

Mexicans in the United States:  
A Historical Perspective, 1900-1942

by

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“We asked for workers. We got people instead.”

-Max Frisch

## **DEDICATION**

For Mom and Dad, who have always unconditionally supported me in every endeavor I have pursued. For Jonny, who is the best friend anyone could have. And, finally, for Leah, whose words of encouragement and love through the tough days of writing made all of this possible.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The roots of contemporary debates on Mexican immigration to the United States can be traced back to the early decades of the twentieth century. I argue that the key period was from 1900-1942, during which time the first major wave of Mexican immigrants traveled north to the United States and, upon arrival, had to wade through complex racial hierarchies and perceptions. During this period, the US-Mexican border was enforced for the first time; contemporary immigration enforcement apparatuses were established; and Mexicans lost considerable political, economic, and social power in the US borderlands in the face of discrimination and racism. Each of these factors play a significant role in the modern debate on Mexican immigration to the United States.

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## **I. Introduction**

The United States spent \$20 billion on the US Border Patrol, on Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and the various other mechanisms through which it patrols and enforces its 2,000 mile border with Mexico in 2016 under the administration of President Barack Obama, one of the friendliest US presidents toward Mexico in recent memory. His successor, President Donald J. Trump, launched his political life with a discussion of the perils Mexican migration, of Mexicans more broadly, and made the construction of a complete border wall a fundamental pillar of his 2016 Presidential campaign. He won, and one of his very first actions as President was to issue an Executive Order demanding the construction of such a wall. In the era of NAFTA and relatively tranquil US-Mexican relations, which since the end of the Cold War have been at a historic high, this may seem a shock.

However, such a concerned preoccupation with the southern border and with the residents who live on the other side of the Rio Grande is a deep American tradition that has its roots in the earliest days of the American political experiment, manifested through the conquering of the frontier and the divine right of Americans to control the entire northern portion of the Western Hemisphere. This preoccupation grew in concert with American power; at the turn of the 20th century, with the frontier “civilized” and US power at a historic high, many influential Americans sought to demarcate American society from Mexican society.

Such a demarcation was a natural progression from the US-Mexican War of the 1840s and represents an experiment in statebuilding, national identity, and the great power politics of empires and the politics of difference. This story becomes especially interesting at the turn of the century as both Americans and Mexicans begin to think of the border in a different light for the first time. Policy fluctuations become common, anti-Mexican sentiment bursting at the seams, all

through the major world events of the Mexican Revolution, two World Wars, the booming 1920s, and the Great Depression.

The purpose of this project is to examine the determinants of US policy toward Mexicans specifically during this period (1900-1942) and explain what lay underneath the dramatic fluctuations in policy that are observed. This is a study in both domestic and international politics; with the United States and Mexico, the line between domestic and foreign policy is so blurred as to be almost nonexistent. I propose that economic considerations, a framework through which political actors often make policy decisions, lie at the core of US immigration policy. When there was a demand for labor, the US government encouraged and facilitated Mexican migration and when there was not, it sought to restrict it. I suspect this to be true across contexts and across societies.

There is a second, more interesting, component that cannot go ignored and that involves racial understanding and identity. The fundamental role that race and racism play in this story is critical to a proper understanding of US policy. That the value of Mexican immigration was restricted solely to economic labor - primarily low-wage agricultural labor - did not occur in a vacuum. A close analysis of the borderlands reveals that over a period of 50 years, from the end of the US-Mexican War to roughly 1920, white Anglo settlers arriving from the eastern part of the United States consciously eroded the existing economic and political structure of what was once a predominantly Mexican society, limiting the economic and political power of ethnic Mexicans. It was this transformation that destroyed traditional class arrangements and made it so that hard labor was the only opportunity available to Mexicans and it was through this process that many Americans came to perceive and think of Mexicans. Without this, I argue, the fluctuations in policy would not have been possible and the modern relationship with Mexico

would be far stronger. Race played a key role in this: after all, it is not the northern border with Canada, which is longer, that preoccupied Americans in this period. In this way, this challenges contemporary international relations scholarship and offers a new lens through which to view both the historic and contemporary relationship of the United States and Mexico.

## **II. Constructing a Border: Competing Scholarly Approaches**

Many factors contribute to an analysis of the historical construction of the 2,000 mile border that divides the United States and Mexico. There are traditional issues of politics - carving out a space to exert a monopoly of violence and political power, national security, economic concerns, and state power. There are complex historical dynamics that must be accounted for - early US-Mexican relations are not often enough processed as an experiment in peacebuilding and statebuilding on both sides. There are also low-level social interactions between Mexican migrants and longtime Mexican-Americans living in the American southwest and west that contributed to an always evolving and shifting social climate in which Americans operated in the early 20th century. Any theory that attempts to explain the shifts in policy and perception of the border must be cohesive and inclusive of each of these factors if it is to be satisfactory.

This section is divided into two parts in an attempt to properly understand and comprehend the issues at play. The first is a review of the literature related to issues of the borderlands and immigration as they relate to US policy toward Mexican immigrants in the first half of the 20th century, with an eye toward the broader contours of the US-Mexican political relationship. I hypothesize that underneath traditional issues of security and economic interests was a negative perception of ethnic Mexican migrants and Mexican-American citizens held by Anglo Americans that can explain the shifts in US policy and the periodic outbursts of violence

and discrimination against Mexican migrants and Mexican-Americans. These attitudes were most prevalent in the period that laid the foundation for the contemporary conflict over the US-Mexican border and are thus critical to any understanding of those debates and issues. As such, this section will be multidisciplinary and involve the work of sociologists, political scientists, sociologists, and others.

The second section positions that interdisciplinary approach within the framework of international relations, which is still the best scholarly field through which to interpret the US-Mexican relationship. I grapple with the leading theories of international relations and discuss their merits and drawbacks in this discussion, most of which are related to the dearth of racial dynamics as an explanatory device. In short, racial dynamics and the social construction of race are critical to the framework I propose and to the proper understanding of US-Mexican relations.

### *The Borderlands, Immigration, and the Creation of a Border*

There is no shortage of scholarly literature related to the United States' southern border with Mexico, which forms the bedrock on which the bilateral relationship between the two nations rests. Despite the nuances and complexities interwoven into the tapestry of the US-Mexican relationship, the shared border is fundamental to understanding most issues of interest. There is a broad consensus that three issues are the most relevant and pressing concerns for the United States and Mexico: security, trade, and migration.<sup>1</sup> Each issue is connected to the issue of the border and its enforcement; indeed, it is difficult to imagine the contours of any of those issues without first diving into the history of the border. Even among these, the issue of

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<sup>1</sup> Rosenblum, Marc, William A. Kandel, Clare Ribando Seelke, and Ruth Ellen Wasem. "Mexican Migration to the United States: Policy and Trends." *Federation of American Scientists*. June 7, 2012. Accessed February 7, 2017. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42560.pdf>.

migration is the one most obviously connected to the border. This review highlights the predominant academic debates, theories, and guideposts related to the period during which the southern border of the United States was imagined by citizens on both sides during the first half of the twentieth century.

The first relevant questions are the most basic: what is a border, and how has the border between the United States and Mexico been legislated and conceived? Broadly speaking, a border is a boundary between two or more separate nation-states; these can be geographic, such as an ocean or mountain range, or more translucent boundaries imagined and agreed upon by relevant political actors. Borders are a legal necessity in the contemporary international ecosystem in which nation-states are the dominant shape of political organization. A state takes form in areas where it alone has the right to use violence, a concept known as the monopoly of violence.<sup>2</sup> The modern US-Mexican border is over 2,000 miles and is divided only by a natural boundary in the east by the Rio Grande. The vast majority of this territory, then, exists only in imagination as an artificial construction. This territory has a long history, fraught with violence, tension, and contradiction.

It cannot be overstated that the modern border was created out of asymmetrical violence and conquest. The modern US-Mexican border was largely formalized in the aftermath of the US-Mexican War, waged from 1846-48, after which the United States purchased from Mexico territories that include all or part of the modern US states of Arizona, California, Colorado,

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<sup>2</sup> Tilly, Charles. *War Making and State Making as Organized Crime* in *Bringing the State Back In* edited by Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). [http://www.fd.unl.pt/docentes\\_docs/ma/RBR\\_MA\\_11377.pdf](http://www.fd.unl.pt/docentes_docs/ma/RBR_MA_11377.pdf); Published as "Wissenschaft als Beruf," *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (Tübingen, 1922), pp. 524-55. Originally a speech at Munich University, 1918, published in 1919 by Duncker & Humblot, Munich. From H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Translated and edited), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, pp. 129-156, New York: Oxford University Press, 1946. <http://anthropos-lab.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Weber-Science-as-a-Vocation.pdf>

Kansas, New Mexico, Nevada, Oklahoma, Utah, and Wyoming.<sup>3</sup> Forty years after Mexican Independence (declared in 1821), half of its original territory was acquired by the United States. This historical legacy must be reckoned with: Mexico lost 55% of its territory and many Mexican officials and citizens held animosity toward the United States over what is considered the relationship's "original sin", a sentiment surely compounded by the discovery of gold in California in 1849, one year after the land transfer.<sup>4</sup> The historical record is clear on the role of violence in the creation of the boundary between the United States and Mexico and its roots; it is far murkier on the historical enforcement of that border after it had been legally created.

There is significant evidence that the border was loosely enforced at the federal level in the immediate decades after the war. The United States government imposed no restrictions on border crossings in the 19th century, and did not even bother to record crossings in the first two decades of the 20th.<sup>5</sup> Prior to the creation of the US Border Patrol, the entire 2,000 mile border was patrolled by an agency that, at its most, had 75 "mounted watchmen" that were based out of El Paso.<sup>6</sup> These loose efforts are reflected in the remarks of one US soldier assigned to Texas, who wrote that it was "America's only in its possession" and "Mexican in its people, its language, and its mode of life." Visiting Texas for the first time reminded him of a superior's

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<sup>3</sup> "Guadalupe Hidalgo, Treaty of." *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6Th Edition* (April 2016): 1. *History Reference Center*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 24, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Keller, Renata. "U.S.-Mexican Relations from Independence to the Present." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*. 19 Dec. 2016. <http://americanhistory.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-269>.

