Make Room for the “Americans”: The Role of Race and Ethnicity in Mexican Repatriation

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In 2011, Esteban Torres remembered: “At about that time, as you will recall in history, the repatriation of Mexicans came about and one day they came to the mine and rounded up all the Mexican miners, and they shipped my dad back to Mexico. That was in 1933. I was three years old. My brother [Hugo Torres] was two years old, and I never saw my father again. Never saw him again.”[1] Esteban Torres was a natural-born U.S. citizen. His father worked in the local mine in Miami, Arizona where the whole Torres family lived. Esteban’s mother and brother were also U.S. citizens. This experience was by no means unique to the Torres family. Mr. Torres refers to the “repatriation of Mexicans” that saw the forced removal of hundreds of thousands of Mexicans and Mexican Americans through formal processes of deportation, repatriation, and expatriation from the United States in the 1930s. I make a semantic distinction between these three processes of removal because repatriation, the term used most often to describe this period, refers to the return to one’s homeland. Expatriation, on the other hand, refers to a departure from one’s homeland, and deportation is distinguished as a legal process of expulsion. All three of these removal processes took place during the period known as Mexican repatriation.

This repatriation was in part a reaction to the harsh difficulties faced during the Great Depression; however, the Great Depression alone does not account for what took place. While the true number of Mexicans and Mexican Americans repatriated during the Depression is historically contested, some historians place the number around one million.[2] Repatriation occurred in every corner of the United States, but the Southwest, with its high Mexican and Mexican American population, bore the brunt of these repatriations. Los Angeles, in particular, found itself as the primary object of early repatriation efforts. For this reason, I will center Los Angeles in the context of the national repatriation. Repatriation of Mexicans and Mexican Americans from Los Angeles has received critically important scholarly attention, which I will highlight throughout the paper, but I also seek to connect the uniquely urban experience in Los Angeles to the broader social, political, and economic implications of this forceful expulsion.

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[1] Esteban Torres, interview by Virginia Espino, January 19, 2011, in Covina, California, Transcript, University of California Los Angeles Library Center for Oral History Research, Los Angeles, CA, https://oralhistory.library.ucla.edu/catalog/21198-zz002cds25?counter=1&q=repatriation.

The period of Mexican repatriation has largely slipped out of the American collective memory. For repatriates and their loved ones, however, this period would be impossible to forget. The hardships endured through this nativist exclusion have been etched into repatriates' family histories. Periods of nativist exclusion in the United States have been all but infrequent. Political policies have put a target on the backs of various racial and ethnic groups, but the sentiments remain the same. American immigration policy has always been an unresolved issue, at times rather arbitrary, but consistently exclusionary. The period of Mexican repatriation was no deviation from this practice. Mexican repatriation exemplifies the way American immigration policy was used as an ad hoc exclusionary tool to maintain America's racial hierarchy.

Historical Trajectory of Mexican Repatriation

To build an analytical foundation, it is necessary to contextualize the events that took place by tracing the trajectory of Mexican repatriation. This context does not begin with the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, nor does it end at the Rio Grande. It is absolutely imperative to adopt a long view of Mexican repatriation to successfully analyze its broader implications. This long view is situated first and foremost with the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo brought an end to the formal conflict of the Mexican-American War (1846-1848). With its signing in February of 1848, the treaty granted ethnic Mexicans formal access to U.S. citizenship. Access to citizenship hinged on the fact that with the annexation of vast southwestern territory, the U.S. now had a significant number of Mexican nationals living within its borders. These Mexican nationals had the option to remain on U.S. soil and adopt American citizenship status within one year of the treaty's signing.[3] This came at a time when existing immigration policies excluded many other minority groups from formal U.S. citizenship on the basis of race and ethnicity. This placed Mexicans in a unique but ambiguous place that would become a defining feature of their American experience.

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[2] Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 121-122.

