FOREWORD

FLAGSTAFF

Habitat for Fresh Thinking

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A decade before Eric Meeks got his PhD in history, I went to speak at Northern Arizona University, where Meeks now teaches. On this particular trip, I was carrying with me a preexisting concern about the wisdom of the American people. (Readers who have traveled with similar baggage will already know that this does not have to be disclosed when clearing security.)

Here's what was weighing on me: a sizable sector of the American public seems unwilling to tolerate accurate and unsettling portrayals of the western past. And so, near the end of this long-ago speech in Flagstaff, I proposed a policy recommendation composed of equal parts solid sense and wacky implausibility.

The time had come, I announced, for a U.S. Surgeon General's Warning on the Risks of Nostalgia:

Indulging in nostalgia for a romanticized Old West is widely thought to be a harmless pastime. But overdoses have produced serious side effects: the trivialization of the complex lives and characters of the people of the western past; a narrow and brittle definition of "heroes" and "heroism"; and a propensity to fatalism and a sense of inevitability. *Remember: never operate heavy equipment when under the influence of nostalgia, and be very cautious in exercising your right to vote when your level of nostalgia exceeds reasonable standards.*

A quarter century has passed, and surgeons general of every imaginable political persuasion have come and gone without diagnosing this troubling public health risk. And yet, over that same time period, an industrious

group of scholars has fashioned the components of a robust treatment program, nearly ready for designation as a Nostalgia Prevention and Recovery Program.

This program has many features, but two particularly valuable dimensions demand our attention. We'll begin with a remedy for nostalgia that may have particular relevance for historians of the American West, but which also offers relief to people working in hundreds of other occupations.

In many established professionals, the aging process cultivates an inclination to bemoan and lament the vitality and enterprise of their successors. Embracing nostalgia for the days when they were in their prime, older people can be tempted to exalt the great works that they and their contemporaries produced . . . until the whippersnappers came into the picture.

Alas, this is a pleasure I am never going to enjoy. Thanks to the labors of an extremely peppy group of scholars younger than I (an inordinately large assemblage, now that I am in my late sixties), I have been denied the satisfaction apparently delivered by the expression of what we might call "generational transition dismay." On the contrary, the younger scholars have been unrelenting in forcing me to take the path of cheer and appreciation.

As a significant figure in the well-staffed campaign to deny me access to professional nostalgia, Eric Meeks has also been a major contributor to the second, far more significant project of offering a corrective to popular nostalgia for a romanticized and sentimentalized Old West. Wisely, the members of Meeks's cohort have not wasted any time in reprimanding and scolding believers in the multiple myths of the West. They have invested their energy in asking fresh and unsettling questions of the sources they have uncovered in archives and libraries, and in forging narratives of the western past that stir up curiosity and inspire deeper reflection in their readers, leaving few stereotypes and simplifications intact. While their work aspires to truth and accuracy, humility in response to the complexity and uncertainty of historical evidence is a key part of their practice. Sometimes Meeks and his colleagues take up historical topics that none of their predecessors ever noticed. Sometimes they ask questions that refresh and revitalize historical subjects that once seemed to have been studied to the point of satiation and surrender.

What makes *Border Citizens* such an outstanding example of this broader renaissance in the writing of western American history? What are the principal elements of its success?

First, when Eric Meeks has encountered a taken-for-granted instance of categorization and classification, he has steadfastly refused to accept it at face value, thereby unleashing a cascade of fresh understandings and in-

sights. This delivers quite breathtaking results, as when he refuses to take for granted the familiar categories of "Indian," "Mexican," and "white." With those categories deservedly rattled and shaken, a much more interesting and instructive picture of social relations in Arizona gets revealed. With his deft tracking of a dynamic world of migration and movement, economic transformation, cultural exchange, and the inscription and variable enforcement of geographical borders, Meeks tells a story that puts conventional categories of identity through a dance. In a particularly interesting line of analysis, Meeks shows the constantly shifting relationship between definitions of identity imposed by external forces and definitions of identity originating from individual and group self-definition. John Donne's wise saying "No man is an island" may seem unsuited for application to arid landscapes so distant from the sea, while also being deficient in gender inclusivity. But Donne's observation keeps coming to mind as Meeks deepens his readers' recognition that all these matters of identity are *relational* and dynamic. With apologies to Donne, here is an updated version of his insight: no one's identity is an intact and bounded unit of self-definition quarantined from the multiplicity of definitions circulating and bumping into each other in south-central Arizona.