<sup>5</sup> "St. John, R.: Line in the Sand: A History of the Western U.S.-Mexico Border. (eBook, Paperback and Hardcover)." Accessed March 1, 2017. <http://press.princeton.edu/titles/9454.html>.

<sup>6</sup> "1924: Border Patrol Established." 1924: Border Patrol Established | U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Accessed April 24, 2017. <https://www.cbp.gov/about/history/1924-border-patrol-established>.

comment that the United States “should go to war with Mexico again, and force her to take [Texas] back.”<sup>7</sup>

At the more localized level tension arises with this narrative. Around the time of the Mexican Revolution (1911), two waves of migrants arrived in the borderlands. One came from the south, fleeing the violence of the Revolution. Prior to the outbreak of violence, northern migration by Mexicans remained fairly low but increased with the violence, creating the first major wave of Mexican immigration to the United States.<sup>8</sup> It is estimated that nearly a million Mexicans came to the US via Mexico during the Revolution, and even though many would return the total number of ethnic Mexicans living in the United States tripled from 1910 to 1920. Concurrently, many Anglo Americans began arriving in the borderlands territory in the same period from southern and northern states, setting the stage for a restructuring of the traditional society and for racial tension.<sup>9</sup> It is the social interactions at this level - between ethnic Mexicans and Anglos who had deep roots in the American southwest and west and between new migrants from the American north and east and from Mexico - that are of interest. How did these interactions shape the discourse around immigration and the border?

There was an observed spike in violence against Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, viewed as enemies of white supremacy by many, in the borderlands during this period alongside the rise of the white nationalist Texas Rangers in both power and significance.<sup>10</sup> This coincided

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in: Montejano, David. *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836–1986*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987. Page 89.

<sup>8</sup> Rosenblum, Marc, William A. Kandel, Clare Ribando Seelke, and Ruth Ellen Wasem. "Mexican Migration to the United States: Policy and Trends." *Federation of American Scientists*. June 7, 2012. Accessed February 7, 2017. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42560.pdf>; Gratton, Brian, and Emily Merchant. "Immigration, Repatriation, and Deportation: The Mexican-Origin Population in the United States, 1920-1950." *International Migration Review* 47, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 944-975. *SocINDEX with Full Text, EBSCOhost* (accessed February 7, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Montejano, 105-9.

<sup>10</sup> Hernandez, Kelly Lytle. *Migra! a history of the U.S. Border Patrol*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010. 19-21.

with a dramatic loss of Mexican political power and land in Texas, a growing nationalist sentiment in the United States toward most immigrants, and a so-called “Bandit War” waged against Mexican insurgents around the US border by the United States Army.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, large US industrial leaders successfully advocated for Mexican exemption to a 1917 law requiring migrants to pass a literacy test, reflecting the value of Mexican laborers to the American economy.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, economic transformation and the erosion of traditional Mexican society in the borderlands led to the Anglo perception of Mexicans as laborers during this period (Ngai 1999, 2004; Ochoa 2004; ).<sup>13</sup> It is crucial to understand that most Mexican migration in the 1920s was circular: laborers ventured north seasonally, earning money to send home, and then returned to Mexico after roughly six months in the US.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, US agribusiness sent labor contractors to Mexico with the goal of encouraging Mexicans to enter the US.<sup>15</sup> This at least partially explains why Mexicans were exempted from nativist legislation like the one referenced above or the landmark 1924 Immigration Act: while the US economy was booming and growing in the 1920s, there was no need to restrict a wave of migrant workers, even as undercurrents of anti-Mexican sentiment were bubbling and taking form. Again, it is this tension - between large

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<sup>11</sup> Montejano Chapter 3.

<sup>12</sup> Ochoa, Gilda L.. *Becoming Neighbors in a Mexican American Community*. Austin, US: University of Texas Press, 2004. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 8 February 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Fuhlhage, Michael. "Brave Old Spaniards and Indolent Mexicans: J. Ross Browne, Harper's New Monthly Magazine, and the Social Construction of Off-Whiteness in the 1860s." *American Journalism* 31, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 100-126. *OmniFile Full Text Mega (H.W. Wilson)*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 8, 2017).; Keller, Renata. "U.S.-Mexican Relations from Independence to the Present." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*. 19 Dec. 2016. <http://americanhistory.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-269>; Ngai, Mae M. "The Architecture of Race in American Immigration Law: A Reexamination of the Immigration Act of 1924." *The Journal of American History*, 1999., 67, *JSTOR Journals*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 8, 2017). Ngai, Mae M. *Impossible subjects: illegal aliens and the making of modern America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004.; Ochoa, Gilda L.. *Becoming Neighbors in a Mexican American Community*. Austin, US: University of Texas Press, 2004. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 8 February 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Gratton, Merchant.

<sup>15</sup> Hernandez, 25.



economic interests and local action - that is worth exploring. How did the border become so militarized?

It is widely accepted that the collapse of the United States economy dramatically changed the way ethnic Mexicans and the US-Mexican border were treated in the United States. Mexicans were scapegoated for stealing Anglo jobs during the Depression in a way that was consistent with other economic hardship.<sup>16</sup> It is accepted by scholars of the era that many Mexican immigrants and a significant number of American-born citizens of Mexican ancestry left the United States during the Great Depression; in fact, the 1930s was the only decade in the 20th century that experienced more north-to-south migration than south-to-north.<sup>17</sup> There is great debate, however, over exactly how many migrants left the United States and under what conditions. Some scholars estimate the total number to be between 1-1.5 million, of whom roughly 60% are estimated to have been American citizens.<sup>18</sup> Others, in what is considered the most common assumption, estimate the number to be somewhere between 300,000-500,000.<sup>19</sup> The specific number of migrants who ventured to Mexico is not critical to this research, which is premised on the assumption that even the most conservative estimates point to a significant trend that requires an explanation. Instead, I focus on the social realities that created the conditions for

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<sup>16</sup> Ochoa 2004.

<sup>17</sup> Rosenblum, Marc, William A. Kandel, Clare Ribando Seelke, and Ruth Ellen Wasem. "Mexican Migration to the United States: Policy and Trends." *Federation of American Scientists*. June 7, 2012. Accessed February 7, 2017. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42560.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Balderrama, Francisco E., and Raymond Rodriguez. *Decade of betrayal: Mexican repatriation in the 1930s*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2006.; Lim, J. 2010 "Chinos and Paisanos: Chinese Mexican Relations in the Borderlands." *Pacific Historical Review* 79(1):50-85.; Kropp, P. S. 2006 *California Vieja: Culture and Memory in a Modern American Place*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

<sup>19</sup> For a full chart of scholarly estimates of deportation in the 1930s, please see Graph 2 in Gratton and Merchant 2013.

a mass exodus and ponder the effects that low-level social interactions had on the formulation of national policy.

There is also some debate over the use of certain terminology. There is a significant legal distinction between *deportation* and *repatriation*. As Gratton and Merchant helpfully explain, “people repatriate; governments deport.” Deportation involves forceful expulsion from a country while repatriation refers to voluntary migratory patterns. Given the highly cyclical and circular nature of migration prior to the Depression, it is indisputable that voluntary repatriation played a significant role in this phenomena. The Mexican government itself also facilitated repatriation, as it was eager to “increase the ranks of Mexico’s skilled and modernized laborers” as well as ease the sting of having such a large emigre population living in the United States.<sup>20</sup> The United States government - at both the state and federal level - also forcibly removed a significant number of immigrants. The State of California apologized in 2005 for its actions, which included “massive raids conducted on Mexican-American communities.”<sup>21</sup> Much like the total sum of repatriation, whether or not most migrants returned voluntarily or forcibly is tangential to the discussion that follows, which is more interested in the construction of Anglo perceptions toward Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in this period, the social climate that those perceptions produced, and hypothesizing that climate’s role on the formulation of lasting US immigration policy toward Mexico.

The outbreak of World War Two and the gradual recovery of the international economy once again dramatically altered US and Mexican policy toward immigration. As the US government sent millions of young men overseas, particularly in the agricultural southwest, a

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<sup>20</sup> Ramón Lint, Roberto Sagarena Roberto. *Aztlán and Arcadia: religion, ethnicity, and the creation of place*. New York: NYU Press, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> SB 670, State of California [ftp://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/05-06/bill/sen/sb\\_0651-0700/sb\\_670\\_bill\\_20051007\\_chaptered.html](http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/05-06/bill/sen/sb_0651-0700/sb_670_bill_20051007_chaptered.html)

new labor shortage emerged in the United States. To fill the gap, the US government sought to recreate the cycle of circular agricultural migration from Mexico from the 1920s; the result was a bilateral agreement known as the Bracero Program that began in 1942. The bilateral nature of the negotiations reflected a new era in US-Mexican relations, one during which the security and national interests converged despite the tension of the previous decades. The very title of the agreement highlights the American cultural perception of Mexican migrants: in Spanish, *bracero* translates to *laborer*. Labor groups in both the United States and Mexico feared the terms of the agreement would adversely harm labor rights and create an underclass.<sup>22</sup> Although the Program intended to mimic the circular migration of previous decades, it ironically had the effect of increasing “illegal” immigration and led to longer stays by temporary Mexican workers.<sup>23</sup> The transformation described above is astounding and highlights the speed with which social conditions and political power can change and the implications that those shifts have in the short-term for citizens and in the long-term relationship between two large states.

This general survey of the literature surrounding the history of the borderlands prior to WWII reveals several tensions. First, we see a clear discrepancy in the early enforcement of the border at the federal and local level. What explains this discrepancy, and why did the federal government eventually choose to escalate its patrolling and enforcement of the southern border? Second, we see repeated major disruptions to the social fabric of life in America for those living in the American southwest and west - especially for those who were ethnic Mexicans. In the 1910s, Mexicans were new migrants from war-torn Mexico; in the 1920s they were valued laborers fighting against a climate of xenophobia and nativism; in the 1930s they were job-

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<sup>22</sup> Bickerton, M. (2000). Prospects for a bilateral immigration agreement with Mexico: Lessons from the Bracero program. *Texas Law Review*, 79(4), 24. Retrieved from [www.nationalaglawcenter.org](http://www.nationalaglawcenter.org)

<sup>23</sup> Gratton, Merchant 2013.

stealing enemies to be expelled; in the 1940s, they were once again laborers, this time incentivized to return to the United States. The prevailing literature does not adequately address these tensions, contradictions, and patterns, nor does it offer a satisfactorily offer a theory that explains the dramatic shift in US policy toward its southern border or toward the migrants who came from the other side. To begin to fill this gap, it is first crucial to position the research into international relations scholarship.

