

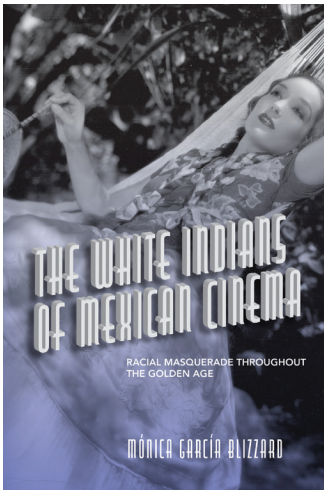
cinema—a goal that inherently undergirds Askari’s innovative investigation of cinema in Iran until the turbulent 1970s.

BOOK DATA Kaveh Askari, *Relaying Cinema in Midcentury Iran: Material Cultures in Transit*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2022. \$85.00 cloth, \$34.95 paper. 260 pages.

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***The White Indians of Mexican Cinema: Racial Masquerade throughout the Golden Age* by Mónica García Blizzard**



Mónica García Blizzard’s first book is a rich and revelatory project that contends with a question that US and European spectators often ask when first encountering mainstream Mexican films and telenovelas: “Why is everyone so White?” (1). Offering an in-depth analysis that examines a “pervasive racialized visual logic in Mexico” (38) that privileges white-

ness, *The White Indians of Mexican Cinema* answers this spectatorial question by unraveling how Mexico’s audiovisual landscape operates under the legacy of colonialism.

García Blizzard postulates that the coloniality of power, as suggested by Aníbal Quijano, pervades the films of the early, mid, and late periods of Mexico’s golden age of cinema, which glorify whiteness by casting white Mexicans as Indigenous leads, thus valorizing “whiteness-as-indigeneity” (5). With a decolonial perspective grounded in the theoretical tools of critical race theory, this study sheds light on Mexican cinema’s gendered and racialized implications of whiteness-as-indigeneity. García Blizzard’s book is a welcome addition to the existing scholarship on the racial politics of Mexican cinema during its golden age (the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s) by scholars such as Joanne Hershfield, Charles Ramírez-Berg, Andrea Noble, and Dolores Tierney. Here, García Blizzard intervenes in

ongoing debates on Latin American and Mexican film and visual culture, particularly regarding the function of race, gender, melodrama, and star texts in the postrevolutionary project of *indigenismo-mestizaje* of the twentieth century.

Organized by chapter into thematic analyses, the book first provides overviews of the terms “Whiteness” and “Indigeneity” within the Mexican racial formation. García Blizzard defines whiteness “contextual[ly]” (21–22), following Omi and Winant, as a racial formation governed by “Western discourses of modernity” and as a “historically and socially situated project” (21). Whiteness here is both *blanquitud*, a sense of socioeconomic ascension as defined by the philosopher Bolívar Echeverría, and *blancura*, the embodied white Mexican phenotype. Both Spanish terms date back to the Spanish conquest and continue to exist in residual forms.

García Blizzard succinctly summarizes how Indigeneity was opposed to whiteness as an “undesirable categorization” during the postrevolutionary twentieth-century nationalist project (13). Thus, to make Indigeneity desirable and “elevate” its place in the national narrative for Mexican spectators in the years following the Mexican Revolution, audiovisual production used whiteness to represent Indigenous people as “compassion-worthy” by privileging the white female body. As such, the trope of whiteness-as-indigeneity—working in the opposite direction of its “hemispheric cousin” blackface—“infus[es] the racialized subject with the dignity and desirability that coloniality confers upon Whiteness” (6).

García Blizzard’s argument about the trope of whiteness-as-indigeneity convinces in large part through the sheer force of accumulated evidence. The collected corpus of films under discussion—an interesting amalgamation of silent-era (*Zítari*), preindustrial (*Janitzio*), heavily studied (*María Candelaria*), *indigenista* (*La india bonita*, *El indio*, *Maclovía*, *La Zandunga*, *Tierra de pasiones*, *Tizoc*), revisionist *indigenista* (*La noche de los mayas*, *Deseada*), late golden age (*Tizoc*, the *María Isabel* duology, *El violetero*), and relatively understudied (*Chilam Balam* [1957]) films—impress with their racist engagement with indigeneity through a pervasive use of gendered and schematically white bodies on-screen.

The first chapter examines how films idealize pre-Columbian womanhood in this way. Analyzing *Zítari* (1931) and *Chilam Balam*, the author argues that the whiteness of their female protagonists functions as a “racialized semiotic device for underscoring the pathos and desirability of the characters,” and that the films portray the white (but passing for Indigenous) women as “glorious contributors of

Mexicanness” (68). The films employ a melodramatic mode that centers these women as both melodramatic victim and desirable female.