Beginning in the 20th century, the number of Mexican nationals in the U.S. began to swell. The growing trend can be seen in the compilation of U.S. Census of Population and Housing data in Figure 1.[4] The 1930 Census was also the first to count the Mexican-origin population as a separate nonwhite racial group.[5]

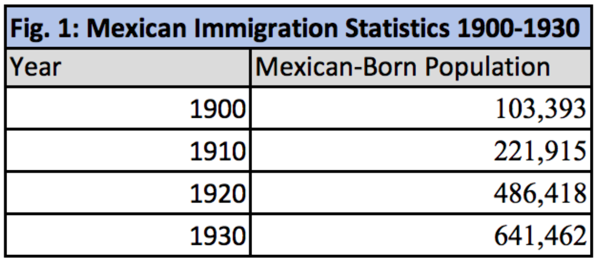

Fig. 1: Mexican Immigration Statistics 1900-1930

Year	Mexican-Born Population
1900	103,393
1910	221,915
1920	486,418
1930	641,462

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[3] "Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo [Exchange-Copy]," signed February 2, 1848, *General Records of the United States Government, 1778-2006,* ARC Identifier: 299809, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/299809.

[4] U.S. Census Bureau, Census of Population and Housing, 1900, https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html.; U.S. Census Bureau, Census of Population and Housing, 1910, https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html.;U.S. Census Bureau, Census of Population and Housing, 1920, https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html.;U.S. Census Bureau, Census of Population and Housing, 1930, https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html

[5] U.S. Census Bureau, Census of Population and Housing, 1930.

Multiple factors gave rise to this surge in Mexican migration to the U.S. Primarily, the prospect of higher wages in Southwestern industries drew many Mexican immigrants to the U.S. There, Mexican immigrants found jobs in railroad construction, agriculture, and metalliferous mining and smelting. Many historians argue that the construction of western railroad extensions produced the region's economic boom. Now connected to the national economy, developers could market and transport their goods across the country. Along with railroads came the irrigation projects that transformed the formerly arid land into an agricultural hotbed.[6] These new developers looked for an affordable workforce willing to do the arduous labor in the extreme climate of the Southwest. Landowners, rail companies, and smelters increasingly relied on Mexican labor at very low wages. The Dillingham Commission Reports of 1911 concluded that Mexican workers consistently received the lowest wage of any racial group across most industries in the Southwest. The report also painted Mexican immigrants as ambitionless and content with their wage relationship, making them further desirable as a labor force.[7] In response to the growing market for Mexican labor, agencies began to form in the border region looking to profit by matching Mexican immigrants with rail companies and landowners. In a 1908 U.S. Bureau of Labor bulletin, consultant Victor S. Clark noted:

> Along the Texas border, and even in the larger centers are men who secure laborers in small numbers for cotton and beet planters and other minor employers. Some of these recruiters are themselves hardly above the laboring class, and several are Mexicans or Spanish-speaking Americans.[8]

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[6] David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987) 106-107; and David G. Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) 41.

[7] U.S. Congress, Senate, The Immigration Commission, *Abstracts of Reports of the Immigration Commission: With Conclusions and Recommendations and Views of the Minority*, 61st Cong., 3rd sess., 1910, S. Doc. 747, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/umn.31951p00832719i.

[8] U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor, *Mexican Labor in the United States,* by Victor S. Clark. Bureau of Labor Bulletin, (Washington: September 1908), 476, https://fraser.stlouisfed.org/files/docs/publications/bls/bls_v17_0078_1908.pdf.

These labor agencies helped form larger recruitment networks that promised Mexican immigrants higher wages and helped employers fill out their workforce. Presented with few alternatives upon arrival across the border, the labor recruitment networks reveal how Mexican immigrants were actively siloed into industries deemed too menial for white laborers.

