

BEYOND BORDERS: MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS ON THE ROAD TO THE AMERICAN
DREAM DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION

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Immigration and repatriation invigorated and disrupted the lives of Mexicans and Mexican Americans, destabilizing communities on both sides of the border. Mexican immigrants in the United States, as well as Americans who could be mistaken for immigrants, lived in constant fear of expulsion. The objective of immigrant settlement, assimilation, and citizenship has been a long-lasting socially constructed narrative of American history; though, not the reality for Mexican immigrants' desires. During the Great Depression, amidst the economic turmoil and societal upheaval, the American dream glimmered dimly for many. Yet, against this backdrop of hardship, another narrative unfolded: one deeply intertwined with the social constructs of legality and exclusion. The designation of who is deemed legal or illegal is not merely of objective law, but a product of societal constructs shaped by historical biases and political agendas. As such, the legal status of Mexican immigrants during the Great Depression era was not a reflection of objective reality but a deliberate construction designed to uphold existing hierarchies and preserve the privileges of ethnically white individuals. However, immigrants have historically pursued individual and family improvements as a matter of escape rather than the political interests of conquest. Thus, the Great Depression set off an endless and harmful chain reaction that ultimately ripped Mexican immigrants away from securing the promised American dream lifestyle free of marginalization.

The invention of racial concepts, such as national origins and racial ineligibility to citizenship, placed Mexican immigrants on a trajectory of racial formation that altered their prospects for full citizenship in the nation. The Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 placed numerical limits on immigration and established a quota system that classified the world's population according to nationality and race, ranking immigrants in a hierarchy of desirability for

admission into the United States.¹ At its core, the law served contemporary prejudices among white Americans from northern European backgrounds and their desire to maintain social and political dominance. Ultimately, as the law constructed a white American race, it created a sharper definition in the legal boundaries of both white and non-white. The quota system distinguished persons of the colored race from white persons from white countries, beginning the conviction that the American nation was, and should remain, a white nation. However, Mexicans were not excluded from immigration on grounds of racial ineligibility to citizenship because, for purposes of naturalization, and therefore for immigration, the law deemed Mexicans to be white.² The cutoff of Asian and European immigration created a special need for farm labor; hence, Mexican labor became praised due to the economic benefit. However, Americans looked upon Mexicans as an impure race, perpetuated through the portrayal of non-white people as inherently lesser. Moreover, Mexican immigration into the United States peaked and continued at high levels, meeting labor demands not only in Southwestern agriculture and mining, but also in the Midwest and North. The rapidly changing environment produced new class relations thickly overlaid with race.

Population growth in Mexico encouraged the migratory impulse to cross the border into the United States. Intense demand for Mexican workers in the United States emerged at the same time, consistent with economic expansion in the Southwest and with the decline in immigration from Europe. Mexico became the answer to deficiencies of supply in the Southwest, and extreme differences in wages across the border brought supply to demand. Mexican workers, being quite knowledgeable about the different opportunities offered by distinct locations, inevitably took advantage of them. Thus, immigration promised an immediate and striking upward economic

¹ Ngai, Mae. *Impossible Subject: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004, pg. 7

² Ngai, *Impossible Subject*, pg. 50

mobility that was easily accepted by eager Mexican workers. Though individuals casually crossed an unmarked border, more permanent entry was rare as border crossing became more tightly regulated.³ Requirements for entry arose in the form of visas, fees, and literacy tests. These regulations implied the marking of immigrants from Mexico as aliens whose entry was to be restricted, and who, if they did cross the border, were not allowed to remain.⁴

Mass immigration created a Mexican American Southwest, where the large flow from Mexico in the 1920s provoked a sharp, racialized nativism that sought to restrict immigration and preserve the perceived cultural and racial homogeneity of the nation. Simultaneously, the economic crisis of the 1930s, the Great Depression, led to a substantial forced reverse migration that came to be known as the Mexican Repatriation. A unique challenge was witnessed: the explosion of illegal immigration and deportation reignited a debate over Mexican immigration that is yet to be concluded. Xenophobic reactions to Mexicans grew. Rising levels of immigration from Mexico had depended in part upon the Western hemisphere that wanted to ensure a steady supply of cheap, racialized labor from the South of the U.S. border. Open borders for Mexico had only two strong advocates: Southwestern employers who relied on labor from Mexico, and the politicians who represented those employers. The Mexican immigrant-driven story emerges from a large framework surrounding themes of colonization and economic exploitation, with racism driving the narrative. Thus, Mexican immigration was seen as evil, destructive, and a clear sign of failure by the Mexican government.

