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A Re-evaluation on Racism: How a Strong U.S. tradition of anti Mexican Sentiment was  
Responsible for the 1930s Mexican Repatriation Crisis

La Placita was a vibrant park located on Olvera Street in Los Angeles, California where Mexican culture, music, and politics all intersected. Before the times of movie theatres and TV, Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans would go to La Placita and talk about current political debates and listen to local Mariachi bands.<sup>1</sup> However, on February 26th, 1931 La Placita transformed from a symbol of celebration to a symbol of fear. Dressed in plain clothes local immigration officers sealed off both the entrance and exit of the park before anyone inside could even notice. Soon, those inside the park noticed the immigration agents, who along with police officers were holding guns and batons, and screaming “La Razzia!”. The traditional raid against Mexican immigrants at this time usually targeted one specific person. La Placita was different because instead of targeting an individual, the raid was used to spread fear across the entire population of Mexicans living in Los Angeles. While only a handful of Mexicans had been detained, this raid proved to be a successful scare tactic. Every person in the neighborhood park was individually seized by an immigration officer and searched for proof of legal residence.<sup>2</sup> Only a couple of months after the La Placita Raid, the Mexican Newspaper *La Opinion* reported that by August 1931 over 1,300 Mexicans had left Los Angeles because of the effect of La Placita and other coercive immigration policies.<sup>3</sup>

The movement to repatriate Mexicans during the Great Depression has returned into the fold in contextualizing the present movement against Mexicans and other immigrant groups. Just like the 1930s, today’s anti Mexican rhetoric seems to be disguised as a fear of job loss. It is no coincidence that a rise in nativism was sparked during both the Great Depression and the Great

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<sup>1</sup> Francisco Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez, “Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s”, (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1995)

<sup>2</sup> Steve Boisson, *When America Sent her own Packing*, (Virginia, American History Magazine, 2006)

<sup>3</sup> *La Opinion*, August 18th, 1931,

Recession. However, in the U.S., anti Mexican sentiment has historically been based off race, and the repatriations of the 1930s as well as the desire to ‘build a wall’ is no different. Working together with the need to paint Mexicans as the scapegoat for the failing economy, the strong U.S. tradition of racism towards Mexicans came to a peak in the 1930s when Mexicans constituted 46.3% of all the people deported from the United States.<sup>4</sup> These deportations happened in spite of the fact that only 10% of the Mexican population were on welfare.<sup>5</sup> This tradition of racism resulted in hundreds of thousands of Mexican nationals and Mexican Americans being unjustly ‘repatriated’ back to Mexico. The mass exodus of Mexicans at this time has been categorized as repatriations, implying that most of these immigrants returned to Mexico at their own volition. This was not the case. It is estimated that of the 400,000 repatriations, 1/3 were people who were either lawful residents or U.S. citizens.<sup>6</sup> As a U.S. citizen it is unconstitutional to be deported, and even though various local governments and welfare agencies knew this they still sponsored repatriation movements. This specific wave of racism stemmed from an influx of Mexican immigration during the 1920s and the increasing number of Mexican American communities across the country ,which triggered a resentful backlash. Nationally, newspapers like the *Saturday Evening Post* published racist cartoons and editorials citing the “violent” nature of Mexican culture. While much of the racist rhetoric around Mexicans during the 1930s was surrounded by economic anxiety, the economic incentive used as justification to repatriate a mass amount of Mexicans is not the whole picture.<sup>7</sup> These economic

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<sup>4</sup> Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s*, (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 53

<sup>5</sup> Balderrama and Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal*, 88

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, 1

<sup>7</sup> George C Kiser and David Silverman “Mexican American Repatriation During the Great Depression.” (Austin, University of Texas, 1973), 139

justifications for repatriations were almost always informed by racism. Removing Mexicans during this time actually hurt the economy and did not cause a dramatic change on the welfare rolls.<sup>8</sup> My paper focuses on the overarching role that racism played in both the public's desire to deplete the Mexican population from their communities and the government's efficiency in executing such a plan.

Although many repatriations took place in smaller, community driven processes, the federal government played a huge part, with Secretary of Labor William N. Doak prompting the mass removal of immigrants all over the country. While the exact number is not certain, the efforts of Doak, the Bureau of Immigration, local governments, and relief organizations resulted in hundreds of thousands of repatriations and human rights violations. The majority of these repatriations took place from 1929 to 1932, with many contemporary Mexican American scholars devoting their research to how this monstrous event was able to take place so quickly and so efficiently, without a concern for human rights and families? The answer to this question can be found in the efforts of those who committed these repatriations, using the Great Depression as a justification to express their nativism. These repatriations, with a great amount of them being unconstitutional deportations, resulted from a specialized expression of racism towards Mexicans with the ideology that their presence in the U.S. was dangerous to both the economy and the American way of life.

By creating quotas on immigrants not from the Western Hemisphere, the Immigrant Act of 1924 ironically gave way to an increase in Mexican immigrants. Although this Act had racist intentions to keep the U.S. as Anglo Saxon as possible, Mexicans were exempted from the quota

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<sup>8</sup> Jong Kwan Lee, "The Employment Effects of Mexican Repatriations: Evidence from the 1930s", (The National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, 2017).

system due to them being seen as only as inexpensive, disposable labor force, desired for work in the field but undesired for inclusion in the polity.”<sup>9</sup> It is estimated that during the period between 1910 and 1929 the number of legal Mexican migrants rose from 20,000 a year to 100,000 a year with a total of over 600,000 Mexicans living in the U.S.<sup>10</sup> However, the encouragement of Mexican immigrants did not last long. The growing presence of Mexicans in the country did not satisfy those who previously called for immigration quotas. While Mexicans were allowed to enter the U.S. without a quota system, they soon experienced a large amount of anti Mexican sentiment, which later resulted in the repatriation movement.

