frontier provided a safety value, a place of escape to which discontented workers could flee and find new opportunities, unlike in the Old World—France, China, or Russia—which had no frontiers and so descended into violent “class war,” leading either to socialist parties or communist revolutions. Discontented American workers could always abandon New York or Chicago and, like Huck Finn, light out the frontier. No need for socialism when true freedom was only a journey west to the frontier away.

Comparisons

What happens when we put this mythic American history in comparative perspective? Does it still yield a story of exceptionalism? Or is the U.S. not so incomparable? A good place to start with this question is with the most American of mythic figures—the cowboy.

What could be more American than the cowboy? He is a symbol of naturally noble manhood and freedom on the “open” range, a knight-like figure, if you embrace the depiction of
writers from Teddy Roosevelt and Owen Wister, artists like Frederic Remington, and film stars John Wayne. When American presidents pursue diplomacy by taking action first, guns blazing if necessary, rather than endless talking, as Europeans are want to do, according to U.S. myth, it’s called . . . “cowboy diplomacy.” And we have had cowboy presidents, from Teddy Roosevelt to Ronald Reagan and George Bush—all of whom rode horses, cleared brush, and talked tough and straight, as a way of shaping their images in the White House.

But the cowboy belongs not to the U.S. so much as to the Americas in general, from the gauchos of Argentina, the llaneros of Venezuela, the vaquero of Mexico, to the cowboys of Alberta and Saskatchewan in the Canadian West. Unlike children’s games of “cowboys and Indians” and countless films and TV shows, actual cowboys seldom fought Indians or played a role in the U.S. politics. But they were a key force in Venezuela’s independence movement. The history of cowboys in Latin America is much older than that in the U.S. Indeed, much of the clothing, equipment, and techniques we associate with U.S. cowboys were imported into Texas and the West from Mexico and Mexican-American vaqueros.19

Something similar could be said about frontier farm families and their “little houses on the prairies.” The struggles and triumphs of the Ingalls family on the Great Plains had their counterparts on the prairies of Western Canada, with its own homesteading tradition, the Pampas of Argentina, the steppes of Russia, and the grasslands of South Africa and Australia: similar landscapes, struggles with nature, and fortunes to be made or lost in national and global markets for wheat. And in all, even in autocratic Czarist Russia, one of the lures of frontier was hope of economic opportunity and relative freedom from government and society.20

As in the U.S, the experiences of farmers—and miners, fur traders (mountain men), cattle herders, and more—spawned national mythologies. The gaucho and llanero are important in the national mythologies of Argentina and Venezuela, perhaps even more than the cowboy in the U.S. And as in the U.S., Canadian writers, film makers, politicians, preachers, and other
myth-makers promoted the notion that Canadian frontiers have shaped a unique national character. “Can the generous flame of national spirit be kindled and blaze in the icy bosom of the frozen north?” Indeed it could. “We are the Northmen of the New World,” Robert Grant Haliburton told the Montreal Literary Club in 1869. The harsh northern climate would produce a new people by blending the diverse European “races” in Canada into one people, claimed a physician, William Hales Hingston, in 1884. The future citizens of Canadian soil would be “taller, straighter, leaner people,” with powerful physiques. To them would belong “the great privilege” of “aiding in erecting, in what was so lately a wilderness, a monument of liberty and civilization, broader, deeper, firmer, than has ever yet been raised by the hand of man.”

Even the gold rush is a global story more than an American one. The California gold rush of the late 1840s and the 1850s was the biggest and most spectacular, perhaps, and it was followed by more gold and silver rushes in many parts of the American West in the later 1800s. But California was only the first, and that a matter of timing and luck. It was followed by gold rushes in Australia and British Columbia in the 1850s, New Zealand and British Columbia in the 1860s, Australia in the 1870s, South Africa in the 1880s, and Australia and the Canadian Klondike in the 1890s. The last gold rush, little known, but the biggest in terms of output, was in northern Ontario in Canada around 1910. All of these gold rushes led to the destruction or exploitation of native peoples, and all attracted miners from around the world—Europe, the Americas, Asia—along with all of the crazy characters we associate with gold fields (gamblers, con artists, entrepreneurs, prostitutes, and sooner or later law and order).

When you look at a map of global gold rushes several things stand out: The role played by modern technology, especially after 1870s, with the railroad, telegraph, and steamship. The significance of ideal of free trade, open borders, and entrepreneurial capitalism, allowing for the movement of people, gold, corporate investors, and manufactured goods in
making gold rushes possible and creating the predominance of Anglo-American territories. The gold rushes were not American, but part of nineteenth century globalization and the spread of industrial capitalism. And if anything, ethnically, they were Anglo-American not American. Indeed, arguably, they were more British than American from a global point of view.\textsuperscript{22}

The violence done to indigenous peoples on frontiers—Indian wars—also is not unique to the U.S. Put another way, the U.S. is not exceptional is its alleged goodness, as an empire of freedom; nor is its history exceptionally evil or violent, as some counter-mythologies claim. On a small scale, Canada had its own Indian wars from the 1860s to the 1880s. In the U.S., thousands of native people died, along with death and injury to a couple thousand U.S. soldiers and a few hundred civilians. In Canada, the Indian wars killed a few hundred people in total on both sides—though Indians ended up no better, on reservations. In Mexico, a century of Indian wars killed over 200,000 people.\textsuperscript{23} We can extend the comparison still further. In the late nineteenth century, for example, Argentina and Chile fought wars on their frontiers against native peoples. And at the same time that the U.S. was winning its Indian wars in the far West, penning in the survivors on reservations, France and Britain were conquering native peoples in Asia and Africa, creating colonies and settling farm families and ranchers. The parallels are striking between the British conquest of the Zulu in South Africa and the U.S. of the Sioux the 1870s and 1880s.\textsuperscript{24} Finally, we should not forget that even as the U.S. was finishing the Indian wars in the 1880s, it was expanding overseas. In the 1890s it seized Hawaii, Guam, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Cuba as U.S. colonies. And it fought a brutal war of conquest against the Filipinos, from 1899 to 1902, that led to the deaths of thousands U.S. soldiers (many more than the Indian wars), 15,000-20,000 Filipino rebels, and over 200,000 Filipino civilians.\textsuperscript{25}

Lest you think that this comparison is one imposed by historians and moralists from our time imposed on the past, note that Americans in the late 1800s and early 1900s eagerly called for their nation to expand overseas, and they celebrated the emergence of a global U.S. empire as a sign of America coming of age. These ideas involved major figures like President
Theodore Roosevelt, senators such as Albert Beveridge and Henry Cabot Lodge, writers and artists like Owen Wister and Frederick Remington, clergymen like Lyman Abbott, and entertainers like Buffalo Bill Cody. In the 1890s and early 1900s, for example, Cody began to include figures from imperial conquests overseas by France, Britain, and the U.S. into his “Wild West” show, calling it “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World.”

Exclusions

This reference to the “Wild West” brings us back home. But whose home? Put another way, what does the familiar American myth-history of the frontier obscure or wholly leave out of the story? There is no neutral way to tell a story—words don’t let you. So what does the way “we” have told our American creation story generally not reveal?

Whose home is it? Settlers creating new homes for themselves on frontiers? Or the ancestral homelands of the scores of Indian nations? And what word do we use to describe this American story? “Settlers” and “settlement” leave out the violent conquest of Native peoples already there. “Invasion,” “conquest,” and “imperialism” tell the truth of the violence, but perhaps don’t reflect the experience of American-born and immigrant families simply looking for land and the opportunities they hoped it would provide. “Expansion” is neutral sounding, but it blandly covers over the realities of “ethnically cleansing” the region of its Native population, first by disease, then war and occasional massacres, then segregation onto apartheid-like reservation territories. Are “apartheid” and “ethnic cleansing” too strong? Remember, though, that both the U.S. and the British in South Africa used reserve territories to control native peoples. Above all, remember that U.S. frontiers, supposedly “open” “wildernesess” waiting for settlers, were “home” for Native Americans, and remain home for them, albeit alienated homelands stolen from them, homes mostly never returned. The Lakota Sioux continue to reject the hundreds of millions of dollars the U.S. has offered them in compensation for the Black Hills, stolen in the 1870s.
and they continue to demand its return. This is just one example. What else does the U.S. creation story cover over?

The racism, occasionally deadly, faced by Chinese immigrants—miners, railroad workers, prostitutes, owners of small businesses such as laundries and restaurants. Racism faced by Japanese, Korean, Filipino and other Asian immigrants in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From the South to the West, slavery and its legacies marked frontiers, places associated in American myth with freedom. After the Civil War, African Americans faced more discrimination in the West than any other ethnic group. Thinking comparatively again, we should remember that slavery and racial discrimination also marked frontiers from Argentina and Brazil in South America to Canada in the North.

Beyond racism, we can look to the land itself and the environmental destruction that American expansion entailed: tons of garbage left by pioneers on the trails through the West in the 1840s, 50s, and 60s. Forests wantonly cleared from Southern, Midwestern and far Western frontiers. The heedless destruction wrought by appallingly destructive mining practices, from water cannons that laid waste to mountain sides to the poising of land and water to separate ore from dross. There was also destruction of land, leading to erosion of millions of acre-feet of topsoil by over-grazing of cattle and sheep, and by farming wheat in lands too dry to sustain it.

As to labor violence and exploitation, the West was not a safety-valve, a place where the poor could go to escape work in factories or mines and find free land. Such workers had neither the skills nor the thousands of dollars needed to start a farm or ranch. When the poor went West, they went to find work—low-paid, dangerous work in mines, cutting timber, or herding. If you strip the myth away, a cowboy is simply a migrant worker. The pay was so low, and the work so dangerous and relentless, that most cowboys worked only a season or two before calling it quits and finding a better job. Almost anything was better. Those who stuck with it often were physically broken men by their thirties. When cowboys tried to start labor unions or went on strike in the 1880s, the big time ranchers turned to the political
authorities and hired gunmen to suppress them.\textsuperscript{32} More generally, the West was marked by extensive labor organizing, much of by radical, even socialist labor unions, such as the Western Federation of Miners, the International Workers of the World, and the One Big Union. And the region, along with the U.S. as a whole, had some of the most violent labor conflict in the Western world.\textsuperscript{33}

Finally, let’s turn to the borderlands region with Mexico, remembering Mexican-Americans, from Texas to California. After the U.S. conquest of northern Mexico—and before that, the revolution that won Texas its independence from Mexico—what happened to the Mexican population? The U.S., and before it Texas, had promised to respect the property rights of the Tejanos and Mexicans. The U.S. did recognize Mexican-Americans as citizens. But in a fashion loosely reminiscent of the “redemption” of the white South after the Civil War and Reconstruction, in which “Jim Crow” was imposed on Mexican Americans from Texas to California.: property stolen; denial of the right to mine in gold fields in California, sometimes lynched when they did not take the hint that they were not wanted; limited rights to testify in court in many jurisdictions; exclusion from voting; segregation in the job market, in the most menial, dangerous, and low paying work; even the labor unions, except the most radical and socialist, did not want them. Not surprisingly, Mexican Americans in the twentieth century had to campaign for Civil Rights much like African Americans.\textsuperscript{34}

My point in this list of the injustices is not to impose the morality of the present on the past. It’s worth noting, however, that many of my points were made by people at the time. They’re not invented by historians. Nevertheless, it is true that we understand things about the environment, race relations, the realities of the work place, and the complexities of freedom that people nineteenth century generally did not. We with live mountains of garbage and climate change, the Holocaust, the Civil Rights era, independence movements around the world, and the end of apartheid. The point is for us to think about our mythmaking today and make judgments about our creation stories. This means myth-busting. But that’s not enough. We need creation stories—new creation stories—that don’t exclude
people and don’t cover over the sins of the past. How else can our creation stories be redemptive for us today, all of us?

Who Is My Neighbor?

The place to start thinking about the ethics of creation stories and national identities is, I think, with ideas about hospitality and neighborliness. This framework is both ancient and contemporary.

At the center of moral reflection on relations between people in the twentieth and early twenty-first century has been the language of the “other”—those people whom “we” think of as “them” and not “us.” They are “other” than us, not like us.35 “We” might be Americans and “they” Mexicans or Canadians. (Remember, of course, that for Mexicans and Canadians we are “them”—Yankees.) We might be atheist and they fundamentalist, or vice versa. We might be white and they brown. The point is how this “we” and “them” language works. What stands out is the way our sense of identity, who “we” are, is defined to a significant degree by what we are not. We’re not them. When we construct our “imagined community,” we construct it as this and not that. American, not communist. Not Muslim. Not Mexican. Not French. This, not that. These distinctions sometimes are thought out, but their real power is instinctive. Trust of this, disgust with that. It goes with a tendency to blame others for our problems, to make a scapegoat of the other, and try to drive the scapegoat out in order to cleanse ourselves, whether that other, that scapegoat, is in the legal sense foreign, or a fellow citizen who seems foreign for one reason or another. Drive out the other. Unclean! This “othering” leads us to see people as strange, foreign, even monster-like and not quite human.

The surest way to get beyond that othering, which makes a person or group seem less than human, is to see people in their individuality. Go from “us” and “them” to “me” and “you.” This does not mean erasing our differences. If we are going to see other people and ourselves clearly, we need to see how we are
different. Equally, we need to see each other, me and you, and look for what is familiar and human in each other. We’ll be different people, not humans versus not-quite-human.

In ancient traditions, the language of the “other,” and the ethical goal of shifting from us vs. them to the shared humanity of me and you, echoes in the language of the moral obligation that a person has towards the “stranger” or “alien.”36 In the Hebrew Scriptures, we find repeated calls to welcome the stranger at your gates, to offer justice and hospitality to the alien in your homeland—because, as those scriptures say, you once were aliens too. We find similar language in all of the Abrahamic religions—Jewish, Christian, and Muslim. Here, too, differences are not erased; but there is recognition that people share the image of God, and that difference does not erase the obligation of hospitality. We are not called to be hospitable only to those like us. Indeed, hospitality is most meaningful, and the calling most dear, when we encounter a stranger in the land. After all, we are all strangers, aliens, depending on the context.

This way of thinking about ethics is probably most familiar in the parable of the Good Samaritan. An expert in religious law asks Jesus what is required of him for righteousness and salvation. He knows the answer, of course. The law requires him to love God and to love his neighbor as himself. What he really wants to know is how far this obligation goes. “Who is my neighbor?” he asks. So Jesus tells the parable. A man, presumably Jewish (in the lawyer’s imagination) is attacked by bandits while traveling. Other travelers encounter the dying man. Jewish leaders like the lawyer himself pass by the man, fearing to be contaminated by a stranger they don’t know, fearing that the bandits still may be nearby, and wanting to avoid the burden of stopping their own busy lives. When a Samaritan sees the man, presumably sharing the same fears, he nonetheless stops. He binds the man’s wounds and takes him to an inn, where others can take over. But the Samaritan goes beyond the minimum. He’s extravagant in his help, leaving money with the inn keeper, telling him to continue to care for the wounded man. When Jesus asks the lawyer, who followed God’s command, who was a good neighbor, he reluctantly acknowledges the
Samaritan, though he can’t bring himself to name the man’s race. The one who helped, he says instead.

The scandal of Jesus’ point is that our obligations go beyond the minimum. Worse, the neighborly relationship includes those we despise most, i.e., Samaritans. Think about those whom you despise most, or struggle most not to despise. We all have someone. Those are your neighbors. Those are the people you must be neighborly towards—whether that means offering help or accepting it. Accepting help often is harder. Think about how hard it can be to take a hand offering to help you, and how tempting it is to spit or strike at that hand. I’m reminded, in the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, of the horror of whites in a courtroom when a black man says that he felt sorry for a white woman. The audacity of his neighborliness and the shared humanity it implies. To see shared humanity in other person, without overlooking how a person is different, without assuming that he or she is just like me, is hard. Our shared humanity, after all, lies both in what we have in common and what makes us distinct, as groups and individuals.

But more specifically, what does being neighborly mean? Who determines that? Does the person offering neighborly hospitality determine what hospitality entails, or does the person in need, receiving it? After all, the power to give hospitality can involve a subtle or not so subtle power over another person, especially one in need. Neighborliness easily can be coercive—as in “I am going to give you want I think you need, whether you like it or not.” This is not abstract issue. Government officials, reformers, and missionaries in the U.S. in the much of the 1800s and 1900s told Native Americans what they needed. One idealistic reformer, no doubt trying to be neighborly, summarized what was needed by saying, “Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.” Tear down their Native ways and make them into civilized, Christianized, individual Americans. Idealistic reformers and missionaries forcibly took children and sent them to boarding schools. Many Native leaders and people recognized the need for change and were willing to take a hand that offered help. But they did not want the terms of this help, and change, forced on them. More than the ancient Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scriptures, contemporary ethnical
theorists of relations with the “other” have been sensitive to the
eexercise of power.\textsuperscript{37}

In thinking about what it means to be neighborly, we also need to recognize that it changes who we are. Paul Riceour, a French philosopher, talked about the “long route” of the self as going through the other.\textsuperscript{38} What he meant was this. We do not become who we are on our own. We evolve, we find ourselves, through our encounters with other people. This starts in infancy, as a baby comes to realize that it is a separate being from the people caring for it. It starts in the family, whatever shape that family takes. But quickly it goes further. Infants who interact regularly with people of different races learn to trust them. Infants that don’t encounter people of different races, tend to be more distrusting, wary of people who are different. As we learn talk and read and grow up, our identities are shaped culturally. The process continues to be interactive, and we become ourselves through our encounters with others, both in face to face relationships and through the music, movies, TV, video games, stories, and more, that we grow up with. Our interactions with “others,” whether we scapegoat them or live with them as neighbors, continue to shape us. We continue to learn, unlearn, and relearn. This process is both individual and communal, in the groups that we are part of, and in relation to those whom we consider “other.”

What might it mean to be neighborly, then, in the creation stories that we tell about ourselves as Americans? Who should be in the stories? How should they be told? What should they be about? And who should tell them?

\textbf{Alternative Creation Stories}

It’s pretty easy to consider alternative frameworks for doing history in the academic context. Classroom and academic conferences are places to try on ideas, critique them, and debate them. It’s much more complex to cultivate new mythic histories, new creation stories. These involve emotional commitments and more of a suspension of disbelief. They shape whole communities, and there needs to be significant consensus about
them. Myths need to become so instinctive, so much a part of the way we see ourselves, that we don’t even notice their influence.

Furthermore, when we think about alternative creation stories, should our goal be a single, common new story? Or should it be to develop the habit, the instinct, to listen for and welcome diverse creation stories? If the latter, how do you encourage some sort of unity out of the diverse, and sometimes conflicting, stories? Finally, should our goal be to tell better local creation stories, national ones, or global ones?

In the past few years I have become interested in two new approaches to the past, one called “big history,” the other called “deep history.” Big history explores how the past looks different if we put together what normally is done separately: “history,” going back five or six thousand years, which typifies what conventional historians like me do; so-called prehistory, the work of archeologists, ethnologists, and anthropologist, which goes back hundreds of thousands of years to the emergence and spread of our species; and evolutionary biology, geology, physics and astronomy, which go back billions of years to the origins of the universe. How do human history and cosmic history look different when we put them together? Deep history is more modest. It asks: what can we learn by putting the study of early humans and pre-humans in context with the study of human civilizations since the emergence of agriculture? What light do these two, normally separate fields of study, almost always done separately, shed on each other?39

What happens if we think really big and deep, then, as we imagine new creation stories for ourselves as Americans? What springs to mind for me is the recognition that the most central component to American mythic-history is migration, from Europe, Asia, and Africa and elsewhere to the Americas. From the viewpoint of deep history and big history, the European encounter with the Americas, and global migration to the Americas that started in the 1490s (first Europeans, very soon the forced migration of African slaves, later Asians), is just one example of global human migration. Here is the starting point for a new mythology.
The American creation story should be one part of a mythic telling of the deep history of human migration. The natural world as we know it, with our separate continents, was born over many million years, between about 175 million and 50 million years ago. Humans, *homo sapiens* essentially like us, began migrating out of Africa 100,000 years ago, in an initial pulse, and again 40-50,000 years ago, in a second pulse. They spread to Australia by 40-60,000 years ago. By 14,000 years ago they had reached the Americas. This was the first great era of globalization. But then, for 13,000 years, places like Australia and the Americas stood separate from Afro-Eurasia—with the brief exceptions of the Viking voyages to North America. The second era of globalization began with Columbus in the 1490s, permanently linking the world together. The third phase, ours, with ships and railroads driven by fossil fuels, electronic communications, and later air travel, began in the mid-1800s. We live in a time when information travels around the world instantaneously and people and goods travel around the world in a day or less. Hunters and gatherers globalized tens of thousands of years ago. People in agricultural societies did it hundreds of years ago. And people in industrial societies have been doing since the 1850s.