The nativism that was built compromised a cultural nationalism in which cultural homogeneity, more than race superiority, was the principal concern.⁵ The possibility of Mexican

³ Montoya, Benjamin C. “‘A Grave Offense of Significant Consequences’: Mexican Perspectives on U.S. Immigration Restriction during the Late 1920s.” *Pacific Historical Review* 87, no. 2 (May 2018): 333-55. doi:10.1525/phr.2018.87.2.333, pg. 343

⁴ Ngai, *Impossible Subject*, pg. 32

⁵ Ngai, *Impossible Subject*, pg. 23

assimilation was not entirely discounted but it was complained that the high volume of immigration would discredit the population.⁶ In the context of socioeconomic changes in the Southwest and the nativist climate in national politics, calls for restricting Mexican immigration grew. Immigration quotas for Mexico were pushed by white small farmers and the urban middle class concerned about the emerging “Mexican problem.”⁷ Anti-Mexican rhetoric invariably focused on allegations of ignorance, filth, laziness, and criminality, to the extent of calling Mexicans “very low mentally and generally unhealthy.”⁸ Moreover, calls for excluding Mexicans on the grounds of racial ineligibility to citizenship were being produced as many believed that the Mexican migrant was unassimilable and a threat to the social integrity of the U.S.⁹ However for purposes of naturalization, Mexicans were still deemed to be white, an unintended consequence of conquest. Their legal whiteness was contingent and unstable; thus, Mexican immigrants emerged as a race problem.

Mexican immigrants’ illegal status became essential to a racialized Mexican identity and Mexican exclusion. Immigration policy rearticulated the U.S.-Mexico border as a cultural and racial boundary, a creator of illegal immigration. Federal officials self-consciously understood their task of creating a barrier where, in a practical sense, none had existed before.¹⁰ Racial presumptions about Mexican laborers, not law, dictated the dehumanizing procedures done at the Mexican border. Moreover, immigration policy constructed classifications of entry that supported local and regional labor markets, though they were also perceived as opportunities for

⁶ Montoya, “Mexican Perspectives on Immigration Restriction,” pg. 334

⁷ Ngai, *Impossible Subject*, pg. 52

⁸ Guerin-Gonzales, Camille. *Mexican Workers and American Dreams: Immigration, Repatriation, and California Farm Labor, 1900-1939*. New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1994. <https://login.proxy048.nclive.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com>, pg. 12

⁹ Montoya, “Mexican Perspectives on Immigration Restriction,” pg. 334

¹⁰ Ngai, *Impossible Subject*, pg. 67

illegal immigration.¹¹ The instability of these immigration categories led officials to cast additional doubt on Mexican immigrants. Hence, Mexican marginalization in terms of illegal immigration became ironic. Unlike Europeans, Mexican immigrants were not subjected to numerical quotas. And, unlike Asians, they were not excluded as racially ineligible to citizenship. But as numerical restrictions assumed primacy in immigration policy, its enforcement aspect - inspection procedures, deportations, border patrol, criminal prosecution, and irregular categories of immigration, created many thousands of illegal Mexican immigrants.¹² The undocumented Mexican laborer who crosses the border to work in the flourishing industry of commercial agriculture emerged as the prototypical illegal alien.

The American dream during this period took on a multifaceted and often elusive form for Mexican immigrants in the United States. While the concept of the American dream typically embodies the ideals of upward mobility, economic prosperity, and social advancement through hard work and perseverance, the realities faced by Mexican immigrants during this period were complex and shaped by a multitude of shameful factors. For many Mexican immigrants, the promise of the American dream represented an escape from economic hardship and political instability in their homeland, though they were received with such in the U.S. Perhaps the most powerful implication of the American dream was that immigrants and Americans alike believed they shared an understanding not only of the concept but of its defining principles.¹³ The United States offered the appeal of employment opportunities, higher wages, and the possibility of a better life for themselves and their families. This belief in a shared definition of the American dream hid deep splits along class, gender, ethnic, and racial lines over who had access to

¹¹ Guerin-Gonzales, *Mexican Workers and American Dreams*, pg. 52

¹² Ngai, *Impossible Subject*, pg. 71

¹³ Gratton, Brian, and Emily Klancher Merchant. "An Immigrant's Tale: The Mexican American Southwest 1850 to 1950." *Social Science History* 39, no.4 (December 2015): 521-50.doi: 10.1017/ssh.2015.70, pg. 531

economic security and freedom and over the meaning of the dream itself.¹⁴ The onset of the Great Depression brought unprecedented challenges to the realization of the American dream for Mexican immigrants. The economic downturn resulted in widespread unemployment, poverty, and discrimination, exacerbating the already precarious position of many Mexican workers; further disrupting communities and undermining the pursuit of the American dream.