For many Mexican immigrants, labor prospects alone were not enough to uproot their lives in Mexico. Economic downturn and the social upheaval in early 20th century Mexico forced many Mexicans north of the border. The growing unrest associated with a widening socioeconomic gap, stagnant wages, and the nearly continuous dictatorial regime of the last thirty years culminated in the Mexican Revolution of 1910. The effort to remove President Porfirio Díaz, who had stymied attempts at democracy since 1876, turned into years of violence and jockeying for political power amid a factionalized Mexico. The violence and uncertainty associated with the Revolution caused many Mexicans to turn north.[9]

The growing Mexican population in the U.S. coincided with the socially constructed "Mexican problem." As the 20th century progressed, the Mexican population came to be seen as unassimilable and burdensome on public relief. White Americans increasingly saw Mexican laborers as backwards and un-American. This narrative gained traction in the 1920s, and social workers were instrumental in its creation. Citing selective statistics on Mexican usage of public relief rolls and ignoring external factors (ability to naturalize, work opportunities, and discrimination), these social workers framed the Mexican presence in the United States as a "dependency problem."[10]

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[9] Gilbert M. Joseph and Jürgen Buchenau, *Mexico's Once and Future Revolution: Social Upheaval and the Challenge of Rule Since the Late Nineteenth Century*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 74.
[10] Cybelle Fox, *Three Worlds of Relief: Race, Immigration, and the American Welfare State from the Progressive Era to the New Deal*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 74.

The "Mexican Problem" narrative was not confined to those in the field of social work. Government officials and academics alike perpetuated this belief. To those in public office, immigration restriction came to be seen as a solution to the problem. In May of 1924, President Coolidge signed the Immigration Act of 1924 which set up a quota system for admission into the U.S. The quota system limited immigration to 2% of each nation's foreign-born population according to the 1890 U.S. census. Congress also added a $10.00 visa fee in addition to the existing $8.00 head tax.[11] The increased fees made legal migration to the U.S. difficult for many Mexicans, though formally the Act omitted Mexico and other nations in the western hemisphere from its quota provisions. For many restrictionists, including U.S. Representative John C. Box, the 1924 Act did not go far enough. Congressman Box served as a representative for Texas beginning in 1919, and he made immigration restriction his main conviction throughout much of the 1920s. In response to the omission of Mexico and other nations in the western hemisphere, Congressman Box introduced H.R. 11072 in December of 1924. The proposed resolution would amend the 1924 Immigration Act to include Mexico, Canada, Cuba, and other nations on the American continents.[12] Although the resolution did not pass, Congressman Box proposed similar legislation during each session of Congress through 1930.

As government officials discussed a potential immigration restriction, the "Mexican problem" became increasingly racialized in the academic sphere. In a 1929 paper, University of California professor of Zoology, Samuel J. Holmes asserted this racialized view of Mexican immigrants, stating: "A Mexican may be anything from a descendant of pure Castilian stock to an Indian Peon without a trace of Caucasian blood." According to Holmes, the "Indian Peon" accounted for much of the recent migrant population, a population which he described as "ignorant, tractable, moderately industrious, and content to endure wretched conditions of life which most white laborers would not tolerate."[13] In his argument, Holmes classifies Mexicans as a separate and distinct nonwhite racial group, a sentiment which would be echoed by the U.S. Census of Population and Housing the following year.

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[11] *An Act To limit the immigration of aliens into the United States, and for other purposes,* Public Law 139, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 43 (1925): 153-169, https://congressional.proquest.com/congressional/docview/t41.d42.68_pl_139?accountid=14553.

[12] U.S. Congress. House. *A Bill: To amend the Immigration Act of 1924 by making the quota provisions thereof applicable to Mexico, Cuba, Canada, and the countries of continental America and adjacent lands.* HR 11072. 68th Cong., 2nd sess. Introduced in House on December 29, 1924. https://congressional.proquest.com/congressional/docview/t01.d02.68_hr_11072_ih_19241229?accountid=14553.