It's the stuff of science fiction, but humans have long imagined traveling to other planets. With the newest Mars rover, "Curiosity," landing in August and now sending us data from Mars, perhaps those who want science fiction to become history will get their chance. Who knows? We might go from globalization to interplanetary migration. Even if science fiction, and myth in its own way, the question sheds light on something essential to human existence. We are wanderers, pilgrims, who leave homes, seek out new places, and make new homes.

This is not a story without conflict. It’s not a story of Eden without a fall into sin. Whether entering genuinely new lands, as the ancestors of Native Americans did 14,000 or more years ago, or entering lands with people already at home there, migration includes violence and competition. Nor when we think of new lands should we forget about the land itself—by which I mean the non-human biosphere and rock, water, and air. Migrating humans contributed to the extinction of species 15-
20,000 years ago. Globalization since 1500s has involved a massive movement of plants, animals, and micro-organisms. There’d be no horses in the Americas, no tomatoes in Italy, without globalization. Today, the human power to transform the planet is causing the sixth great extinction event in our planet’s history—the last happening some 65 million years ago, killing off the dinosaurs. The current phase of globalization has humans controlling some 24-40 percent of the bio-energy on the planet (us 7 billion humans plus all the plants and animals we control). In telling our American and human creation stories, and making mythologies about Old Worlds, New Worlds, and migrations, we should consider whether the land has its own story. Creation groans in travail, the apostle Paul said in his letter to the Romans (8:22). In one science fiction series, about the settlement of Mars, where there are no sentient beings, and no life of any sort, some radical settlers assert that the rocks have rights.

Let’s bring it closer to home again. Is it American “the West”? Or “El Norte”? For snow birds, it’s going South for the winter. These are migration stories all. And it’s something humans have been doing for 100,000 years. A human migration mythology is more than big enough to include the American creation myth. It puts our national myth in its place, as one story among many. It reminds us that in reality, and properly in our creation stories, we are part of a global community. But let’s not let that happy progressive sounding thought crowd out the sound of conflict. Migration, and stories of migration, always includes conflict.

Tonight and tomorrow, in this symposium, we will hear stories about migrants at the U.S borderlands. The legal and illegal immigration that Americans debate today, and that is changing the U.S. today, is part of that older American and world history. How does the global mythic history that I’m suggesting help us to understand migration to the U.S. today? What does it mean to be neighborly in our circumstances today?

The mythic-history of migration that I’m suggesting, with the U.S. as one piece of a larger story, is global. But not will everyone agree. Just as U.S. national mythology forgot
about Native Americans, or at least pushed them to the margins, so too the one I’m suggesting does. Most Native American creation myths say that this is where they were created. They have always been here. This has always been home.⁴⁴ I have a mythic-historical tale to tell. I think it a good one. But I also need to listen to those who would stories that conflict with my own.

Conclusions

I have three simple conclusions, propositions about mythic-history and creation stories that have shaped what I’ve said today.

• The creation stories we tell matter.

• We should tell a national creation story that places us in the larger world, without us as Americans defining that world. In other words, we should get over the insistence that we put us at the center of things globally. We are part of the story. And we should make room for others to tell their stories.

• Whether we think about telling these stories as Americans, with fellow residents of the U.S., or as humans, with fellow residents of our global community, we should imagine ourselves sitting together, telling our story and listening to others tell their stories. Listening matters as much as telling. We have an obligation to listen as well as the privilege to talk.

These propositions are, I think, a good basis on which to think about new creation stories, and perhaps retelling older creation stories. They’re about being at home and being hospitable in telling our creation stories and listening to those of others.


8 Best study of this paradoxical impulse, how the idea of America as starting over became a nostalgic tradition in American political culture, is Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1993).


14 See Gilgoff, “Despite Fights About Its Merits.”


37 See on this issue, Joan Tronto, Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care (New York: Routledge, 1994).


39 See David Christian, Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Daniel Lord Smail, On Deep History and the Brain (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); and Andrew Shyrock and Daniel Lord Smail, eds., Deep History: The Architecture of Past and Present (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). David Christian, in particular, hopes that studying Big History can help us, as modern, twenty-first century people better understand our place in the universe. He has a 17-minute TED talk that tries to do this. It starts with the Big Bang and ends with him and his grandson Daniel; find the video at http://www.ted.com/speakers/david_christian.html.


41 On this issue, for North America, see Shepard Krech III, The Ecological Indian: Myth and History (New York: Norton, 1999), chapter one.


44 A classic statement of this position is Vine Deloria, Jr., Red Earth, White Lies: Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 1997).
A Response to William Katerberg

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When I first took up William Katerberg’s essay, I had some trepidation, having seen efforts to “globalize” American stories done badly, in ways that merely relativized them, so as to trivialize them. Such has not been the case here. Dr. Katerberg’s exploration in “Globalizing American Creation Stories” has provided a wide ranging set of observations that take the stories American tell themselves and others and relate these stories both to the wider world and to those most often left out of them – displaced peoples, minorities, immigrants or others not part of the standard narratives. But he does this in a way that grants the stories continuing cultural weight. In doing so, he has also related American stories to what historians increasingly see as the global phenomenon of migration, and situates this not only in relatively recent events, but in both “big” and “deep” history, reflecting on millennia of human experience and the frequent movement of peoples from one place to another. The idea of “permanent settlers” turns out to be something of an illusion, as most people now do not live very near where their ancestors would have 10,000 or 15,000 years ago - maybe least of all in the Americas. Katerberg notes at the end, though, that to impose this larger, more complex set of stories also displaces others, including those of some of America’s “first peoples,” whose own creation stories tell of their having been always here on this continent, sometimes in the very acres they are settled in today. Anyway we look at it, the stories get more complex when we pull back from one culture and begin relating it to others.
Katerberg has touched on many themes and I was tempted to pursue several directions for exploration until reminded that I had but 10-12 minutes for my commentary. So I have focused on getting the broader stories of America to be taken seriously in these United States. I begin with the question, “To whom are we telling these stories?,” and explore how one gets “buy in” to an approach that challenges many common American assumptions, and so is not always popular.

For what I might say elliptically and without controversy in a gathering of scholars can, and perhaps must, be different from what and how I would share with my classes of college students. As a historian who teaches undergraduates, I confess I am painfully aware that one cannot get away from creation stories of one sort or another - because to tell of the beginnings or development of anything is to indulge in some interpretative story or myth - no matter how much these might be based in confirmable evidence. The very choice to include some observations over others creates an interpretation that communicates something of what I value as good, most important, or “most true.” My added benefit, or burden, because I teach at a small Christian liberal arts college, is that I am the only full-time European historian. This makes me responsible for teaching things like the European history survey. From such courses, I can identify with big and deep history approaches, since I now start that sequence with a discussion of the earliest remains of human temples and settlements in what is today southern Turkey, which date to the 10th millennium before Christ and the start of the Common Era. But even when I get to the traditional first cultures of Mesopotamia and Egypt, I am tasked with covering about 5500 years of human history. So for me, in this setting, the American creation stories have always been part of a global setting, even if my presence in America and as a citizen might lead me to privilege them in some ways. Adding to my disorder, according to my Americanist colleagues, is my specialty in the history of the United Kingdom, which they claim, causes me to talk about the American Rebellion and its subsequent break with the British Empire in a way entirely too
focused on that most civilized island. I cannot imagine what they are thinking of.

But given these settings, not to treat the American stories in a global setting is really to presume American exceptionalism, and to accept as normal a way of telling American stories as if the rest of the world were only there to give Americans something to shine against. Admittedly, some western civilization texts have done that, but not for some time. The history of the United States, its origins, manifest successes and obvious failures, are just part of an evolving way of speaking that attempts to situate all of western civilization into some kind of global “narrative,” though there are clearly many different ways of constructing this. The “privilege” of not seeing the creation stories of one’s country in a larger setting really is an American one. As Katerberg has noted, the “others” to the north and south of the United States have not really had that luxury, and I would add neither have most European states. Perhaps only Russia and China have been both big and long-lived enough to have talked about their own creations and national missions with the same confidence as have Americans – as practically isolated, or as culminations of all that was come before, or at least as the most complete version of human society. But of course from our current perspective, neither of these states can do so any longer.

Dr. Katerberg has noted that often American creation stories leave out many peoples and actions that really must be seen as central, not only from their own point of view, but even in explaining American developments well. These missing parts can and should be integrated into the American story, and that set within the larger world. But in doing so we might also observe that Americans are not the first to have made choices of inclusion or exclusion in their creation myths. We can find examples from ancient Babylon or Egypt to modern England, Germany or Japan. Let me consider the Romans for one rather successful example. They attempted to purge their own history of their culture’s debt to those before them, most especially the Etruscans, from whom so many of their values and customs
actually derived. This would be rather like telling the American story without Britain at all, or as if Britain were merely a people to be overthrown, so that Americans could begin their novus ordo seclorum. As Dr. Katerberg has also observed, however, this cannot be done with any integrity, as even the basis of the American Revolution was a principle established earlier in England. But for centuries Roman historians did tell their story without the Etruscans, or by marginalizing them so completely as to make them seem comparatively inconsequential. And because the Etruscans had lost, and no one could read their language any longer, their story got lost for two thousand years. It got retold only in the past century, with the consequence that Roman culture now makes far more sense in its relationships with those that preceded and grew up around it. The rise of Rome is told as part of a larger Mediterranean story now, which is part of a still larger story of antiquity as a whole.

In a similar way, the story of the American republic should be put into larger contexts, perhaps if possible to avoid the pitfalls of the Roman. By recognizing that its story is not singular, but multi-vocal and layered, perhaps the American republic might at least delay that process of rise and fall so commonly observed in the long history of humankind. Because it is clear that our wrestling with these questions of creation stories, and of borders - both temporal and geographical - are part of a wrestling with the realities of human institutions and the relationships between human cultures that have consequences for the present and the future.

Besides this long history approach, I find a further impulse for globalizing creation myths in reflecting on my Christian faith as part of a global story. Dr. Katerberg’s paper reminded me very much of my own awakening to a wider world beyond the country of my birth, which corresponded with my learning to see Christianity as not simply an American or European religion, but one of global commitment and connection. As an undergraduate taking my first trips abroad, I encountered Christians from four other continents and was forced to expand my grasp of the meaning of making disciples of
all nations, and that those of every tribe would worship at the feet of Christ. Up until then no one had told me that only Christianity in America mattered, but until then it seemed always implied that somehow America had got it right and the rest of the world was trying to catch up. Put this way it sounds absurd, yet there it was, and although over a quarter of a century has passed since I discovered how naïve this was, I still find the attitude in some students that I teach, whom I must help through the process of seeing a bigger picture - of the Church and of the world it serves. And this brings me back to considering one’s audience.

We have only one required history course in our core curriculum at Covenant College, entitled “Twentieth-Century World History.” The course gives historical grounding for a follow up course on “global trends” intended to get students thinking about present issues more clearly. In my opening discussions, where I explain how Christianity affects my approach to history, along with other issues I talk about the command to love one’s neighbor as oneself, a charge Dr. Katerberg has also touched on. I relate this explicitly to the Decalogue’s commandment, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." In studying people in the past, especially those whose descendants are still among us, we are in essence studying our neighbors. If we only look at the parts that confirm our pre-existing views, or leave out the parts that don’t support our presuppositions and prejudices, we are in essence lying. To "spin" history for the sake of proving a partisan or national viewpoint is falsification, and it shows disrespect not only for the people and events studied, but for their Maker.

The implications from this are multiple, but one at least is that it should compel us to get the history as right as possible - telling the stories, about creations or continuing developments, as clearly, correctly and completely as possible from the sources we have, in the time and space allowed. This also means being honest about the errors, mistakes, misjudgments and downright sins of those who have gone before us. And I have found, as I also tell my students, that it is often easier for Christians in America to admit that Christians before them and around them
have done wrong - even that they themselves have done wrong
as Christians - than for them to admit and accept that sometimes
Americans have done wrong and that the American government
has acted in ways that do not reflect the highest values of the
very documents that created it and sustain it. Just consider the
recent coverage about whether American presidents should
admit to other countries when we have made errors and need to
apologize. And what I ask my students, and all of us, to
consider, is what such an emotionally charged reluctance reveals
about our deepest identities and commitments. What gods do we
really worship, if we can confess the sins of the Church, but not
of our country?

But on the flip side, as we open American stories to
greater inspection and relate them to the broader world, as we
make room for hitherto unheard or under-heeded voices, and
recognize that borders are as much about things traded and
transferred as about what is kept out or contained, other
questions also arise. If we reject the idolatries of nationalism or
ethnocentricism, what new influences might come in? If we
have expelled one demon and swept the house clean, do we
blindly invite it back in new guise and with seven of its best
friends? What are the challenges and pitfalls of a global
narrative of a particular land and people? Once we beat the idols
of the tribe, will we then be seduced by the idols of the
marketplace or the theatre, or to update Francis Bacon’s
categories, the idols of technology or the Internet? And on the
practical level, can we write and speak and teach in a way that
embraces globalized narratives, while still valuing the particular
and the peculiar? In the popular mood of our times, we may
desire to teach our students to “think globally,” but what skills
do we need to help them “act locally”? Sometimes seeing the
“big picture” leaves one immobilized, which seems a bad place
to end. We must communicate what is, as best we know it, but
“What is actual is actual only for one time/ And only for one
place,” and still we must do something in our time.7

Finally, even as we relate American creation stories to
the countries around the US and the cultures it has so often
ignored within its borders, I stress again that relativizing should not mean negating what is unusual or even unique in those stories, whether good or bad. A bigger story with more diversity must be told, but in doing so, in the *impulse* to do so, we also reveal something that is relatively unusual in the history of human societies - the implied command to be self-critical, to be constantly forming, and reforming. I say this is unusual, not unique: Tacitus implied a need for reform in Rome when he held up the Germanica as admirable; the Islamic historian Ibn Khaldun meant his universal history at least in part to help leaders to discern the patterns of development in the world so they could rule more wisely. But culturally, few civilizations have adopted institutions and expectations so ready to consider and allow for amendments and change. Whether this is good or bad might also be evaluated with reference to a global scale, but that it is unusual in the big and deep history of humankind I think cannot be denied.  

1. Having spent a good portion of my youth in Arizona, with a family that liked to visit the Navajo and Hopi lands now and then, I am empathetic to this last observation. Though, in the case of these peoples, both have legends that do speak of movements from place to place. See for instance the Navajo creations story in Jerrold E. Levy, *In the Beginning: The Navajo Genesis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), especially 39-50.


5. One book we have used in our Twentieth-Century World History course that would go along very well with William Katerberg’s essay and the topic of our symposium is Matthew Frye Jacobson’s *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000).


7. The quote comes from T.S. Eliot, “Ash Wednesday” (1930), first section.

8. Jacques Ellul, the French sociologist and lay theologian, who was quite often critical of his own culture, nonetheless brought a related criticism to bear against those who would dismiss the West too much in his book *Betrayal of the West* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978). While acknowledging the many failures of European civilization, some of which he was one of the first to identify, Ellul points out that even that mode of self-reflection as a method of bringing institutional and social change and improvement was something born in the European West - it was not an approach one could find native to many other parts of the world.
A Response to William Katerberg

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Professor Katerberg takes on a key aspect in our public discourse, a narrow and exclusionary national origin story. By arguing that the U.S. rise to power is better explained as the product of historical events rather than the unique character of a predestined nation, Katerberg challenges the veracity of one of our most deeply held national myths, American exceptionalism.

I felt comfortable with the topic of Katerberg’s paper because I do research into the impact of globalization on indigenous populations and I am an advocate for minority rights. The idea that our national origin story should include diverse voices particularly those of native peoples was easy for me to embrace and I looked forward to reading his paper. My enthusiasm continued to build as I supportively followed each of his points. However, I also found myself becoming steadily uncomfortable as his critique began to hit home with my own attitudes and practices. Even as I embraced his most stringent criticisms of our country’s local prejudices and global egotism, the more devastating points concerned a far subtler yet pervasive acceptance of a national creation narrative infused with false pride and hypocrisy. Increasingly, Katerberg’s examples sounded too familiar to my own expressions and language. This reluctant self-reflection drove me to think more critically about the foundations of my own views and natural inclinations.

A history textbook that had been in my family for two generations reminded me that my sensitivity to the story of indigenous people was a more recent revelation than I wanted to admit. My own childhood in a lower middle class, white, Christian family in Western North Carolina was somewhat
insular, but we were aware of the region’s Cherokee history. Mostly, this awareness entailed vacations in the Appalachian Mountains where we saw some caricatures of Indians in dress for tourists and purchased rubber tomahawks and plastic moccasins as souvenirs. I was an adult before I discovered that the Cherokee nation was divided between Appalachia and Oklahoma. I certainly never heard of the “Trail of Tears.” This isn’t too surprising considering this fact of history was omitted from the textbook that had been passed down within my family.

As I read the textbook with new eyes, I was quite annoyed by passages that had never elicited a second thought before. For example, the section about land settlement and “Indian raids” was immediately followed by a glowing tribute to Daniel Boone and the pioneer spirit, a topic that garnered much attention in Katerberg’s paper and Symposium presentation. The prominent Cherokee leader, Sequoyah, who created a written alphabet and preserved local tradition, was never mentioned. In fact, there were very few references to Native Americans except for one curious quote. “The value of the contribution the American Indians have made to the world is beyond reckoning.” “Mankind will be forever in their debt.”¹ This remark intended to be complimentary was actually the most troubling for me because it seemed to refer to the contribution of native peoples in the past sense as if they had collectively made the ultimate sacrifice of their talents and traditions to the greater good of modern society. This view of a national narrative that subsumes indigenous people and minorities into a greater cause and purpose seemed to be exactly the kind of thinking that Katerberg warned against.

An origin story of the United States that attributes our history to destiny and aggregates diverse peoples and events into one coherent meta-narrative is certainly an oversimplification and most likely arrogant and preferential, but is it as destructive as Katerberg seems to suggest? The fact that origin stories are selective about facts and mythic in nature is not unique to the American experience. Many societies have a form of exceptionalism in their national story.

Plato in The Republic argues for the necessity of such “noble lies.” Plato makes the point that national unity and
security is predicated on leaders creating a story that fits the political imperative. “It’s appropriate for the rulers, if for anyone at all, to lie for the benefit of the city in cases involving enemies and citizens.” When attributed to a providential purpose, this twisting of the facts is legitimate. Plato gives the example of a myth of metals. This story serves the political necessity of a harmonious society where envy of privilege and power is negated by divine will. “But the god, in fashioning those of you who are competent to rule, mixed gold in at their birth, this is why they are most honored; in auxiliaries, silver, and iron and bronze in the farmers and other craftsmen.”

The exceptional position of the United States as a global ruler seems less arrogant when explained within a divine purpose or manifest destiny. American exceptionalism becomes a type of gold in the soul of our nation rather than a historically contingent rise to power. Katerberg speaks directly to this characteristic of national myths, “stories are less about factual accuracy and more about what they do.”

Katerberg’s paper succinctly highlights many of the historical contingencies that brought the United States to dominance including colonial conquests, geographic advantage, and global capitalism. Placing the U.S. origin story in the context of both “big history” and “deep history,” Katerberg brings to the forefront global narratives such as human migration that challenge the concept of an isolated and unique American experience. This is an important repositioning because control of a singular national story also determines control of national resources, power and policies.

The idea that control of the political narrative relates directly to the exercise of power is a central debate in many disciplines and methods. One of the most prominent thinkers on this relationship is Michel Foucault. He focuses on understanding history through the lens of public discourse. As Katerberg also points out, stories propagated in the public sphere are meaningful. Katerberg says, “creation stories shape how people understand themselves and act.” In *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault cautions us to look behind the discourse to the political intentions and manipulations.
Look at the totality and treat it in such a way that one tries to rediscover beyond the statements themselves the intention of the speaking subject, his conscious activity, what he meant, or, again, the unconscious activity that took place, despite himself, in what he said or in the almost imperceptible fracture of his actual words. In any case, we must reconstitute another discourse, rediscover the silent murmuring, the inexhaustible speech that animates from within the voice that one hears, re-establish the tiny, invisible text that runs between and sometimes collides with them. The analysis of thought is always allegorical in relation to the discourse that it employs it.

Katerberg like Foucault in this passage challenges us to consider other voices in the discourse; voices that may seem as only murmurs or tiny and invisible, yet not inconsequential, texts. Katerberg gives voice to many of these alternate texts and silent murmurs by noting competing or parallel stories.