There is a long history of anti Mexican sentiment in the U.S. One example of this sentiment can be found during a U.S. congressional debate on the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Robert J. Walker, a Senator from Mississippi, referred to Mexicans in the debate as “a fanatical colored population” and that the Mexican race was one of “imbeciles.”<sup>11</sup> Even predating the Mexican American War and the subsequent Treaty of Guadalupe was the Protestant propaganda of ‘the Black Legend.’ The Black Legend originated in the 16th century and labeled the Spanish as cruel, particularly to the indigenous population, by their English and French counterparts, even though they themselves had engaged in the same practices toward the natives of the New World.<sup>12</sup> Typical depictions of this legend showed Spanish Conquistadors feeding Indian children to their dogs.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Mae M. Ngai, “Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America” (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004), 10

<sup>10</sup> Jason Steinhauser, “The History of Mexican Immigration to the U.S. in the Early 20th Century”, *Library of Congress*

<sup>11</sup> Robert F. Castro, *Liberty Like Thunder: Race, Article XI Enforcement, and the Odyssey of Guadalupe Hidalgo*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013), 307

<sup>12</sup> Alfredo Alvar, *La Leyenda Negra*, (Spain, AKAL, 2017), 20

<sup>13</sup> Theodore de Bry, *Eighty Years War Propaganda Engraving*, (Amsterdam, 1598)

Repatriations were not the first time the U.S. had targeted Mexicans and stripped them of their civil rights in the 20th century. The eugenics movements of the early 1900s directed many of its sterilization efforts towards Mexican immigrants and Mexican American women. In Eugenic research Mexicans were described as operating at “a lower racial level” and Mexican women were “hyper fertile and criminally inclined.”<sup>14</sup> These racial prejudices paved the way for the sterilization movement that targeted both Latino men and women between 1910 and 1953. In a study done for the Smithsonian Institute, it was found that Latino men were 23% more likely to be sterilized than non Latino men, and Latina women were 59% more likely to be sterilized than non Latina women.<sup>15</sup> These sterilizations were done at California state mental health institutions, with many of these sterilizations taking place with Latinos before the ages of sixteen. Sterilizations targeting Mexican men and women were described as “extremely necessary, to protect the state (California) from increased crime, poverty, and racial degeneracy.”<sup>16</sup>

In reaction to the growing amount of Anti Mexican sentiment and the widespread belief that Mexicans should have been covered in the 1924 Immigration Act, Texas Congressman John C. Box sought to amend the Act and create a new provision to include Mexicans. Box represented a district in east Texas that already had a history of Ku Klux Klan attacks against Mexicans. In 1925 he proposed a bill, House Resolution 6741, which sought to amend the 1924 Immigration Act to include Mexico as a quota country. If passed, this bill would allow for only 2% of the annual quota of Mexicans based on the 1890 census.<sup>17</sup> The Box Bill was eventually

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<sup>14</sup> Surveys in Mental Deviation in Prisons, Public Schools, and Orphanages in California (Sacramento, California State Board of Charities and Corrections, 1918).

<sup>15</sup> Nicole L Novak and Natalie Lira, “Forced Sterilization Programs in California Once Harmed Thousands--Particularly Latinas” (Sterilization and Social Justice Lab, University of Michigan)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Harris/Box Bill

defeated, but not because of its profound racism, but because quotas for Mexicans would mean quotas for desirable immigrants (white Anglo Saxon Canadians), as well as fears of an adverse reaction from other Latin American countries. Even though it failed, the Bill found many proponents, especially in the eugenics community, which had endorsed the quota because they believed Mexicans to be “below par physically and in intellectual capacity.”<sup>18</sup> If the U.S. didn’t have to rely on Latin America for raw materials and various resources it is possible that the Box Bill would have been passed, enforcing the same strict exclusion policies on Mexican immigrants as it did others.

The practice of Mexicans returning home from the U.S. for economic reasons had long been unremarkable. Repatriations back to Mexico in the early 1900s actually made sense for many Mexicans who were tired of facing racism in the U.S. in addition to a failing economy. Many Mexicans believed their lives would be better if they returned home. However, what differentiates regular voluntary returns home from the repatriations that took place in the 1930s was the intention and the process. These repatriations were both coercive in nature and a violation of human rights. For a huge majority of those who were repatriated, it was actually unconstitutional deportation, since they were immigrants legally in the country, U.S. citizens, or those who had permanent resident status. Train tickets were arranged without consent, and threatening Mexicans to leave was commonplace. Raids became increasingly common in Mexican hang out spots, like the raid on La Placita, which resulted in mass fear instilled on Mexicans living in cities like Los Angeles. Often Mexicans were thrown into jail cells separated from their families and told the only way out was to return to Mexico with their train ticket

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<sup>18</sup> Gilbert C. Gonzalez, “Racism, Education, and the Mexican Community in Los Angeles 1920-1930” (Los Angeles, Societas, 1974), 288

already paid for. Historians Francisco Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez, write of a case study done on a family that was thrown into a jail cell “never able to collect their personal belongings. The only thing they were able to leave with to Mexico was documentation of a father having worked in the U.S. for 25 years as well as his siblings’ birth certificates proving they had been born in the U.S. and were citizens.”<sup>19</sup> These repatriations were unlawful and involuntary and targeted working class Mexican families that often had many decades of living and working in the U.S.