### *International Relations Scholarship*

Competing theoretical approaches in the field of international relations tend to focus on several key concepts: anarchy, sovereignty, national power, material interests, and institutions, among others. The leading approaches that grapple with these concepts are most broadly realism, liberalism, and constructivism.<sup>24</sup> Each of these perspectives emphasize a different concept as central to understanding the world – for realists, it is power and interest; for liberals, it is institutions; for constructivists, it is the evolution and creation of norms and social interaction. Even though there are significant nuances within each school of thought – neoliberal to liberal, neorealist to realist, etc. – these assumptions guide state policy, inform perceptions of national security, and present a general paradigm through which thinkers can process the world around them. How do these approaches process the US-Mexican relationship, and which is best for solving the puzzle of the border?

Realists emphasize the asymmetry in power that exists between the United States and Mexico. Any analysis will begin and end there - after all, the strong do as they will and the weak suffer what they must. Thus a realist interpretation of the border question would focus on state-

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<sup>24</sup> Jordan, Amos A., and William Jesse Taylor. *American national security: policy and process*. 6th ed. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984.

level interaction and primarily concern itself with hard power, core national interests, and security. In order to guarantee the security of the American state, US officials in the 20th century had to take precautions to secure the border. To a realist, it is inherently problematic for the government to be unaware of border crossings: it provides an easy corridor for enemies to enter the United States and cause it harm. In fact, this argument has been made throughout the century and is offered as an explanation as to why comprehensive immigration reform has not been successful in the United States even when there is bipartisan support.<sup>25</sup> Certainly this sentiment existed in the early twentieth century, particularly with the dramatic case of Pancho Villa - many Americans presumably viewed Mexican “bandits”, as they were known, as a threat to US security, especially as more Americans moved into the southwest. These arguments have been effective and formed cornerstones of US policy, particularly after 9/11, and have roots in the early 20th century. For that reason they cannot be ignored and indeed offer explanatory value, even if other approaches are more comprehensive and persuasive.

Liberal scholars, on the other hand, point to the economic and institutional ties between the two nations as an explanatory factor. US businesses and economic interests were in favor of Mexican migration, and a looser border, because of complex economic ties that had existed between the two societies for decades. The expulsion of Mexican citizens during the Great Depression would thus be explained as an economic phenomenon, just as the welcoming of Mexican laborers during the war effort in the 1940s is an economic phenomenon. These broad trends are observable in the current discourse; those in favor of loosening the border generally make economic arguments rooted in free trade and the economic benefits that immigrants

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<sup>25</sup> Dominguez, Jorge I. and Rafael Fernandez de Castro, “U.S.-Mexican Relations in the Twenty-First Century,” in *Contemporary U.S.-Latin American Relations: Cooperation and Conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Dominguez and Fernandez de Castro, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 17–43 (Chapter 2).

represent to the United States and its workers.<sup>26</sup> Some argue that Canada, Mexico, and the United States must integrate more fully to maximize their economic benefits and problem-solving capacity.<sup>27</sup> These arguments are persuasive and rational. However, they still fall short in that liberalism does not account for why, exactly, the United States has not acted in its economic interests, nor why it is still grappling with this issue nearly a century after it initially bubbled to the surface.

Constructivists tend to focus on social interaction and beliefs as an explanatory device. A famous example of the constructivist approach is the fact that, without any other knowledge, a US official in the 1960s would react differently to learning about a Canadian missile program compared to a Cuban missile program, despite similar geographical proximity to the United States.<sup>28</sup> This reflects the constructed nature of international politics. In this tradition, a constructivist would posit that the minds of most Americans would turn to the US-Mexican border when they process the phrase “the US border” as opposed to the US-Canadian despite the fact that the Canadian border is nearly 3 times the size due to the repeated political and social emphasis placed on the former. Of course this approach has flaws - it is impossible to compare the domestic Canadian climate to the domestic Mexican climate, particularly as it relates to migration, stability, and drug trafficking, for example. Realist and liberal approaches each present explanations that are compelling - for instance, there have been and are real security concerns just as there have been and are real economic and institutional ties - but fail to account

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<sup>26</sup> Fulwood III, Sam. "Why Immigration Reform Is Good for All." Center for American Progress. September 10, 2014. Accessed March 15, 2017. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/news/2014/09/10/96820/why-immigration-reform-is-good-for-all/>.

<sup>27</sup> Pastor, Robert A. *The North American idea: a vision of a continental future*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2011.

<sup>28</sup> Wendt, Alexander. "Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics." *International Organization*, 1992., 391, *JSTOR Journals*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 15, 2017).

for how and why the southern border became the issue it is. To explain the questions posed by this research, a constructivist approach is necessary simply because it is most likely to account for the social construction of race and of racism.

The use of race as an explanatory device in international relations, in fact, has tended to ebb and flow; there was a precipitous fall after the conclusion of the Second World War and there has been a slight return to prominence in recent decades. At the turn of the twentieth century, the intersection of race and politics was thought to be the “fundamental ontological unit of politics.”<sup>29</sup> Contemporary international relations scholarship would look completely foreign to an international thinker of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The history of the journal *Foreign Affairs*, considered the standard mainstream journal on international events, is instructive in understanding the place race once held. From 1919-1922 the journal was known as the *Journal of International Relations*; from 1910-1919 it was known as the *Journal of Race Development*.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the most influential and lasting analysis of the place of race in international politics was written in a 1925 publication of *Foreign Affairs* by W.E.B. DuBois, in which he built upon and expanded an argument he originally made in 1899: that the “problem of the twentieth century” was “the Problem of the Color Line.”<sup>31</sup> DuBois’ thinking was echoed by influential thinkers of the era, including Hobson, Angell, and Lenin.<sup>32</sup> It is clear that at one point, race was fundamental to the understanding of international relations. What happened?

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<sup>29</sup> Bell, Duncan. “Race and International Relations: Introduction.” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 26, no. 1 (March 2013): 1–4. doi:10.1080/09557571.2013.770297.

<sup>30</sup> Henderson, Errol A. “Hidden in Plain Sight: Racism in International Relations Theory.” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 26, no. 1 (March 2013): 71–92. doi:10.1080/09557571.2012.710585.

<sup>31</sup> Du Bois, W. E.B. *The Problem of the 20th Century is the Problem of the Color Line W.E.B. Du Bois 1868–1963*. n.p.: 2015. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 24, 2017).

<sup>32</sup> Henderson, Errol A.

This line of thinking seems to have disappeared from the academy after the Second World War, when victorious Western nations created institutions and a legal discourse that formally rejected racism and promoted equality. Nevertheless, there has been no “significant reorganization of the racialized structures of social power” that were forged and solidified over the course of 500 years of European colonial rule.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, even as antiracism became codified in international institutions, there is an inescapable racial element to many contemporary terms frequently used by policymakers and academics: *development, underdeveloped, inner-city, Western, and North-South* are just a few examples of many possible (Le Melle 2009). There is some evidence that this trend is being reversed; some instructors of international relations at the university level have expressed a fear that racelessness – the dearth of racialized analysis in IR – resuscitates colonial perceptions of the non-white non-western as children to be instructed, or, in the most extreme example, manifesting itself in a grand cultural or societal clash of civilizations in the Huntington model.<sup>34</sup>

Even though race does not factor as a category of analysis from much of international relations literature, it has not lost its importance. Many prominent scholars have argued that racial hierarchies and perceptions play a role in the formulation and execution of state policy. Hunt argues that since the conception of the American government there has existed a racial hierarchy that has underlain US foreign policy.<sup>35</sup> Racial conceptualization of indigenous Americans guided policy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and has remained a component of the telling of that history; the build-up to and fierce brutality of American military action in the Philippines at the

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<sup>33</sup> Gruffydd Jones, Branwen. “Race in the Ontology of International Order.” *Political Studies* 56, no. 4 (December 2008): 907–27. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9248.2007.00710.x.

<sup>34</sup> Chin, Christine B. N. “Claiming Race and Racelessness in International Studies.” *International Studies Perspectives* 10, no. 1 (February 2009): 92–98. doi:10.1111/j.1528-3585.2008.00361.x.

<sup>35</sup> Hunt, Michael H. *Ideology and US foreign policy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.



turn of the century can be best understood as a race war with various racial components; and racial attitudes continue to shape US policy toward West Africa.<sup>36</sup> It is important to note that these thorough and thoughtful analyses of US foreign policy all come from scholars of other academic disciplines – notably history – and that none were trained in the school of international relations. The study of any international policy must factor in racial analysis; in the case of the United States and Mexico, where the line between domestic and foreign policy is so blurred, it is imperative.

US policy toward Latin America, argues Lars Shoultz, has been guided by interests under which there exists a “pervasive belief that Latin Americans constitute an inferior branch of the human species”, an attitude that has influenced policy from the Mexican-American War to Cold War era security policy in the region.<sup>37</sup> It is difficult to argue with Shoultz – who is a historian – when he posits that a US official has a different mental framework with which to process the phrase “there is a problem in Peru” compared with “there is a problem with France.” In fact, this is evidenced by a recent study that that American public attitude and sentiment toward Mexico and Latin America is strongly correlated with certain policy positions on issues like border security, immigration policy, and foreign aid.<sup>38</sup> It is through this framework that I process the long, complex history of the United States borderlands with Mexico. Ignoring this prejudice is not just intellectually dishonest; it inhibits a clear and proper understanding of the issues at hand.