It's important to note Holmes' focus on "white laborers'" in his argument. Holmes sets up a dichotomy of "Mexican labor" and "white labor" which reflected the growing belief that the low wages paid to Mexicans could supplant white workers. Agricultural interests who relied on cheap Mexican labor directly opposed this view and many other immigration restriction efforts. In fact, the anti-restrictionist efforts predated Congressman Box's numerous restriction proposals. In the early months of 1920, Texas farmer John H. Davis spoke on behalf of the agricultural community before the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization. During a hearing on a potential literacy test moratorium for Mexican immigrants, Davis told the committee: "If your minds are on that proposition, if you are thinking that this Mexican is a vicious man, it is because the committee is misinformed. He is the best workman and the most docile citizen that has ever been in our country."[14] Interestingly, John Davis and Professor Holmes adopted very similar rhetoric despite their opposite viewpoints on the restriction debate. Both proponents and opponents of immigration restriction espoused racialized views of the Mexican population. Under each view, Mexicans were reduced to docility and backwardness. The only meaningful difference being that opponents of restriction saw the Mexican population as a cheap labor source to benefit their agricultural interests. The restriction debate and the "Mexican problem" would finally reach a tipping point during the Great Depression.

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[13] Samuel J Holmes, "The Perils of the Mexican Invasion," *The North American Review* 227, no. 5 (1929): 617, accessed October 24, 2021, https://www.jstor.oCerg/stable/25110755.

[14] U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, *Temporary Admission of Illiterate Mexican Laborers: Hearing on H.J. Res. 271*. 66th Cong., 2nd sess., 1920, https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:1183575, 85.

The stock market crash in October of 1929 sent shockwaves through the nation, and the effects of the Great Depression hit every facet of American life. For Mexicans and Mexican Americans, this moment marked the beginning of their forced removal. As unemployment skyrocketed from 3.2 percent in 1929 to 23.6 percent 1932, millions of Americans were out of work and the Hoover administration began searching for solutions.[15] President Hoover tasked his recently appointed Secretary of Labor, William N. Doak to address the growing unemployment problem. Doak's plan resolved to shrink the labor supply through the federal power of deportation. Less than one month after his appointment in December of 1930, Secretary Doak claimed that 400,000 illegal aliens lived in the United States and later declared that up to 100,000 of these illegal aliens could be deported under federal immigration provisions.[16] Secretary Doak's claims launched official removal efforts focused on deportation. While this effort began at the federal level against all aliens, this did not remain the case. The deportation campaign trickled down to state and local levels where it was filtered through local politics. For Los Angeles, this meant zeroing in on Mexican "aliens" for both deportation and coerced repatriation to maintain the city's racial hierarchy.

Los Angeles: The City at the Center of Mexican Repatriation

On March 28, 1928, California Governor C. C. Young commissioned the Mexican Fact-Finding Committee, which was charged with preparing and presenting a report containing

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[15] U.S. Census Bureau. Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1957, 1960, https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1960/compendia/hist_stats_colonial-1957.html.

[16] "SAYS 400,000 ALIENS ARE HERE ILLEGALLY: Doak Tells the Senate That 100,000 Are Deportable, and Urges Stricter Law," *New York Times,* Jan. 6, 1931, https://www.proquest.com/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/99550469/54FF21D54C2148D9PQ/1?accountid=14553.

"only *facts* relating to the industrial, social and agricultural aspects of the problem of Mexican immigration into California."[17] According to the report, the number of Mexican-born individuals in the city of Los Angeles increased from 5,611 in 1910 to 21,598 in 1920.[18] These numbers were likely higher as differing immigrant statuses and fluid labor opportunities would have made it difficult to account for all Mexican-born individuals in Los Angeles. These numbers also did not include Los Angeles' Mexican American population.