García Blizzard returns to the cultural and racial politics of the classical Mexican melodrama throughout the book. Chapter 3 discusses how the narrative conventions of studio films such as *India bonita* (1938), *El indio* (1939), *María Candelaria* (1944), and *Maclovía* (1948) index “the racialized political inequality” that defined much of the *indigenismo* rhetoric, undoing their decolonial projects. Meanwhile, *Janitzio* (1935) and *Raíces* (1954) are offered as counterexamples that do not follow the whiteness-as-indigeneity model because they do not function as melodramas and thereby avoid conforming to studio aesthetics.

In a similar vein, the fifth chapter looks at the persistence of the melodramatic mode in the period immediately following the golden age. García Blizzard studies the *María Isabel* duology—*María Isabel* (1968) and *El amor de María Isabel* (1970)—to argue that the melodramatic vehicle of whiteness-as-indigeneity continues to be used to portray dignified and wholesome indigeneity by recycling tropes from the golden age. Through Silvia Pinal’s star text and her on-screen “desirable diegetic Indigeneity,” the films also instrumentalize Pinal’s body to demonstrate the unruly physicality of Indigenous people. Especially interesting is García Blizzard’s proposal that these *María Isabel* films foretell the *India María* films (224). In a fascinating analysis, she profiles where *María Isabel* stops short and how the *India María* films go further in social commentary and the reproduction of the racist trope of Indigenous female ignorance.

The author’s original approach avoids studying these (and all other) Indigenous-themed films through the “officialist rhetoric of the specific *sexenio*”; instead, she takes as her point of departure the “residual and emergent attitudes about race [that] coexist in complex ways throughout the twentieth century” (36). For example, the second chapter analyzes two Tehuana-themed films—*La Zandunga* (1938) and *Tierra de pasiones* (1943)—that refashion this regional type into a nonthreatening national symbol. In *La Zandunga*, Lupe Vélez’s white star text diegetically defines her white identity (*blancura*) and cultural capital in the film industry (*blanquitud*), pushing the trope of whiteness-as-indigeneity to construct a palatable national symbol of the Tehuana for the viewing public. García Blizzard skillfully contextualizes the public reception of the stars’ white and nonwhite bodies in this period alongside a sophisticated formal analysis that supports her twenty-first-century reading of the films.

In later chapters, García Blizzard delves deeper into how Indigenous-themed films have engaged with the race-based project of *indigenismo-mestizaje*. In the fourth chapter, she discusses how *La noche de los mayas* (1939) and *Deseada* (1951) uphold the *indigenismo-mestizaje* project of the twentieth century that situates “Indigeneity as a locus of cultural value,” foregrounding and legitimating the “Indigenous cosmovision” (188) through Indigenous religious and spiritual beliefs while condemning white intrusion (186).

In the final chapter of the book, the author shifts her attention to the limited portrayals of Indigenous male leads in four films of the long golden age—*Tribu* (1935), *Lola Casanova* (1949), *Tizoc* (1957), and *El violetero* (1960)—in order to argue that the film industry has also applied the whiteness-as-indigeneity vehicle in the reverse, as white Mexican men pass as Indigenous to figure the limits of *mestizaje*. García Blizzard contrasts the impossible romantic coupling of the white-as-Indigenous man and white Mexican woman with the privileged pairing of the Spanish man and Indigenous woman, reading both as allegories of the nation, as described by Doris Sommer. In her conclusion, García Blizzard considers how several post-golden age films continue the earlier legacy and depict the impossibility of mutual desirability between the white woman and the Indigenous man. A recent exception to this sustained trend is *Güeros* (2014), which she describes as subtly beginning “to heal” the “colonial wound” that is bound up in desire (273).

This text is useful for Latin American and Anglophone scholars who work at the intersection of race, ethnicity, gender, and film studies, as the book offers a significant sociohistorical contextualization of the racialized and gendered patterns of colonial power in Mexican cinema. It is especially timely in light of the racist reactions in Mexico to Yalitza Aparicio’s performance in *Roma* (2018). García Blizzard’s analysis productively highlights how such a reaction, which surfaces when “the White norm is not adhered to,” is a symptom of the long-standing expectation of “artificial White ubiquity and racial masquerade in Mexican visual mediums” (286) that seek to insist on the centrality of whiteness at the expense of ethnoracial diversity and equality.

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