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<sup>36</sup> Blackhawk, Ned. *Violence over the land: Indians and empires in the early American West*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008.; Alonso, Ana María. "Reconsidering Violence: Warfare, Terror, and Colonialism in the Making of the United States." *American Quarterly*, 2008., 1089, *JSTOR Journals*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 15, 2017).; Kramer, . P. A. (2006), Race-Making and Colonial Violence in the U.S. Empire: The Philippine-American War as Race War. *Diplomatic History*, 30: 169–210. doi:10.1111/j.1467-7709.2006.00546.x; King, Mae C. “Race and US Foreign Policy: Reflections on West Africa.” *Black Scholar* 40, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 2–12.

<sup>37</sup> Shoultz, Lars. *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy toward Latin America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998. Print

<sup>38</sup> Gries, Peter Hays. “LIBERALS, CONSERVATIVES, AND LATIN AMERICA: How Ideology Divides Americans over Immigration and Foreign Aid.” *Latin American Research Review* 51, no. 3 (July 2016): 23–46.

### *Toward a New Approach*

To understand the determinants of US policy toward Mexican immigration in the early decades of the 20th century, a multidisciplinary, blended approach is necessary. It is imperative to understand issues of *realpolitik*, for there is no doubt that traditional issues of security and economics help clarify conflicting information. For instance, geopolitical concerns were certainly a factor in US policy toward Mexicans during the Mexican Revolution, especially as violent raids took place all along the border, and, in 1916, in New Mexico. Economic considerations were a major factor in nativist legislation and pressure from influential agricultural leaders is the sole reason why Mexican migrants were exempted from national quotas and other restrictions and the onset of the Depression explains why that special privilege eroded during the 1930s and returned in the 1940s. For many theorists of international relations, this state-level analysis is the end of the story, but I propose that to properly understand these dynamics, it is imperative to ask what assumptions lay underneath the security and economic calculus. For instance, local low-level social interaction in the borderlands in both Texas and California demonstrate that ethnic Mexicans and Mexican-Americans were treated distinctly from other groups of migrants and minorities and that Mexicans themselves were forced to wade through murky racial waters - were Mexicans black or white and was “Mexican” an ethnicity or a race? These were questions with which every member of these societies grappled that would influence policy and create a place in America for Mexicans that many still occupy. How did influential policymakers feel about their neighbors to the south, and how did the media cover them? These questions are every bit as important as state-level interactions and strategy.

Anti-Mexican sentiment existed far before nativist legislation passed through Congress and became law, it existed prior to codified Mexican discrimination, and continues to exist in the contemporary discussion of US-Mexican political issues. This racism led to a radical restructuring of Mexican society in the borderlands that stripped Mexicans of their political and economic power and of their social standing and made their entire American community ripe for exploitation. The labor shortage in the 1930s may have been a convenient cloak for a Mexican exodus, but the blame for “stealing jobs” would have been considerably less powerful had the Mexican community maintained its political and organizational clout. As such, my approach blends traditional concerns of international politics with the smallest of political interactions in the borderlands to weave together a story of racism, power, and exploitation. The chapters that follow uncover the depth of anti-Mexican sentiment among Anglo-Americans, consider the vast asymmetry in power that existed between those two groups, and highlight the fact that decisions with vast implications for international politics are often shaped, influenced, and determined far before the specifics of legislation is debated in the official halls of state power.

### **III. Research Design: Identifying and Operationalizing Key Frameworks, Periods, and Terms**

A multidisciplinary approach is required to properly assess the determinants of US immigration policy toward Mexico and regarding ethnic Mexicans living in the United States during the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. Immigration policy is, at its core, a foreign policy with implications beyond the sovereign borders of the policymaking state. Like all political decisions with international implications, the formulation of immigration policy is made in the context of domestic politics and interests - and, perhaps, is the most stark example of the intersection of foreign and domestic policy. This overlap is more pronounced in the case of US immigration

policy regarding Mexico because of the unique position of the two nations. The United States and Mexico have a deep and interconnected history and a shared people and are uniquely able to influence events in the neighboring nation with domestic decisions - although, of course, the United States has long been the more powerful actor and has thus proved capable to influence Mexico than the other way around. To adequately capture all of the relevant dynamics that lie underneath the politics of this period, it is essential to adopt an approach that moves beyond the state-level analysis that is typical of international relations analysis.

### *Historical Perspective*

Establishing historical perspective is a critical goal of the thesis. It is difficult for a modern thinker to imagine the border as it was conceived in 1920, when federal laws on border enforcement were largely non-existent, the Border Patrol did not exist, and when both Mexico and the United States were nations either experiencing national trauma (the Mexican Revolution) or recovering from national trauma (the US Civil War) and attempting to build and shape their national identities. To rid both myself and the reader of our modern assumptions, I attempt to ask questions that lie underneath state-level interactions and focus on the domestic social and political climate in the borderlands during the relevant period. How did inhabitants on both sides of the border interact with one another and how did they perceive one another. How was political power structured, and by whom was it held? How did these dynamics change over time as demographics shifted, and what effect did that change have for the formulation of state policy?

To begin to answer these questions, I use the existing scholarly record - which is quite extensive on this topic - and build on that by analyzing period newspaper articles, portrayals in media, and existing narratives. For example: how was the Mexican Revolution covered in the US

media, and how may that have affected the views Americans reading that press would hold citizens of and immigrants from Mexico? Additionally, it is important to contextualize the nativist climate that dominated the United States during this period, most obviously evidenced by the anti-Asian immigration legislation that would precede anti-European and eventually anti-Mexican movements and legislation. Who were the groups that supported nativist immigration policies? Which politicians were crucial in the passage of that legislation? How did these sentiments align with prevailing narratives surrounding Mexican immigrants in the United States?

### *Constructivist Framework*

I rely extensively on the framework of constructivism in international relations scholarship, which tends to emphasize repeated social interaction and practices as critical in constructing power politics and interests. In the case of the US border with Mexico, this approach is particularly instructive, as the borderlands had been American for only a few decades - enforcing the border was a project in statebuilding and national identity and was thus always shifting and inconsistent. Trends and themes in border patrol and enforcement in this period will help modern scholars clarify the process through which modern policies were set.

This approach is also useful when considering shifting cultural norms and political power in former Mexican lands. In southern Texas in particular, there was an observable erosion of Tejano rights, both in terms of political representation, social standing, and land ownership. These dynamics and their implications for national policy are discussed and considered crucial to addressing the core questions. Focusing exclusively on state-level interaction and policy outcomes obscures crucial questions over political power and obfuscates the argument; in this

specific case, it is most logical to build a bottom-up framework that considers how microinteractions came to influence national policy.

### *Selecting a Time Period*

The period of analysis was, of course, not selected at random. The era follows the first major spike of Mexican immigration to the United States during the Mexican Revolution and coincides with the passage of major legislation related to US immigration policy, including the 1924 Immigration Act that remained policy until 1965. This legislation, which will be explored in detail, allowed for the possibility of the “illegal” alien; a person who was “at once a social reality and a legal impossibility.” (Ngai 2004) It is thus in 1924 that the roots of the “illegal immigration” problem can be traced, but this leads to an interesting puzzle. In the modern American political climate, the term illegal immigration is most closely linked to Mexican immigration. One decade later, despite initial Mexican exemption to the restrictive laws, there was a mass exodus of Mexican immigrants, often at the encouragement of both state governments. One decade later, again, a significant shift in state policy occurred with the bilateral implementation of the Bracero Program. These shifts are dramatic and clearly lay the foundation for the contemporary debate over the southern border; thus, this is a period with significance for understanding modern political debates over immigration.

### *Operationalizing Terms*

Several terms require further clarification before moving forward. The first is *empire* as a historical and political term and its application to the United States. I accept the definition of Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, who in *Empires in World History* define an empire as “a large political units, expansionist or with a memory of power extended over space, that maintain

distinction and hierarchy as they incorporate new people.” Particularly crucial to an empire is its handling of new people and the so-called “politics of difference”, in effect asking how it is the political entity incorporates new members and different members of society. (Burbank and Cooper 8-12) Although historical and political analysis of the United States as an empire has a muddled and confused history (Kramer 2011), it is clear that this definition is applicable to the United States in this period. The US and Mexico had only recently gone to war over the territory of study in this research and the much of the population living in that territory had active memory of when it was once Mexico - this is the definition provided above by Burbank and Cooper. Thus, the study of US-Mexican immigration policy in the early 20th century is a study of state-building, empire, and the “politics of difference”.

The second concerns *race*, an ambiguous term that is crucial to this research. I accept the definition presented by Tilden Le Melle in a 2009 essay in *International Studies Perspectives* that argues race is a “group of people who are socially defined on the basis of phenotypically similar (and dissimilar) characteristics.” This definition is workable and allows for shifts across time and is thus useful. It is also important to note that the term “Mexican” itself is quite muddled; there is some debate over whether or not “Mexican” - a heterogeneous group with various ancestries - is a racial category and whether or not Mexicans are considered “white” or “black.” (Ortiz 2012) Where appropriate, I use language that is more precise - i.e. *Tejano* when discussing Spanish-speaking residents of Texas - to attempt to sidestep these issues, although the lack of legal classification and the fluidity of perceived identity make it impossible to avoid the blanket term “Mexican” or “Mexican-American” to refer to migrants from Mexico and descendants of Mexicans living in the United States. Throughout the discussion, these debates will be touched upon.

### *Establishing a Road Map*

The following discussion section will detail at length the themes and incidents that helped create the modern US-Mexican border. Chapter 4 is broken up into several parts, each of which highlights a different theme. Chapter 4.1 focuses on life in the borderlands during the earliest parts of the twentieth century. It explores Texan society, particularly the areas closest to Mexico, although other border areas are discussed. On a macro-level, it addresses legislation put forth at the federal level regarding immigration with specific attention paid toward the emerging nativist culture in the United States. 4.2 addresses the nativist political culture in the United States prior to the 1920s, specifically the changing social and political structure of the borderlands period, with specific emphasis on the degradation of Mexican-American political power in the borderlands area. It highlights the construction of several narratives by Anglos against Mexican immigrants. 4.3 discusses the racism and violence against Mexican-Americans in the 1920s and 1930s and analyzes the various mechanisms through which the exodus was conducted. 4.4 concludes the discussion section with an analysis of the Bracero Program and the Zoot Suit Riots in California in the 1940s.

