Who is a “real Indian”? Who cares? How do our answers help us think about changing ideas of race in America that affect everyone—White, Black, Asian, and other Americans?

Assistant Professor Eva M. Garroutte takes on such questions in her recent book *Real Indians: Identity and Survival of Native America*. Garroutte, a former municipal Commissioner of Indian Affairs in the state of Oklahoma, explains that a legally established American Indian identity is associated with certain rights and privileges, such as exemption from state taxes and laws. She offers a range of examples of the kind of exploitation that can occur when people improperly claim an American Indian identity.

For example, in the 1990s, the federal government held hearings focusing on an unscrupulous character who had taken advantage of several laws designed to help Native American businesses and used them to his own benefit in an insurance scam that had the potential for disaster had he not been caught.

“He basically had an off-shore tax haven set up on a sand bar in the Rio Grande,” recalled Garroutte. “It was really amazing what he had gotten away with before he was caught and prosecuted,” she said, explaining that the man was claiming to be able to insure major corporations despite the fact that he was nearly broke.

“This example leads us into a discussion about race in America,” Garroutte says. “It helps us think about how we classify people into different races, and the consequences that should be associated with particular classifications. These are discussions that America will increasingly confront in the next decades, and not just in relation to Indians.”

Revised procedures for the 2000 census are a powerful indicator of a “paradigm shift” in American thinking about race. In that year, for the first time, people were allowed to categorize themselves as belonging to more than one race. Now an important question becomes: is a person who describes himself as both white and some other race “really” a minority? Are further determinations of his “real” racial identity going to be based on his degree of ancestry, his self-identification, cultural characteristics, physical appearance, or something else?

Those are important questions because federal agencies consider data on race in order to discover and address such things as systematic discrimination against minorities in hiring, housing, banking, or voting practices, or racial segregation in public schools. There have already been federal hearings debating the issues of how we are going to divide people into different races for these purposes, now that we formally recognize, by the new census procedures, that people can have more than one racial identity.

Garroutte joined the faculty of Boston College after graduating from Princeton University in 1993, and following a period of teaching at the University of Tulsa from 1992-1998. As she says, “the example of American Indians is a very rich one to draw upon as we consider the implications of the increasingly ambiguous system of racial classification in the United States. A whole range of American institutions have been thinking about that question for hundreds of years specifically in relation to Indians. So we can use the American Indian experience to think about the consequences of different choices for defining race in a whole range of groups.”

At the same time, identity is an extremely controversial and difficult issue for American Indians. In addition to legal definitions of Indian identity, there are definitions based on the individual’s culture, ancestry, and self-identification. The definitions can be based on very different things, so that a person who satisfies one definition may well not satisfy another. It is possible, for instance, for a person of exclusively Indian ancestry, who speaks his tribal language and was raised with a strong awareness of his tribal culture, to be unable—through no fault of his own—to satisfy legal definitions of identity. This can exclude him from many of the rights and protections that he should have, including the right to live on the reservation. Conversely, in some times and places (including the present), people who have no cultural connection to Indian communities and even no Native American ancestry may be legally classified as Indians, and claim the rights connected with that status. These realities have caused deep, painful rifts in Indian communities.

While some may never consider their identity, for Garroutte it is very much a part of her family history. As a US citizen and a citizen of the Cherokee Nation, she is the descendent of those who suffered through the 1838 Trail of Tears, an infamous episode in American history when the Cherokee were forced by the US government to relocate from their native homeland in present-day North Carolina. The Cherokee walked over 1,000 miles to Indian Territory, which now is the state of Oklahoma. Along the way, many weaker members of the tribe, elderly and infants perished.

In Real Indians Garroutte documents how the identity of Indian people and tribes has frequently been manipulated by the federal government, tribal officials, and Indians and non-Indians alike to gain political, social, or economic advantage. “I don’t know that you can say one group is trying harder than another to revise or even manipulate those categories,” she says. “All those groups had—and continue to have—a hand in it at one time or another. But the federal and state governments have had the most power to enforce varying definitions of identity in ways with really profound consequences having to do with things like land cessions and the collective rights of whole categories of people.”