For many of these migrants, however, Los Angeles was not their initial destination. As noted earlier, rural labor opportunities served as the main "pull" factor for Mexican migration to the U.S. during the first few decades of the 20th century. Much of this work was in Texas and Arizona. According to Governor Young's Mexican Fact-Finding Committee, 80.6% of Mexican immigrants between 1909 and 1927 listed Arizona or Texas as their intended destination.[19] These rural labor opportunities were not particularly stable, making it difficult for Mexican workers to establish a permanent location. In response to this instability, George J. Sánchez argues:

> After several years' experience in America's migratory labor market, punctuated by occasional trips to Mexico to rejoin family, those immigrants searching for more stability, greater opportunities for employment, and a more congenial atmosphere increasingly looked to urban areas in the Southwest and, to a lesser extent, the cities in the Midwest. After World War I, Los Angeles appeared to offer migrants much of what they desired.[20]

The 1924 Immigration Act also limited Mexican immigrants' ability to see their time in the U.S. as temporary. For an immigrant to return to their home country temporarily, the Act now required an application along with a $3.00 fee.[21] For some, this requirement wholly prevented returning to Mexico. In turn, some Mexican immigrants sought more permanent spaces, and cities offered that higher degree of stability. Los Angeles seemed to be a logical destination for many based on geographic location, industrial and agricultural labor opportunities, and an existing Mexican community. The results of the 1930 census largely support this notion as it put Los Angeles' Mexican-born population at 97,116.[22]

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[17] Will J. French, *Mexicans in California; Report of Governor C. C. Young's Mexican Fact-Finding Committee*, (San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1970), 14.

[18] Ibid., 57.

[19] Ibid., 35.

[20] George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 67-68.

[21] *An Act To limit the immigration of aliens into the United States, and for other purposes,* 158-159.

Los Angeles' high Mexican population allowed the "Mexican problem" narrative to gain relative prominence within the city. The significant increase in the Mexican-born population from 1920 to 1930 amplified the sentiments. These factors among others made Los Angeles a particularly fertile ground for deportation and repatriation. Working in partnership, the Federal government and local Los Angeles officials not only conducted a deportation campaign, but also sought to prey on the fears of the city's immigrant population. This intentional fear mongering campaign targeted Mexican and Mexican Americans causing large-scale coerced repatriation to Mexico.

With Secretary of Labor William N. Doak's claim of 100,000 deportable aliens in the country, local officials in Los Angeles took it upon themselves to take action. Using diligent archival research, historian Abraham Hoffman argues that the newly commissioned Los Angeles Citizens Committee on Coordination of Unemployment Relief used federal assistance to create a "scareheading" campaign against local aliens. By arousing deportation fears, the committee believed illegal aliens would simply repatriate themselves, saving the federal government time and monies needed to conduct thousands of deportation proceedings.[23] Hoffman's work is particularly principled in the sense that it does not posit one simple repatriation narrative in Los Angeles. While the collaboration between federal and local authorities offers deep insights into official policies leading to repatriation, the lived experience for many Los Angeles Mexicans and

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[22] U.S. Census Bureau, Census of Population and Housing, 1930.

[23] Abraham Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression*, (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1974), 51.

Mexican Americans was more complex. As is typically the case, one dimension does not offer us the complete picture.

The media in Los Angeles played an inextricable role in the eventual repatriation of thousands of Mexican and Mexican Americans. Through selective reporting, the media exacerbated community confusion and fear. Charles P. Visel, director of the Los Angeles Citizens Committee on Coordination of Unemployment Relief, was often at the center of this reporting. On January 26th, 1931, the *Los Angeles Times* quoted Visel as stating: "'Statistics here indicate thousands of illegal aliens… their elimination will give many jobs they are occupying to natives of this country and aliens who have made legal entry.'"[24] Visel's initial press release aroused suspicions that the efforts may be targeted at Mexican aliens specifically. The confusion created by the initial publicity statement led to the following clarification on February 4th: "'It is true that strenuous efforts are being made to round up deportable aliens. It is also true that most aliens living in this district are not deportable, that the activities of the immigration authorities are not directed toward any one race of people."[25] Despite this clarification, two weeks later, the *Los Angeles Times* reported on a deportation raid that took place just west of Los Angeles in El Monte. During the raid, authorities took thirteen illegal aliens into custody. Los Angeles County officials took eight of these detainees to the county jail, and the paper reported the names and ages of all eight. The newspaper then went on to state that all detainees were Mexican. The immigration status of the five detainees taken into Federal custody was reportedly ascertained through employment applications.[26]

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[24] "Unified Effort to Oust Aliens Being Evolved," *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 26, 1931, https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/unified-effort-oust-aliens-being-evolved/docview/162518882/se-2?accountid=14553.