Foucault goes on to say that to understand and indeed critique our discourse we must grasp the statement in the exact specificity of its occurrence; determine its conditions of existence, fix at least it limits, establish its correlations with other statements that may be connected with it, and show what other forms of statement it excludes. In so doing we can, “manifest the half silent murmur of another discourse.”

There is always much to unpack in Foucault’s quotes, but I want to remain focused on the half silent murmur of another discourse. Katerberg has given volume to many of the half silent or maybe completely silent murmurs of an alternate U.S. creation story. From native peoples to immigrant laborers, he fills in the map of diverse stories that populate our history. The Gold Rush, global capitalism, imperialism, and technological innovations are cited as forces that changed our social and physical landscapes. Identifying grand themes involving exploitation and violence, Katerberg exposes our ignoble lies as a nation. These are powerful images that alter the premises of a triumphal national creation story. They also change public discourse by including new voices.
Many others have changed our public discourse and even altered our national story by giving a loud voice to quiet murmurs. Martin Luther King changed our national narrative to include a New Dream for America. Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural and Gettysburg Address redefined the American story. These larger than life figures and their mythic political and moral stature are not the only influences that affect our national story. Katerberg appeals to murmurs as quiet as neighborliness and shared story telling. Katerberg asks us in his paper to consider an intimate dialogue in both the private and public sphere, asking the murmers to speak up clearly and loudly – to join the conversation without shame or judgment. It is a beautiful vision.

Seen through Katerberg’s critique, globalizing the American creation story is revealed as a possible attempt to simply justify our nation’s massive power and consumption. There is no doubt that the United States is exceptionally powerful and provides leadership in a world with many problems. False modesty would not be an appropriate analysis in our case. However, sincere humility might be the better mark of true exceptionalism. For the Hebrew prophet Micah tells us what the true will of God is for the exceptional person – or country: “He has showed you, O Man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”


The research discussed here is drawn from a full-length study about daughters and granddaughters of Mexican immigrant farmworkers (Wells 2013). The particular emphasis in this paper explores the impact of the border on the individuals and families living in the Imperial Valley, located in Imperial County, in the far southeastern part of California. It also captures for readers unaccustomed to the social environment of the borderlands a sense of the unique challenges and opportunities experienced by those living near the U.S.-Mexico border.

The women I studied were right when they observe their lives to be shaped by the border. While a border may be defined simply as a physical and political boundary between two countries, the social and political relations associated with the border are complex (Hansen and Mattingly 2006:5). Border scholars typically conceptualize the border as a region (rather than a boundary) that includes both sides of the physical border. This conceptualization captures the dynamic nature of the border and the interrelationship between communities and people on both sides. By this view, the concept of symbiosis or interdependence that transcends national boundaries is key to understanding border regions (Martinez 1998).

The U.S.-Mexican border is a 2,000 mile boundary with settlement concentrated in several twin cities, from San Diego-Tijuana on one side to Brownsville-Matamoros on the other. As Hansen and Mattingly point out, these twin cities – with the
exception of San Diego-Tijuana – are patterned in a similar way, with the Mexico cities larger than their U.S. twins. Further, the U.S. border cities are relatively less prosperous than other U.S. cities while Mexico border cities are relatively more prosperous than other cities in Mexico. On the U.S. side of the border, Latinos are a majority of the population in all border cities except San Diego (Hansen and Mattingly 2006:5).

In the Imperial County borderlands, Calexico, California and Mexicali, Baja California are the twin cities. Calexico had a population of 35,273 in 2005, while Mexicali’s population was 653,046. Mexicali is located in the Municipality of Mexicali, the Mexican municipio or county across the border from Imperial County. Mexicali is the State of Baja California’s capital city (Noriega-Verdugo 2004). In discussing historic development on the U.S.-Mexico border, Norma Fimbres Durazo describes the importance of this particular border region: “[O]ne of the most significant social phenomena that has developed is the migration of people from other regions of Mexico to the Imperial-Mexicali region. Calexico, California, and Mexicali, Baja California, were established by these migratory currents in the early twentieth century. The two cities sit next to one another across the border and have transformed the region into a transborder space with the exchange of goods and capital and an international job market that remains viable today” (2004:44).

The migratory patterns of Mexicans over the past several decades are illustrated in the dramatic growth of the Municipality of Mexicali relative to Imperial County. In 1930, Imperial County had a population of 60,903, which was double Mexicali’s population of 29,900. By 1950, the situation had changed markedly with Mexicali’s population of 124,362 almost double that of Imperial County with 62,975 residents. In 2000, the municipio of Mexicali, with a population that had grown to 764,602, was more than five times larger than Imperial County, with a population of 142,361 (Collins 2004:4).

Mexicali currently serves as home to a large segment of the agricultural work force in the Imperial Valley. Mexicali residents make up most of the 15,000-18,000 seasonal farm workers who harvest the crops in the Imperial Valley every year.
These workers generally cross the border daily in anticipation of being hired as day laborers by farm labor contractors. Prospective workers congregate at the border at 4:00 or 5:00 a.m. and board buses that bring them to the fields in Brawley, Holtville, and elsewhere, and return them to the border at the end of the workday (Martin 2009: 63, 147). Other individuals cross the border daily to work for Imperial Valley growers and agricultural services businesses on a semi-regular basis in jobs unrelated to harvest. The majority of these migrant farm workers are men, because although paid farm labor typically involved the entire family in rural Mexico, women may find other opportunities in this urban setting.

Border control policies have also served to swell the population of Mexican border cities including Mexicali because U.S. authorities have routinely deported unauthorized individuals whose home villages were in central and southern Mexico to the Mexican side of the U.S.-Mexican border. So, for example, detainees from Oaxaca may be “repatriated” to Mexicali, perhaps 1500 miles from home.*1 Many of these people have remained in the border cities, never returning to Mexico’s interior (Lorey 1999:120-121).

**Authorized Border Crossings**

Imperial County is a site of substantial documented border crossing. Its two official ports of entry are known as Calexico and Calexico East. The border crossing in the town of Calexico is the main entry point for pedestrians and personal vehicles. Calexico East is the commercial entry point for this area. The scale of transborder activity is obvious from the numbers. In 2005 when my primary fieldwork was done, pedestrian entries totaled 4,481,014 while 11,846,703 individuals entered the U.S. in personal vehicles*2 (U.S. Dept. of Transportation (DOT) 2009). The sheer volume of border crossings raises the question of why so many of these occur. What explains 16 million annual crossings into a sparsely settled, agriculture-oriented county with a total population of less than 150,000? The answers to this question illustrate the interdependence of cross-border communities in general and the Mexicali-Imperial region in particular.
The Imperial Valley women I studied frequently referred to the impact of the border on their family lives. They described the principal reasons for border crossing – both their own crossings and those of others on both sides of the border – as employment, shopping, education, medical treatment, and family visits.

In turning to border-related actions and interactions, it is relevant to note Carlos Velez-Ibanez’s observation that the separation of people from north and south of the border has been “one-sided: the north trying to keep out the south, whereas from the south there was little or no perception of excluding those from the north” (1996:4). This being the case, it is unsurprising that there are a number of rules and regulations that restrict the admission of Mexican residents to the U.S. and limit their stays. At the same time, there are special regulations that enable Mexican nationals living near the border to be deeply involved in the immediate U.S. border region.

Mexican citizens may enter the U.S. with a passport and valid visa or a Border Crossing Card. The Border Crossing Card (BCC) is especially relevant to understanding the transborder relations of the Imperial-Mexicali region. The BCC, also known as a laser visa or a local passport, permits frequent border crossings for Mexican individuals who live in border areas and meet certain requirements. This card allows Mexican nationals to stay in the U.S. for up to 30 days if they remain within 25 miles of the border (75 miles in Arizona).*3 The Border Crossing Card permits entry for personal business or pleasure, but does not permit entry for employment in the U.S. (U.S. Dept. of State 2010a).

Embedded in the credit card-sized BCC is a machine-readable biometric identifier (digital fingerprints or photograph) that is checked with every border crossing. Individuals seeking a BCC are required to provide employment-related information and indicate the reason for frequent border crossings. An important criterion to qualify for this card is the ability to “demonstrate that they have ties to Mexico that would compel them to return after a temporary stay in the United States” (U.S.
Because financial stability and employment in Mexico are viewed as important indicators of intent to return to Mexico, the applications of many individuals are not approved (Bean et al. 1994). Many Border Crossing Card holders cross the border daily or sometimes more than once a day, accounting for a considerable segment of border crossings.

Another group of border crossers are Mexican residents who are legal permanent residents of the United States. In the Imperial-Mexicali border area, the largest group of these individuals is Mexican agricultural workers who became legal U.S. immigrants with the Special Agricultural Worker (SAW) program that was part of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986. For various reasons, many of these chose to return to Mexico to live and to commute daily or weekly to jobs on U.S. farms. These workers are sometimes referred to as “green card commuters” (Martin 2009:66). These individuals have the freedom to cross the border at will.

Dynamics of the border region

In a conversation in 2005 with Kimberly Collins, Director of the California Center for Border and Regional Economic Studies, about the dynamic interconnectedness of the Imperial-Mexicali border region, she said, “Everyone gets what they want from the border.” Her point was that everyone who lives at the border does so for a reason and benefits from it in some way. The border impinges on the lives of all border region residents, in ways that are surely positive and negative. But overall, there are compelling (and varied) reasons to live in proximity to the border.

In the course of this research I have learned much about the impact of Mexican transborder activity on the lives of research participants and their communities in the Imperial Valley. The interconnectedness of the border region is illumined here by data from a number of sources, including women’s experiences and observations. The transborder connections explored here are those related to shopping, medical services, and education. Border crossing activity related to employment also figured importantly in the experience of the Imperial County
women. I explore this subject in depth in another paper. For now, suffice it to say that a consistent theme of women’s narratives was the negative economic effects experienced by community residents when workers from “the other side” took local jobs.

### Shopping

One of the main opportunities that proximity to the border provides is the opportunity to access goods and services from “the other side.” Transborder shopping is a regular feature of U.S.-Mexico border regions. Mexicans shop in the U.S. for reasons related to quality, availability, and price. Martinez refers to these individuals as “binational consumers” (1998:77). Mexican shoppers seek higher quality products, many of which are less available in Mexico, including food, clothing, and other consumer goods. U.S. prices are lower than prices in Mexico for some products, especially highly-tariffed imports (Martinez 1998).

U.S. retailers benefit tremendously by locating near the border. The success of many Imperial Valley retail businesses depends on Mexican shoppers. Shoppers from Mexico do most of their shopping in three commercial areas. First is downtown Calexico. Pedestrian border crossers generally shop in downtown Calexico, where stores are densely packed into a half-dozen city blocks just north of the border crossing. The scale of these commercial establishments varies widely, from larger enterprises such as Sam Ellis, a locally-owned department store, and J.C. Penney, to medium-sized independent groceries and variety stores, to a multitude of small crowded shops selling an assortment of cheap imported goods. Here most customers are Mexicans and business is transacted in Spanish. This section of Calexico has a very Mexican “feel.” An American with little experience at the border might well assume they were in Mexico rather than the U.S. Signs in the grocery stores advertise “pollo” and food shops promote “tortas” and “menudo.” Receipts for purchases may even be printed in Spanish.

Downtown Calexico offers a broader variety of commercial services than do the other shopping areas. These
include insurance brokers, legal firms (specializing in immigration law), and currency exchange. Most striking are the money exchange shops, where Mexican day laborers frequently stop to change their daily wages from dollars to pesos before crossing back to Mexico.

Two miles north of the border is the second main commercial area drawing transborder shoppers. Shopping here requires a vehicle. This area, just off Highway 111, the main road between Calexico and Brawley, has a Wal-Mart as its central feature. Other retailers are a mix of well-known American companies such as Toys R Us and Radio Shack as well as local establishments.

The third main shopping destination is Imperial Valley Mall, a gleaming, new regional mall located nine miles north of the international border. A local Chamber of Commerce official explained to me the presence of this facility saying, “The IV Mall was built because of Mexico – for shoppers from Mexico. No way can the county support this mall.” This indoor mall opened in 2005, offering customers air conditioned comfort and access to 80 stores. Most significantly, the mall provides a very typical American shopping experience with major U.S. retailers such as Dillard’s, Macy’s, Sears, JC Penney, Victoria’s Secret, the Disney Store, and Express represented. Nothing in the mix of retailers suggests that the mall is anywhere near the Mexican border. Most Mexican shoppers drive to this mall in privately owned vehicles, but taxis are also frequently seen dropping off people who have presumably crossed the border on foot.

Shoppers from Mexico provide strong support for Imperial County businesses. A survey of the cross-border shopping activity of Mexicali households found that the top three products purchased in the U.S. are clothing, foot wear, and chicken. Other items frequently purchased are appliances, auto parts, and other foods. Four in ten Mexicali residents spend more than $50 when they visit the United States (CCBRES 2003). The representation of license plates from Mexican states in store parking lots provides evidence of the importance of these shoppers. In my best effort to assess the percentage of cars with Mexico license plates in the Wal-Mart parking lot on an
ordinary, mid-week afternoon, I found around 48\% of cars to be from Mexico.

An intriguing point here is that Wal-Mart is an important retailer in Mexico; in fact, it is the largest private employer in the country with 702 stores in 64 cities in 2005 (Wal-Mart Mexico 2010). Further, Mexicali – just over the border from Calexico – has two Wal-Marts. The reasons Mexican shoppers bother to cross the border to patronize this establishment are related to quality and selection. Wal-Mart Mexico, with headquarters in Mexico City, stocks its stores with merchandise oriented toward the Mexican consumer. Mexicans who shop the Calexico Wal-Mart do so for products oriented toward the American consumer and deemed to be more desirable and of higher quality than those available in their local Wal-Marts. It was not possible to do the same license plate analysis at the Imperial Valley Mall, with its nearly 5,000 parking spaces, but in general, the proportion of cars from Mexico in the parking lot was typically substantial, but lower than the percentage at Wal-mart.*5

The presence of so many Spanish-speaking visitors resulted in many jobs requiring bilingual skills. One might assume that if the lack of bilingual skills presents an obstacle to the employment of Latinos, job-seekers are likely to be deficient in English. In fact, it was lack of competence in Spanish that disqualified some women from particular jobs in this border region. Every woman who participated in this research – each of whom was second or third generation Mexican American – was fluent in English. However, not everyone was fluent in Spanish. A few third generation women were not. For example, Helen Estrada is a 28-year old mother of four whose Texas-born parents did not speak Spanish in their home. She has been looking conscientiously for a job, without success. She says, “I know if I did know two languages, I would automatically get a job. Actually, I was rejected twice because I didn’t speak Spanish – I wasn’t bilingual. Which is understandable, you know. They want somebody who can communicate with more customers.”

The Wal-Mart in Calexico is the clearest example of an employer whose hiring practices seem oriented toward appealing
to Mexican shoppers. Here facility in Spanish is more important than English competence and job applicants with Mexican cultural traits seem to be favored over Mexican Americans who are more assimilated to American culture. Marta Lujan describes her experience applying for a job at Wal-Mart in Calexico: “I went to pick up an application. I am speaking English, right? The person I am talking to is answering me in Spanish. I think they wanted somebody that was totally Mexican and that maybe just spoke a little bit of English, but their main language was Spanish.” She later had an interview at this Wal-Mart. “They ask me questions in Spanish and I answer them back in Spanish.” Marta did not get the job and concludes, “I think I was too Americanized. I don’t know.”

Health Care and Medical Services

Border region residents also cross the international boundary to access health care and medical services. In general, the transborder transaction occurring here is that Mexico residents gain access to higher quality health care in the U.S., while U.S. residents gain access to lower cost health care and medical services in Mexico.

The movement of people from a developing nation to a developed nation for high quality medical care raises complicated issues. One of the community leaders I interviewed in Brawley told me that many women from Mexico come to Brawley to give birth at the local hospital, Pioneers Memorial Hospital. This subject is sensitive, and raises some morally-charged accusations, because these women typically do not pay for the medical care they receive. There is considerable resentment regarding this situation in among local people because the provision of this care depletes local community resources. This official explained that the hospital tries to get grants from the State of California to offset some of the extraordinary costs associated with its location as a border-region hospital, but there is limited assistance available. In talking about this situation, the women I interviewed pointed to the closing of the hospital in Calexico as evidence of the stress on the medical system caused by border crossers. The hospital in Calexico had provided a substantial amount of care to Mexican
border crossers; the conventional wisdom was that as a direct result, the hospital could not control costs, was not financially viable, and had to shut down. They worry that they too could lose their local hospital. Both Pioneers Memorial Hospital in Brawley and El Centro Regional Medical Center accept Mexican patients who are at risk if they fail to receive medical care. This is consistent with their legal responsibility to provide emergency care to all, regardless of ability to pay. This includes providing childbirth services to pregnant women whose labor has advanced beyond the initial stages. Individuals who are not at risk are not provided care.

A Mexican woman might also be motivated to give birth at one of the Imperial Valley hospitals because the child would be born a United States citizen. None of the women in my sample or the community professionals I interviewed expressed resentment related to the matter of citizenship. Rather, their entire concern revolved around the depletion of this community’s limited financial resources.

A principal reason for U.S. to Mexico border crossings is accessing lower cost health care and pharmaceuticals. Many U.S. citizens, especially retirees, buy their medications and receive medical, dental, and optical care in Mexico at prices far lower than in the U.S. For many retirees, this represents an economic strategy that permits them to stretch their fixed incomes. The following description by Timothy typifies the Mexican side of the border: “Second in number only to souvenir shops, pharmacies, dental offices, and medical practices line the streets near the main crossing points in nearly all Mexican border communities, creating a convenient conglomeration of services for people on fixed incomes and others who live nearby” (2005:60).

An estimated 15,000 retirees spend the winter in Imperial County (Collins 2007). An attractive feature of residing in Imperial County during the winter months is its proximity to Mexico. Most “snowbirds” stay in RV parks, either in mobile homes or in RVs they have driven south from Western Canada or Western states such as Montana, Wyoming, and Colorado. Nearly all of these seasonal residents are Anglos. The quality of
facilities and amenities provided in these parks varies widely, but in general, it is accurate to conclude that Imperial County snowbirds spend much less than do retirees who winter just two hours north and west in the Palm Springs area. Some winter residents are frank in saying they come to Imperial County because it is a place where people of modest means can afford to live seasonally. A benefit of winter residence in the county is the ready access it provides to low-cost prescription drugs and medical services in Mexico. Many retirees are uncomfortable crossing the border at Calexico because Mexicali is a large urban center and is difficult for inexperienced Americans to negotiate. The preferred alternative is driving less than an hour east on I-8 to the southeastern corner of Imperial County and crossing into Algonones from Andrade, California, a small unincorporated community in the Fort Yuma Indian Reservation.

With a population of around 4,000, Algodones represents Mexico on a manageable scale. If Mexicali is intimidating to American visitors, Algodones is not. Visitors from Canada and the United States may park for a small fee in a large secure parking lot provided by the Quechan Indian Nation on the U.S. side and walk across the border to Mexico. Just over the border is the town’s compact commercial district, an area that is four blocks square. A frequently stated claim is that there are more pharmacies, doctors, dentists and opticians in Algodones than in any similar four-block area in the world (Los Algodones 2009). Immediately inside the border are the pharmacies. Here prices for the most popular prescription drugs are posted on hand-written signs in store windows or on sandwich boards on sidewalks. Pharmacies do a brisk business. Changing U.S. dollars to pesos is unnecessary because dollars are the expected currency for cash purchases. What I found most striking was the sheer number of dental offices. An estimated 350 dentists – including pediatric dentists, orthodontists, endodontists and others – provide care for U.S. and Canadian border crossers. When business is slow, staff from dental offices and optical shops sometimes hawk their services from the sidewalk.

The town of Algodones actively promotes itself as a low-cost provider of quality medical and dental care for retirees
from the other side of the border. The website sponsored by the Algodones Tourism and Conventions Committee (COTUCO) states, “[T]his ‘border medical land’ attracts thousands of Canadians and Americans weekly. What’s the big attraction? You can find heavily discounted prescriptions, eye-glasses, and medical and dental care. And, if you listen to your friends in the snowbird RV parks, they can tell you that the care from their Algodones doctor or dentist is as good as anywhere back home”*6 (Los Algodones 2009). Accessing lower cost health care and medical services in Mexico is obviously appealing to many. My quick and incomplete survey of vehicles in the Quechan parking lot found cars from sixteen U.S. states and four Canadian provinces.