## **IV. The Mexican Experience in America, 1900-1942**

What explains the fluctuations in US immigration policy toward Mexicans and Mexican-Americans during the first four decades of the 20th century? A careful examination of major legislation and the social conditions on the ground where Mexicans lived and worked in the United States reveals that major economic considerations, primarily large US agricultural interests, lobbied to exempt Mexicans from nativist legislation in the 1920s and sought to



recreate this system in the 1940s. The mass exodus of ethnic Mexicans from the United States to Mexico in the 1930s is best explained by the dramatic erosion of the economic protection – as will be discussed at length, Mexican laborers in the United States were protected by their immense economic value to large agribusiness – with the onset of the Great Depression.

A second major element cannot be ignored that bubbled underneath the economic argument and even caused its necessity: the prevalence of white supremacy in the United States. This was the era of Jim Crow racial stratification, and Mexicans and ruling Anglos had to navigate complicated racial waters and hierarchies. Where did Mexicans fit into a racialized society directed primarily against African-American descendants of former slaves in the American south? These dynamics varied from locale to locale, but what is clear is that across the southwestern and western United States, Mexicans were not considered white and were therefore inferior. They were the targets of racist violence, codified discrimination, segregation, and nativist scorn. This reality helped shape enduring images of Mexicans in American culture and still plays a role in the contemporary relationship between the two nations and the people within them.

#### **4.1 Life in, and Conceptions of, the US-Mexican Borderlands**

How did Americans conceive of immigration and of the US-Mexican border? What were the dominant political themes in America at the turn of the twentieth century? As I demonstrate, the answers to these questions explain the fluctuating policy toward ethnic Mexicans living in the United States that would follow in the decades to come.

By 1900, the United States was a nation fundamentally at odds with itself: a political actor with a grand strategy of power projection and global power ascension while at the same time pursuing nativist immigration policies at home. It conducted wars of imperial expansion in

Cuba and the Philippines and began a period of intense military interventionism in the Western Hemisphere, particularly in Latin America (where it would intervene 17 times in 30 years). From 1880-1900, the United States armed forces tripled in size and doubled in warship tonnage, reflecting its status as a rising economic power that was comparable to great powers in energy consumption, iron and steel production, rates of urbanization and industrialization, and population size.<sup>39</sup> As the United States projected its power globally, many influential domestic political actors sought to close the American shores to all but a chosen few.

At first glance, the link may seem tenuous; the distinction between foreign and domestic policy too stark. A closer look, however, reveals that this tension is a fundamental political problem for expanding empires. It is the tension of the politics of difference and is the function of a world in which racial distinctions often determined whether or not one was considered “civilized” or not. Both the Spanish-American War and the subsequent war in the Philippines cannot be analyzed without a serious consideration being paid to the racial elements driving US policy in both the halls of power and the newspapers that sold them.<sup>40</sup> The repeated military activity in Latin America in this period, most notably in Central America and the Caribbean, was the product of over a century of American condescension and racism toward Latinos and indigenous citizens of the Western hemisphere.<sup>41</sup> As technology improved and travel became

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<sup>39</sup> Kennedy, Paul M. *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*. New York, NY: Random House, 1987. Print. 194-249.

<sup>40</sup> McCartney, Paul T. "Religion, The Spanish-American War, And The Idea Of American Mission." *Journal Of Church & State* 54.2 (2012): 257-278. Academic Search Complete. Web. 14 May 2016.; Kramer, P. A. (2006), Race-Making and Colonial Violence in the U.S. Empire: The Philippine-American War as Race War. *Diplomatic History*, 30: 169–210. doi:10.1111/j.1467-7709.2006.00546.x

<sup>41</sup> US President John Adams remarked in his journal that attempts to establish democracy in Latin America were as fruitless as “as similar plans would be to establish democracies among the birds, beasts, and fishes”; his son and fellow President remarked that Latin Americans, as a whole, were so “lazy, dirty, and nasty” that he could “compare them only to a parcel of hogs.” These attitudes held at the turn of the century: President Teddy Roosevelt remarked

easier, more and more citizens of the outside world would come to the United States, attracted to its powerful economy and opportunity. As they arrived, they would find that the same attitudes that dominated US foreign policy were even more present at home.

This discrimination, which was codified into law, had already been deeply-ingrained in American society, which was still recovering from the bitter division of the US Civil War - itself a racial war waged over slavery. Bit by bit, new restrictions and discriminations eroded the protections granted to citizens by Reconstruction; the Jim Crow era had arrived and with it recodified the white-black distinction. These attitudes applied to non-black minorities, who, although they did not fit into the hierarchy of Jim Crow, suffered from discrimination at both the federal and local level.

The earliest targets of immigration discrimination were ethnic Chinese, who were effectively banned from the United States with the passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act – repeatedly expanded and updated, becoming permanent US law in 1902, and halting all legal Chinese immigration for 80 years – and were the targets of an anti-Asian media campaign.<sup>42</sup> This bill marked the first time in US history that immigration into the United States was restricted on the basis of national origin and serves as a watermark for the height of nativist political power in the United States.

The treatment of ethnic Mexicans living in the United States must be viewed in this context. Historical conceptions of the US border have tended to ebb and flow, fluctuating from a mystical “frontier” to a militarized boundary between two distinct societies. To understand how

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that reaching a political agreement with “contemptible little creatures” of Colombia was akin to “nailing courtant jelly to a wall.” For more information, please consult Schoultz, Lars. *Beneath the United States: A History of U.S. Policy toward Latin America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998. Print. 5-165.

<sup>42</sup> Kil, Sang Hea. "Fearing yellow, imagining white: media analysis of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882." *Social Identities* 18, no. 6 (November 2012): 663. *Publisher Provided Full Text Searching File*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 4, 2017).

this transformation occurred, it is necessary to explore life in the American southwest at the turn of the century.

This territory amounted to an imperial holding of the United States, which was then had to decide how best to handle the politics of difference in the area that was previously Mexican. After the US-Mexican War, both governments had to account for roughly 50-100,000 Spanish-speaking Mexican citizens that now found themselves living in the United States of America. The Mexican government, suffering a humiliating defeat two decades after independence, had lost 55% of its land and implemented policies aimed at repatriating its citizens.<sup>43</sup> Mexican citizens were faced with a choice: return to Mexico as Mexicans, remain in the United States as Mexicans, or remain in the United States and gain US citizenship.<sup>44</sup> Thus, the place of ethnic Mexicans living in the borderlands was called into question immediately after the transfer of land to the United States and was a question that emerged directly out of wars of imperialism.

As many as 25% of Mexican citizens living in California, New Mexico, and Texas relocated to Mexico after the war.<sup>45</sup> This is a significant number, roughly 25,000 people, but still left the vast majority of Spanish-speaking Mexican citizens in the United States. The political project that was the grand strategy of the United States at the time - continental expansion, from coast to coast, coupled with a destructive civil war and reconstruction period - was complex and massive, which allowed the actual legal border to “recede from American consciousness” in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>46</sup> The border was permeable and local: residents could simply

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<sup>43</sup> José Angel Hernández, *Mexican American Colonization during the Nineteenth Century: A History of the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 5

<sup>44</sup> Timothy J. Henderson, *A Glorious Defeat: Mexico and Its War with the United States* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007) 182

<sup>45</sup> Hernandez 225

<sup>46</sup> Massey.

cross an invisible line that cross in the middle of cities near the border.<sup>47</sup> The Mexican citizens who remained in the borderlands, and those who would seasonally cross the border, “provided not just labor but also local knowledge about effective mining, farming, and ranching techniques” in addition to crucial labor on infrastructure projects, “building railroads and canals, extract[ing] gold, silver, and copper from the subsoil, and establish[ing] homesteads, farms, and ranches.”<sup>48</sup> In short, many Mexicans remained in their land after the US-Mexican War and managed to sustain their way of life and culture, which included the ability to cross from the US and Mexico freely. The distinction between what was Mexican and what was American was seemingly one reserved only for maps, legalities, and history.

Around the turn of the century, American soldiers and journalists stationed in Texas and journalists who covered the area all remarked upon the resilience of Mexican society. A journalist reporting for *Harper's* noted that although citizens of the Rio Grande area “had been American citizens for more than forty years, [they] are almost as much an alien race as the Chinese.”<sup>49</sup> Texas, one soldier wrote, is “America’s only in its possession; Mexican in its people, its language, and its mode of life.” He was reminded of a superior’s joke that the US should provoke Mexico into war again, this time to “force her to take [Texas] back.” The United States did not need this territory, which he described as “the backyard of the world.”<sup>50</sup> Yet, underneath these observations, there were signs of a gradual shift in power that would culminate around the turn of the century.

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Keller

<sup>49</sup> In Montejano, 89.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

A profound transformation was underway in the structure of economic and political power in this region that played a significant role in “Americanizing” the southwest. When Anglo Americans began traveling to Texas and beyond after the territorial acquisition, they brought with them new conceptions about land ownership and economic markets that culminated in the gradual erosion of Mexican land ownership and political power. There are various statistics that point to this reality - for instance, 46 non-Spanish surnamed owners owned 1.2 million acres of land in one Texan county, four times as much land as the sum of all Spanish-surnamed owners.<sup>51</sup>

Land loss coincided with a decline in Mexican economic and political power in the early days of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Consider the breakdown of labor among the Mexican adult community: in 1850, 29% of Mexican laborers were skilled, 33% owned ranches, and 34% were manual laborers. Over the next 50 years, Mexican class mobility was almost all downward: by 1900, 12% of Mexican laborers were skilled, 16% owned ranches, and a stunning 67% were manual laborers.<sup>52</sup> Predictably, loss of economic power and land ownership coincided with a similar decline in political power. Although Mexicans in Texas had been granted the right to vote with the drafting of the 1848 Constitution, their franchisement was controversial and had many opponents. Mexicans who voted often faced discrimination, violence, coercion, and threats; many simply stopped voting. The effects of this are clear: Mexican alderman, who once dominated the politics of San Antonio, all but disappeared by 1900. The entire Mexican elite

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* 72

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* 73

class - including those who were once business, agricultural, and community leaders became subservient to a newly-powerful ruling class made up of Anglos.<sup>53</sup>

If the frontier was truly the “meeting point between savagery and civilization”, as Frederick Jackson Turner had defined it in 1893, then the “civilized” Anglos successfully dissolved and remade the supposed “savage” political organization and structures that dominated life in the borderlands.<sup>54</sup> The mission to control the frontier had changed as America’s power grew economically and militarily - after conquering came incorporating the new subjects into American life. As the next section demonstrates, Americans - Anglos and Mexicans alike - struggled with questions over racial identity, politics, and labor that still inform contemporary thinking on US-Mexican immigration.