By combining scholarly sources, personal accounts, interview data and her own reflections Garroutte compiles and examines the ways in which individual and collective American Indian identities are created, challenged, and manipulated.

Regarding manipulation, Garroutte said that she is disturbed when she sees newspaper advertisements inviting others to pay money to take part in deeply sacred Indian ceremonies.

“There has been a long history of fascination with Indians in America. It seems as though it is something exotic to people,” she said. “But you have to be wary of anyone who is charging money for such things.”

She said that Indian tribes are very concerned with people using traditional practices to gain money or power.

“That would be like a Catholic priest charging $50 to perform a baptism,” she said. “I think the Catholic church would be troubled by that.” These issues are also part of struggles about identity for Indian people. But at the same time it is imperative that tribes be able to maintain their boundaries and resist such exploitation, it is also important to them not to deny people who are genuinely Indian, even if they do not seem to satisfy certain formal or typical criteria. “Tribes are struggling to attend to issues of identity with the seriousness they deserve, but
without being destroyed by them.”

She said the difficulty in writing Real Indians was in being responsible not only to the values and interests of academia, but also to American Indians. “As an American Indian person writing about this topic, I think you can’t avoid having an agenda, and I’m no different. I do worry about the way that people try to exploit claims to an Indian identity and inflict harm on Indian communities—which often exist in pretty tenuous circumstances to begin with. But I am also very concerned about the way that disagreements about identity have become bitter and divisive within tribes. I admit to being interested in seeing Indian communities be able to heal the wounds that battles over identity have inflicted. But people have very strong feelings about these things, and in this book I just tried hard to let everyone make their case, from all perspectives, just as persuasively as they could—whether or not I agreed. And I tried hard to make sure that the people I interviewed were comfortable with the ideas that I attributed to them.

“I hope that through this book I have opened a space for further conversation people will have,” she said.

Sarah Babb Wins Mirra Komarovsky Award

Professor Sarah Babb was named co-recipient of the prestigious Mirra Komarovsky Award for her book Managing Mexico: Economists from Nationalism to Neoliberalism (Princeton University Press, 2001). Each year the Eastern Sociological Society (ESS) presents the award for the book deemed to make the most valuable contribution to sociology. In selecting Babb and her co-recipient Harvey Molotch (Where Stuff Comes From), the award committee stated “These two very different books both seemed to us to advance sociology, to reframe the problems posed and/or to ask new research questions.”

Babb became interested in the prominent role of U.S. trained economists in the Mexican government when she visited the country while working on her Ph.D. at Northwestern University. Managing Mexico, her first book, examines the phenomenon in detail, exploring the evolution of Mexican economics from its leftist origins as a state-centered profession in the continental mold to its “Americanization” over the last few decades. The book describes the complex institutional struggle between the public National University (UNAM), the primary training center for economists in the early stages of this evolution, and the more conservative Autonomous Technological Institute of Mexico (ITAM), established by businessmen in 1946 as an ideological counterweight to UNAM. Babb employs a variety of innovative and painstaking sociological methods to demonstrate this ideological shift, including the coding and analytic interpretation of hundreds of undergraduate economic theses from these schools. (She used undergraduate rather than graduate work because the number of Ph.D.s was relatively small.) This scrupulous research is tied to larger theoretical concerns, providing a basis for comparison between Mexico and other developing countries. The book has already been translated into Spanish and is, according to Mauro Guillén, a “landmark achievement.”

The woman who served as the inspiration for the ESS award, Mirra Komarovsky (1906-1999), became a prominent sociological scholar when that achievement was unusual for a woman, especially a woman who was also a Jew and an immigrant. (Her family came from Russia in 1921.) She specialized in issues of class, was a pioneer in the study of gender, and was one of the first to challenge the functionalist approach in sociology, in particular the justification for conventional gender roles. She authored several books, served as president of both ASA and ESS, and won numerous awards, among them the Banard Medal of Distinction, the Banard Distinguished Alumni Award, and ASA’s Distinguished Career Award.