Second, in the scholarly world of the early twenty-first century, Meeks has always had to devise his own strategies and techniques to deal with the fracturing of human curiosity into sharply divided zones of specialized expertise. With impressive grace and good nature, Meeks has fashioned a remarkably effective way of proceeding on his course, with his explorations enriched—rather than interrupted or impeded—by this fragmentation of expertise. *Border Citizens* proves to be a well-ordered mosaic, drawing together understandings of political history, cultural history, economic history, labor history, environmental history, Chicano/a history, American Indian history, the history of gender, and the history of social class (the history of Okies!) both within and outside Euro-American society. When Meeks encounters the borders and boundaries of traditional scholarship, these potential roadblocks turn out to serve a function similar to that of the hurdles that exist to test the skills of track athletes. He does not come to a halt before these boundaries; he moves over them, in a way that seems (but cannot actually be) effortless. Driven both by determination and by an instinct for uncovering congruence and connection, Meeks reliably finds the ties that unite a range of subjects that have traditionally been studied in isolation from each other.

Third, by making it a priority to pay attention to the people of the past who have left sparse written records, Eric Meeks, and his fellow scholars who share that priority, have gotten stuck with the literary dilemma pre-

sented by the rise of social history. The fact that women and men who were not members of educated elites were unlikely to keep diaries or journals or to write letters or reports has been a hardship for historians when their attention has turned to these folks. Seemingly rendered silent by the passage of time, people of modest circumstances may well have talked volubly in their lifetimes, but records of their vital chattiness are elusive. But alarm over this literary constraint has not proven well founded; the shift toward social history has not unleashed a tide of generalized statements about big patterns, conveyed with numbers, proportions, and percentages and supplanting the stories of recognizable individuals. Why? Because historians figured out how to mine archival sources, to sort through the written records of elites to find clues and hints, and to phrase quantitative findings in ways that convey much about the lives of those less likely to record their own experiences. Social history has not, after all, been reduced to dreary characterizations of the nameless, voiceless, and faceless. On the contrary, social history arrived, confronted a literary challenge, and prevailed, as we see amply in *Border Citizens*. From the adaptations of a Tohono O'odham family to off-reservation wage-work (as James McCarthy said, "All the money we made we put into one bank—my mother" [p. 60]), to the trans-border migrations of a Yaqui family ("From this time on," Rosalio Valenzuela said, summing up the effect on his family of military violence in their Mexican home terrain, "our lives changed" [p. 71]), the practice of social history did not prevent Eric Meeks from making the most of compelling and grounded individual stories.

Fourth, Meeks joined in the enterprise of identifying subjects that had gotten stuck at the margins of historical inquiry, relocating them to the center of attention and thus telling stories that—in the most positive and productive way—mock the predictable articles of faith about the wild and colorful western past. Examples of this reallocation of emphasis abound in *Border Citizens*. Meeks tells the stories of Indian people incorporated as wageworkers into the industrial workplaces of extraction. He demonstrates the power of realignments of kinship, through intermarriage and social affiliation, to scramble the usual categories of ethnic identity. And he brings to the fore the centrality of an emphasis on race in western statehood movements. Moreover, Meeks evokes the great complexity of the cast of characters involved in western civil rights movements, and in doing so challenges a propensity, in mainstream American history, to pay attention almost exclusively to the unquestionably important history of African-American activism. He sets out the wide range of variation in the impacts—intended and otherwise—of the actual implementation of federal laws and policies on particular people, places, and communities. And

he illuminates the entrancing maneuvers by which Euro-Americans divided up western states into counties which, in turn, acquired distinctive characteristics and qualities that persist to today. (This last item may not yet be universally recognized as a subject of fascination, but I believe its time is coming.)

