

University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

**ScholarWorks @ UTRGV**

---

History Faculty Publications and Presentations

College of Liberal Arts

---

5-2016

## **Review: Americans in the Treasure House: Travel to Porfirian Mexico and the Cultural Politics of Empire. by Jason Ruiz**

George T. Diaz

*The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/hist\\_fac](https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/hist_fac)



Part of the [History Commons](#), and the [Latin American Languages and Societies Commons](#)

---

### **Recommended Citation**

George T. Díaz; Review: Americans in the Treasure House: Travel to Porfirian Mexico and the Cultural Politics of Empire. by Jason Ruiz. *Pacific Historical Review* 1 May 2016; 85 (2): 288–289. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1525/phr.2016.85.2.288>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts at ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. For more information, please contact [justin.white@utrgv.edu](mailto:justin.white@utrgv.edu), [william.flores01@utrgv.edu](mailto:william.flores01@utrgv.edu).

Numerous factual errors (p. 52, 56, 95, 97, 98–99, 107, 108, 187, 193, 200, 204, 211, 213, 215, 262 n. 8 and n. 75, 264 n. 40, and 266 n. 99) are overshadowed by pervasive Eurocentric prejudices. The authors note the “savagery of Upper Louisiana [that] overwhelmed Europeans” (p. 53), but “by the time of the settlement of St. Louis, . . . Indian heritage was no longer noticeable” (p. 297 n. 30). They also contend that “in the colonial era, life . . . for the black slaves in St. Louis [was] likely easier in America than in Africa” (p. 186) and claim that the “settled portion of Upper Louisiana” was defined only by “permanent *European* settlement” (p. 1; my italics)—thus ignoring the highly advanced Mississippian metropolis of Cahokia and later complex Native American towns.

Ekberg and Person contend that Chouteau’s manuscript is a mythical, self-serving document that historians must use “gingerly” (p. 4, 58). But their misdating of it—should be 1804 rather than 1825 (p. 225)—prevents a more accurate analysis, and they are unable to explain plausibly how, when, and why St. Louis was founded and named without relying on Chouteau. This flawed book reveals that even the best empirical sources, when tainted by prejudices and twisted by the authors’ “reimagining” (p. 211), must also be used cautiously.

*University of Missouri–St. Louis*

J. FREDERICK FAUSZ

*Americans in the Treasure House: Travel to Porfirian Mexico and the Cultural Politics of Empire.* By Jason Ruiz. (Austin, University of Texas Press, 2014. xviii + 275 pp. \$55 cloth, \$25 paper)

*Americans in the Treasure House* examines U.S. citizen travel to Mexico during the Porfiriato and its immediate aftermath and argues these visits greatly shaped the U.S. image of Mexico. Long before commercial tourism marketed Mexico in the twentieth-century, Americans sojourned south of the border for business and pleasure. Although U.S. economic imperialism has been examined in works such as Gilbert G. González’s *Culture of Empire*, Jason Ruiz fills a scholarly gap by considering Americans who toured Mexico for pleasure rather than business. Using an array of travel literature including photographs and postcards, Ruiz argues American visits shaped the “cultural politics of empire,” or how Americans came to see Mexico as exotic, barbarous, and in need of U.S. dominance.

American visits to Mexico were welcomed by Porfirio Díaz (1876–1911), who invited foreigners to invest in his dictatorship.

Unlike filibusterers of earlier eras, Americans traveling in Díaz's Mexico shot Mexicans with cameras rather than guns. Still, as Ruiz shows, cameras can be as much a tool of empire as any weapon. Rather than dwell on modernization efforts that Díaz tried so hard to implement, Americans focused their lenses on dark-skinned, barefoot, Indian girls and in so doing fetishized Mexico as something exotic, backward, and feminized. Ruiz's chapter "Desire among the Ruins," particularly examines American photographers' fascination with pictures of young Mexican girls. Ruiz's analysis demonstrates how these impromptu-feeling snapshots were actually elaborately staged presentations that invited viewers to see Mexicans (and thereby Mexico) as objects of desire and easily dominated. Inviting smiles by those depicted may be nothing more than gestures of friendliness, but when coupled with shredded attire exposing bare brown flesh and angled shots of clothing barely clinging to the body, these photographs "illuminate the imperialistic gaze that framed many American representations of Mexico" (p. 36).

Longing desires became manifest with the arrival of the Mexican Revolution in 1910. No longer restrained by respect for Díaz, unrest provided a pretext for U.S. interventionism. In 1914, U.S. sailors in Veracruz took time from their occupation duties to take snapshots and make postcards like the ones they saw from traveler visits during the Porfiriato. Ending in the 1910s, Ruiz shows how tourism not only contributed to U.S. imperialism, but also how agents of U.S. empire took up cameras and became tourists themselves, thereby acting out the very activity that in part inspired U.S. entry to Mexico in the first place. It is unlikely that the swaggering sailors summoning Mexican women beside them for the camera grasped the irony.

Well written and persuasive, Jason Ruiz gives readers a beautiful book on Americans' literal and figurative image of Mexico under and immediately after Díaz. A history of pictures rather than a pictorial history, *Americans in the Treasure House* has great depth and will be useful to scholars of U.S.–Mexican relations, travel, and the gendered politics of empire.

Sam Houston State University

GEORGE T. DÍAZ

*How to Read the American West: A Field Guide.* By William Wyckoff. (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2014. xvi + 384 pp. \$44.95 paper)

More likely than not, if you are reading these pages, you are interested in the American West, you know a thing or two about it,