#### **4.2 Racial Identity, Nativism, and the Mexican Laborer**

Mexican President Porfirio Diaz’s famous remark that Mexico was “so far from God and so close to the United States” reflected the geopolitical reality that existed before the outbreak of the Mexican revolution. Mexican power was scant compared to the United States, its economy less dynamic and vibrant, and its political situation far more tenuous. Over the decades, US economic interests grew in Mexico, and by 1910, United States corporations controlled 75% of mining companies in Mexico and 70% of its metallurgy, invested heavily in Mexican infrastructure projects and maintained a close relationship with Diaz despite his anti-US

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<sup>53</sup> For more detailed information, including the shift in representation in government and in state authorities such as police departments, please see Montejano 38-41.

<sup>54</sup> “The Significance Of The Frontier In American History”, Frederick Jackson Turner (1893)." (2013): *Credo Reference Collections*. Web. 10 May 2016.

posturing.<sup>55</sup> The result of this activity was a transformation of the Mexican agrarian class into a landless working class that subsided on wage-based labor, mirroring the transformation of the Mexican working class in the United States.<sup>56</sup> On both sides of the border, the Mexican working class became one dominated by landless laborers. Given the economic and political asymmetries, the southern United States became an increasingly attractive target for Mexican migrants.

This transformation, along with the outbreak of violence with the Mexican Revolution that began in 1910, led to the first spike of Mexican immigration into the United States. Nearly one million Mexicans sought refuge in the United States from 1910-1920, and although many would return to Mexico after the Revolution, the number of ethnic Mexicans living in the United States tripled in this decade.<sup>57</sup> They arrived to find political, legal, and economic rights to have been stripped away; the majority found work in the agricultural industry, working for low-wages that subsequently translated into higher land prices for landowners.<sup>58</sup> The value of Mexican labor was made more stark by the successful banning of Asian workers from the American west, which had created a labor shortage. These factors worked to the benefit of Mexicans living across the United States at the federal level.

The exclusionary political climate that had blossomed during the late 19th century continued to grow in influence as the 20th century progressed. Groups like the Immigration Restriction League (IRL), a nativist domestic group, gained influence as the United States

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<sup>55</sup> Robert M. Buffington and William E. French, "The Culture of Modernity," in *The Oxford History of Mexico*, eds. Michael C. Meyer and William H. Beezley (New York: Oxford University Press), 397–432, 419. and Colin M. MacLachlan and William H. Beezley, *Mexico's Crucial Century: 1810–1910* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 204.

<sup>56</sup> Keller.

<sup>57</sup> Gratton, Brian, and Emily Merchant. Immigration, "Repatriation, and Deportation: The Mexican-Origin Population in the United States, 1920-1950.," *International Migration Review* 47, no. 4 (Winter 2013 2013): 944-975. SocINDEX with Full Text, EBSCOhost (accessed February 7, 2017).

<sup>58</sup> Martin, Philip. "Mexican Workers and U.S. Agriculture: The Revolving Door." *The International Migration Review* 36, no. 4 (2002): 1124-142. <http://ezproxy.library.nyu.edu:2231/stable/4149494>.



received more immigrants from non-traditional areas of the world - primarily southern and eastern Europe. The IRL repeatedly lobbied for a literacy requirement for all immigrants seeking to enter the United States throughout the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the support of influential members of the Senate, most notably Henry Cabot Lodge. The 1917 Immigration Act represented the culmination of their efforts, requiring all immigrants entering the United States to read at least 40 words of any language.<sup>59</sup>

Mexicans were exempt from this legislation primarily for two reasons. The first is the lobbying from agricultural interests who feared losing Mexican labor; the second is that “of all the non-Anglo Saxon groups entering the United States at this time, Mexicans were probably the most inconspicuous.”<sup>60</sup> This was the case because of their location - the American southwest was not as populated as the northeast, where most other immigrants entered - and because of the association of immigrants with tenements and overcrowded urban spaces. These same factors were a major determinant in Mexican exemption from the 1924 Immigration Act, which placed national origin quotas on immigrants entering the United States.

It is important to note that these bills did not become law until a noticeable amount of non-Anglo Saxon (and increasingly Catholic) migrants found their way to the United States - after which point nativist groups gained political power and influence. Mexican migrants were spared the brunt of legislative discrimination at the federal level in the 1910s and 1920s, an outgrowth of their economic value, relatively remote location, and rural association. However, the passage of this legislation had legitimized nativist attitudes of many Americans and hardened nationalist conceptions of an Anglo-Saxon nation. By 1924, the United States Border Patrol was

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<sup>59</sup> "Immigration Restriction League." Open Collections Program: Immigration to the US, Immigration Restriction League. Accessed April 05, 2017. <http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/immigration/restrictionleague.html>.

<sup>60</sup> Gutiérrez, David G. *Between two worlds: Mexican immigrants in the United States*. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2001. 24.

formed (mostly to patrol the southern border with Mexico, through which many Asians could gain illegal entry to the United States) and all immigrants from Asia and most from southern and eastern Europe had been effectively banned from legally entering the United States.<sup>61</sup> Mexican migrants had been exempted from federal restrictions on immigration and were thus carved out a space in American society - but what did that space look like?

On the most basic level, Mexicans living in the southwest occupied a sort of intermediary space: not quite European (Anglo), not quite African-American.<sup>62</sup> This led to repeated interactions in the border area in which members of society tried to create their own space; this is the politics of difference at its smallest level. Mexicans-American community leaders living in Texas, for instance, “often adopted the dominant discursive and legal practice of being white”, done by “distinguishing themselves from the less politically powerful groups of blacks, Asians, and Native Americans.”<sup>63</sup> The dominance of Jim Crow racial stratification incentivized these leaders to do so, and these efforts were grown upward and were adopted by the Mexican government, which introduced anti-black, anti-indigenous, and anti-Asian legislation of its own. In America, this allowed for the construction of Mexicans as *illegal immigrants*, a concept made possible by the national origin restrictions - this space could not be occupied by black Americans or by the indigenous community but could solely be filled by Mexicans. Wading through convoluted, confused, and contradictory racial waters proved difficult and ultimately futile for

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<sup>61</sup> Hernandez, Kelly Lytle. *Migra! a history of the U.S. Border Patrol*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010.

<sup>62</sup> OVERMYER-VELÁZQUEZ, MARK. "Good Neighbors and White Mexicans: Constructing Race and Nation on the Mexico-U.S. Border." *Journal Of American Ethnic History* 33, no. 1 (Fall2013 2013): 5. *Publisher Provided Full Text Searching File*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 5, 2017).

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

Mexicans; it is clear that despite their best efforts, many powerful Anglo Americans viewed them suspiciously and with outright contempt.

It is useful to consider El Paso as a window into life in the borderlands. It was the most common port of entry for Mexican migrants during this period, receiving over 50% of Mexican immigrants; the composition of the city itself was 60% Mexican by 1930, a higher percentage than any other US city; and housed more Mexicans in raw numbers than any other place in the United States aside from San Antonio.<sup>64</sup> Despite this, it was the minority of Anglos who controlled the city: only 3% of managerial and professional positions in El Paso were held by Mexicans, and a lesser percentage held political office. The separation of Mexican from Anglo is observable in El Paso's education system, in which Mexican children attended segregated schools that performed worse than their white counterparts; in its employment, where if restaurants/confectioneries employed Mexicans at all "it was only for janitor service or dishwashing; they did not hire them to wait on people"; and in its housing, as Mexicans lived in "overcrowded neighborhoods along the border without basic municipal services."<sup>65</sup> Although there were shifting and confused racial dynamics in the city and region as a whole, it is clear that Mexicans occupied a lower rung in the ladder of political power than their white counterparts.

This separation existed between nations, too. As the Border Patrol grew and as immigration checkpoints became more and more formalized, so too did the conception of difference between the United States and Mexico. Entry into El Paso had once been easy and quick, but that experience was transformed by the 1917 and 1924 nativist immigration laws. For many Mexicans, entry into the United States was for the first time "a painful and abrupt event

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

permeated by an atmosphere of racism and control—an event that clearly demarcated one society from another.”<sup>66</sup> This culminated in 1936, when the city of El Paso began classifying Mexicans as “colored” as opposed to “white” - an event that enraged Mexicans on both sides of the border. It was the first and remains the only time in United States history that this legal distinction was made - yet a close analysis of the borderlands society in the decades that built up to it reveals that ethnic Mexicans living in the United States had long been considered non-white by the ruling political class.

### **4.3 Stereotypes, Violence, The Great Depression, and Mexican Flight**

While the dynamics of race remained fluid during the period leading up to the Great Depression, certain stereotypes of Mexicans living in the United States began to take shape even as the value of Mexican labor to the United States economy grew. These stereotypes bubbled underneath this economic usefulness and grew as a result of the Mexican Revolution and the Great Depression. The first is an association made by Americans toward Mexicans that associates them with low-wage manual labor, aka “doing the jobs Americans won’t do”; the second is the image of the Mexican as the “bandit” and an enemy of the United States. Economic value proved to be a strong protector of Mexicans and their right to exist in the United States. When the economy collapsed, though, these two associations combined with economic anxiety to result in a dangerous situation for Mexicans living in the United States.