Mass repatriations did not really begin until the worst years of the Great Depression, signifying the complex relationship between a strong tradition of nativism and a failing economy. Politicians and newspapers often cited Mexican immigrants as a detriment on the economy. Working with local relief agencies, city and state governments began to sponsor repatriations back to Mexico. Because the number of Mexican immigrants, entered either legally or illegally, is incomplete, there is uncertainty over just how many Mexicans and Mexican Americans were forced to return home. Although historian Brian Gratton has found the number of repatriates to be around 250,000, the number is often cited as much greater.<sup>20</sup> The most common answer to this question has found to around 400,000 to 500,000 found by historian Abraham Hoffman.<sup>21</sup>

My paper will also expand on the recent historiography that has embraced the role of racism in the movement towards repatriations. Starting in the 1970s with Abraham Hoffman’s

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<sup>19</sup> Francisco Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez, “Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s”, (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 135

<sup>20</sup> Brian Gratton, *Mexican Repatriation: New Estimates of Total and Excess Returns in the 1930s* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2011), 12

<sup>21</sup> Abraham Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression: Repatriation Pressures* (Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 1974), 96



*Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression: Repatriation Pressures*, the historiography began to focus on the public perception of Mexicans in the 1930s. In the 1990s Francisco Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez wrote *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriations in the 1930s* and found race to be the prime motivator for repatriations. These three historians analyzed the prior scholarly work on the subject and began to realize that racism was inflicted in these works as well with one historian describing Mexicans as “criminally inclined, inadequately controlled by family organization and a frequent charity case.”<sup>22</sup> Hoffman, Balderrama, and Rodriguez argue that racial prejudices against Mexicans played a larger role in repatriations than previously believed, and expanded on the idea that these repatriations were not always voluntary. For example, Balderrama interviewed many people who were repatriated in their childhoods and discovered the nature of coercion in these repatriations. All three historians made significant contributions to the subject by emphasizing racism as the prime motivation for repatriations. Balderrama and Rodriguez also discovered that “over 60% of expulsions were legal American citizens.”<sup>23</sup> My paper uses the insights made by these historians and expands them to include just how prejudiced anglo saxon white Americans were to Mexicans through legislation, discriminatory legal procedures, newspaper portrayals, and lack of regard for civil rights.

Contemporary newspapers in the 1930s amplified popular attitudes of racism against Mexicans and triggered economic anxiety. During the late 1920s newspapers began reporting how many Mexicans were on the relief rolls for each county. Newspapers created the narrative that every Mexican was on welfare, while in actuality during the Depression only 10% of the

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<sup>22</sup> Taylor, *Mexican Labor*, 169

<sup>23</sup> Balderrama and Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal*, 216

Mexican population were on welfare.<sup>24</sup> States like Illinois, home of the *Chicago Herald*, a newspaper that fanned the flames of anti-Mexican feelings, actually had a welfare roll with 85% of its recipients being white.<sup>25</sup> In addition to the racism of the *Chicago Herald*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, one of the most widely circulated and popular magazines of the time, dedicated a series of articles expressing their desire for Mexican deportations. While discussing the benefits of Mexican labor to certain markets, vehemently anti immigrant journalist Kenneth L. Roberts examined “whether the economic value in the Southwest...was worth the expense of saddling all future Americans with a dismal and distressing race problem.”<sup>26</sup> Nativism was not a new concept during the Great Depression, and neither was anti Mexican sentiment and stereotypes. However, newspapers like the *Post* regularly publishing articles citing Mexicans as “the most unassimilable of aliens”, provided the perfect scapegoat that was deemed responsible for both job loss and an anti American society.

Although state and local government across the country participated in unconstitutional deportations, one man bears particular responsibility, William N. Doak. Doak was appointed to be President Hoover’s Secretary of Labor in 1930. There was great pressure on the Hoover administration to alleviate the national unemployment problem, and Doak believed the mass deportation of aliens to be the solution. He stated that his “conviction is that by strict limitation and a wise selection of immigration, we can make America stronger in every way, hastening the day when our population shall be more homogenous.”<sup>27</sup> He then told President Hoover that he knew of “400,000 illegal Mexican immigrants residing in this country” without specifying his

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<sup>24</sup> Balderrama and Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal*, 88

<sup>25</sup> Balderrama and Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal*, 79

<sup>26</sup> Kenneth L. Roberts, “The Mexican Invasion”, *The Saturday Evening Post*, (March 1929)

<sup>27</sup> Rodolfo F. Acuna, “Anything but Mexican: Chicanos in Contemporary Los Angeles, (Brooklyn, Verso Press”, 1996), 112

source of information.<sup>28</sup> Historian Abraham Hoffman explained that “during the first nine months of 1931, Doak sensationalized the routine bureaucratic procedure of the Labor Department’s Bureau of Immigration, and turned it into a gladiatorial spectacle.”<sup>29</sup> Before Doak was appointed the routine procedure under the Bureau was to arrest any alien who was under the suspicion of not having legal papers, usually targeting immigrants who held radical political views or having a large income. However, once Doak took over, immigration officers rarely asked questions of politics and economic status when it came to Mexicans. Instead of economics or politics it became about whether you physically looked ‘Mexican’. Doak’s deportation campaign was disguised as not having a racialized target, however, Mexicans were numerically the most affected group.<sup>30</sup>

Due to Los Angeles’ already anti Mexican sentiment Doak and the Bureau of Immigration were successful in repatriating thousands in a very short amount of time. Doak’s deportation campaign in Los Angeles was designed to both arrest ‘illegal aliens’ and scare Mexican nationals and Mexican Americans into returning to Mexico. Doak received help from the local newspapers in Los Angeles because if someone of Mexican heritage was arrested for a crime it was highly publicized with pictures of the perpetrator on the front pages of the local newspapers. These newspapers would also feature flashy headlines that always made it apparent the criminal was ‘an alien’. Doak worked alongside the Los Angeles district director of immigration, Walter E. Carr. They together launched a very aggressive campaign and even