Education

Observations at the pedestrian border crossing at First Street in Calexico reveal that a significant number of Mexican children cross the international border daily for school. A few blocks east of the border crossing, in clear view of the fenced barricade that separates Mexico and the United States, is the Calexico Mission School, a 400-student private school associated with the Seventh Day Adventist Church (Calexico Mission School 2010). The school uniforms – all children in burgundy or white shirts, boys in dark trousers and girls in plaid skirts – easily identify students from this school. Approximately 85% of students in this K-12 school are from Mexicali; they cross the border daily from Mexico to the United States and back again (Steffen 2009). In the mid-afternoon, dozens of students, some walking alone, some clustered in small groups, in some cases older students minding younger ones, can be seen approaching the border crossing. Also in evidence are women – some surely mothers, but also other women, perhaps grandmothers, aunts, or neighbors – who approach the border crossing with one or more younger children in tow. Frequently these women have done some shopping in Calexico and carry one or two plastic bags with them. On hot days, women might carry an umbrella for sun protection. A notable sight is a Mexican woman, umbrella over her head against the beating sun, leading a small troop of uniformed children in single file down
First Street. In addition, some parents cross the border by car and pick up their children in the school parking lot.

The description above of the Calexico Mission School and its students differs from the common observation of border scholars that a typical feature of life at the border is the movement of students from Mexico across the border to attend public schools in the U.S. (Martinez 1998; Velez-Ibanez 1996). Hansen’s (2006) analysis of the border crossing activities of women in the border twin towns of Douglas, Arizona and Agua Prieta, Sonora found that while the most common reason for women’s border crossing was shopping, many also crossed regularly to transport their children to and from school in Douglas.

In fact, I also observed a few junior high and high school-aged youths wearing tee shirts and sweatshirts with logos from Calexico public schools and crossing the border from Calexico to Mexicali in the mid-afternoon. I assumed these teens were students returning to Mexicali after a day at school in Calexico. When I asked my community sources how it is that students from Mexico attend U.S. public schools, the immediate answer was that most of these families have a relative in Calexico. Border-crossing students are enrolled in the school as a member of the household of extended family members in the United States. Schools require proof of residency, but “proof” may misrepresent realities. As a result, classes in Calexico Public Schools are, as one woman said, “overpopulated,” meaning large class sizes and crowded classrooms are the norm. Local public schools are less convenient to the international border than is the mission school. Some parents walk an elementary or middle school child across and border and put her or him in a taxi to be dropped off at a city school. After school, that child is either picked up by a taxi or brought to the border or a parent drives across the border and picks up the child at school.

The presence of non-resident students from Mexico in Imperial County Public Schools is a contentious issue in the community. Many believe the schools do not do enough to verify residence. While some rant on this subject in blogs and letters to the editor of the Imperial Valley News, cooler heads tend to
make two points. The first is that the addition of students from Mexico increases the percentage of English language learners in classrooms, thereby increasing the daunting challenges already faced by classroom teachers. Second, Imperial County children are already some of the most disadvantaged in the State of California. Increasing student numbers function to exacerbate existing inequalities.

The truly dynamic nature of border activity may be seen in that some Mexican American families living in Calexico enroll their children in private schools in Mexicali. These parents perceive the Calexico public schools to be sub-standard, but they cannot afford U.S. private schools. Mexican private schools represent an alternative because they provide a private school experience that is reasonable by U.S. standards. Erica Martinez reported that her brother’s family did this for several years. Another woman, a university student at SDSU who did not meet the criteria for inclusion in my research sample, told me that her younger brother was a student at a private school in Mexico. In fact, her mother sometimes made three round trips across the border per day – one “drop off” trip to school in Mexicali, one “pick up” trip home from school, and then sometimes a trip back for after school activities.

Unauthorized Border Crossings

It is unsurprising that in this county with the highest rate of unemployment in California and with many of the women I interviewed unemployed and looking for work, the first concern is jobs. Women did think Mexican citizens were taking “their” jobs, but the people taking them were not the Mexicans from Southern states like Chiapas and Oaxaca who crossed the border illegally in the desert with coyote guides or swam across the All-American Canal. Rather, they were concerned about Mexicali residents who crossed the border legally in the morning, worked in the Imperial Valley (whether or not they were authorized to work), and returned to Mexicali at night to repeat the same routine the next day. The critical distinction here is that these transborder commuters were legal border crossers, but they may be illegal workers. Research by Frank Bean and his colleagues (1994) on the legal status of Mexican commuter workers at the
El Paso/Juarez border found that one-third of this group entered the U.S. legally with a BCC, but then worked illegally. In their typology of Mexican border crossers, they refer to this group as legal crossers/illegal workers.

Imperial County as a Site of Border Enforcement

Introducing the subject of border enforcement adds complexity to our analysis. This paper initially framed the construction of the border as a dynamically interconnected region. Conceptualizing the border in this way may lead readers to question the heavy policing of the boundary between partner regions in an integrated social system that transcends national boundaries. These are contradictory impulses. Upon examination, we will see that as a public policy matter, the U.S. has since the early-to-mid 1990s adopted policies that increasingly construct the border to be a heavily guarded barrier between nations, while at the same time promoting the creation of a permeable, dynamic border region.

Historically speaking, U.S.-Mexico border enforcement is relatively new. Historian Patricia Limerick (1987) points out that it was European and not Mexican immigration that was an important public issue in the early twentieth century. The Immigration Act of 1924 restricted immigration by imposing numerical quotas for European immigration, but not for immigration from Western Hemisphere nations.*7 The only stipulations for Mexican immigration were literacy, the prohibition of contract labor, and an $8.00 head tax. Limerick notes that none of these requirements was strictly enforced (1987:246).

The Border Patrol was established in 1924 to control both the Mexican and Canadian borders. At this time the international boundaries were divided into “sectors,” with border control operations instituted in each sector. With the establishment of the El Centro Sector in 1924, Imperial County has played an important role in border control since the very beginning. At present, the U.S. is divided into twenty sectors, nine of which patrol the U.S.-Mexico border. Approximately 98% of apprehensions occur at the Southwest border. This means
that of 1.19 million border patrol apprehensions nationwide in 2005, 1.17 million of these occurred in the sectors at the U.S.-Mexico border (Terrazas 2008).

The El Centro Sector covers an area of more than 23,400 square miles. Its agents patrol 71.1 miles of the United States-Mexico international border. Sector operations are conducted through four stations located at Calexico and El Centro in Imperial County, and Indio and Riverside to the north in Riverside County. The Calexico Station administers the international border crossing at Calexico and patrols the city and the 37 miles of international boundary to the east. The El Centro Station patrols the desert and mountains west of Calexico, a span of 34 linear miles (U.S. Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) 2007).

The Imperial Valley is further involved in border security as the location of one of eight U.S. government-owned detention centers operated by the Office of Detention and Removal, a division of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). This facility, the El Centro Service Processing Center (SPC), is a detention center for adult males facing deportation or waiting for a decision on their immigration case (U.S. ICE 2009). The U.S. Immigration Court responsible for hearing the cases of detained individuals is also located in the detention center. In recent years, the average number of individuals in detention in this facility on any day has been approximately 450 (Fessenden 2010).

One of the strategies mentioned on the El Centro Sector web site for accomplishing its mission is a highly visible deployment of agents. By all observations, this strategy has been successful. Border agents are regularly seen patrolling the county’s population centers by a number of different means, including patrols on foot or horseback, by bicycle or motorcycle, in a variety of motor vehicles, and in low-flying helicopters. While the greatest concentration of border control agents is evident in Calexico, I saw border agents in all Imperial Valley cities and towns. Community professionals I interviewed tended to believe most Mexicans in Imperial County were here legally. Their general viewpoint is that people who have managed to cross illegally will quickly move further north where less
immigration enforcement occurs. As one individual noted, “You can’t even get into the county now from San Diego if you are illegal with the new checkpoint on I-8.” The new checkpoint on Interstate Highway 8 monitors the immigration status of individuals moving east and west. She referred to the fact that the two long-utilized Border Patrol traffic checkpoints on California Highways 86 and 111 in Imperial County monitor northbound traffic to prevent illegal entrants from leaving the border region. These traffic stops are positioned more than 25 miles north of the border, also serving to deter Mexicans with border crossing cards from leaving their travel zone limit of 25 miles from the border.

Operation Gatekeeper, begun in 1994, reframed the task of border control in Imperial County and reshaped life in the community. The San Diego area had historically been the site of heaviest illegal crossing activity into the U.S. from Mexico. Operation Gatekeeper used a “prevention and deterrence” strategy, preventing many prospective migrants from crossing at the San Diego border by adding officers, enhancing surveillance equipment, and putting up physical barriers (Nieves 2002).*8 Tightening the border there meant prospective immigrants would need to find another entry point to the U.S.; the illegal immigrant stream would necessarily shift eastward, where migrants would encounter rough mountain terrain and vast deserts. This strategy assumed that harsh geography would serve as a natural deterrent to immigration (Berenstein, 2004a). What happened instead was that the policy mostly channeled illegal immigration to more hazardous areas, and increasingly, immigrants coped with the increased risk of the journey by using human smugglers, otherwise know as coyotes, who they believed would ensure their safety (Cornelius 2001).

The strain on local institutions precipitated by a new federal strategy of border enforcement is especially clear when we consider the statutory responsibilities of coroners and community hospitals. The Imperial County Coroner’s Office is responsible under California law for determining the cause of death, identifying the body, and notifying the next of kin when an individual dies in the county. This includes, of course, migrants who die crossing the border. The coroner’s office
performs autopsies and works closely with the Mexican consulate in Calexico to establish identification. Bodies awaiting identification are stored at Frye Chapel and Mortuary in Brawley. And eventually, many of the dead are buried in the paupers’ section of the Park Terrace Cemetery in Holtville. The burial expenses for individuals who have been identified are paid by their families or the Mexican government. Unidentified individuals are buried as John or Jane Doe, with the county covering the costs (LeDuff 2004). By 2004, the county had spent $1.7 million on expenditures related to border deaths (Berestein 2004b).

I visited the Park Terrace Cemetery in 2010. By then, the number of graves in the pauper’s field was estimated to be 750. Most were the final resting places of individuals who perished in the desert or drowned in the All-American Canal while attempting to cross the U.S.-Mexico border. Brick-shaped markers provide identification, if known. The pauper’s section, located behind a conventional looking grassy cemetery and separated from it by a single barbed wire barrier, is an entirely stark and barren place.

Many who survive the border crossing require medical care. These people are usually brought to the El Centro Regional Medical Center, the hospital closest to the border, where they are most commonly treated for exposure or injuries sustained in crossing the border. According to a hospital official, the El Centro facility provides charity care in the amount of $1.5 million annually for patients assumed to be foreign nationals (Berestein 2004b). The hospital provides emergency care as it is required by law to do, but in most cases, it is not reimbursed from federal border control funds. (The Calexico hospital mentioned earlier in this chapter closed in 1995.)

For several years, the El Centro Sector had the dubious distinction of being the sector with the highest number of border-crosser deaths.*9 This reflects two deadly scenarios that played out all too often for Mexicans and others crossing illegally into Imperial County, resulting in death from either exposure or drowning.
Immigrant deaths due to exposure were rare on the Southwest border prior to 1994, but rose dramatically with the new immigration policy that rechanneled illegal crossings from urban areas to deserts. Heat-related exposure became the leading cause of death by 1998 (U.S. GAO 2006). Leslie Berestein (2004a) provides an example of the shift that occurred in immigrant crossings. As illegal border crossings in the San Diego sector became more difficult, an area near the small town of Ocotillo – just over the San Diego County line into Imperial County – became a popular crossing route. Illegal migrants began their trip to the U.S. on a trail near Mexico’s Highway 2, between Mexicali and Tijuana. Its popularity derived from the fact that this border area had no surveillance cameras or fencing. This desert trek took migrants over the border and across Davies Valley toward California Highway 98, the southernmost east-west road in the area and in close proximity to the border. As Berestein notes, most of these border crossers had never seen a desert and were “woefully unprepared” for the trip (2004a).

Migrants making desert crossings – whether near the San Diego County line or anywhere else in the Imperial desert – are vulnerable to dehydration and heat exhaustion. Wayne Cornelius, a scholar of Mexican immigration, contends that it is impossible to carry enough water for the journey. Summer temperatures in the desert average 112 degrees, with daytime highs often at 120 degrees. He estimates that migrants entering through the Imperial desert will walk 20-30 miles to reach a major road (2001:675). Many migrants – sometimes on the advice of their coyotes – take just one gallon of water, an amount insufficient for the journey. The Imperial County coroner and his deputies know all too well, however, that sufficient water does not by itself ensure that migrants will not succumb to the elements. Excessive heat can raise a border crosser’s body temperature to a level that results in death (Ellingwood 2004).

As unlikely as it may sound in the California desert, the second major risk endangering illegal border crossers in the El Centro Sector is death by drowning. An estimated 550 individuals, most of them undocumented immigrants, have drowned in the All-American Canal, an aqueduct that provides the entire water supply for Imperial Valley communities and
irrigates its agriculture (CBS 2010; Spagat 2011). The All-American Canal is an 82-mile long irrigation canal that carries water from the Colorado River to the Valley. At its widest point, the canal is 200 feet wide, and is at its deepest, 20 feet deep. It originates at the Imperial Diversion Dam, 18 miles northeast of Yuma, Arizona. Fifty-three miles of the canal run parallel to and just north of the U.S.-Mexico border (NASA 2009).

From the surface, water in the canal appears deceptively quiet. In fact, the canal moves more than 26,000 cubic feet of water per second and has a strong undercurrent. Immigrants who attempt to cross the canal on a raft or swim across it are frequently unprepared for the perilous conditions they encounter. The concrete-lined sides of much of the canal make it difficult for swimmers in distress to save themselves. Drowning deaths began to rise in 1997 and continued to mount in subsequent years, becoming the major cause of border crossing deaths in the El Centro Sector (Cornelius 2001).

Operation Gatekeeper’s success in reducing illegal entries in San Diego and the corresponding effect of increased illegal entries in Imperial County is apparent from immigration statistics. Between fiscal years 1994 and 2000, apprehensions of illegal migrants in the San Diego sector fell 66 per cent, from 450,152 to 151,681. In the same period, El Centro sector apprehensions rose an astonishing 761 percent from 27,654 to 238,126 (Cornelius 2001:665).

The federal response to soaring illegal border activity in Imperial County was a dramatic increase in funding for El Centro Sector operations and additional border agents. In 2002, border-crossing deaths began to decline in Imperial County, and the Tucson sector took over (and continues to hold) the dubious distinction of having the most immigrant crossing deaths annually. This change is believed by many to be associated with a shift of the illegal immigrant stream further east from the now more heavily fortified Imperial County border to the less tightly guarded Tucson sector border in Arizona. Over the course of the past decade, human smugglers have increasingly viewed the Arizona desert as the easiest route for guiding would-be immigrants across the U.S. border. By 2008, 45% of all
apprehensions of illegal immigrants in the Southwest border area were in the Tucson sector (U.S. Dept. of Homeland Security 2009).

The Imperial County border is an increasingly barricaded border. Increased budgets have provided hundreds of additional border guards, steel fencing, high-intensity lighting, motion detector sensors, thermal imaging devices, and remote video cameras. In the post-September 11, 2001 era, an insecure Mexican border has been reframed as a threat to national security (Tirman 2006). In this context the American public has generally supported a heavy investment in border security. The Secure Fence Act of 2006 has also gone forward, providing $1.5 billion to provide additional fencing (a type of “tactical infrastructure”) and enhanced electronic surveillance (sometimes called “virtual fencing”). One of the stipulations of this law is a border fence from ten miles west of the Calexico, California port of entry to five miles east of the Douglas, Arizona port of entry, a distance of approximately 361 miles (AILA 2006).

By 2008, the number of border patrol agents in El Centro Sector had risen to nearly 1,100 and apprehensions had fallen to 40,962. The downward trend in apprehensions here is consistent with similar declines elsewhere. Total apprehensions at the U.S.-Mexico border had declined sharply from their recent peak of 1,643,679 in 2000 to 705,022 in 2008. Explanations for the reduction vary. U.S. Customs and Border Patrol concludes that fewer apprehensions indicate that the border patrol has been successful in its mission to improve border security. Miles of new fencing are completed every year, extending the physical barrier to border crossing. Further, more agents and advanced technology are providing better enforcement (U.S. CBP 2008a). The supposition here is that in implementing a deterrence-based strategy as the Border Patrol has done, fewer apprehensions means that prospective illegal border crossers were deterred from attempting an entry.

Other analysts suggest different explanations. First, new border enforcement strategies have increased the financial costs and physical risks of crossing the U.S.-Mexico border (Cornelius 2005). This means that once illegal entrants manage to cross into
the U.S., they are more likely to extend their stays, returning to their home country less frequently, and, perhaps, remaining in the U.S. permanently. As a result, total attempted border crossings are reduced. Second, most illegal border crossers entering the U.S. are economic migrants. They cross the U.S. border for employment. The high rate of unemployment associated with the current economic downturn in the U.S. functions to depress immigration by decreasing the likelihood that an immigrant will find desired employment. Passel and Cohn find that the economic recession has had a “harsh impact” on the employment of Latino immigrants (2009:i) Third, in assessing numbers of illegal immigrants, both illegal crossings and visa overstays must to taken into account.

As part of my effort to understand this research setting, I spent considerable time driving around and through this vast, but sparsely populated county. I sometimes avoided familiar direct routes to my destinations to explore new areas. One day, instead of taking I-8 back from San Diego to El Centro, I exited I-8 at Ocotillo and dropped down to California Highway 98, which would take me into Calexico. Highway 98, a two-lane, 56 miles unlimited access road, is the southernmost east-west road in the county. It is a mile or two north of the U.S.-Mexico border, which in this area runs through the uninhabited desert. Traveling this route provided me with an opportunity to observe considerable border enforcement activity in a rural rather than city context. Because this is a common illegal crossing area, it is unsurprising that this area is closely monitored. Since the Ocotillo-Davis Valley area became a popular area for illegal crossing in around 1997, dozens of border crossing-deaths have occurred here. Exiting Interstate 8 at Ocotillo, I drove south a short distance on Imperial Highway passing a gas station and crossing railroad tracks to Highway 98. Here Border Patrol vehicles were parked off-road at this intersection, presumably monitoring activity in the area. Proceeding east along Highway 98, I observed border patrol to be, in the main, an off-road enterprise. Border patrol vehicles traversed the area using a set of tracks and trails in the desert sand. Some vehicles used a one-lane dirt track that ran parallel to the highway, just south of it, and extended for miles. Trucks and off-road vehicles also cut in and out of the rough terrain on the north side of the highway.
The dirt track mentioned above was also used in an effective but low-tech strategy to detect illegal activity. Here I observed a border patrol vehicle dragging a set of tires that were harnessed together through the dirt. In doing so, they created a smooth and undisturbed surface. Anyone who had made an illegal entry into the U.S. through this desert area would need to cross the track to get to the paved road, leaving footprints on the groomed dirt track to signal their presence. It would be difficult to exaggerate the stark desolation along this route. It was inhospitable to both vegetation and human habitation.

My own experience of the Imperial Valley as a border region was reinforced almost daily in a way I did not anticipate. I was a research associate at San Diego State University in Calexico and had chosen Brawley – approximately 20 miles north as my primary research setting. I lived in El Centro, midway between Brawley and Calexico, and a modest drive to both. To be specific, I lived on the far south side of El Centro, just south of and in sight of Interstate 8. What I did not anticipate was low-flying border control helicopters patrolling the area along I-8 after dark most nights. Helicopter patrols were initially startling and their noise was always disruptive.

My research participants – all second and third generation Mexican Americans and U.S. citizens – had next to no direct interaction with border enforcement personnel. Certainly, they experienced border control as part of the larger social context in which they lived. They endured traffic checkpoints like everyone else; border patrol circulated through their neighborhoods. But they did not seem to see the border control enterprise as something that related very directly to them. They accepted the border patrol’s presence and activities without analysis or critique. In general, their sentiment seemed to be this: we live in a border community, so we need the border patrol to do its job. In fact, the one shared characteristic that allowed these women to be quite disengaged on this subject was the reality that all of them were U.S. citizens; the border patrol was a matter of concern for people who were illegal. This made all the difference. The main point women made in talking about border control was that border patrol agents had some of the best jobs in the county.
Antonia Alivar was the only woman I interviewed who described an incident with the border patrol. The desperate economic circumstances of the family had placed them in a housing situation in proximity to undocumented immigrants. Antonia had lost her job and her unemployment had run out. Her husband had been ill and unable to work. This family of five rented a tiny two-bedroom mobile home without heat or air conditioning in a run-down mobile home park. I asked her if the park was safe and quiet. She says that it was, but told me about frequent visits of immigration agents to the park. She told me about an incident in which her husband was outside and came to the door of the trailer and asked her for his wallet. She opened the door and found two border patrol officers standing there. She reminds me that they are U.S. citizens, but it scares her when this happens. As she explains it, this park is home to many “illegals.”