[25] "CAMPAIGN ON ALIENS OUTLINED: Statement Issued After Conferences Here of Immigration Officials," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 4, 1931, https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/campaign-on-aliens-outlined/docview/162419791/se-2?accountid=14553.

The choice by the *Los Angeles Times*, intentional or not, to report the racial and ethnic identity of those arrested had deep effects on the city's Mexican and Mexican American population. While it is difficult to estimate the true extent of these effects, the message created by this type of reporting could have only served to engender anxiety.

Spanish-language newspapers in the city also reported on the deportation efforts quite regularly. On February 27, 1931, *La Opinión*, carried a front page story on a roundup of potential "aliens" that took place in Los Angeles City Plaza the previous day. During the roundup, Los Angeles policemen and federal immigration officials stopped those in the Plaza to conduct immigration questioning. According to the report, Mexicans and Mexican Americans constituted the majority of those questioned. Ultimately, authorities took eleven Mexicans, five Chinese individuals and a Japanese individual into custody. Despite internal discrepancies in the reporting, the piece offers insights into information provided to the Mexican and Mexican Americans.[27] Mexican communities interpreted these reports of deportation raids in the preexisting atmosphere of nativist sentiments and anti-Mexican restriction movements. The reporting in Spanish-language newspapers and other informal communication networks led many Mexican and Mexican Americans in Los Angeles to question their own safety in the U.S. and weigh their options. Formal deportation would have prevented future return to the U.S., but repatriation implied the possibility for return.

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[26] "FUGITIVE ALIENS SEIZED IN DRIVE: Thirteen Taken in First of Raid Series; Illegal Entrants to Be Held for Deportation; Employment Seekers Step Into Trap," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 15, 1931, https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/fugitive-aliens-seized-drive/docview/162408133/se-2?accountid=14553.

[27] "11 MEXICANOS PRESOS EN UN APARATOSO RAID A LA PLACITA," *La Opinión*, Feb 27, 1931, https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=A8NefVh_EAoC&dat=19310227&printsec=frontpage&hl=en; and Abraham Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression*, (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1974), 59-63.

This fear led to what can be categorized as coerced repatriation. For some, this constituted coerced expatriation. American-born children of Mexican immigrants had every privilege and immunity of American citizenship, yet many departed with their families for an entirely new country. Families uprooted their entire lives to board trains bound for Mexico. In many cases the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, the Mexican Consulate, or other charitable organizations sponsored these repatriates, covering their train fares and other costs. Conventional news sources typically portrayed these repatriations as entirely voluntary and an overall positive development.[28] These trains continued to take repatriates to Mexico through much of the early 1930s and began to wane in the second half of the decade. With each train full of Mexicans and Mexican Americans, Los Angeles slowly became more "white."

Economic and Social Implications of Urban Mexican Repatriation

As the rollout of New Deal programs provided relief to certain Americans, it became difficult for government officials to continue painting the deportation of illegal "aliens" as a panacea to the ails of the Great Depression. However, thousands of Mexicans had already been formally deported, and hundreds of thousands of Mexicans and Mexican Americans had already been repatriated and expatriated. A group that seemingly gained a form of "white" status in 1848 and served as the lynchpin of economic growth in the Southwest suddenly became the target of one of the most viscous and consequential nativist programs in American history. The reality is that Mexican repatriation was not so sudden. The long view of Mexican repatriation reveals the way that the period cannot be reduced to a simple reaction to the Great Depression. In fact, interviews conducted by agricultural economist Paul S. Taylor indicate that Mexican immigrants began to fear deportation as early as the spring of 1929, over a year before Secretary of Labor Doak's announcement of 400,000 deportable aliens in the country.[29] To understand Mexican repatriation, it is imperative to critically analyze the racial and urban implications behind the construction of the "Mexican problem" that ultimately produced deportation and repatriation efforts.