Fifth, Meeks steers clear of the straitened style of historical interpretation that struggles (usually fruitlessly) to jam complicated motives, ambitions, justifications, forms of conduct, and rationalizations of outcomes into an arrangement of simple either/or binary configurations. In place of the lethargic cognitive exercise that allows terms like "contradiction," "inconsistency," or "hypocrisy" to carry the weight of analysis and interpretation, Meeks adopts the much more vigorous and rewarding practice of seeking out and recognizing paradox. As a prime example, consider his wise adoption of the term "resistant adaptation," or, as he defines it, "the unanticipated, resilient, and sometimes defiant ways that people adapt to impositions by those in power (p. 4)." In other styles of historical appraisal, resistance and adaptation get cast as opposite and antagonistic practices. But Meeks joins a cohort of scholars in mobilizing multiple case studies to demonstrate that adaptation and resistance are actually quite compatible, often contributing to each other's effectiveness. Rather than two practices confronting each other across a canyon of difference, they more often function as collaborating parts of a paradox. And, in the words of Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, "There is nothing like a paradox to take the scum off your mind."

PERIPHERAL STUDIES STAKES ITS CLAIM TO THE CENTER

In the early 1980s, when the field of western American history was having a tough time in the competition for scholarly respectability and stature, providence awarded me an unexpected opportunity for optimism. At Harvard, history graduate students sometimes had the option of taking an undergraduate class while shouldering the burden of bigger assignments. But this had little impact on my classroom life, since I was an untenured assistant professor in a field that did not register as prestigious. When a couple of graduate students asked their advisers if they could take my western American history course, the response was not spirit-lifting: they were told they could not take my class because my field of study was "peripheral."

For a time, reports of this judgment made me sad. But then Harvard brought an Australian historian, Kenneth Inglis, to join us for a semester. He and I had an extended festival of conversations, comparing the colonization of Australia with the colonization of the American West. In one of the

liveliest of those conversations, Professor Inglis and I decided to cofound the Peripheral Studies Association, and thus to neutralize the sense of marginalization and dismissal we sometimes encountered. Having only two members gave us enormous freedom in selecting our officers: Ken Inglis took office as the Southern Hemisphere President of the Peripheral Studies Association, while I became the Northern Hemisphere President. While our association has not grown significantly in formal membership since its founding, Peripheral Studies now thrives, to the point where it risks losing its identity because of its entirely unforeseeable rise to prominence. In the 2010s, the project of placing U.S. westward expansion in a comparative framework with Australian, New Zealand, and Canadian settlement has gained many recruits.

Surely one of the most spirit-lifting demonstrations of the intellectual prosperity of Peripheral Studies arises from this fact: while historical scholarship has been unleashed in every field of western American history in recent years, research focused on the history of Arizona has registered as a zone of particular energy and originality for gifted historians. A list of these scholars—Katherine Benton-Cohen, *Borderline Americans: Racial Division and Labor War in the Arizona Borderlands* (2011); Geraldo Cadava, *Standing on Common Ground: The Making of a Sunbelt Borderland* (2013); Rachel St. John, *Line in the Sand: A History of the Western U.S.-Mexico Border* (2011); and Samuel Truett, *Fugitive Landscapes: The Forgotten History of the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (2006)—barely begins to convey the vitality of this field.

In other words, even if Ken Inglis and I were not very effective stewards of our association, Peripheral Studies has come into its own, with Arizona history now making a forceful claim on the attention of historians in every field. And a major measure of that change in status is this: in a time when an honest and forthright reckoning with the nation's history can still trigger defensiveness and resistance (and not the adaptive kind), the convergence of first-rate scholars studying the history of Arizona is a very auspicious development.

When Arizona history benefits from the attention of gifted and original historians, all of us—academic historians, history enthusiasts, the general reading public, and elected and appointed officials who are trying to navigate in difficult times—come into possession of an invaluable resource. The history of this state provides Arizonans and non-Arizonans alike with compelling stories of people engaged in intense, sometimes congenial, sometimes brutal encounters as they put forward their claims for legitimacy—to live on their own terms and to benefit from the state's resources. And the stories told now are often much more compelling than the roman-

ticized tales of the Old West steeped in that old-style nostalgia, which now look ready for retirement.