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<sup>28</sup> Juan Gonzalez and Joseph Torres “News of All of the People: The Epic Story of Race and the American Media” (Brooklyn, Verso Press, 2012), 246

<sup>29</sup> Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexican Americans*, 7

<sup>30</sup> Bureau of Immigration, *Annual Report 1931*

admitted that many of the men they apprehended were in fact U.S. born, and thus unconstitutional.<sup>31</sup>

Los Angeles was chosen as the biggest focus for repatriations because racism was so commonplace in the city. . It is estimated that the number of repatriates from Los Angeles during 1931 was 75,000.<sup>32</sup> Writing for *the Post*, Kenneth L. Roberts, described Los Angeles saying “there were endless streets crowded with the shackles of the illiterate, diseased, and pauperized Mexicans, taking no interest whatever in the community, living constantly on the ragged edge of starvation, bringing countless American citizens into the world with the reckless prodigality of rabbits.”<sup>33</sup> While Los Angeles did have the largest number of Mexicans receiving relief in the country, it was only because this was the area with the largest concentration of Mexicans. Of the Mexican population living in Los Angeles who received relief, only 38% were aliens, meaning that the majority were permanent residents or citizens. In addition, 62% of Mexicans who received relief had lived in the country more than ten years, and 31% had lived in Los Angeles their entire life. <sup>34</sup> During the Great Depression, there was a new procedure in Los Angeles county in response to a growing anti Mexican sentiment. Mexicans now had to present formal paperwork in order to collect their relief, which displaced thousands of Mexicans who had entered the country before these documents were created.

Due to both a strong tradition of Mexican Racism and a strong tradition of accepting Mexicans, Texas was the first state to follow the Los Angeles model and had one of the most efficient repatriation efforts in the country. Historian R. Reynolds McKay conducted a case study

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<sup>31</sup> Presidential Emergency Committee for Employment (1931-1932)

<sup>32</sup> Abraham Hoffman, “Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression: Repatriation Pressures, 1929-1939” (The University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 1974), 100

<sup>33</sup> Kenneth L. Roberts, “The Mexican Invasion”, *The Saturday Evening Post*, (March 1929)

<sup>34</sup> Mexican Embassy to Secretary of State, 24 August 1933

of Mexican coal miners living in Texas during this period.<sup>35</sup> He found that Mexican nationals and their children worked at the Bridgeport coal mine for decades, with the mine's town now characterized as 'predominantly Latin American'. By 1930 two thirds of the Bridgeport miners were U.S. citizens of Mexican descent. The miners chose to stay in Bridgeport even after the mine closed because the mining company owed them six thousand dollars in backwages. These miners had been employed by the mining company for either ten or twenty years and did not wish to leave their homes. Soon after the mine closed newspapers reported stories of Mexican families eating just beans and starving, as well as having no clothing.<sup>36</sup> Almost immediately, the local government recruited the Red Cross to lead a repatriation campaign to send these miners back to Mexico. The Red Cross was able to make a deal with the mining company and use the back wages to pay for the trains back to Mexico, without asking the miners if this was what they wanted. It is important to note that not a single Mexican was on the committee in charge of making these decisions. After the Bridgeport repatriations took place, a former miner came forward and said that "virtually none of the miners and their families wished to return to Mexico."<sup>37</sup> Those who organized these repatriations knew that they were not sending these Mexican and Mexican Americans to a 'better life'. It was also realized that these repatriates were people who had been living in the U.S. for decades, who identified themselves as American. One of the leaders of the repatriation movement in Texas, Rev. Walls, said that Mexicans "will

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<sup>35</sup> Robert Reynolds McKay, "The Impact of the Great Depression on Immigrant Mexican Labor: Repatriation of the Bridgeport Texas Coal Miners," (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1984), 356

<sup>36</sup> San Angelo Evening Standard, 7 December 1931

<sup>37</sup> Manuel Vidal. 1981. Personal interview with Reynolds McKay

actually go there as foreigners.”<sup>38</sup> Due to these repatriation campaigns Texas lost about a third of their Mexican population.<sup>39</sup>

Cities like Gary and East Chicago, Indiana had large Mexican populations and strong traditions of anti Mexican sentiment, allowing for Mexicans to be scapegoated at the start of the Great Depression. In the 1920s Mexicans migrated to Gary, Indiana and nearby East Chicago to work in the steel mills. Almost at once Mexican workers felt discrimination from native born Americans, segregating their housing and schools. Increased poverty exacerbated the discrimination in Gary, with local newspapers comparing Mexicans to blacks. While the first repatriations were voluntary, it was clear that in 1932 these new repatriations were not voluntary. Funds were raised from rich donors in order to pay for transportation, calling on ‘civic duty’ to encourage Mexicans to leave. A study was done by the Bureau of Immigration in Indiana to observe the process of the repatriations and found “most of those who want to return have already done so, and many of those who remain have been in the U.S. so long they have no close connections in Mexico and no reason for returning.”<sup>40</sup> One teenager who did repatriate from Gary, said “many Mexicans were forced into repatriation while others because of the language barrier and fear of government were sort of fooled into it.”<sup>41</sup>

The *Calumet News*, East Chicago’s most popular newspaper gave prominent coverage to crimes committed by Mexicans in order to skew the public’s opinion.<sup>42</sup> The East Chicago

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<sup>38</sup> Wise County Messenger, 10 December 1931, 1

<sup>39</sup> Robert Reynolds McKay, “Mexican Americans and Repatriations” (Texas State Historical Association, 2010)