Conclusion

This paper captures a fundamental paradox at the Imperial-Mexicali border. On the one hand, U.S. citizens and Mexican citizens with the requisite documents cross the border to engage in various economic and social activities. Mexicans cross to the U.S. to shop at Dillard’s. Americans cross to Mexico for prescriptions. Mexican children cross to attend the Calexico Mission School. Mexican Americans cross to visit relatives. And on it goes. In addition, some crossborder activity reveals connections between Imperial Valley communities and Mexicali that go beyond the decisions and preferences of individuals. For example, marching bands from Mexicali high schools participate in the annual Cattle Call Parade, a major community event in Brawley. And some women I interviewed told me they crossed the border when their children had soccer games in Mexicali.

At the same time, the U.S. government spends billions of dollars on fencing, technology, and personnel to limit the access of some Mexican citizens to the U.S. side of the border. The “war on drugs” is a battle that is fought in large measure at the border. The paradox at the Imperial-Mexicali border is the same paradox that characterizes the entire U.S.-Mexico border. This examination of life on the border reveals contradictory impulses.
toward what might be called, in Peter Andreas’ words, “a borderless economy and a barricaded border.” The present situation is that the border is “more blurred and more sharply demarcated” than in the past (2003:4). In examining life at the Mexicali-Imperial border, it is ironic to note that NAFTA, the agreement intended to enable North American partners to transcend national boundaries, was instituted in 1994, the same year that Operation Gatekeeper, the program resulting in massive increases in funding for border enforcement, was implemented.

Although the concepts of “border as regional social and economic system” and “border as physical boundary” pull us in different directions, Frank Bean and his colleagues bring these concepts together to see the border “as a complex mixture of both integrating and differentiating processes that are often in tension with one another” (Bean et al. 1994:6; Lowenthal and Burgess 1993). This tension predicts that public policy-related discussions of border issues may be contentious. Here, we may expect that individuals with “views that give overriding emphasis to the border as a mostly geographic boundary between sovereign states tend to highlight divergences in state interests and the need for policies that protect these,” while individuals with “views that give predominate weight to the border as an area in which northern Mexico and the southwestern United States are inextricably tied together tend to highlight convergences in state interests and the need for policies that foster further integration” (Bean et al. 2004:6).

Border-Based Discomforts and Contradictions

I have done considerable thinking about the border as I conducted my research Imperial County and as I have worked on this manuscript. I agree with the dominant perspective in the border literature that it is more accurate to describe the border as an integrated region than a boundary between nation states. But a possible consequence of conceptualizing the border as an integrated system is that massive border-based inequalities may be invisible in this construction. The life chances of border-dwellers depend in large measure on whether they live on the U.S. or Mexico side of the border. Americans crossing the border to Mexico for cheap prescriptions represents a different
relationship with the border than does Mexicans crossing the border to the U.S. for work because you are desperate to provide for your family. Relations of power are deeply embedded in the borderlands. I believe we can better communicate that transborder exchanges and interactions do not occur on equal terms. For example, the commonly used reference to pairs of border cities such as Calexico-Mexicali or El Paso-Juarez is as “twin towns” or “sister cities.” Vila contends that this language contributes to what he calls “the construction of sameness” to be found on both sides of the border (2000:124). This construction, in all cases, obscures dramatic inequalities.

One of the scholarly themes in narrating life at the border is agency. Mexican women and men are often described as exercising agency as they cross the border into the U.S. for work, medical care, or education. I do not intend to adjudicate here the moral dilemmas of border crossing, especially those at a border separating a developing nation from a developed nation. Of course I celebrate women who manage by extraordinary measures to, for example, feed their children adequately. But I found that my study of social relations on the U.S. side of the border increased the complexity of this matter in my thinking. The Imperial County women are trying to get ahead, trying to achieve the American Dream, defined as a stable job, a home, and decent prospects for their children. But many are poor people in a poor place. They experience competition with unauthorized workers as a zero sum game: the number of jobs is limited and every job that goes to someone from “the other side” is one that will not benefit a particular family in this community. They also fear that their hospital will close and their children’s education will suffer. We see that the Imperial County women negotiate multiple macrosystems of inequality that include the local and the global. In U.S. society they experience disadvantage on the basis of their race-ethnicity, social class, gender, and place. However, in respect to relations of inequality in the border region, they are socially privileged.
Notes

*1 This would be comparable to depositing someone in Calexico whose home was in Minneapolis, Minnesota or Memphis, Tennessee.

*2 In 2005, 320,212 commercial trucks entered through Calexico East (U.S. DOT 2009).

*3 Prior to August of 2004, Border Crossing Card regulations enabled Mexicans to remain in the U.S. for only 72 hours. The Federal Register notes that extending the period to 30 days accomplishes two things: first, it creates greater parity between policies for Mexican and Canadian nationals; second, it promotes commerce and tourism near the southern border of the U.S. (U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2004:50051).

*4 Visa applicants must also demonstrate their intention to return to their home country. According to the U.S. State Department, “The presumption in the law is that every visitor visa applicant is an intending immigrant. Therefore, applicants for visitor visas must overcome this presumption by demonstrating that: The purpose of their trip is to enter the U.S. for business, pleasure, or medical treatment; That they plan to remain for a specific, limited period; Evidence of funds to cover expenses in the United States; Evidence of compelling social and economic ties abroad; and That they have a residence outside the U.S. as well as other binding ties that will insure their return abroad at the end of the visit” (U.S. Dept. of State 2010a).

*5 The significance of the cross-border shopper became especially clear to me in March, 2010, when on a return research trip to Imperial County, I happened to visit Imperial Valley Mall on a Monday afternoon. Rather than finding it quiet, as I had expected, it was bustling with customers. I later found that this day, March 15, 2010, was a public holiday in Mexico in celebration of the birthday of Benito Juarez, the famous President of Mexico and national hero. Apparently many Mexicans decided to spend part of their holiday shopping in the U.S.

*6 The same website provides prospective visitors with advice intended to quell possible concerns about border crossing: “We recommend that you park in the lot on the U.S. side and walk over. Most people do. Entering Mexico is effortless. No one checks your ID or inquires about what you are bringing in. Just stroll across and voila you are in another country.”
A public outcry marked by nativism followed the omission of Mexico from the quota system. Concerns about an unrestricted number of Mexican immigrants were countered by Southwestern growers and others who emphasized the need for Mexican labor (Limerick 1987).

The number of border control agents with the San Diego sector increased from 980 in 1993 to 2,274 in 1998 (Nunez-Neto and Garcia 2007).

Accurate totals for migrant border deaths are not available. A number of sources provide data on this subject; in some cases, considerable variation is seen between data sources. The Border Patrol did not track deaths until 1998. Imperial County coroner records show that in 1995, ten migrants died crossing the border. These numbers rose gradually until 2001, when approximately 100 deaths occurred (U.S. GAO 2006).

Works Cited


News and Imaginings from the Borderlands: Responding to Barbara Wells

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In about 220 BCE the Qin Emperor in China had a vision of a great wall that would protect Chinese civilization from “the barbarians.” That first wall, which was built at enormous human cost with forced labor, came to represent something about the way the Chinese empire saw itself in relation to people of the Eurasian steppe that stretched westward for hundreds of miles. For the Chinese this wall was a marker of identities—it divided the “civilized world”—the Chinese world of course—from the barbarians—the horseback riding nomads of the borderlands. The wall was not maintained continuously over the succeeding centuries but in 1500, the Ming Emperors, fearful again of the strangers on the steppe and unable to craft a workable policy for interacting with them, ordered a new round of wall building—again at enormous expense. The result was The Great Wall of China and it is undoubtedly still an impressive sight. Certainly when President Richard Nixon was taken to see it he was impressed. “This,” he solemnly pronounced, “is a great wall.”

As I finished Dr. Wells excellent paper on the complexities of the border region in Imperial Valley California, I was reminded of the Great Wall because for the last few decades the United States, a similarly powerful and prosperous country, has been engaged in building a Great Fence along its southern border to keep at bay people who are routinely marked in popular American discourse as “aliens” if not exactly “barbarians.” Today the Great Wall snakes its way across a stunning array of terrain for 1500 miles. At an average height
and width of 25 feet, it represents an amazing feat of building and engineering in the pre-modern world. Hordes of tourists from Beijing are swept up to the wall every day in air conditioned charter buses on a brand new multilane highway to walk along the wall and buy souvenirs. The terrain is rugged, the vista is breathtaking, and in some places the Great Wall seems to go straight up the mountainside and is barely wide enough for two people to pass. The countryside around is wooded and seems to be largely uninhabited. And so one wonders from this vantage point in both time and space, what was the point? What were they afraid of?

Great walls like this, of course, say as much about the people who build them as they do about the people they are barricading out. According to renowned scholar of China, Patricia Ebrey, the Great Wall mostly represents the siege mentality of the Ming Emperors--their fear and anxiety about the incessant problems on the borders. Theirs was a powerful and prosperous empire. They had the money and manpower to build a Great Wall, so they built one. It seemed such a straightforward solution to the border problem—an early modern homeland security plan built of stone, brick and mortar and manned by soldiers patrolling from the watchtowers. There it stands today—guarding against a threat which has long ceased to matter. But the wall was an important part of their policy and their identity. It was both as an attempt to protect themselves from people they feared and as a way to control access to their identity as a zone of “superior” civilization. In fact, of course, there were places along the length of the wall where nomads and Chinese were in constant interaction--in an economic relationship that was complex and necessary for both sides. For the Chinese, in spite of what they said about the nomads, needed them for their excellent horses and for the trade that this exchange engendered along the frontier.

Like the Great Wall, our Great Fence functions as a marker between “civilizations” and also, as in pre-modern China, between different economies. Border problems – border regions, border dynamics, border economies – these are the subjects of Wells’ very fine and thought provoking paper. Wells’ study plunges us into the dynamics of life on the US-Mexico border and allows us to see the complexity of the border region as it
appears through the eyes of third generation Mexican-American women who live there. But the paper is also an intriguing view of the border region through the eyes of a scholar observing at firsthand what goes on in the border region on a daily basis as she travels around and interviews these women. What is clear from her study is that this is a world where the dynamics of the globalized economy are right in your face and identities are negotiated every day. In Imperial Valley, California, people on both sides of the border are constantly making decisions about which culture and economy to engage with, which one to identify with, and which one to try to get some advantage from. From her paper is it clear that the US-Mexican border region is not a simple place for the people who live there and should not be for the U.S. policy makers who make decisions about it in Washington, D.C.

There are two powerful things going on at the border and they are separate and yet inextricably interrelated. There is the action that takes place around the boundary fence—the fortified checkpoints and the hundreds of miles of barricaded fencing and surveillance towers where one side tries to keep the other side out, where the message of identity purports to be clear: “This is the American side, that is the Mexican side.” But there is another story of this area unfolding concurrently and this is the story of this border area as a socio-economic space where the people on both sides of the border interact in an economy and society that has grown up to support people moving back and forth across this barrier on a daily basis.

One of the interesting things about walls that are built to divide people, maintain separate identities, or protect assets, is how they look after they become pointless, as eventually many of them do. I think of the remains of the Berlin Wall in Germany. Part of it has been preserved as an outdoor art gallery at the East Side Gallery where artists flocked in 1990 during the “Fall of the Wall euphoria” to paint images of hope for freedom around the world. Two giant slabs of the Wall were left sitting on the sidewalk at Potsdamer Platz in front of the glossy new Sony Center in what was the middle of a heavily fortified and militarized “No Man’s Land” just 20 years ago and is now the thriving commercial district of a dynamic European city. If, while standing next to these massive concrete slabs you look...
down at your feet you’ll see a bronze line inset into the sidewalk tracing the line of the old wall and you can walk a mile along this line and enter a newly renovated metro station that is also a photographic memorial to the history of the Wall and a celebration of post-wall “freedom.” ¹ Falling walls force us to confront issues of identity.

In 1989, barely six months before the Berlin Wall fell, American photographer Edward Murray decided to create a photographic documentary of the graffiti and pop art that covered the western side of the wall. He did this because he believed that the wall would have to come down because “the absurdity of this medieval concept would soon succumb to the realities of a modern world.”² Meanwhile, across the Atlantic the United States was launching The Great Fence. While perhaps ironic, this convergence of events might call us to think about how our Great Fence might appear in our memories and in our historical record when, like all similar walls/fences/barricades in history, it has outlived its usefulness as a policy measure. Will we spend money to preserve the Fence? Will it become the basis for a piece of art? Will it just fall into disrepair? Will tourists come? Will the Great Fence be the subject of a museum? This last question is provocative. What would a museum devoted to the Great Fence look like? What would it say about the United States in the late 20th and early 21st century and its struggle to resolve the problem of American identity? What might it try to say about the people who were constantly negotiating this border? Dr. Wells’ paper provides us with some of the images and ideas we might use to populate and furnish this museum which would, inevitably, compel us to think about complexities of the border region in Imperial Valley, California.

Let us call it “The Imperial Valley Museum of the Fence and the Border Region.” We will use this rather awkward double title because it will tell us something important – that there are two contending dynamics at work – the attempt by the US government to maintain tight control over entry into the US at the border and a community of economic and social exchange which has developed in this border region as a result of the constant movement of people across the border in the wake of the 1994 NAFTA “free trade” agreement.
I won’t attempt a full catalog of the items that might find their way into the museum but here are a few thoughts, drawn from Dr. Wells’ paper:

- A section of the Fence that visitors could touch: wire mesh with barbed wire or thick bars stretching away into the distance; security towers and surveillance cameras; maybe a price tag could be hanging from it, something in excess of 220 billion dollars.
- A surveillance helicopter – and maybe a recording of it droning overhead – a reminder of the pervasive presence of border control.
- A replica of a stretch of the ironically named “All American Canal” where hundreds of would-be immigrants were lured into its deceptively calm surface only to be pulled to their deaths by a strong undercurrent when they were unable to climb up its steep concrete sides.
- Perhaps a sage bush with a young man under it lying dead from exposure trying to cross the border in a harsh desert somewhere away from the tight security zone in Imperial County.
- A panel describing the Border Industrial Complex which lobbied Congress so effectively to keep the fence building going to enhance the sales of all sorts of high tech and low tech supplies.
- Pictures of families standing on opposite sides of the Fence visiting, sharing news, trying to stay in touch through the Fence.
- A uniform of a border patrol officer. We would have to take note of the fact that the border patrol jobs are among the best paid in the entire region, a source of possible social mobility in an area with a high poverty rate and few good jobs.

This part of the museum might not surprise us although we might find the details interesting if we are not from the area. But then the museum will also want to help us understand the complex ways in which this area functions as a region of social and economic interchange in spite of the presence of the Fence and the network of power structures that control access to the United States. Dr. Wells’ paper provides the details. Here we would begin with a border pass because Mexican citizens who
live near the border can obtain permits (after a fair amount of hassle) which allow them to go back and forth across the border as often as they like. Holders of these permits have convinced US immigration that they don’t plan to stay in the US, that they have jobs, families, and reasons to remain in Mexico. So the museum will need to show us some of the things these Mexican border crossers do that create interactions across the border:

- take their children to and from a private mission school in the US
- send their children to live with a relative living legally on the US side who can send them to an American public school
- shop at an American Wal-Mart for consumer goods not available at Mexican Wal-Mart on their side of the border, especially cheap chicken and clothing
- shop at the Imperial Valley Mall for more fashionable shoes and clothes than they can find in on the Mexican side of the border
- seek healthcare at local hospitals
- work as day laborers in the vast agricultural fields of Imperial Valley

Americans can pass over the border almost at will as long as they have a passport. And a substantial number do just that. But what do they go to Mexico for? The Museum will perhaps recreate a street in Algodones, Mexico. Dr. Wells gives a wonderful description of American and Canadian retirees flocking to winter in Imperial Valley in their RV’s and then going across the border into Mexico in search of bargain healthcare provided by Mexican doctors, dentists, and pharmacists. They feel especially comfortable crossing at Algodones where they can deal with Mexico on a manageable scale. The big city of Mexicali is, presumably, too Mexican and too big for them to negotiate easily. Thus American and Canadian snowbirds, because of their relative wealth in the borderlands economy, can live in a bubble of sorts—carefully controlling their interactions with the border.

Perhaps the most intriguing part of the Museum would be a section devoted to the third generation Mexican American women in Imperial Valley who, as citizens of the United States,
live on the “front line” of many border issues. How do they view the consequences of this mostly legal flow of Mexican citizens across the border into where they live and try to work and raise their families? What identity do they choose as Mexican Americans? What do they worry about?

- The closure of a local community hospital due to insolvency, commonly believed to have been brought on by the pressures of providing too much free medical care to Mexican citizens.
- Overcrowding in the public schools that their children attend and the strain this puts on teachers when so many of the children in school are actually from across the border and are not native English speakers; they wonder what this does to the quality of education that their children receive and thus the impact this has on their upward mobility.
- The difficulty of finding a job in this strange border economy where their own successful assimilation into American culture can work against them; because they speak English and not Spanish they are actually less desirable as workers in the border region’s economy where to be Spanish speaking or bi-lingual is more marketable because so many Spanish speakers cross the border to shop.

This border area is truly a far more complicated place than many of us imagine. In terms of identity, these women are clearly part of the “us/U.S.” side of the border when they look at the issues raised in their lives by the Fence and the economy of the border region. But how many Anglo Americans would accept their self-assessment of their identity? When Dr. Wells interviewed these women many of them could not believe that anyone (Anglos) would want to hear their stories or perspectives. They feel invisible in the “American story.”

In concluding her paper, Wells makes a point about power that is worth further contemplation. Many border scholars like to talk about border regions in positive terms as places of dynamic interchange and places of possibility for cultural integration. However, there is, as Wells points out in her conclusion, a danger in downplaying or masking the reality of the power differential on the two sides when a wealthy county
bumps up against a much poorer one. The wide disparity in wealth on the two sides of the border is real, pervasive, and important.

A possible consequence of conceptualizing the border as an integrated system is that massive border-based inequalities may be invisible in this construction. The life chances of border-dwellers depend in large measure on whether they live on the U.S or the Mexico side of the border. Relations of power are deeply embedded in the borderlands.

If the power differential and the financial differential were not real, would there even be a need for this border fence and this obsession with border security? In asking this question another fortified and walled border almost instantly comes to mind, the massive concrete barrier wall the Israeli state has been building to encircle the West Bank. The purpose of which is to keep Palestinians out of Israeli territories unless they can produce a visitor’s pass or work permit. So, although it is important to understand border regions as places of interaction there is a danger in placing too much emphasis on defining border regions as a kind of positive and dynamic community where people and cultures mingle when the border is, in fact, heavily fortified and tightly controlled. In such a space what kind of exchanges are possible? The powerful and the rich experience borders differently than do the poor.

Both NAFTA and Operation Gatekeeper were launched in the same year, one purporting to create openness, the other designed to clamp down on the border. This has led to what Peter Andreas calls a “borderless economy and a barricaded border.” Since NAFTA was launched we have been living in a world in which capital is mobile, and people are “illegal.” Perhaps this is what we will most struggle to understand about ourselves as “Americans” after the Fence is gone. How did this construct of “mobile capital” and “illegal people” come into existence as part of the “free trade” globalization which shaped border policy in the late 20th and early 21st century? Was it the right way to construct our identity? Will we as North Americans bother to ask what happened when NAFTA helped put millions of small farmers in Mexico out of business and pushed them northward in search of wage labor in the fields of North
American agribusiness? Will we ask ourselves what identity we expected these people to claim from out of this devastation?

Meanwhile, academics who study immigration suggest that our changing economic situation may drive our Great Fence policy in a different direction. How much longer will we want to spend billions of dollars on the Great Fence and border security if immigration slackens due to the poor performance of the US economy? Even conservatives in Congress might have to start asking this question. If it weren’t for the rapidly growing and politically powerful Border Industrial Complex which now has a vested interest in maintaining and expanding The Great Fence this marvel of the modern technological world might be well on its way to becoming a museum piece. But perhaps some world leader will one day come and stand at the Great Fence for a photo-op and lay down a challenge to us: “Mr. President, tear down this Fence.” We could immortalize that in the Museum as well.

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1 As you walk along this mile from the slabs to the new metro station you will pass the eerily haunting Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe where hundreds of concrete sarcophagi are sunk into the ground as a potent reminder of the 20th century’s most infamous political entity that was obsessed with walls, concrete, barbed wire, and questions of “identity.” Thus walls often bring us face to face with the question of identity and power.