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[28] Abraham Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression*, 86-90; and "JOBLESS MEXICANS GO HOME: 1,150 Adults and Children Are First of 15,000 to Leave California." *New York Times*, Apr. 25, 1931. https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/jobless-mexicans-go-home/docview/99423724/se-2?accountid=14553.

Historian David Montejano argues that integration and assimilation were unrelated to the creation of the "Mexican problem" narrative. Instead, he argues the narrative was concerned with the need to locate another racial "other" into America's already complex racial and ethnic makeup.[30] While it is true that part of the "Mexican problem" revolved around the broader racial makeup of American society, this is perhaps an overly simplistic view. Montejano's argument posits that assimilation and integration were unrelated to the "Mexican problem." This assertion neglects the fact that multiple interpretations of the "Mexican problem" could have existed in American society. I would argue that there was an economic interpretation as well as a social interpretation of the "Mexican problem." Both of these interpretations, however, filtered Mexican immigration through a directly racist and nativist lens.

The economic reading of the "Mexican problem" was a reactionary movement spurred by the urbanization of Mexican immigrants. Initial acceptance of Mexican immigrants as a labor force hinged primarily on two conditions: impermanence and confinement. As Camille Guerin-Gonzalez argues:

> As early as 1910, many U.S. employers had begun expressing their preference for Mexican workers over other immigrants, as well as over native-born workers, for seasonal jobs they classified as low skilled. They complained that other national groups made unreasonable demands

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[29] Paul S. Taylor, "Mexican Labor in the United States: Dimmit County, Winter Gardens District South Texas," in *Mexican Labor in the United States,* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1930), 327.
[30] David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas,* 181.

> for higher wages and better working conditions. Mexicans, they claimed, would work cheaply and were "birds of passage" who would not remain in the U.S. permanently.[31]

Consciously or not, many saw Mexican labor as a temporary fixture of Southwestern industrial and agricultural production. Employers hired Mexican labor to compete with other racial and ethnic minorities under the assumption that Mexican immigrants would not expand beyond low-skilled rural labor positions. This view is best characterized by the 1908 U.S. Bureau of Labor bulletin which concluded that a "lack of education and initiative confines most of these immigrants to the simpler forms of unskilled labor. They compete little, if at all, with what is called 'white labor' in the Southwest."[32]

Ultimately, neither of the two conditions needed for Mexican acceptance would persist. The Mexican immigrant population expanded rapidly during the first three decades of the twentieth century, and the 1924 Immigration Act made it more difficult for Mexicans in the U.S. to return to Mexico. As many Mexican immigrants began to see their residence in the U.S. as permanent, they sought out the stability offered by urban spaces. The urbanization of Mexicans and Mexican Americans allowed the "Mexican problem" to take root among politicians, academics, and the broader American public. The rural labor opportunities initially obscured the magnitude of this Mexican immigration as most of the immigrants were hidden by the nature of their work. However, the urbanization and geographic expansion of the Mexican immigrant population made the American public increasingly aware of the scale of this Mexican immigration movement.[33] The public not only became more aware of the Mexican immigrant's presence in the U.S., but in urban spaces white workers found themselves competing with

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[31] Camille Guerin-Gonzales, *Mexican Workers and American Dreams: Immigration, Repatriation, and California Farm Labor, 1900-1939,* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 25.

[32] U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor, *Mexican Labor in the United States,* 466.

[33] Mark Reisler, "Always the Laborer, Never the Citizen: Anglo Perceptions of the Mexican Immigrant during the 1920s," *Pacific Historical Review* 45, no. 2 (1976): 232-233, Accessed December 13, 2021, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3638496.