<sup>40</sup> Gary Post Tribune, “Monthly Report, May 1932 I.I. Papers” April 20, 1932 p.1

<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth N Wilson “Notes on the Early History of the International Institute of Gary” I.I. Papers; Monthly Report, Sept 1932, *ibid*, interview with Joseph Alamillo, Gary, Indiana. Aug 1970

<sup>42</sup> Francisco Arturo Rosales and Daniel T. Simon, “Mexican Immigrant Experience in the Urban Midwest: East Chicago, Indiana 1919-1945”, (Bloomington, Indiana Magazine of History, 1981), 347

American Legion group, working with other relief agencies and the East Chicago local government created a program to rid the city of its Mexican population. The relief group actually wrote to Doak saying “to rid this community of Mexicans...by them leaving, our unemployment problem here in the city and in fact almost the entire Lake County would be solved.”<sup>43</sup> Railroad companies donated several train cars and between the months of June and October 1932 six train cars left East Chicago with a total of 1,032 repatriates consisting of 112 families and 382 single men.<sup>44</sup>

The state of Michigan ignored the human rights of Mexicans by repatriating those who had been recently hospitalized or very sick Mexicans and sticking them into cramped train cars. By 1932 towns like Grand Rapids, Flint, and Port Huron had signed an agreement to finance repatriations in each locality. In many cases train companies actually donated their train cars in order to speed up the process of repatriations. Once the repatriations were processed immigration officers were placed in the trains to observe how the repatriates were treated. One official readily acknowledged that these repatriates were not leaving voluntarily, and that in some cases men actually leaped out of the windows to escape going back to Mexico.<sup>45</sup> Another inspector filed a report, this time detailing that his specific train car actually had a doctor on board “owing to the fact that several of these Mexicans were taken from the hospitals or had been removed from the hospitals shortly before this trip.”<sup>46</sup> These reports proved that it was common knowledge to the state immigration bureau in Michigan that these repatriations were not voluntary and that many of those who were sent back to Mexico were physically ill and had very recently been taken

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<sup>43</sup> Daniel T. Simon, “Mexican Repatriation in East Chicago, Indiana” (journal of ethnic studies 1974)

<sup>44</sup> East Chicago American Legion Repatriation File

<sup>45</sup> Report dated November 29th, 1932, from Gangeware to District Director of Immigration at Detroit

<sup>46</sup> Report from Yeager to District Director of Immigration at Detroit, November 21st, 1932

from their hospital beds. It was impossible for these repatriations to be voluntary evidenced by how sick these people were and the fact they physically tried to escape out of a moving train window.

Racism was at the heart of the welfare myths surrounding Mexicans. Although prejudice led to an increase in Mexicans being on welfare due to denied opportunities, the majority of welfare recipients in the U.S. were actually white families. For example, during 1933, the worst point of the depression, there were 126,000 families on the dole in Los Angeles County, yet it is important to note that only 10% of these families were Mexican.<sup>47</sup> White Anglo Saxon families received up to \$30 a month while Mexican families received only \$20 dollars due to the rationale that Mexicans “had a lower standard of living and could get along better on a cheaper diet.”<sup>48</sup> The states that had a large foreign born population tried to alleviate the joblessness problem and create new laws that limited how many foreign workers a company could hire. This of course made Mexicans an undesirable employee and the economic recession hit them especially hard. For many Mexicans there was no other choice then to go to their county’s welfare agency. While the media and the common perception of the time blamed Mexican immigrants and their families for an increase in welfare, they only constituted around 10% or less.<sup>49</sup> Much of the justification used for these deportations came from media outlets and public officials dispelling Mexicans for taking up so much space on the relief rolls.

Welfare offices and local governments adapted their policies to be specifically discriminatory against Mexicans seeking aid. When applying for welfare many Mexicans were asked to present their naturalization papers, which was not a requirement for obtaining county

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> *Nation* 30 December 1931

<sup>49</sup> State of Illinois Second Annual Report of the Illinois Emergency Relief Commission (June 1934)



aid. In addition, California created a residency requirement that stated you had to live in the state for over one year before you could receive aid. Various organizations and clubs like ‘America for Americans, Inc.’ worked with welfare agencies and county governments to create records of aliens on relief, later used as justification for repatriations. These private records were then broadcast all over the media, furthering the public’s negative opinion on Mexicans. Across the country welfare departments were conducting investigations on aliens seeking relief, trying to figure out which aliens were the most ‘deportable’. For instance, one case in Pennsylvania was about Mexican aliens who had recently been hospitalized.<sup>50</sup> These discriminatory procedures encouraged the idea that Mexicans on relief were a great contributor to the public economic woes.

What is feasibly the most shocking is that these welfare organizations and local governments were aware that a large percentage of those pressured or forced to repatriation were actually U.S. citizens. Someone who is a naturalized citizen can be stripped of citizenship, however in only very rare cases. In a 2011 an Immigration Statistics Review report from the Department of Justice found that only about five hundred people have ever been stripped of their naturalizations and most of them have been due to Nazi involvement in World War II or terrorism.<sup>51</sup> The denounced naturalizations are only in extreme and rare cases, yet in the 1930s approximately 1/3 of the half a million repatriations were U.S. citizens. Evidence of these unconstitutional deportations show that various local governments and welfare agencies knew they were dealing with U.S. citizens. One case worker wrote in their report “Although Mr. M had citizenship and was therefore a legal resident he was demanded to repatriate himself in view of

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<sup>50</sup> Norman D. Humphrey, “Mexican Repatriation from Michigan: Public Assistance in Historical Perspective”(Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1941), 500

<sup>51</sup> Department of Justice Report, February 2nd, 2011

the dependency of his family.”<sup>52</sup> Another report from a social worker read “Mary Lou, age fifteen, born in Wayne, Michigan, is suited for repatriation even though she did not wish to return to Mexico.”<sup>53</sup>

Deportation hearings were filled with human rights violations and violations of due process. If you were suspected of being in the country illegally, you had the option of a deportation hearing. Many detainees were never told of this. Detainees were denied their legal rights and kept in solitary confinement, unable to see or speak with their family, and usually denied counsel. Many of the detainees were kept in jail, unable to post their bail, until the next deportee train arrived.<sup>54</sup> If deportation hearings did take place they often were in side of a jail cell.