3 Ted Robbins, “The U.S. Grows a Border Industrial Complex.” http://www.npr.org/2012/09/12/160758471/u-s-grows-an-industrial-complex-along-the-border. Robbins says that this is the total of the budgets of all the agencies engaged in border control since 1986, measured in today’s dollars. According to Robbins this is “roughly the entire cost of the space shuttle program. Unlike the space shuttle program, though, there’s no end in sight.”

4 Peter Andreas as quoted by Wells.
Race, Migration, and American Society:  
Our History, Our Present Situation, and What We Might Do

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A Nation of Immigrants?

“We are a nation of immigrants” is one of the axioms of American identity. It is embossed on a plaque at the base of the Statue of Liberty, right there at the front door to the country, in the words of Emma Lazarus's poem:

Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the nameless, tempest-tossed to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

One of our core beliefs as Americans imagines our country as a magical giant escalator. Every new group starts at the bottom, as foreign, and makes its way inexorably up to the top over the course of three or four generations. It’s mechanical; it's inevitable; it just happens. Along the way, in order to stay, each group has to jettison the things that distinguish it from other Americans: language, religion and ways of thinking. At the top, people are all the same and cease to have ethnicity. They are simply Americans, and American democracy is triumphant. So we believe.

Yet despite such rosy visions it has always been true that membership in American society has been available more readily
to some natives and newcomers than to others. One of the key
determinants of full membership has always been race. This
paper attempts to sketch in an outline of the complex history of
American thinking and doing with regard to immigration, race,
and membership; then to assay the current state of affairs with
regard to these matters; and finally to make a few tentative
suggestions for how informed citizens, Christian and otherwise,
might engage these issues.

Race, Immigrant Status, and the History of Membership

We Americans have always been a complicated people
in terms of our origins and identities. We have always been a
nation made up of several races, but never equally. Race in
America has never been just a matter of White and Black. We
have always been Red too, and often Brown and Yellow as well. Despite our longstanding racial multiplicity, until very recently
in our history, full membership in American society was always
limited to people who were deemed White. That's the first great
truth to stand against the myth of the magical homogenizing
American escalator. Race frames the opportunity for
membership. Some examples:

1640. John Punch, a Virginia man of African descent,
and two White men, James Gregory and a man we know only as
Victor, all indentured servants, ran away from their master.
They were apprehended and brought before a judge who
sentenced all three to be whipped. He added years to the
indentures of the two White men; John Punch, the African, was
sentenced to slavery for life.5

1787. The United States Constitution enshrined the
principle of racial slavery in a famous compromise: each
African-descended slave would count, for purposes of
Congressional representation, three-fifths as much as a White
person. Only free Whites (and usually only the owners of
substantial property) could vote. These provisions not only
ensured the subordinate status of all African-descended people
(most of whom were slaves but a small number of whom were
semi-free). It also ensured that states with large numbers of
slaves would have a disproportionately large say in how the new
nation would be governed. Three-fifths of the number of slaves in each state were added to the whole number of Whites when Congressional representation—hence the Electoral College—was decided. This electoral advantage due to the way they counted the slaves is the reason, more than any other, why four of the first five American presidents hailed from Virginia. Virginians had about one and a half times the votes per White capita that northern states like New York and Massachusetts had.  

**1790.** Congress passed the first Naturalization Act. It specified that, in order to become naturalized as an American citizen, a person had to be a "free white person."  

**1848.** The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ceded the northern half of Mexico to the United States. The government of Mexico could not do much to protect the 80,000 to 100,000 Mexican citizens who now lived in the American Southwest, but they did get them American citizenship. This put Mexicans and other Latin Americans, from that day to this, in a strangely conflicted position: They had formal, legal Whiteness, but functional, social Brownness. All through this period, American Indians were formally barred from citizenship until 1924.  

**1862.** The Homestead Act offered 160 acres of "free land" (it had until very recently been occupied by Native peoples who had been summarily pushed off it) to people who qualified to receive it. To qualify, one had to be a US citizen or declare the intent to become one. So only White people could become homesteaders. This was part of a consistent US government policy of racial replacement across the American heartland.  

**1866.** The first Civil Rights Act was passed but never enforced. The Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution, passed in 1870, forbade denying anyone the right to vote on account of race. It was cheerfully ignored from the 1870s through the 1960s.  

What about immigrants? Did immigrants experience barriers to access to full membership in American society?
Well, that depends on where they came from. If they came from Europe, access to full citizenship was pretty much wide open. To be sure, there was always something of a hierarchy among Whites. English people were always assumed to be Americans, even if they were fresh off the boat, while non-English people had to lose their accents and change their behavior to be accepted into full membership. Protestants were assumed to be more naturally American than Catholics, and both of these were thought to be more American than Jews. German immigrants experienced some discrimination during the colonial period, Irish and Italians during the nineteenth century. But no people whom we now call White ever experienced anything like being killed en masse or shipped off their land as Native peoples were; being sold and branded and whipped and compelled to work as Africans were; being excluded from citizenship and barred from the country as Asians were. No people whom we currently recognize as White ever had their fitness for citizenship denied in court.

Asians, by contrast, were barred from acquiring citizenship through naturalization. In 1882, after a three-decade campaign that included lynching, mob violence, and mass deportations from various locations, Congress passed a law barring Chinese workers from entering the country. In 1924 they added Japanese and other Asians. In that 1924 law they also established a quota system, which left wide the door for English and other mostly-Protestant, Northwest European peoples, but only a crack for the largely Catholic and Jewish Eastern and Southern Europeans. The total ban on Asians was not loosened until the era of World War II. The racially-inflected quota system was not abandoned entirely until 1965.

Since 1965, the racial profile of America's immigrant population has changed substantially. Under the racially-motivated quota system, the vast majority of immigrants came from Europe, with a secondary number coming from Canada. After the 1965 act, the sources of immigration shifted. Since the 1970s, the largest number of immigrants has come from Latin America, with the next largest group coming from Asia. It is significant that, in this new era, immigrants from Asia and Latin
America were accorded at least legal access to full citizenship, if not social access to full membership, in American society.\textsuperscript{11}

\textbf{Biblical Principles}

Now let us turn to the current political scene with regard to these issues and make some guesses about America’s immigration and racial future. Since many of the people here today are Christians, or at least people who respect Christianity, and since the Maryville Symposium is connected with a Christian-inflected purpose, I would like to offer, as a conceptual guide for our thinking, some wisdom from the Bible. The principles I'm going to cite appear again and again throughout the Old and New Testaments; they are among the most common of Biblical principles.

The overarching principle is given in Genesis 1:27: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Galatians 3:28 adds an important part of the picture. In God's eyes, it says, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female." Human beings are special creatures made in God's image, and God does not recognize distinctions such as race and gender among them. Leviticus 19:33-34 tells us explicitly how to think about immigrants: "When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated just exactly as you treat one of your native-born. Love him as you love yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God."

\textbf{The State of Our Nation in Regard to Race and Membership}

So what is the practical reality regarding race, migration, and membership in the United States today? Although some of us would like to think we live in a post-racial era, when the prejudices and discriminations of yesteryear are behind us, sadly that is not the case.

\textit{African Americans}

Take, for instance, the current situation of African Americans. It is true that in many respects access to full
membership in American society has improved over the decades that I have been alive. The Civil Rights movement, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which banned the poll taxes and literacy tests that kept African Americans from voting and taking full part in their American citizenship, resulted in Black sheriffs in southern towns and Black members in Congress. They resulted in Blacks in the boardroom and Blacks on television. On TV today we see apparently Black husbands with apparently White wives in car commercials and advertisements for household products. Today, at least for the moment, we have a Black President, although we must admit that part of his appeal is that he is a particular kind of Black man. He is not Al Sharpton or Charlie Rangel. We know that he is not the descendant of African American slaves (at least not on his father's side). Instead, his father was some kind of elite African who came to study in exotic Hawai‘i, dropped his seed, and then went out of his son's life forever. We know that President Obama was raised in Hawai‘i and Indonesia by his hippie mother as well as his Kansas grandparents. We know that he performs Whiteness as well as he performs Blackness, so he is accessible to those of us who are White in a way that no Black great-grandson of former slaves would be accessible. Still, it is remarkable that the United States should, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, have elected any Black man at all as its paramount leader.

On the other hand, there are ways in which African Americans have made very little progress at all toward full membership in American society. Since about 1980, a change in the goal of incarceration from rehabilitation to naked punishment; a prison-building boom; and the so-called "War on Drugs," which has been directed mostly at Black and Latino communities, have resulted in what legal scholar Michelle Alexander calls "The New Jim Crow." One out of fifteen young Black males and one in thirty-six Latino males currently are incarcerated, vastly more than the percentages for Whites or Asians. And even the White and Asian numbers are far higher than are the incarceration rates in other capitalist democracies.¹²

These days, in the run-up to the 2012 election, we see systematic attempts to suppress the votes of Blacks, Latinos, the
elderly, and young people through voter-ID laws, which demand that each voter produce a government-issued picture identification card, something that has never been required previously and that as many as one-third of the voters in some swing states do not possess. There have been no serious allegations of an upsurge in fraudulent voting that would justify such laws; it is clearly (and by the admission of some of its advocates) a naked attempt to keep certain categories of people from exercising the franchise. It is our era's poll tax and our literacy test.  

Another sign of the times for African Americans is the recurring assertion, contrary to all evidence, that President Obama is a Muslim. Hillary Clinton raised this issue in the Democratic primaries four years ago, although John McCain, to his credit, dismissed it. Yet it keeps cropping up. According to a survey made in May 2012 by the Public Religion Research Institute, 16 percent of Americans believe that President Obama is a Muslim (including 25 percent of Republicans and 24 percent of Evangelical Christians). Only 25 percent of Americans correctly identify President Obama as a Protestant (in fact he is an Evangelical). In Clinton's case, and in the case of President Obama's current political opponents, thinking of him and referring to him as a Muslim is a kind of code for what some people regard as his racial inappropriateness for the highest office in the land. It is another way of saying that he is not a legitimate person to be holding the Presidency.

Native Americans

How about the situations of other racialized minorities in American society today? There are currently no formal legal barriers to full membership in American society for Native peoples. But there are many practical barriers. Life expectancy for Native Americans is three-and-a-half years less than for the American population at large. After two generations of narrowing the gap, it is now growing again. Native American infant mortality is the highest of any racial group—and forty-four percent higher than it was a decade ago. American Indians have 1.6 times the infant mortality rate of non-Hispanic Whites. Native babies are 1.7 times as likely as non-Hispanic White babies to die from sudden infant death syndrome. Native
American infants are 2.5 times as likely as non-Hispanic White 
infants to have mothers who began prenatal care only in the third 
trimester of pregnancy or who received no prenatal care at all. 
Native Americans rank behind all other American racial groups 
in terms of total years of education, high school completion, 
enrollment in colleges and universities, and university degrees 
aquired. More Native Americans, in percentage terms, are 
unemployed than any other racial group. According to one 
state's recent report, the median Native American household 
income was $22,800; for Whites it was $59,500. That's a big 
difference in life chances.15

**Asian Americans**

Three groups of Americans—Asian Americans, Latinos, 
and Arab Americans—have consistently been viewed not as 
Americans but as eternal foreigners. Let me give some 
examples. In 1996 I was working on the campaign of Gary 
Locke for governor of the state of Washington. Gary is a third-
generation American, the son and grandson of immigrants. He 
was born in Seattle and grew up in the central part of the city. 
He and I were Boy Scouts together once upon a time. The 
*Seattle Times*, the region's leading newspaper, endorsed Locke. 
Nonetheless, because he was Chinese they felt constrained to 
send an investigative reporter to pore over the records of all the 
people who donated to his campaign, extract all the Chinese 
names, and check to make sure that they were American citizens 
and therefore eligible to contribute. The *Times* did not feel 
called to check on the citizenship of the people who contributed 
to the campaign of Locke's White opponent, Ellen Craswell. 
Locke won, had two successful terms as Governor, then went on 
to serve in President Obama's cabinet, and now is the 
Ambassador to China.

The most egregious case of abuse of an Asian American 
because he was assumed to be a foreigner was the matter of Wen 
Ho Lee.16 Lee was a scientist who came to the United States in 
the 1960s from his native Taiwan to get a PhD at Texas A&M. 
He became a US citizen and took a job at Los Alamos National 
Laboratory, where he worked on problems in fluid dynamics. 
Over the next three decades he did the work of a scientist,
including traveling to conferences where physicists of many nations gathered to exchange their findings.

In the mid-1990s, Los Alamos Labs came under criticism for lax security. The FBI began an investigation; Wen Ho Lee was soon their chief suspect, perhaps because he had met some Chinese scientists, perhaps because he was ethnically Chinese. Los Alamos fired Lee in 1999 and the Justice Department brought a fifty-nine count indictment against him "for copying bomb secrets with intent to injure the United States and to aid a foreign country." He was called the most damaging spy since the Rosenbergs gave nuclear secrets to Russia in the early years of the Cold War. They locked Lee up in solitary confinement, where he remained for 278 days, denied bail, often in shackles, under twenty-four-hour watch. He could not scratch or go to the bathroom without being observed. He faced the possibility of spending the rest of his life in prison.

In the end, it turned out that what Lee had done was to take his work home with him. He had put it onto his home computer, something that most of his colleagues also did. The materials he downloaded to his home computer were not classified. The nuclear secrets that the FBI said he had given to the Chinese were, it turned out, all available in published articles and reports. His FBI interrogators had lied, both to Lee during questioning, and to the courts and the press about what Lee said and did. Ultimately Lee was exonerated. Judge James A. Parker set him free and chastised the government for its misconduct.\(^\text{17}\)

**Arab and Muslim Americans**

Asians are not the only Americans who have been treated as perpetual foreigners. Mexican Americans of whatever generation have been subjected to the assumption that they are recent immigrants, and probably illegal ones at that. Arab Americans and other people who may “look Middle Eastern” have shared the dubious distinction of being seen by other Americans as eternally foreign. Arab Americans have long been viewed, along with Asians (and somewhat less Latinos), as fundamentally foreign to the United States. No matter how long they have been here, they are not seen as Americans; they are identified in the minds of other Americans with the places from
which their ancestors came, to a degree that does not happen to Irish or French or British or even African Americans. Part of the source of the difference has been the image that Arab Americans are not Christians. Never mind that more than half of Arab Americans are Christians; they are perceived as non-Christians, and that attribution of a foreign religious identity adds to their racial foreignness.

Some may object that this is religious, not racial targeting and discrimination. But there is leakage between the two categories. Anti-Muslim activists have attacked Georgetown scholar Yvonne Haddad, author of several books on Muslims in the West, because they assume she is a Muslim, although she is a Christian; they do so because she is an Arab American and because she speaks up for Muslims.

Yusuf Islam (formerly the 1970s folk-rock singer Cat Stevens) is a White British guy who converted to Islam. He is on the government's no-fly list because he is a prominent Muslim. James Yee is a Chinese American West Point graduate who converted to Islam and became a Muslim chaplain at Guantanamo Bay. When he complained of the treatment that inmates there were receiving, he was arrested and jailed on charges of terrorism. Brandon Mayfield is a pink-cheeked Portland lawyer, also a convert. His fingerprints (on file because he is an officer of the court) don’t look like the fingerprints that Spanish authorities found after a bombing in Madrid, but the FBI was convinced that they did. He was incarcerated, though like Yee he was ultimately cleared. These three guys are not Arabs, but they are treated as Arabs because they are Muslims. In our time, Muslim identity has been racialized by its opponents. That is, it has been treated as an indelible feature of a person’s character, not a religious choice or affiliation. It is seen as an evil quality lurking deep in the heart of every Muslim. This racializing of religion is the reason that calling the President “Barack Hussein Obama” or asserting that he is a Muslim has such power in American politics: being a Muslim is a stain on the soul of anyone to whom that racial label is applied.18

In the middle decades of the twentieth century, Arab Americans were White people. No one questioned the essential
Whiteness of comedian Danny Thomas or consumer activist Ralph Nader, both of whom had Lebanese grandparents. But over the last quarter of the twentieth century, and the first decade of this one, Arab, Muslim, and other Middle Eastern Americans became steadily browner in the public mind.

The darkening began with the Oil Shock of 1973-74, when the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries took the outrageous, unthinkable step of embargoing oil in response to an American decision to re-supply the Israeli army during the Yom Kippur War. All across the continent, there were lines of cars waiting for gas as service stations, and Arab and other Middle Eastern peoples got darker in the US public mind. The darkening increased in the 1980s with Palestinian-linked hijackings of airplanes, and again in the 1990s with a terrorist bombing of the World Trade Center in New York.

In 1995, when someone blew up the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, many Americans assumed it was the work of sinister Muslim terrorists. Calls went out in Congress and the press to put Arab and Muslim Americans in concentration camps. In the next few days, 222 hate crimes were reported to have been committed against Muslims nationwide. When the perpetrator turned out to be Timothy McVeigh, a white Christian ex-soldier, the initial racist response directed against Arab and Middle Eastern Americans was conveniently forgotten.

The making over of Arab and Muslim Americans in the minds of other Americans, into dark-skinned, threatening, perpetual foreigners, began long before the attacks of September 11, 2001. The darker image became universal after 9/11/2001. In the weeks that followed, Arab Americans, Americans who were adherents of Islam, and people who just “looked Middle Eastern” came in for some pretty nasty treatment at the hands of their neighbors, for example,

- An elderly woman in the Los Angeles area was hauled out of her car and beaten so badly she ended up hospitalized. Her offense? Wearing the hijab.
• A Sikh American was hunted down and murdered in his gas station in Mesa, Arizona.
• An American Christian who fled his native Egypt two decades earlier partly because of religious persecution was murdered in his San Gabriel, California, grocery store.
• More than 1200 people of Middle Eastern origin were arrested, some on charges that were extremely specific and that might have led to convictions for terrorist involvement had they been proved true, others on the vaguest sorts of guilt by association. None led to a conviction.
• On a Pennsylvania highway a Sikh man was shot by another motorist.
• In Seattle a mosque was torched and worshippers were shot at.
• In Dallas, a Pakistani grocer was shot dead.
• In Salt Lake City, a curry restaurant was fire-bombed.
• In suburban Los Angeles, two White men followed a Mexican American home, chased him into his house, and beat him in front of his small son because they thought he “looked Arab.”
• In Minneapolis, passengers on an airliner refused to take off until an Afghani refugee family was removed from the plane.
• Outside San Diego, a Sikh woman stopped at a traffic light was assaulted by two knife-wielding men who shouted, “This is what you get for what you’ve done to us!” and “I’m going to slash your throat,” which one of them then did. She barely survived.

That was just in the few weeks following 9/11. It did not end there. Anti-Muslim hate crimes jumped fifty percent – to 160 according to FBI reports – in 2010 and have not dropped since. In August of this year, a man opened fire on a suburban Chicago mosque during Friday evening Ramadan prayers. And one still doesn't have to be a Muslim in order to be murdered for being a Muslim. On August 5 of this year, White Christian supremacist Wade Michael Page walked into a Sikh Gurdwara in
Wisconsin and killed six worshippers before turning his gun on himself as the police closed in.$^2$22

*Mexican Americans—Foreign and Sinister, Too*

The past decade has seen the conflation of the permanent foreigner designations that have been placed by White Americans on two racialized groups: Mexican Americans and Arab or Muslim Americans. I could cite a lot of people to make this point – *Fortune* and *National Review* journalist Peter Brimelow, the late Harvard professor Samuel Huntington, former Congressmember Tom Tancredo – but let me quote from Patrick Buchanan who has been at various times a presidential speechwriter, TV pundit, Republican candidate for president, and distinguished party elder. He also wrote of “the death of the West,” which he saw coming because immigrant invasions imperil our country and civilization….

Uncontrolled immigration threatens to deconstruct the nation we grew up in and convert America into a conglomeration of peoples with almost nothing in common—not history, heroes, language, culture, faith, or ancestors. Balkanization beckons…. A sense that America, too, is pulling apart along the seams of ethnicity and race is spreading…. Not only ethnically and racially, but culturally and morally, we are no longer one people or “one nation under God.” … In half a lifetime, many Americans have seen their God dethroned, their heroes defiled, their culture polluted, their values assaulted, their country invaded, and themselves demonized as extremists and bigots….