It is not difficult to see why Mexicans became associated with manual labor during this period. Due to the predominant political culture of white supremacy described above, there was little in the way of economic advancement available for Mexicans. Their political rights in the

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

borderlands had eroded, their land rights ceded to a new class of capitalists from the eastern United States, and their numbers had swelled. Such a combination of ingredients makes a unsavory cocktail for any minority group. “We have the Mexicans here and don’t need to work,” one white Texan landowner remarked in 1920.<sup>67</sup> His honesty reflected the situation on the ground: 98% of Texas’ agricultural workforce in that year was ethnically Mexican. Such a situation was mirrored from Texas through California, across the borderlands. The structure was consistent: an overwhelming majority of agricultural workers were Mexican while “the owners and top managers were white.”<sup>68</sup> These statistics represent the culmination of the efforts of Anglo settlers who had traveled west and found an overwhelmingly Mexican society that they deemed a different country than the one they had left back east and sought to bring the American state into the frontier.

It was this comfortable arrangement that incentivized the agricultural industry to fight for the exclusion of Mexicans from legislation aimed at reducing levels of immigration. They correctly recognized that the profitability of their entire industry was based on the exploitative system that capitalized on Mexican labor - indeed, Mexican labor organization was met with violence. It is impossible to overstate the significance of this. Mexican exemption was *not* because of any affinity for Mexicans themselves but rather an act of self-preservation by wealthy agriculturalists. The arguments made by these men mirrored the conclusions of a 1911 US Government study on minority groups in the United States, which found that although Mexicans were “notoriously indolent and unprogressive in all matters of education and culture” and despite “their lack of ambition and proneness to the constant use of intoxicating liquor”, they were

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<sup>67</sup> Hernandez 29.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

considered “good workers compared to the Japanese” so long as they worked “dirty jobs” befitting the “lowest grade of non-assimilable native-born races.”<sup>69</sup> Written in 1911, these words proved prophetic and described the general attitude, reflected in observable reality, toward Mexicans and their “place” in society: as workers doing the jobs carved out for them. No more, no less.

This space, though, was built upon a contradiction: all while agribusiness “controlled” Mexican migrants by limiting their opportunities for economic advancement, so too rose a fear that Mexicans couldn’t be “controlled.” This was a conception that was forged in the era of the Mexican Revolution and in the Cristero Wars. The Revolution, which lasted from 1910-1917, was a tumultuous period for broader US-Mexican relations but also proved troublesome on the micro level. Not only did a new wave of migrants enter into the United States - forming the agricultural backbone that protected them - but the relative fluidity of the border allowed for Mexican rebels to escape into the United States and take refuge in cities like New Orleans and San Antonio, where they could acquire supplies and weapons.<sup>70</sup> This openness transformed the social fabric of the United States in an observable way. Lynchings against Mexicans were carried out with impunity by primarily local figures and sometimes state actors, including the Texas Rangers, and have been largely forgotten in the history of the United States civil rights movement. The early part of the 20th century was not an easy time for ethnic Mexicans to live in the United States of America.

Mexican political figure Pancho Villa, long controversial in the United States, played an outsized role in this transformation. His 1916 attack on Columbus, New Mexico - which resulted

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<sup>69</sup> U.S. Immigration Commission, *Immigrants in Industries: Part 25: Japanese and Other Immigrant Races in the Pacific Coast and Rocky Mountain States: Agriculture* (Washington, D.C., USA: Government Printing Office, 1911), pp. 50, 59, 94, 110.)

<sup>70</sup> Keller.

in the death of seventeen Americans and over one hundred of Villa's forces - remains the only instance of a Latin American military intervention into United States territory a century later.<sup>71</sup> This attack puzzled American historians and policymakers in the era - they assumed Villa was irrational or irresponsible, with some interpreting the raid as the "revenge of a reckless desperado" with a "pathological hatred of the United States."<sup>72</sup> The logic or lack thereof behind Villa's raid is of little importance to this study, but the interpretation is revealing.

A political cartoon (found in the appendix) published in 1916 by Clifford K. Berryman is representative of this attitude. In it, a rifle-wielding Uncle Sam hops a barbed wire fence (clearly representing the US border) and chases a cartoon-version of Pancho Villa, saying "I've had about enough of this." While one must interpret a single cartoon with caution, there are several significant elements to this cartoon. The first is the general appearance of Uncle Sam when compared to Villa. Uncle Sam is fully clothed and looks composed and almost reserved about the chase; he towers over Pancho Villa, whose bare feet are exposed under tattered and dirty trousers and clothes and is about half the size. Also of note is the imagery. Uncle Sam, of course, is the national image of the United States. By comparing Uncle Sam to Villa, the cartoonist seems to equate all of Mexico with the notorious Villa. This, coupled with the text, makes it seem as though Villa, and Mexico writ large, is an annoyance to the United States that not even a decisive military victory in US territory by the US military can dispel. The subsequent US Marine manhunt into Mexico to find Villa and hold him responsible was a disaster; US forces would return north without even so much as a glimpse of the leader.

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<sup>71</sup> Katz, Friedrich. "Pancho Villa and the Attack on Columbus, New Mexico." *The American Historical Review* 83, no. 1 (1978): 101-30. doi:10.2307/1865904.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

Raids like Villa's, coupled with other violence around the border as an outgrowth of the Revolution, helped shape a dominant image of Mexicans as bandits. A search of all digitized newspapers in the United States, held by the Library of Congress, reveals the effect the Revolution had on news coverage of Mexicans. From 1/1/1900-12/31/1909, the phrase "Mexican bandit[s]" was used 408 times in the American press. 26% (107) of those were on the front page of the paper that used the phrase. Over 70% of those papers were located in the American southwest or west, with most being prominent in Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas. Less than 5% of this usage could be found in New York or Washington DC. After the Revolution (and specifically after the 1916 attack), this would change dramatically. In the decade of the Revolution, 1/1/1910-12/31/1919, the phrase appeared a stunning 9,243 times. 34% of those instances were on the front page - not only was the phenomenon more widely-reported, it was also deemed more newsworthy - and spanned a greater geographical range. 95 front-pages in New York during the decade featured the phrase. Although this is an insignificant portion of total coverage, it is a remarkable increase. While the Mexican was a controllable, docile laborer, he was also a bandit, dangerous and an enemy. There is clear tension here; something had to give.

The breaking point proved to be the Great Depression. An economic catastrophe of almost unimaginable proportion, the Depression transformed life across the world. For Mexicans living in America, it meant that the protective cloak of economic productivity had been yanked away. The factors described in the sections above, when mixed with economic catastrophe, all aligned to create an especially dangerous and volatile climate for Mexicans. White Americans blamed the laborer Mexicans for stealing their jobs, as had happened to other minorities in previous eras of economic depression.<sup>73</sup> Many Mexicans left the United States

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<sup>73</sup> Ochoa, Gilda L.. *Becoming Neighbors in a Mexican American Community*. Austin, US: University of Texas Press, 2004. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 8 February 2017.



during the 1930s - in fact, this was the only decade of the 20th century in which US-Mexican migration flowed south, not north. Most scholars estimate that somewhere between 300-500,000 Mexicans left the United States. What happened?

There are several relevant factors at play. The first is obvious: the economic pull factor drawing Mexican labor to the United States simply evaporated with the collapse of the economy. It is important to note that most Mexican migration to the United States prior to the 1930s was largely circular; they traveled north seasonally and returned to Mexico after an average period of about six months richer than when they'd come.<sup>74</sup> In fact, this trend had once worked to their advantage: agriculturalists assuaged nativists by claiming that "like a pigeon, [the Mexican] goes home to roost" and thus no need to limit immigration from Mexico.<sup>75</sup> With the onset of the Depression, nativist sentiment exploded and the economic argument was lost. It was expected, by allies and enemies alike, that Mexicans would return to Mexico.

There were various causal factors that encouraged this migration, which was simultaneously voluntary and forced. On the state-level, the Mexican government was eager to repatriate the citizens it had lost to the destruction and violence of the Revolution and established programs to pull its citizens southward. The US Government, particularly on the local level, conducted raids against the Mexican population that resulted in deportations; as mentioned previously, the State of California has formally apologized for what it called "massive raids" against the Mexican population living in California. However, no widespread federal deportation campaign occurred. Instead, widespread anti-Mexican sentiment that had been present for

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<sup>74</sup> Gratton, Brian, and Emily Merchant. "Immigration, Repatriation, and Deportation: The Mexican-Origin Population in the United States, 1920-1950." *International Migration Review* 47, no. 4 (Winter 2013 2013): 944-975. SocINDEX with Full Text, EBSCOhost (accessed February 7, 2017).

<sup>75</sup> Hernandez, 31.

decades finally took shape and observable anti-Mexican campaigns in the United States took place.

In California, for instance, public health campaigns specifically associated Mexicans with tuberculosis, a disease that had a specific association in California with economic burden.<sup>76</sup> Mexicans, argued influential doctors, were especially susceptible to the disease due to their “Indian blood”; this made ultimate recovery unlikely, they said, and stated that “most physicians” had never seen a single case of a Mexican recovering from TB.<sup>77</sup> Arguments like this gained traction during the Depression because of the economic factor and were largely seen as a tacit endorsement of the growing phenomenon of deportation by doctors (deportations in California had increased eightfold in the 1920s). To combat rising unemployment, argued Secretary of Labor William Doak in 1930, would be to expel 400,000 “illegal aliens” - which meant Mexicans - and the easiest targets were those who were sick. Indeed, immigration officials would travel to hospitals in California to target sick Mexicans for removal.<sup>78</sup>

In Texas, too, there was widespread association of Mexicans and dirtiness. “The Mexicans have head and body lice and don’t want to bathe”, one Texan superintendent of schools pointed out as he argued against school integration; another farmer that “they are filthy and lousy, not all, but most of them and I have raised two children with the idea that they are above the doggone Mexican nationality.”<sup>79</sup> Texas Mexicans were associated with TB as well, although, much like in California, any higher prevalence of disease was largely a function of the poor housing that was available to them, by less access to health care, and by the wages they

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<sup>76</sup> Abel, Emily K. 2003. "From Exclusion to Expulsion: Mexicans and Tuberculosis Control in Los Angeles, 1914-1940." *Bulletin Of The History Of Medicine* 77, no. 4: 823-849. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 10, 2017).

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Montejano, 225-230.

were paid. The great irony of the era is that if Mexicans were any “dirtier” than their white counterparts - although it is important to note that “dirty” often simply meant “brown” - it is because of the segregated society that had been created.