Mexican workers for industrial positions. Governor Young' Mexican Fact-Finding Committee devoted an entire section of their report to the presence of Mexican labor in non-agricultural and non-railroad positions. This section of the report concluded that "Mexican immigrants have gained a strong foothold in California industries, undoubtedly supplanting other immigrant races and native Americans."[34] Mexican labor was imported to compete with other racial minorities, but once Mexican immigrants began to compete with "white labor," Mexican immigration became a "Mexican problem" and the debate over restriction escalated.

The economic interpretation was not the only reading of the "Mexican problem" narrative. Contrary to Montejano's argument, assimilation and integration played a role in the construction of this narrative. First, the existence of a Mexican-American community as early as 1848 suggests that some Americans tolerated the presence of another racial "other" so long as that racial "other" was "Americanized" to a certain extent. The social interpretation is perhaps best summarized by Cybelle Fox's argument that prior to the 1920s, social workers in Los Angeles largely believed they could assimilate the Mexican population. However, as the 1920s progressed, citing low naturalization rates and low socioeconomic mobility, these social workers became convinced that Mexicans were "a dependent and diseased population" incapable of fitting into American society.[35] The social interpretation is also evidenced by the Mexican Fact-Finding Committee's report, which included an entire chapter dedicated to the rates of naturalization among Mexican immigrants in California. Specifically, the report compared the rates of Mexican naturalization to those of other foreign-born individuals in California, concluding that Mexicans were comparatively reluctant to naturalize.[36] The report largely ignored existing barriers to naturalization including various fees.[37]

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[34] Will J. French, *Mexicans in California*, 95.

[35] Cybelle Fox, *Three Worlds of Relief*, 74

The Mexican Fact-Finding Committee inclusion of an entire section of their report to non-agricultural Mexican labor and another to naturalization suggests that both the economic and social interpretations of the "Mexican problem" existed. Despite the apparent difference between the two interpretations, they both racialized and otherized the Mexican population. Both interpretations portrayed the Mexican immigrant as unintelligent, backward, and only capable of rural wage labor. These interpretations turned into justifications for the restriction of Mexican immigrants. When the restriction efforts of the 1920s bore little to no fruit, restrictionists turned towards deportation and ultimately repatriation. To a certain extent, the Great Depression was only a pretext for ridding the nation of the already existing "Mexican problem."

Conclusion

Aside from the most vehemently nativist bloc of society, many Americans initially tolerated Mexican immigration as long as these newcomers remained in the labor positions deemed fit for racial "others." However, once Mexican immigrants expanded beyond these hidden labor positions, the white American public began to construct the "Mexican problem" narrative. Different segments of the population adopted different rationalizations for the "Mexican problem" narrative, but all hinged on the maintenance of America's racial hierarchy. Many conflated the concept of an "American" or "native" worker with whiteness. This conflation demanded that Mexican immigrants remain in rural spaces performing backbreaking labor at exploitative wages. Those willing to accept a Mexican presence in urban spaces required the Mexican population to assimilate and “Americanize” so as not to disturb the American racial hierarchy with their perceived “otherness.” The construction of the “Mexican problem” would grow into the immigration restriction efforts of the 1920s. Both proponents and opponents of immigration restriction directly racialized the Mexican population, but much of the anti-restriction camp consisted of the individuals who directly profited from Mexican labor. The Great Depression ultimately offered the federal government and specific localities such as Los Angeles an opportunity to clear out its “Mexican problem.” Deportation and repatriation efforts forcefully expelled hundreds of thousands of Mexican and Mexican Americans and entirely ignored Mexicans’ cultural, social, and economic contributions to American society. The issues of race and ethnicity in American immigration engendered by Mexican repatriation remain unresolved and questions over who can access American space remain largely unanswered.

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[36] Will J. French, *Mexicans in California*, 74.

[37] "Halve Naturalization Fees to Encourage New Citizens.," *New York Times*, Apr. 22, 1934, https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/halve-naturalization-fees-encourage-new-citizens/docview/101095124/se-2?accountid=14553.

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