Buchanan singled out Mexican migrants as the heart of the problem:

Mexicans not only come from another culture, but millions are of another race. History and experience teach us that different races are more difficult to assimilate…. Unlike the immigrants of old, who bade farewell forever to their native lands when they boarded the ship, for Mexicans, the mother country is right next door. Millions have no desire to learn English or to become citizens. America is not their home; Mexico is; and they wish to remain proud Mexicans. They have come here to work. Rather than assimilate, they create
Little Tijuanas in US cities…. Uncle Sam is taking a hellish risk in importing a huge diaspora of tens of millions from a nation [Mexico] vastly different from our own…. Our children will live with the consequences, balkanization, and the end of America as we know her.23

Buchanan explicitly linked what he saw as the moral decimation of the republic to a large in-flow of what he regarded as racially inappropriate immigrants. Their presence in America was what was bringing down the house of virtue and turning the United States into a mongrel nation.

Fortifying the Border: The usual solution that such people propose is to fortify the US border with Mexico. Other parts of our program speak to border issues: the campaign to build a huge Berlin Wall along our southern border; multiplying eightfold the size of the Border Patrol; vigilantes setting up along the border to keep Mexicans out; deaths of many hundreds of would-be migrants as their pathways into the US are pushed out into the desert and mountains.

Searching Out the Undocumented: Beginning in 2004, US Customs and Border Patrol officers began to make sweeps of immigrant neighborhoods across the country, many of them quite far from the border and inhabited mainly by American citizens of Mexican descent. They checked people for papers and hustled those they suspected of being unauthorized immigrants off to detention and possible deportation. Such suspicions, of course, were based on people’s perceived nationality (i.e., their race), so it was Mexican Americans who were targeted, whether or not they were in fact immigrants. Mexican Americans—citizens as well as non-citizens—were, quite naturally, terrified. The Obama administration later curtailed the immigration sweeps, but the number of deportations increased dramatically.

States and localities from New Hampshire to California began harassing immigrants. The poster city for this movement was Hazleton, Pennsylvania. Hazleton had been a town in decline. The population had dropped from 38,000 to 23,000 before Latinos and other immigrants began to move in and
brought the number back up to 31,000. Latinos built more than fifty new businesses downtown and the population surge more than doubled the value of Hazleton homes. Yet these were brown people, and Hazleton had previously been all White. Mayor Louis Barletta began to rail against what he called an illegal immigrant crime wave (although crime had in fact gone down since the boom in Latino population) and took to wearing a bulletproof vest around town. In 2006, Hazleton’s city council passed the Illegal Immigration Relief Act, which declared that English would be the city’s official language, that anyone applying to rent a dwelling would have to submit to a check of his or her citizenship status, that landlords who rented to illegal immigrants would be fined $1,000 a day, and that businesses who hired, rented to, or provided goods or services to illegal immigrants would lose their licenses.\textsuperscript{24}

In 2010 Arizona passed SB 1070, a tough law that, among other things, forbade workers without papers to solicit employment and required law officers to ask for proof of citizenship from anyone their eyeball judgment suggested may not be in the US legally. The Arizona law spawned a spate of copycat measures in other states, including Alabama, Utah, Georgia, Indiana, and South Carolina. Not surprisingly, a lot of immigrants left those states, and in Georgia and Alabama, at least, that meant crops were left rotting in the fields. A lot of cities passed laws making it illegal to rent an apartment to an immigrant without papers, or requiring employers to use E-Verify, a notoriously unreliable computer document system, to check on people’s legal status before giving them work. In June 2012 the US Supreme Court struck down most of the Arizona law, and presumably the others as well.\textsuperscript{25}

Arizona's Governor Jan Brewer wasn't intimidated. After President Obama signed an executive order deferring deportation proceedings against perhaps a million immigrants without papers who were brought to the United States as children by their parents, a partial fulfillment of the stalled DREAM Act, Brewer promptly acted to deny driver's licenses, in-state tuition, and other state benefits to the newly-documentined.\textsuperscript{26}
Abuses Converge

These strands of abuse – anti-Arab/Muslim/Middle Eastern and anti-Mexican/ Latino – converge. Historian Otis Graham blamed the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on the 1965 immigration act and our too-open border with Mexico: "The costs of America’s porous borders were stunningly piled even higher on the morning of September 11, 2001. While Mexican President Fox traveled northward to Washington on his mission to open America’s southern border to his surplus population, Islamic terrorists commandeered jetliners and struck the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon, killing nearly three thousand persons." 27

Patrick Buchanan used 9/11 as an occasion for gratuitous immigrant-bashing: "Our enemy, we are told, is Osama bin Laden. But though he may be the instigator and financier of terror, the war crimes of Tuesday last were carried out by men who live among us. The enemy is already inside the gates. How many others among our 11 million 'undocumented' immigrants are ready to carry out truck bombings, assassinations, sabotage, skyjackings?"

Such hysterical accusations, and the general anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, anti-Arab and anti-Mexican feelings on which they stand, resonate with a lot of Americans and increase their fearfulness. It really is about terror that many White Christian Americans feel. It’s not a War Against Terror. It’s a War of Terror. It depends on Terror for its very existence. We feel anxiety about the “Browning of America.” A lot of White people are obsessed with the idea that someday soon the US will be a “majority-minority” country (never mind that all projections have White people still a majority past 2050 and the largest single group for a long time after that).

The fear of being overrun by Brown hordes is associated with anxiety about the United States' loss of pre-eminence in the world. What was once called The American Century after World War II – and what a lot of Americans came to believe was our natural place at the top of the world power order – turned out to have run its course in less than half a century. Diplomatically
these days we are more impotent and ignored than ever we have been in any living person’s memory. Economically we are beholden to China and Germany.

To top it off, now the whole world is coming here. And one of Them has taken over the Presidency. It all seems so illegitimate. So we conclude that President Obama is a Muslim/Nazi/Socialist, that he was born in Kenya and is not a US citizen. So we have to strike back and get all of Those People out of this country. The discussion today in the Republican Party is not about what to do with illegal immigrants; it is whether or not to ban all immigrants. It would be pitifully comical, but the cost to people whose families migrated here, or who are cast as immigrants in the public mind, is enormous. The symbol of the United States was once the Statue of Liberty. Now it is the Wall.

What Do Our Leaders Say We Should Do?

For those of us who are Christians, or simply for those who would be good stewards of the citizenship that we hold, how ought we think and do about these issues? It's a tricky business, for our religious and political leaders are not always very faithful guides in this area.

Religious Leaders

Religious groups have things to say about immigration, and for the most part they are thoughtful, although some are not particularly courageous. For example, the conservative Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod's President Gerald B. Kieschnick and other high officials in 2006 urged the nation's leaders to find "appropriate solutions" and wrote with some sympathy about immigrants:

Millions of undocumented persons have come to the United States for many and various reasons. They have come to flee oppression of many sorts, including extreme poverty and hunger. They have come in order to make provision for their loved ones. They have come in order to end separation from loved ones. They have come illegally because they have deemed that the legal route is nearly impossible to maneuver. They have come because they can work, and they find dignity in labor. We recognize also that a small
percentage have come for malevolent reasons. Christians equally committed to God's Word may reasonably arrive at different conclusions on specific aspects of these issues and their resolution. However, this much is certain: God, in His Word, consistently shows His loving concern for "the stranger in our midst" and directs His people to do the same.

It is not a very strong statement but not entirely unsympathetic to immigrants.\(^{29}\)

The Southern Baptist Convention splits the baby somewhat differently, perhaps reflecting a stronger anti-immigrant consensus among SBC congregants. This largest Baptist denomination starts with the idea that immigrants are in need of salvation and cites the Great Commission to "take the gospel to all the nations" as their first priority in thinking about immigration. Next, the SBC emphasizes the rule of law and asserts that people without papers are lawbreakers. On the plus side as far as immigrants are concerned, they say that "any form of nativism, mistreatment, or exploitation is inconsistent with the gospel" and "deplore any bigotry or harassment." Then they call on "our governing authorities to secure the borders." Only then do they "ask our governing authorities to implement, with the borders secured, a just and compassionate path to legal status," with the caveat that this "is not to be construed as support for amnesty for any undocumented immigrant." It's not a strong positive statement in terms of immigrants' inclusion in American life, but it does resonate with at least a few biblical themes.\(^{30}\)

Roman Catholics take a very different position. Clergy, bishops, and lay leaders have consistently stood on the side of immigrants since the founding of our nation. Their priorities are the reverse of those expressed by the Southern Baptist Convention and pretty far from those of the LCMS—immigrant rights and welfare first, border security second and then only in a humane manner. The US Conference of Catholic Bishops wrote in 2011:

The Catholic Catechism instructs the faithful that good government has two duties, both of which must be carried out and neither of which can be ignored. The first duty is to welcome the foreigner out of charity and respect for the
human person. Persons have the right to immigrate and thus government must accommodate this right to the greatest extent possible, especially financially blessed nations: "The more prosperous nations are obliged, to the extent they are able, to welcome the foreigner in search of the security and the means of livelihood which he cannot find in his country of origin. Public authorities should see to it that the natural right is respected that places a guest under the protection of those who receive him." Catholic Catechism, 2241.

The second duty is to secure one’s border and enforce the law for the sake of the common good. Sovereign nations have the right to enforce their laws and all persons must respect the legitimate exercise of this right: "Political authorities, for the sake of the common good for which they are responsible may make the exercise of the right to immigrate subject to various juridical conditions, especially with regard to the immigrants' duties toward their country of adoption. Immigrants are obliged to respect with gratitude the material and spiritual heritage of the country that receives them, to obey its laws and to assist in carrying civic burdens." Catholic Catechism, 2241.

The Bishops then go on to call for comprehensive immigration reform, including a path to legalization and citizenship, family reunification, the restoration of due process, and addressing the root causes of poverty and displacement that have driven many migrants into the United States.\textsuperscript{31}

Presbyterians stand close to the Catholics on immigration. Some highlights from the PCUSA's statement on the subject:

Affirm those Presbyterian congregations and presbyteries that are already standing alongside immigrants…. Challenge each Presbyterian congregation and presbytery to embrace a comprehensive approach to advocacy and welcome that includes, at the very minimum:

a. an opportunity … to come out of the shadows, regularize their status … and, over time, pursue an option to
become lawful permanent residents and eventually United States citizens;
b. significantly reduce waiting times for separated families … to be reunited;
c. creation of legal avenues for workers and their families who wish to migrate … and work in a safe, legal, and orderly manner with their rights fully protected …
e. a call for living wages and safe working conditions for workers of United States-owned companies in other countries;
f. a call for greater economic development in poor countries to decrease the economic desperation, which forces the division of families and migration.

The PCUSA goes on to call on congregations and presbyteries to lobby their political leaders, to provide sanctuary for undocumented immigrants, and to fight against the border fence.\(^{32}\)

**Politicians Who Say They Are Religious**

On the other hand, some of our most prominent political leaders, who say they are guided by Christian commitment, say things about immigration that don't square well with Scripture, with any of these various church statements, or with anything one might characterize as social reality. I'm not going to report on all the people who have run for President lately—there are too many of them, and some of them have been pretty crazy. Ron Paul has been all over the map on immigration—for it, against it; for the fence, against it; for a national immigration data base, against it.

Minnesota Congress member Michele Bachmann is an Evangelical Christian and the wife of a pastor. During her recent campaign for President, in October 2011, she said some things that are hard to square with a Christian commitment. In the GOP debate in Orlando, Florida, on September 22, 2011, she said "I would build a fence on America's southern border on every mile, on every yard, on every foot, on every inch of the southern border."\(^{33}\) She also claimed that the US-Mexico border was leaking Muslim terrorists: "Fifty-nine thousand this year came across the border … from Yemen, from Syria. These are nations
that are state sponsors of terror. They’re coming into our country!" Well, not so much. It turns out that the State Department, which seems quite eager to classify Arab nations as sponsors of terrorism, does not in fact include Yemen on its list. More to the point, according to the US Border Patrol, while it apprehended 59,000 illegal border crossers in 2011, only 663 of them had any ties to countries that are regarded as states sponsoring terrorism. And not one of those was charged with coming into the US for the purpose of committing acts of terrorism. More recently, Bachmann claimed that the Obama administration had ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and employed radical Islamists near the center of power.

Rick Santorum is a Catholic with ties to Opus Dei, but he takes positions on immigration that the Catholic Church does not support: he voted yes to building a fence along the Mexican border, voted no on establishing a guest worker program, voted no on opening a path to citizenship for guest workers, voted no on allowing undocumented immigrants to participate in Social Security, and echoed Governor Mitt Romney's call on such immigrants to "deport themselves."

Rick Perry and Newt Gingrich lost the Republican Presidential Nomination for many reasons. But both of them first began to slip because they adopted positions on immigration that didn't sound like Michele Bachmann, Rick Santorum, and Mitt Romney. Perry took heat for allowing undocumented students who graduated from Texas high schools to pay in-state tuition while attending Texas universities. He was deemed insufficiently heartless for saying things like this, in that same Orlando debate: "If you say that we should not educate children who have come into our state for no other reason than they've been brought there by no fault of their own, I don't think you have a heart. We need to be educating these children." Gingrich lost favor for saying in Orlando that he would not deport all immigrants without papers: "If you’ve been here 25 years and you got three kids and two grandkids, you've been paying taxes and obeying the law, you belong to a local church, I don't think we're going to separate you from your family, uproot you forcefully and kick you out." Both Perry and Gingrich were attacked for their immigration positions, not just by their fellow
Christian Republican candidates, but by a wide swath of the so-called Christian electorate.\textsuperscript{37}

There is a striking, indeed a disheartening ill fit between, on one hand, the ethical principles about immigrants and racialized minorities one finds in Scripture and the considered positions of major church leaders and, on the other, the hatred spewed by a lot of politicians and activists who like to call themselves Christians. In the hope of finding a way out of this impasse, I am going to ask you to guess which prominent American political leader spoke the following words:

Our nation is a nation of immigrants. More than any other country, our strength comes from our own immigrant heritage and our capacity to welcome those from other lands. We shall continue America’s tradition as a land that welcomes peoples from other countries.

At the same time, we must ensure adequate legal authority to establish control over immigration: to enable us, when sudden influxes of foreigners occur, to decide to whom we grant the status of refugee or asylee; to improve our border control; to expedite (consistent with fair procedures and our Constitution) return of those coming here illegally; to strengthen enforcement of our fair labor standards and laws; and to penalize those who would knowingly encourage violation of our laws. The steps we take to further these objectives, however, must be consistent with our values of individual privacy and freedom.

This leader then went on to single out Mexico as the place of origin for many productive contributors to American society:

We have a special relationship with our closest neighbors, Canada and Mexico. Our immigration policy should reflect this relationship. We must also recognize that both the United States and Mexico have historically benefited from Mexicans obtaining employment in the United States. A number of our States have special labor needs, and we should take them into account. Illegal immigrants in considerable numbers have become productive members of
our work force. Those who have established equities in the United States should be recognized and accorded legal status.  

And your guess would be…? None other than Ronald Reagan.

A lot of Americans adore the memory of Ronald Reagan. They are fond of believing that their favorite President, were he alive today, would approve whatever policy position they choose to take. Activists in the Tea Party Movement recently called on the Republican Party to expel members who do not adhere to what they regard as Reaganite principles. One of the principles they cited was opposition to immigration, especially immigration from Mexico, and most especially illegal immigration.

Ronald Reagan, in fact, liked immigrants, even those who came without papers, and especially those who came from Mexico. President Reagan stood squarely in favor of a balanced approach to immigration policy: enforcement of quotas and regulation of America’s borders, but a warm welcome to immigrants generally and Mexican immigrants especially. He also spoke in favor of granting legal status to those Mexican immigrants who had come to the US without papers, but who were working and contributing to the American economy. In 1986, President Reagan signed an omnibus immigration reform and control act that legalized hundreds of thousands of immigrants who were living in the United States without documents. If Republicans, Evangelical Christians, or others today want to advocate a punitive policy toward undocumented immigrants, that is their right as members of American society. But they cannot claim the approval of Ronald Reagan for the position they choose to take.

What Are You Going to Do?

So where does that leave us, those who have an impulse to follow Scripture, or just to be decent people? Those who take seriously the Bible's insistence that, before God, there is neither Jew nor Greek and who take seriously the injunction to treat the alien among us just exactly as we treat the native born?
Actually, our calling is quite clear, and it is not what many of our political leaders imagine is a Christian imperative.

I don’t have a laundry list of things that I think you should go out and do. But I hope that the things I have talked about today may spur you to self-reflection, and then to action. Some steps along that way:

- Engage your fundamental values. If you are a Christian, study the Bible. Ask yourself, at the very least: "Who Would Jesus Deport?"
- Confront your fears. If you are bothered by immigrants being in the United States, exactly what is it that you are afraid of? Are you more comfortable among some kinds of people than among others? How can you challenge yourself to step outside your comfort zone?
- Examine your prejudices.
- Get to know some immigrants. You'll find out their lives, hopes, and fears are not all that different from your own.
- Find a way to make some difference. Maybe it would be a good idea to contact a local immigrant support agency and volunteer to help some young immigrants register for the deportation deferral program.

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1 Thanks to Ron Wells, who extended the invitation that spurred the writing of this paper and gave excellent suggestions for ways to improve an earlier version; Sally Howell, whose invitation to give an address at the University of Michigan, Dearborn, in 2011 sent me down the path toward some of these interpretations; and Jason Ward, Anita Gustafson, and Bill Trollinger, who kindly commented on an earlier version.


5 Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "Obama Has Ties to Slavery Not by His Father but His Mother, Research Suggests," *New York Times* (July 30, 2012).

6 For the full argument, see Spickard, *Almost All Aliens*, 83-88. The three-fifths clause gave extra representation in Congress and in Presidential elections to southern Whites. For example, Virginia in 1790 had a White population of 442,000, Pennsylvania had 424,000, and New York had 414,000, all of a similar order of magnitude. But with three-fifths of the slave population added in, that White Virginia population had an effective representation of 671,000, vastly more than the 433,000 for Pennsylvania and 432,000 for New York. Virginians had, effectively, one and a half times as much representation per White capita as citizens of the northern states.


18 Warren J. Blumenfeld, Khyati Y. Joshi, and Ellen E. Fairchild, eds., Investigating Religious Oppression in the United States (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2009); Junaid Rana, Terrifying Muslims: Race and


38 LeMay and Robert Barkan, US Immigration and Naturalization Laws, 276-77.
I appreciate the opportunity to respond to Paul Spickard’s paper. His exploration of these issues is very provocative, and I found myself agreeing with his main thesis, that the most important divisions in our history and in America today are those based upon race. Those divisions are deeply seated in the fabric of who we are as Americans, and more particularly, in who can aptly be called an American and benefit from full acceptance into American society.

Let’s start where Paul Spickard started, with J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur’s question: “What then is the American, this new man?” And his answer: “He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys and the new rank he holds.” So fundamentally, not only was (and is) America a place, a destination, it is also a process. It is a process of changing people who immigrate to America into someone new. And the subtext here is that it turns them into something better. It’s a long-standing view of American exceptionalism that still, for better and for worse, permeates American thinking. And our concepts of exceptionalism are based upon the right to American citizenship as well as the opportunity for economic success.

Another part of this line of thinking is determining who belongs and who does not. And that is at the heart of Professor Spickard’s question. Who can be part of this American system?
Who has the real ability to progress economically, socially, and politically? Who can be truly “in” and not considered as “other”?

I agree that if one looks longitudinally, Americans from European backgrounds (who are white) had an easier time of assimilating into citizenship and American values than did non-Europeans. As Spickard notes, “one of the key determinants of full membership has always been race.” While acknowledging the complexity of American “racial multiplicity,” he points out that “full membership in American society was always limited to people who were deemed white.” Indeed, recently historians have explored this theory of whiteness and the sense of inclusion whiteness allowed. Non-whites were known, especially in the 19th and 20th centuries, to try to “pass” as white if at all possible.

So while I agree that race is the prime divider in American society, I do not want to gloss over other differences that, at times, have been also divisive. Specifically, ethnic identity, even among European immigrants, has been a great divider. I think it is important that we not oversimplify the term “white” or even the term “European,” acknowledging that there have been significant differences of religion, class, culture, language and even racial perceptions, that, in the first generation or two, determined to what degree European immigrants were accepted and succeeded in America.

I want to examine two different times in our history in which ethnic identity has impacted the degree to which a group was able to succeed and assimilate into American society. The first is the Anti-Irish/Catholic sentiment in the early and mid-19th century, and the second is the public discussion over the changing nature of European immigration at the turn of the 20th century. Both are examples of how, at times, some Europeans were not seen as sufficiently white by their American counterparts.