The stratification of American society, new mechanisms for border control, racist stereotypes about Mexicans, and the collapse of the global economy combined to create a vicious climate for Mexicans living in the United States during the Great Depression. Anti-Mexican sentiment exploded during the period in the form of public health campaigns and local threats, hundreds of thousands of migrants left for Mexico at the behest of both the Mexican and American governments, and finally, after two decades of intense lobbying, nativist political aims had been achieved.

#### **4.4 The Bracero Program and “Illegal” Immigration**

The structure of American immigration changed dramatically in the decades that preceded World War Two. The borderlands area itself changed from a relatively loose and thin concept that separated two predominantly Mexican societies from one another at the turn of the century into a rigidly-enforced boundary between the “backward” Mexico to the south and the highly-segregated America to the north. Decades of interactions at the local level coupled with broader anti-immigrant sentiment and media coverage of Mexican immigrants had created images of Mexicans as dirty laborers with a high likelihood of carrying disease or a bandit’s rifle. In the summary of one historian, the predominant view of Mexicans was that they were “inferior, untouchable, detestable.”<sup>80</sup> Additionally, Mexicans were increasingly viewed as “illegal” - a direct product of immigration legislation and of the resentment above. The flight in

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<sup>80</sup> Montejano 228.

the 1930s was largely a reaction to these dynamics and marked a major disruption in the patterns of migration that were dominant for decades. After the outbreak of World War Two, though, both the American and Mexican governments sought to recreate those patterns through the Bracero Program, implemented in 1942.

By the outbreak of World War Two, US-Mexican relations were historically cooperative and tranquil, making such cooperation on such a contentious issue possible. The two governments instituted a guest worker program that sought to “forestall illegal immigration, avoid permanent settlement, and provide a financed, orderly repatriation.”<sup>81</sup> This phenomenon would be inexplicable given the previous decade if not for the agricultural labor shortage caused by World War Two that the Bracero Program aimed to fill.<sup>82</sup> Once again, economic considerations defined the space for Mexicans in the United States.

Because of the intense labor shortage due to the war, the US government quickly ceded the demands of the Mexican government, which wanted to guarantee that workers would have a written contract, compliance to that contract by both states, transportation costs covered by the US government, permanent residency for contract workers, and specific action taken against instances of anti-Mexican racism.<sup>83</sup> The anti-Mexican climate in the United States was obviously palpable to Mexicans living in America, and with the intense cost of 1930s repatriation to the Mexican government, these demands were fundamental to reaching an agreement.<sup>84</sup> The US government accepted these terms, against the lobbying of local labor organizations, in another

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<sup>81</sup> Merchant, Gratton.

<sup>82</sup> BIRDAL, Nur Banu Kavaklı. "The Bracero and European Guestworker Programs Revisited: A Comparative Analysis." *Calisma Ve Toplum* 35, no. 4 (October 2012): 149-164. *Legal Source*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 10, 2017).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> Gratton, Merchant.

major victory for the US agricultural business - again based on the condition that the workers (who were solely young men) were temporary workers brought to the United States as a part of the war effort.

The “temporary” status of workers in the Bracero Program was essential to its initial conception - which aimed to recreate circular migratory patterns of decades prior - and is also one of the program’s greatest failures. Not only did the Program become the institutionalized mechanism through which Mexicans could legally enter the United States, it also had the effect of encouraging, not discouraging, illegal immigration. The Bracero Program lasted until 1965 and various researchers have found that the rates of illegal immigration from Mexico into the United States rose “in concert with the expansion of the program.”<sup>85</sup> US agriculture was eager to hire undocumented workers, who did not receive the same protections that legal migrants did under the Program, and many Mexicans were eager to travel to the United States in search of work. Many overstayed their contracts or simply became familiar enough with the border areas to cross undocumented after returning to Mexico. The US government began deporting undocumented migrants at a new, faster pace, but it was unable to fully stop the phenomenon.

This had three effects. First, it further institutionalized the role of Mexicans in the United States as laborers (*bracero* in Spanish means “laborer”). The space that was carved out for Mexicans in the 1910s and 20s was reserved for them again when the economy improved, and many were happy to fill that space. Second, it introduced the so-called problem of illegal migration from the country: although undocumented rates had risen throughout the earlier decades, it was not until the 1940s that illegal immigration became a true national issue. Concurrently, illegal immigrants in the United States are almost all Mexican in origin - further cementing the status of Mexicans as “illegal.” Third, it made formal the rigid border. Those who

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<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

fought to demarcate and separate America from Mexico had won: any large migratory efforts needed to be facilitated by governments in an act of restoration, not in organic economic migration and human movement.

The actions of the government did little to quell the anti-Mexican sentiment in the United States at this time, nor did the relatively strong relationship that had developed between the US and Mexico. Thousands of braceros in Arkansas reported terrible working conditions, instances of violence, and codified discrimination: without electricity, furniture, or mattresses, housing only came with blankets at the cost of a pay reduction and health care was administered by an aging veterinarian. Twenty years later, Mexicans still occupied a segregated part of American life and were treated as if they were dogs.<sup>86</sup> The Zoot Suit Riots, in 1943 Los Angeles, exemplify this. Zoot suits were large and bulky suits worn primarily by minorities like Mexicans in the era and many white Americans believed the use of fabric to be “unpatriotic” during wartime. More likely, though, this was thinly-veiled racism and a continuation of the anti-Mexican violence that had been occurring in the United States since at least 1840. The racially-charged program Operation Wetback, a US government program designed to target and deport illegal Mexican immigrants in the 1950s, would follow the Bracero Program and was the first major US-government led deportation campaign against “illegal” migrants from Mexico.

The lessons from the Bracero Program are the same lessons learned from this entire story: economic factors can pull the governments closer and even lead to unprecedented bilateral cooperation and program implementation, but they alone are not enough to ensure safe conditions. It is at the local level that the state truly operates, and for many Anglos, Mexicans

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<sup>86</sup> Castro, J. Justin. "Mexican Braceros and Arkansas Cotton: Agricultural Labor and Civil Rights in the Post-World War II South." *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 27-46. *Humanities Source*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 11, 2017).

were simply not welcome. Nothing that the agricultural industry, wartime needs, or the US government could say would change that fact.

## **V. Conclusions**

I have argued that US immigration policy toward Mexican immigrants during this period was convoluted, contradictory, and confused. Considering the fluctuations in political realities, in racial identity and perception, in migratory patterns, in geopolitical relationships, and of global economics that created this story, it is not difficult to see why. Look underneath the contradictions, though, and quickly a coherent explanation emerges, the implications of which still reverberate throughout our contemporary debates on immigration, the southern border, and on the United States' broader relationship with Mexico.

The United States and Mexico are vital partners and allies. Not only do the states share a large landed border, but they trade with one another extensively, rely on one another for mutual security, and their domestic policies disproportionately influence the politics of the other. Despite this there are significant tension points in the relationship, particularly on issues of narcotics and immigration. Trade, too, is becoming an increasingly important point of contention as the Trump White House takes shape. Each of these issues are related and cannot be analyzed without factoring in the border. It is in this area that the research of this thesis is most relevant.

Tracing the history and development of the borderlands, viewed through the lens of immigration legislation, reveals the origins of these conflicts. After the conquest of Mexican lands in the 1840s, both the United States and Mexico had to begin a project in statebuilding and national identity. The United States, it had to adapt to its new citizens and decide how to incorporate them into its political project. The Mexican government had to adapt to suddenly

losing over half of its most valuable land and citizens. For much of this period, the border was an abstraction and an afterthought. That would change, though, as the domestic American climate became increasingly nativist and as more and more white Americans from the east moved into traditionally Hispanic borderlands.

The arrival of American capitalists and eastern Anglos sped up the statebuilding project on the American side and was essentially a continuation of Manifest Destiny - powerful businessmen from the northeast restructured society in the borderlands in such a way that Mexicans became a subclass, an inferior group of people to white Americans. Their political power was stripped, their economic opportunities eroded, their social fabric shredded. Mexicans living in the United States were pushed into pre-existing racial hierarchies from which they have not yet managed to escape. The image of the Mexican laborer doing “the jobs we won’t” emerged in this period. Any observer of the modern debates on immigration can hear the echoes of this era. All the while, the United States and Mexico became two separate demarcated societies with a rigidly-enforced border.

That new, rigid border is the foundation of the relationship between the United States and Mexico. The implications of this are clear: there is still an enduring racial element to that relationship that challenges the modern notion that race plays a limited role in international relations. By this point, it should be clear that racism and anti-Mexican sentiment played a critical and essential role in the formulation of American policy toward Mexican immigrants. It informed US opinion on Mexican migrants and it helped shape perceptions and identities that remain in place. It allowed for the creation of the “illegal” Mexican migrant. Without these images and perceptions, the modern border control apparatus would not exist.



Economic trends, I argue, have been the weapon and the shield for Mexican immigrants. This was at least the case during the period of study. To build on the research presented here, future scholars could test US immigration policy toward Mexicans against economic patterns in the long-term. I suspect that the overall economic well-being of the United States would correlate to the status of Mexican migrants in the United States. For example, in times of economic insecurity or downturns, I predict that there will be more media coverage of illegal immigration, more political rhetoric directed against Mexican-Americans, a general rise in anti-Mexican sentiment in the United States, and an overall contentious relationship between the governments of the United States and Mexico. What is clear from this research is that economic factors, coupled with intense racism, combined to create a volatile cocktail for Mexicans living in the United States and explain shifting US policy.

These realities may be difficult for many to face. On its face, debates about immigration seem simple. Two separate countries, two separate peoples, one legal channel through which to enter one country or the other, and an enforced border that divides them. Those who come without documents are criminals, illegal. They are a threat to security and a burden to bear. A closer look, however, reveals that the roots of this debate are found in the turn of the century and were first advocated by white supremacists in the era of Jim Crow. Race and racism not only shaped policy in that period but shape the contours of the place of Mexicans in the modern United States. The story would be impossible to tell without it. Reckoning with this past is not just vital to recognizing the role that Mexicans have played in shaping modern America and how modern America shape the role of Mexicans in it. It also would recognize that, as William Faulker wrote, the “past is never dead; it is not even past.” Accepting this is the first step forward, for both the United States and for Mexico.

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