The study of borders and boundaries holds a lasting position as a central strength of Arizona history. The unending relevance of that topic can catch the attention even of those disdainful souls who stride the earth declaring, "You know, history was my least favorite subject in high school." Human beings who stick with that attitude and who turn down the insights that authors like Eric Meeks offer them are people making an eccentric choice to live in willful befuddlement. For reasons that seem unfathomable, they are refusing the opportunity to understand the expected and unexpected consequences arising from the enthusiasm for drawing arbitrary lines on the earth and then trying, fitfully, to endow those lines with a semblance of consistent meaning.

Recent books on Arizona history constitute place-based historical case studies that travel well. Several passages in *Border Citizens* make this explicit with direct evocations of international relevance, citing the work of scholars like Benedict Anderson, James Scott, and Frederick Cooper. Perhaps most notably, in making such effective use of the concept of "resistant adaptation," Meeks allies himself with a historian of the Andes, Steven J. Stern. In ways beyond counting, this book offers opportunities for applying Meeks's methods and findings to the history of other locales and populations worldwide. Readers get regular reminders that it may take more effort to refuse the invitation to commute between local history and global history than to go along for the ride.

Endowed with a history that carries planetary significance, Arizonans confront a consequential question: What do they want to make of their shared past? As Meeks's new afterword in this edition of *Border Citizens* makes clear, contemporary challenges calling for historical perspective have escalated in the last decade. The history of Arizona comes with an undiminished oversupply of relevance to the conflicts, dilemmas, and challenges of the present. And, with Sunbelt in-migration a persistent feature of the state's dynamism, every arrival from elsewhere presents an opportunity for "heritage acquisition." As longer-term residents find themselves in the company of new neighbors, civic groups might offer invitations to convene in a wondrous form of civic engagement, with communities orchestrating programs to read and discuss *Border Citizens* or to hold discussions with its author, making it possible for contemporary Arizonans to understand themselves in the larger context of time.

Some books about history are intrinsically interesting and enchant readers by permitting them to escape their own times and visit another world almost magically disconnected from the present.

Border Citizens is not that kind of book.

Yes, its stories are intrinsically interesting, but they are also intensely and unmistakably relevant to the present. With this book, Eric Meeks volunteered for strenuous civic engagement, and thus I conclude with an expression of gratitude and appreciation.

In refusing to take ethnic identities for granted, and in showing them as changeable, relational, and permeable, Eric Meeks endows his readers with a heightened recognition of the contingency and unpredictability at work (and, sometimes, *at play*) in the creation and transformation of social categories in the borderlands. In the early twenty-first century, the recognitions that Meeks awakens in us draw our attention to the contingency, even the implausibility, of the past. To go all out for alliteration, I see *Border Citizens* as offering an option for optimism, and as proposing that paradox presents possibility.

Alert readers will now realize that I began this essay by proposing a cure for nostalgia aimed at an imagined western past. And now, those alert readers may be thinking, I have given up the search for a cure, and simply succumbed.

Well, not exactly.

My case for extracting inspiration from the past bears little resemblance to old-style nostalgia for the Old West. On the contrary, *Border Citizens* permits us to envision an earlier West where ethnic identities proved permeable and relational, and where the course of events took unexpected turns that offered and offer a forceful challenge to a sense of inevitability and fatalism. In other words, I am trying to get better oriented to the troubles of the present by accepting the much more evidence-based appraisal of the past that Eric Meeks has provided us.

To put this another way, the phenomenon called “resistant adaptation” has not outlived its usefulness nor begun to approach its expiration date. In the decade since *Border Citizens* first came out, Eric Meeks notes in the new afterword, “proponents of global human rights in the Arizona-Sonora borderlands have fought back with a substantial degree of success,” often joining in cross-border alliances to protest local and global “ethnic and racial nationalism.” As he then declares in a forceful personal statement, “As a scholar born and raised in Arizona, I hope that this”—in other words, these recent manifestations of resistance and resistant adaption, and not the proclamations of racial nationalism—“is the model the world might follow” (p. 279).

BORDER CITIZENS

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