Some media outlets did undertake investigations into the repatriation hearings, but ultimately did not uncover enough information to stop the proceedings. *The Nation*, a left wing magazine, reported on the illegality of the repatriation hearings about six months after they had began. *The Nation*, wrote “it is an outrage that the immigration bureau officials should be investigators, prosecutors, judges and a final court of appeals in deportation cases.”<sup>55</sup> Although the public outrage was not enough to stop these illegal proceedings, it attracted the attention of many who wished to understand what exactly was taking place. One study found that local agencies used a “variety of of methods” like “rounding people up to fill carloads of human cargo, with little if any time spent on determining whether the methods infringed upon the rights of citizens.”<sup>56</sup> Another study that focused on the hearing proceedings reported that immigration

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<sup>52</sup> Humphrey, Mexican Repatriation from Michigan, 502

<sup>53</sup> Ibid

<sup>54</sup> Ray, Mexican Repatriation ,175

<sup>55</sup> *The Nation*, 19 August 1931

<sup>56</sup> Grebler, Mexican Immigration to the United States, 27

officials would tell Mexicans that if they left voluntarily now they would have a much better chance of entering the U.S. at a later date.

Although the 1931 federal Wickersham Commission cited the Bureau of Immigration as discriminatory towards Mexicans, they themselves were also guilty of discrimination. The Wickersham Commission was the first federal report done on police brutality and found that the bureau's "apprehension and examination of supposed aliens are often characterized by methods which are unconstitutional, tyrannic, and oppressive. The recommendation given is that some legislative discretion be given to prevent cases of unnecessary hardship and suffering to the alien's family."<sup>57</sup> However, the rest of the report featured notes from various sociologists, citing Mexicans as being "lower on the cultural evolution scale than white Americans" and far more violent.<sup>58</sup> This helps explain why, although Doak's practices were explicitly mentioned as being unlawful, there was no real protest after the report's release. The report made little impact and Doak and various local governments and relief agencies were able to continue their repatriation policies, even after receiving confirmation that what they were doing was discriminatory.

Although Mexican immigrants were wrongfully depicted for the cause of unemployment during the Great Depression, research has found that repatriations didn't actually make the economy better for U.S. natives. In fact, Mexicans in the United States actually helped the economy and labor markets for both natives and immigrants. Economist Jong Kwan Lee, found that Mexican repatriation didn't make the economy any better, and in some cases it actually hurt the economy.<sup>59</sup> Lee's study also found that that the decrease of Mexicans due to repatriation was

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<sup>57</sup> 1931 Wickersham Commission Report

<sup>58</sup> Edward J. Escobar, "Race, Police, and the Making of a Political Identity: Mexican Americans and the Los Angeles Police Department 1900-1945 (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999), 117

<sup>59</sup> Jong Kwan Lee, "The Employment Effects of Mexican Repatriations: Evidence from the 1930s"(Cambridge,National Bureau of Economic Research, 2017)

actually associated with lower employment of natives and higher unemployment of natives. Repatriation did not cause the wages of U.S. born workers to rise and there was no significant change in the labor market for natives after the repatriation of likely over half a million Mexican immigrants and U.S. citizens. Lee studied specific cities like Gary, Indiana, Los Angeles, California, and East Chicago, Indiana, because they had the most aggressive campaigns of repatriation. The study also compares repatriation rates of Mexicans with repatriation rates of Italians, Poles, and Russians, as well as their ages in which they repatriated. It was found that Mexicans experienced larger repatriations in comparison to other immigrant groups. More importantly, the study compared the average age of repatriation with the average age of Mexicans who repatriated. Usually people who repatriate for economic reasons are younger, categorized as under forty years old. Those who are forty years and older have spent more time in the United States and are less likely to leave. However, with the Mexican repatriation population it was found that in comparison to overall repatriations, there were more Mexicans who repatriated that were over forty. This finding can only be attributed to forced repatriations, as those who are over forty are less likely to volunteer to repatriate. Lee's study sheds light on the fact that Mexicans had a much different immigration experience in the early 20th century than other groups. Likewise, this study pointed to the scapegoat effect and showed that Mexicans in the U.S. were never the problem to begin with. These repatriations did not help the U.S. economy. Instead they were used as a method to fuel nativist attitudes towards Mexicans specifically.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>Lee, *The Employment Effects of Mexican Repatriations*, 3

Because most opposers of repatriations were fringe communist groups, like the Trade Union Unity League of Dallas Texas, protests against repatriations went largely unnoticed. This group used Mexican repatriations as a way to show that U.S. imperialism should be defeated and that the U.S. should pledge its allegiance to the U.S.S.R. This message called on “workers of all races, creeds, and nationalities.”<sup>61</sup> The Trade Union Unity League also published a workers manifesto titled ‘Vida Obrera’ in order to recruit workers who had been fired for being Mexican. Lastly, they demanded that they were “against all deportation of foreign workers and that they must show solidarity with the international proletariat.”<sup>62</sup> The list of demands was concluded by “for the demand of the Union of Soviet Republics against the imperialist war.”<sup>63</sup> Although protesting against these repatriations was a good thing, the intentions of this group was to connect this tragic event to their desire for the country to be communist. This did not reach a mainstream audience and had the potential to actually increase the desire for repatriations because of this connection to communism.