As David A. Gerber and Alan M. Kraut point out, “until well into the twentieth century, the word ‘race’ was often used to conceptualize what we might call ethnicity, so that immigrant
peoples, such as the Irish or Jews or Italians and others, were often spoken of as races.”¹ Immigrants from Ireland, for example, were different enough from white Americans that native-born people saw them as the consummate outsiders who could not possibly become American. Like African Americans, they were marginalized. Political cartoons depicted the Irish with monkey-like features. As David R. Roediger points out, terms used to describe the Irish before the Civil War included, “Low-browed and savage, groveling and bestial, lazy and wild, simian and sensual.”² No wonder, as Ronald Wells pointed out, Scots-Irish Presbyterians wanted to separate themselves from these newer Irish Immigrants.

Some of this sentiment was because the Irish were poor and congregated in cities where they took on menial tasks, much like the black workers of that time. They also lived in the worst slums of the city, often in close proximity to African Americans. In addition, a key component of the Irish distinctiveness had to do with their religion. As Roman Catholics, they stood outside of the American Protestant mainstream, and many religious leaders saw them as a significant threat to the future of the republic. Writing before the Civil War, Lyman Beecher, an American religious leader, worried that the Catholic vote would take over the nation: “A tenth part of the suffrage of the nation, thus condensed and wielded by the Catholic powers of Europe, might decide our elections, perplex our policy, inflame and divide the nation, break the bond of our union, and throw down our free institutions.”³ He was not alone in these fears. Many Americans believed that Catholic voters would undermine our political system, owing more allegiance to the Pope than to the U.S. Constitution. In 1846 Thomas Whitney went so far as to say “American Republicanism is Freedom; Romanism is slavery.”⁴ These fears fueled the creation of the Know Nothing Party in 1849 in an effort to curb the influence of immigrants by, among other things, extending the time that it took for an immigrant to become a citizen—the ticket to full American identity.

Unlike blacks, however, the Irish did eventually become viewed as white. But it took a generation or two, and it did not happen without significant efforts put forth by the Irish
community to convince Americans that they could safely be accepted into the American mainstream. Competition over jobs and the desire to increase their political power led them to deliberately distance themselves from African Americans. As David Roediger argues, “the imperative to define themselves as white came from the particular [advantages] whiteness offered to a desperate rural and often preindustrial Irish population coming to labor in industrializing America.”

By the early twentieth century, it was clear to observers at the time that the source of European immigration was changing from Northern and Western Europe to Southern and Eastern Europe. Contemporaries distinguished the former as being “Old Immigrants,” those more palatable to traditional, Protestant native-born Americans. The latter were called “New Immigrants,” those who were more likely to be Catholic or Jewish, and were less educated as a whole than their northern European peers. Americans at that time saw these differences in racial terms. Madison Grant wrote in *The Passing of the Great Race* that “these new immigrants were no longer exclusively members of the Nordic race as were the earlier ones who came of their own impulse to improve their social conditions…..the New immigration…contained a large and increasing number of the weak, the broken, and the mentally crippled of all races drawn from the lowest stratum of the Mediterranean basin and the Balkans, together with hordes of the wretched, submerged populations of the Polish Ghettos….the native [-born] American will entirely disappear. From the point of view of race it was better described as the “survival of the unfit.”

Americans were so concerned about the new ethnic groups arriving on our shores that the U.S. Congress formed the United States Immigration Commission in 1907 to discuss what was perceived as the problem of this new immigration. As Roger Daniels observes, the “Commission…claimed that these immigrants were, in a sense, exploiting America without becoming part of it.” The fear was that newer groups were only settling in America temporarily, taking advantage of relatively high paying industrial jobs but not attempting to become full-fledged citizens. The eventual solution was, not to encourage
citizenship and permanent residence, but to attempt to stop these groups from entering the United States by introducing immigration quotas heavily favoring northern Europeans who were already, by that time, coming in lower numbers. The Emergency Quota Act of 1921 was another example of how not all immigrant groups, particularly those from Italy, Poland, and other areas of Eastern Europe, were sufficiently white enough to gain full access to American society.

Let us now fast forward to more contemporary understandings of race. Spickard includes in his paper an interesting commentary on America today, claiming that even though we have elected a black man, Barak Obama, to the presidency, we have not become a post-racial society where race no longer matters. Again, I agree with him on that issue. Race continues to divide. As Spickard points out, Arab-Americans are seen as perpetually ethnic, more so after 9/11 than before. Arab-American has “become steadily browner.” Attempts to keep Mexicans away have led to the building of a wall along parts of the United States-Mexico border. Non-whites are jailed at higher rates than whites. Overall, Spickard argues that “We feel anxiety about the Browning of America” and that fear coincides with the overall decline of American power in the world.

I agree that we have not achieved a post-racial society in America today. But I would also argue that the American dream has not died. The American dream of inclusion—inclusion in citizenship and the ability to succeed economically—continues to be important to Americans of all ethnicities and races. Although Barak Obama’s election might not have ushered in a post-racial America, I believe that the election of a black man, even a bi-racial black man, provides a very important symbol for all Americans. Obama’s election suggests that the American dream is possible for those who are not white. For those who have, for generations, been deemed the outsider and the “other,” this is indeed a very important step forward. So although the process of Americanizing all persons into full citizenship and opportunity has had fits and starts over the years, the mere fact that a black president and his family occupy the White House
represents a significant step forward toward greater racial inclusiveness.


5 Roediger, in Gerber and Kraut, 172.


7 Roger Daniels, *Not Like Us: Immigrants and Minorities in America, 1890-1924.* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997)
In this thoughtful essay, Paul Spickard argues that thinking about race mediates full membership as American, and then he surveys the broad history of the intersection between immigration and race in the United States to imply that our received wisdom regarding immigrants clashes with Biblical principles regarding those same immigrants. He further implies that we should be able to overcome toxic attitudes toward undesirable immigrants by appealing to Christian values to replace racial discrimination. The argument, while it is internally logical and, moreover, is philosophically appealing, seems to place under the heading of “race” several different historical forces that cannot in practice be quite so easily distinguished in American history. By way of a response, I would submit that Spickard’s own evidence highlights the greatest obstacle that American Christians have when thinking about immigration. This obstacle is a complicated historical heritage in which American and Christian ideals regarding equality have clashed with realities of discrimination.

Spickard’s sweeping historical summary of the attitude toward immigrants to the United States generally works to support the thesis that race has been the key to acceptance or rejection of immigrants. From the 1640 example of colonial discrimination against Africans, to the nineteenth-century examples of discriminatory treatment of Californios, freed slaves, and Asians, to twentieth-century
examples of Jim Crow and even the current discourse surrounding President Obama, history reveals a consistent theme of identify and rejecting Others (non-Anglo Americans) as inferior. Consequently, Spickard concludes that certain groups today, including even some “native-born” Americans, are branded as “eternal foreigners” today—although in one important case, it is the religion rather than the biological makeup of the rejected persons that marks them as not eligible to assimilate; race has been stretched considerably in modern American culture to describe a multitude of Other, non-American persons. Even so, history does suggest that American attitudes toward immigrants have long been shaped by social attitudes toward race.

If history is our guide, then the problem is to reconcile the egalitarian ideals of the United States with the discriminating reality that Spickard discusses. Racial divisions of a supposedly equal society have, as Spickard documents, plagued the nation from its colonial days to the present. This suggests a consistent failure by earlier immigrants to welcome later ones who seemed to differ substantially. Indeed, that racism regarding immigration also colored U.S. foreign policy during this era, when Dollar Diplomacy governed relations with Latin America, and when U.S.-Pacific relations also responded to racialized conceptions of Japanese, Chinese, and Pacific Island persons. The question that American leaders discussed then revolved around “Americanness.” One good example of this occurred in 1898, when Andrew Carnegie famously wrote in opposition to American expansion to the Philippines after the Spanish-American War, largely over concerns about the place of Filipinos in the American Republic. He asked, “Is the Republic to remain one homogeneous whole, one united people, or to become a scattered and disjointed aggregate of widely separated races?” It is possible to question Carnegie’s statement as out of touch with the Gilded Age and Jim Crow realities of one united people inside the continental United States, but
his opposition to imperial expansion illustrates well Spickard’s argument. Carnegie, a Scottish immigrant to the United States made “American” by his biology and his economic success, rejects the idea that the humans living in the Philippines can produce “true” Americans like himself.

If full participation as true Americans thus requires the correct biological makeup, then the very existence and prosperity of the nation for its non-Christian citizens is threatened by arrival of foreigners of the wrong types. As much as this patriotic, nationalist, irrational conclusion clashes with the American ideals of rational freedom and equality based on individual rather than any other merits, it is a problem that has not been resolved to this day. However, Christian Americans seem to have a different perspective from which to think about immigration. To locate this perspective, Spickard invokes Bible passages to find the ideal that we should aspire to: all humans are equal in God’s eyes, and we should therefore treat them so.

Like the disjunction between patriotism and democracy, though, Christian leaders frequently speak about immigration in ways that demonstrate that Christians fall short of behaving in ideal fashion regarding immigrants. Thus, we hear leaders of various Christian denominations pay careful attention to borders as much as they do the humans who live beyond those borders. Worse, of course, are public figures seeking political offices who portray themselves as Christians while also insisting upon the necessity of keeping foreigners (presumably including some of those “eternal foreigners”) out of the nation. Indeed, there is a history within every Christian denomination in America of accommodating the message of Christianity to slavery, so the convenient merging of American racial discrimination against undesirable immigrants with Christian belief is not really new.

It is no surprise that fallen man cannot match his behavior to an ideal set of standards, whether these
standards are crafted by God or by man. What is interesting from Spickard’s essay, though, is the eerie overlap between A) how patriotic Americans (who are not necessarily Christians) have consistently fallen short of their Enlightenment ideals about equality, and B) how Christian Americans have consistently done the same regarding their Biblical views. Modern science tells us that, just as God said, there is only one human species, with no meaningful biological distinctions. So in any currently accepted understanding of truth, neither patriots nor Christians have any true reason to discriminate against groups of people whose culture or phenotype differs from theirs. But we do so despite any basis for believing that some immigrants are inherently undesirable.

This practice, and its lack of justification on the basis of any truth, is reflected in the racializing of Islam in twenty-first century United States discourse. It also poses a lasting problem—since our public rhetoric about immigrants is so far from our principles, we cannot actually engage in meaningful discussion about what a more honest and just policy toward immigrants might look like. Instead, opponents of any attempt to discuss the practical implications of immigration policies can paint those various attempts as racist, or else unpatriotic. Ultimately, Spickard’s essay offers a vision of a nation whose citizens are systematically and culturally unable to think impartially about the issue of how we should treat foreigners and immigrants.

No wonder that many Christians in America have such trouble resolving race and immigration questions. The kind of righteous intolerance that believes it possesses truth combined with a received tradition that there is a biological “Americanness” to protect, leads many Christians in this nation to believe that there is no reason to welcome or to treat with dignity “un-American” people. Indeed, the historical resolution of immigration questions in the nation’s history, clouded as it has been by ideas about
race—as seen in the birther controversy over President Obama—has poisoned the ability of American Christians to think about immigration. In fact, the essay ultimately raises a serious question about just how much Christians in America should embrace or accept “American” values as if they were compatible with Christianity at all.

This year’s Maryville Symposium on Faith and the Liberal Arts takes place but one month before the presidential election. What a perfect time to deal with the theme of borders and citizens and membership in American society, especially given the arguments during the presidential campaign regarding: national security and what is required to protect our borders and who is let in and who is not; who gets to vote, and whether the establishment of voter identification laws is a matter of eliminating voter fraud or reducing the number of minority voters; who are the contributing members of society and who are the moochers, and whether or not our president is really an American citizen.

We are indeed fortunate to have heard three smart papers that help us think more clearly about frontiers and borders and citizenship. Beginning with the most locally focused paper; Barbara Wells is compelling in explaining the ways in which the U.S.-Mexico border in the Imperial Valley is both a “dynamically interconnected region” and a “heavily guarded barrier between nations.” Regarding the former, Wells notes how “U.S. citizens and Mexican citizens with the requisite documents cross the border to engage in various . . . activities.” She provides fascinating details of trans border shopping (the Calexico, California Wal-Mart prefers hiring Spanish speakers over English speakers), health care (there are approximately 350 dentists in the small town of Algodones, Mexico who serve
Anglo snowbirds), and education (Mexican students attend a Seventh Day Adventist school in Calexico and Mexican American students attend private schools in Mexicali). At the same time the U.S. government has spent great sums of money making Imperial County “an increasingly barricaded border,” with “hundreds of additional border guards, steel fencing, high-intensity lighting, motion detector sensors, thermal imaging devices, and remote video cameras.” This policing effort has reduced but not eliminated horrific deaths by dehydration, heat exposure, and drowning in Imperial County (and the death rate has gone up in the inhospitable Arizona desert to the east, as immigrants have shifted their routes). In short, Wells makes clear that the border is complex: an integrated region but with massive border-based inequalities, including poor women on the American side of the border who are socially privileged because they are Americans while also suffering their own race, class, and gender inequities.

Those inequalities at the national level are at the heart of Paul Spickard’s provocative paper, in which he makes a compelling case that despite Americans’ conviction that “our country [is] a magical giant escalator” [in which] “every new group starts at the bottom . . . and makes its way inexorably to the top,” the reality is that “membership in American society has been available more readily to some natives and newcomers than to others,” and that “one of the key determinants of full membership has always been race.” Spickard substantiates his argument with a remarkable number of examples, including: the beginnings of race-based slavery in 17th-century America; the creation of a Constitution that ensured that the proslavery South would dominate the federal government; the 1862 Homestead Act that established a policy of “racial replacement” in the West; the denial of citizenship for Indians and Asian-Americans; and, the racially inflected immigration quota system established in 1924. In the present, Spickard points to: the appalling percentage of black and Latino males who are incarcerated; the popularly-accepted falsehoods that our first African-American president was not born in the United States and is Muslim; the ongoing discrimination and violence against Asian Americans, Latinos, Arab Americans, Muslims, and Sikhs; and the ever more-extreme campaign against “brown” immigration. In short,
Spickard makes very clear that while “some of us would like to think that . . . prejudices and discriminations of yesteryear are behind us, sadly that is not the case.”

Finally, there is Will Katerberg’s wonderful discourse on the American creation myth, which sees America as the exemplar (“the city on a hill”), unique in world history (“novus ordo seclorum,”), made possible by God’s providence and by the frontier which shaped Americans into a “new people.” Katerberg asks us to look at this myth from the perspective of “new lands with their own frontiers” and “from the viewpoint of people [who were] already living here.” As regards the former, Katerberg nicely summarizes the ways in which Latin Americans, Canadians, Australians, even Russians have their own frontier myths that look strikingly similar to the American frontier myth, down to the cowboys, miners, and farmers. As regards the latter, Katerberg notes the native Americans and Mexicans who were brutally displaced, the workers and racial minorities who were brutally exploited – none of whom have a place in the American creation mythology. Of course, the business of ignoring the other and ignoring the violence used to displace the other is strikingly at odds with the neighborliness mandated in the scriptures of the Abrahamic religions. The Good Samaritan story could not be further from the American creation myth. So Katerberg concludes by suggesting an alternative creation story, in which the “American creation story should be one part of a mythic telling of the deep history of human migration,” while also pleading for Americans to “make room for others to tell their stories.”

One of the most troubling aspects of these three papers and the film is that what they have to say is so damned obvious. I say this not as a criticism by any means: I salute our presenters for shining a bright light on what is right there in front of us. What makes these papers and the film troubling has to do with the fact that if we Americans would open our eyes, even a little, we would see that despite the way in which national security plays out in the political arena, actual human beings live in the U.S.-Mexico border region, go back and forth and back again, all the while negotiating the power issues forced upon them by an increasingly militarized border. We would see that despite all of
our cant about being a nation that welcomes immigrants, full membership in American society has and continues to be greatly determined by race (and religion). We would see that despite our deep commitment to origin stories that make us feel good about ourselves as Americans, these stories in fact distort the past, leaving out all sorts of inconvenient facts and all sorts of inconvenient people.

It troubles me, particularly in this election year, that we can’t or won’t see the obvious. Why can’t we see? Of course, there are lots of reasons. Some of it surely has to do with racism, as Paul Spickard’s paper makes extremely clear. Some of it is that we live in a hyper-ideological age that renders anything like facts, including historical and sociological facts, as irrelevant. But it seems to me that a primary reason we cannot and/or do not and/or will not see is the notion – most explicitly referenced in Will Katerberg’s paper -- of American exceptionalism, the idea that America is special, unique, the providentially blessed nation, the city on the hill. There is no question that this idea seems almost hard-wired in Americans. A 2012 Public Religion Research Institute poll reveals that 62% of all Americans believe that the United States “has a divinely ordered place in history,” with a whopping 85% of white evangelicals holding this conviction.¹

The latter point suggests that our churches – particularly our evangelical and fundamentalist churches – play an important role in promoting the notion of American exceptionalism. But our primary and secondary schools are certainly crucial. I know from three decades of teaching first-year college students that they come to university with the idea that America is the “best nation” firmly implanted in their consciousness, thanks in part to American creation myths they learned in elementary school, including the Columbus story – the false tale (popularized by Washington Irving) that the Genoese explorer proved the world was round when all of medieval and backward Europe knew it was flat -- and the Thanksgiving story – the incomplete tale about the warm-hearted 1621 interracial meal that leaves out Miles Standish’s brutal attacks on the Indians just two years later.
By the time Americans reach adulthood many of them are so wedded to the idea of America as the unique nation that, as Katerberg mentions in his paper, President Obama’s unexceptional observation that other peoples might also feel their nation is “exceptional” resulted in a wrathful response that led Obama to backtrack, boldly asserting that America “has been, and will always be, the one indispensable nation in world affairs.” Obama’s claim highlights one extraordinarily problematic aspect of the idea of American exceptionalism: it presumes that in some fundamental sense America is (unlike all other nations) outside of history. But of course this is absurd. The notion that one’s own country stands apart from ordinary historical forces is the sort of hubris that will always be proven misguided. And yet, when I make this point to my first-year students – when I tell them that America will someday fall from its superpower perch, and that American civilization will someday crumble into dust – the silence is deafening.

More than this, once one understands America as the unique nation, beyond history, one is disposed not to see all sorts of things that challenge this glorious self-perception, not to see those who have been denied full membership in this “exceptional” nation. Now, to be fair, it is important to acknowledge that the idea of American exceptionalism can be and certainly has been used to advance social justice and to critique injustice in the United States. Both Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, argued for black equality by calling on America to be America, by calling on Americans to live up to the timeless ideals enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. And in her fascinating study of the Filipino-American War, *God’s Arbiters*, Susan Harris describes at some length the ways in which the anti-imperialists – particularly, Mark Twain – drew upon the notion of American exceptionalism to savagely critique American imperialism. Twain pointed out all the ways in which this island grab was at odds with the essence of America, and called on the nation to return to – quoting from Twain – “‘what we were before . . . [the nation with] the only clean hands in Christendom, the only hands guiltless of the sordid plunder of any helpless people’s stolen liberties.’”\(^2\)
Ah, do you see? Twain used American exceptionalism to critique American imperialism while at the same time his commitment to American exceptionalism blinded him (at least in this instance) to the violent takeover of the continent from the Indians and the transport of millions of Africans to America. “The only clean hands in Christendom?” I don’t think so. And I think that any effort to rehabilitate American exceptionalism, any effort to fix American exceptionalism as serving justice and mercy, is doomed. At the end of the day American exceptionalism does more damage than it does good. It keeps us from seeing all those who have been denied full membership in American society; it keeps us from seeing our connection with the rest of the world, with all peoples through time; it keeps us from seeing our connection with those people just across the imaginary line we call a border. Most important, perhaps, the notion of exceptionalism keeps us from seeing the ways in which the United States of America is both good and bad, keeps us from seeing that – in its goodness and in its badness, in its sinfulness (if I may speak theologically) – the United States looks much more similar to other nations than it looks different.

I would argue that it would be wonderful – both humbling and liberating – for us as a nation and us as citizens to jettison the notion of American exceptionalism. As I was reading these three terrific papers my mind returned again and again to a poem by the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, “When in the Soul of the Serene Disciple.” In this poem the disciple is serene because he has stopped striving; he has contentedly accepted that he is but a “noble ruin” who has no halo and no spotless reputation; he has contentedly accepted that he is not special.3

It is a wonderful poem, certainly worth meditating on. And with but the change of one word, the conclusion to Merton’s poem is a fitting conclusion to these final thoughts on the symposium: “What choice remains? Well, to be ordinary is not a choice:/It is the usual freedom/of nations without visions.”
As reported in “American Exceptionalism,” Christian Century, 129(October 17 2012): 9. Interestingly, it seems that higher education helps to disabuse people of the notion that the USA is divinely exceptional, as only 42% of white college-educated adults believe this idea.