Mexican repatriations during the 1930s would not have taken place without the U.S. tradition of nativism and strong anti-Mexican sentiment. Anti-Mexican sentiment dates back to the 16th century and the propaganda of the ‘Black Legend’ and has been sustained in the history of the U.S. through eugenics, immigration acts, workplace restrictions, and repatriations. Small towns and cities took it upon themselves to coerce Mexican immigrants to return to their home country and illegally deport U.S. citizens who happened to be of Mexican heritage. The federal government also played an instrumental role, often being contacted for advice from relief

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<sup>61</sup> The Organizing Committee for the Trade Union Unity League & Unemployed Councils of Dallas, Texas, 25 February 1932

<sup>62</sup> The Organizing Committee for the Trade Union Unity League & Unemployed Councils of Dallas, Texas, 25 February 1932

<sup>63</sup> Ibid

agencies and local government on how to find those who seemed 'deportable'. These deportations found justification in the fact that there was a decreasing job market and an economic depression. Often times job loss was chosen as the rationale for repatriations, with Mexicans used as the scapegoat for a failing economy. Mainstream newspapers like the *Saturday Evening Post*, and other regional papers like *The Los Angeles Times* and *Chicago Herald* propagated anti Mexican racism by focusing on the Mexican communities 'inclination towards violent crimes' and their false economic burden on welfare rolls.

The repatriations of the 1930s separated families and altered the fabric Mexican communities in the United States for decades to come. To many politicians and relief agencies, it seemed 'self evident' that fixing the economy could be done by simply repatriating Mexican immigrants. The ideology claiming Mexicans as the least desirable of immigrants, spread by Doak and immigration services, was easily accepted. The efficiency of these repatriations was proof of the pre existing racism surrounding Mexicans. Fundraising for transportation back to Mexico was done in a matter of days, with most train companies actually donating train cars in order to rid the community of thousands of Mexicans. It is estimated that the U.S. lost a third of its Mexican population during this period of repatriation, which forever modified the history and experience of Mexicans and Mexican Americans. What is the most startling about these actions is the degree to which the perpetrators knew they were breaking the law. It was evident to most relief agencies and local governments that a large amount of repatriates were actually U.S. citizens, often coming from families that had been living in the U.S. for generations. Those in charge understood the crime they were committing and did it anyways.

The racist motivations behind the repatriation movement can still be seen today in contemporary culture. Anti immigrant sentiment never truly went away. In 1982 the Supreme Court ruled in *Plyler v Doe* that a Texas law denying education to those in the country illegally was unconstitutional. However, this was only applied to actual K-12 schooling. States have the discretion to deny funding alien students eligibility for in state tuition, scholarships, or enrollment in public or state universities or colleges.<sup>64</sup> Once again, in the 1990s, California was home to one of the worst anti immigrant movements that resulted in Governor Pete Wilson drafting Proposition 187, also known as the “Save our State” initiative. Proposition 187 was voted into state law and created its own citizen screening process, prohibited illegal immigrants from using non-emergency health care and public education.<sup>65</sup> This initiative won with over 58% of the votes, was extremely popular, and gave Governor Wilson the votes needed to be re-elected. In 1996 President Bill Clinton signed into law the “Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act.” This Act increased penalties on immigrants, expanded the list of crimes that made an immigrant liable to deportation, denied immigration hearings before a judge if you were found within 100 miles of the Mexican/American border, and limited the cancellation of removal of immigrants who had been in the country for at least 10 years.<sup>66</sup> This Act also worked closely with CAP (Criminal Alien Program). Since CAP isn’t as narrowly focused to deport those with criminal convictions like ICE is, it has resulted in mainly removing people who have no criminal convictions with a strong bias towards Mexican and Central

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<sup>64</sup> Stella M. Flores “In State Tuition and Access to Scholarships for Undocumented College Students”, (Boston, Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>65</sup> Ruben J Garcia, “Critical Race Theory and Proposition 187: The Racial Politics of Immigration Law” (University of Nevada Press, Las Vegas, 1995).

<sup>66</sup> Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, 104th Congress, September 30th, 1996, 110 Stat. 3009

American Nationals.<sup>67</sup> Racism towards Mexicans and other immigrants have tainted both U.S. government and U.S. history. In 2005 the state of California issued an ‘Apology Act’ for the 1930s repatriation movement that took place in Los Angeles. Racism towards Mexicans and other other non-white immigrants have shaped U.S. policy and U.S. institutions for over a hundred years. The only way to make sure more civil rights do not get violated is to re evaluate our anti Mexican rhetoric and make sure that terrible events like the repatriation crisis of the 1930s do not repeat themselves. Only then can this country ensure that more families do not get broken apart and do not become victim to the Mexican racism that plagued the 1930s and continues to do so today.

### Graphs and Figures

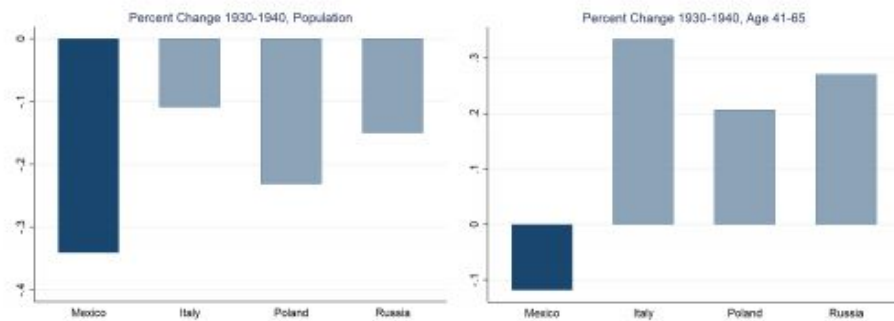
- A. Jongkwan Lee, Giovanni Perri, Vasil Yassenov, “The Employment Effects of Mexican Repatriations: Evidence from the 1930s”, September 22nd, 2017

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<sup>67</sup> Guillermo Cantor, Mark Noferi, Daniel E. Martinez, “Enforcement Overdrive: A Comprehensive Assessment of ICE’s Criminal Alien Program” (Washington D.C., American Immigration Council, November 2015)



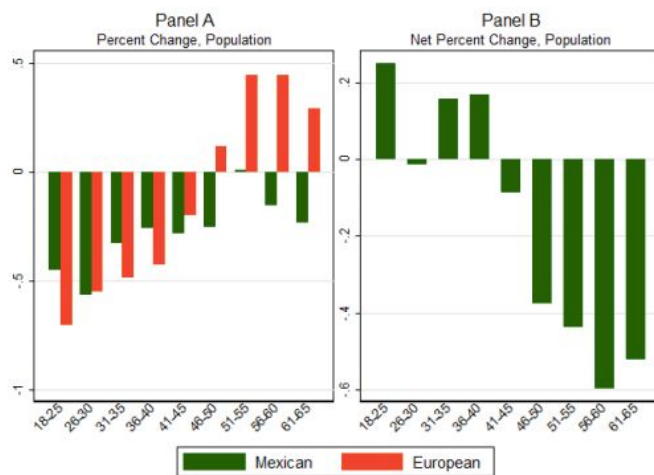
Figure 3: Percent Change 1930-40, Population



Notes: Percent changes in the population by ethnic groups. The left panel shows these for the overall population, and the right panel shows the same for people aged 41-65.

## A Figures

Figure A1: Percent Change 1930-1940, by Age Group and Ethnicity



Notes: Percent changes in the population by ethnic and age groups. The left panel shows these separately for Mexican and Europeans. The right panel shows the difference between the two. Europeans include people who are born in Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe.

## B. Newspaper Article Depicting Mass Exodus of Mexicans, Joseph M. Park, *The Los Angeles Times*, April 24th, 1932

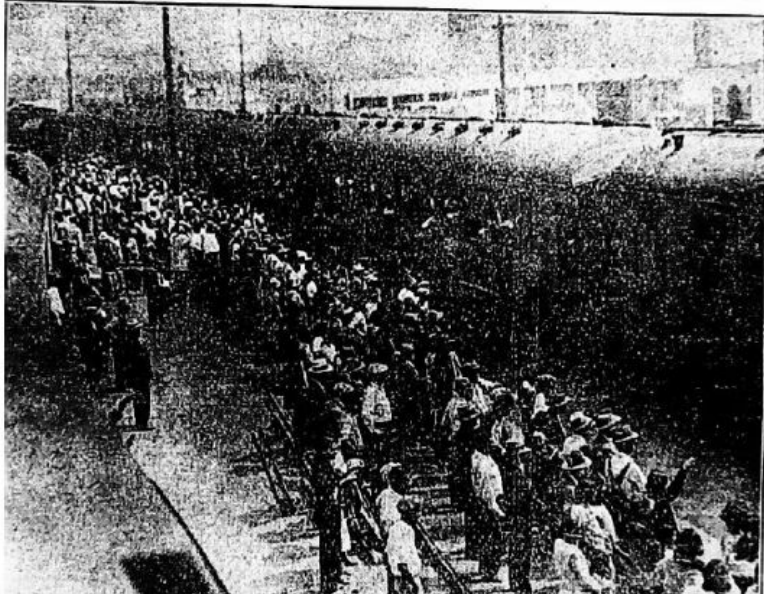


# La Partida de los Repatriados

1,300 mexicanos salieron ayer de Los Angeles, a bordo de dos trenes especiales, rumbo a nuestro país. Los gastos fueron pagados por las autoridades

del Condado de Los Angeles. En esta fotografía se ve la partida de uno de los trenes, y la multitud que fue a despedir a los repatriados.

—Foto Carroll.



## VIAJAN EN 2 TRENES A LA FRONTERA

En la Estación Los Repatriados recibieron víveres y dinero para gastos.

Por El Paso, Texas y Nogales se internarán a nuestro país.

A las 10 de la mañana salieron a bordo de los dos trenes los repatriados, acompañados por la Beneficencia mexicana. Uno de los trenes hasta El Paso, Texas, y se detendrá en Nogales. En esos puntos los compañeros cambiarán de tren para continuar su viaje hasta el punto de destino.

Además se dio a cada uno la suma de cinco dólares en efectivo y el International Proletarian Organization proveyó de comida y otros dos grupos también internaron, entre los repatriados con los que salieron para sus países.

D. Los Angeles Times Political Cartoon, July 22nd, 1934



E. Melita M. Garza, "They Came to Toil: Newspaper Representations of Mexicans and Immigrants in the Great Depression"



*Figure 3.1. Matilde Elizondo (left) standing next to Salome Rodriguez in a caravan of about 1,600 Mexican repatriates passing through San Antonio on their way to Mexico from Karnes City, Texas, October 18, 1931. San Antonio Light Photograph Collection, UTSA Special Collections–ITC, No. L-1310-A. Used with permission, © San Antonio Express-News/ZUMA.*

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