The Great Depression of the 1930s exacerbated the shift in attitudes towards Mexican immigration. Mexican immigration became unstable, owing to the policies of deportation and administrative exclusion, as well as a lack of employment. Economic insecurities inflamed racial hostility toward Mexican immigrants with widespread deportation and repatriation campaigns targeting Mexican laborers deemed surplus to the nation's economic needs. Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants alike reaped the consequences of racialized foreignness that had been constructed earlier on, facing discrimination and marginalization. For Mexican immigrants, impediments to higher wages consisted of low human capital, circular migration, concentration in the Southwest, racism, and union hostility.¹⁵ Relative socioeconomic status remained low, and there was no guarantee of upward mobility across time in the U.S. Nearly 20 percent of the Mexican population in the U.S. returned to Mexico during the early years of the Depression.¹⁶ Underlying the economic reasons for the Mexican departure, was the perception of Mexican immigrants as temporary foreign workers and their assignment to an inferior racial status. The repatriation of Mexicans was a racial expulsion program that saw the dreams of Mexican immigrants of making a life for themselves and their children either destroyed or seriously threatened.

¹⁴ Guerin-Gonzales, *Mexican Workers and American Dreams*, pg. 3

¹⁵ Ngai, *Impossible Subject*, pg. 93

¹⁶ Ngai, *Impossible Subject*, pg. 75

Mexican immigration came to be seen as depriving the nation of valuable labor power and stunting the nation's economic growth. The stock market crash fueled economic nativism. Additionally, it scapegoated Mexican immigrant laborers and their families.¹⁷ Although the Immigration Service neither organized nor funded these repatriations, it encouraged repatriation by generating an atmosphere of fear of deportation. Raid tactics were deployed in towns and cities as a witness describes an immigration raid in San Francisco: "Deputies rode around the neighborhood with their sirens wailing and advising people to surrender themselves to the authorities, barricading all the exits so that no one could escape."¹⁸ Thus, many Mexicans voluntarily left the country, induced by the atmosphere of growing racial animosity. While others chose to stay and weather the economic storm, often enduring hardship and isolation. The deportations and repatriations disrupted families and communities, exacerbating the social and economic challenges faced by Mexican immigrants. Despite the evident distress experienced by the repatriates and the questions about the legality of deporting Mexican Americans with U.S. citizenship, few objected to the project.

As the Depression deepened, these municipal campaigns often became more dangerously coercive. Mexican American mutual aid societies provided funds and the Mexican government underwrote transportation to and within Mexico, exempting migrants from duties when crossing the border and making the promise, largely unfulfilled, of land in repatriate colonies.¹⁹ The press opposed deportation but saw repatriation as largely voluntary, though far from the truth, and to Mexico's benefit, rarely criticizing American authorities. The hundreds of thousands of repatriated reentering Mexico during the Great Depression greatly strained governmental resources. Many were able to find relatives to help them find employment and housing, but

¹⁷ Montoya, "Mexican Perspectives on Immigration Restriction," pg. 340

¹⁸ Ngai, *Impossible Subject*, pg. 73

¹⁹ Ngai, *Impossible Subject*, pg. 90

others found that they had no friends or families to turn to.²⁰ Repatriates had expected to find refuge in Mexico from prejudice and discrimination; instead, they had found that they could never become Americans, and now, in what was supposed to be their home country, they were not Mexicans.

Marginalized by their position in the lower strata of the workforce, and even more so by their exclusion from the polity, illegal aliens might be understood as a caste, unambiguously situated outside the boundaries of formal membership and social legitimacy. With a population of over 1.4 million, Mexican immigrants were too numerous to be completely removed. Moreover, their labor was still needed for farming, mining, and railway maintenance work throughout the Southwest. Work was sometimes the preferred alternative to both repatriation and relief. From August to October 1935, the California Relief Administration and the federal Works Progress Administration denied relief to seventy-five thousand Mexican workers to force them to work the harvest in Southern California.²¹ Similarly, state authorities forced men on relief in Sonoma County to pick crops for 75 cents a day and to live in miserable impoverished shelters.²² Repatriation, thus, saved local welfare bureaus millions of dollars, temporarily alleviated the labor market of surplus, and provided a solution for Americans who blamed Mexicans for their economic woes all at the expense of Mexican immigrants.²³

The construction of Mexicans as migratory agricultural laborers, both legal and illegal, mixed with the perceived criminality of Mexicans' illegal entry, gave a powerful sway to the notion that Mexicans had no rightful presence on U.S. territory and no rightful claim of belonging. Despite the adversities, Mexican immigration persisted, albeit at a reduced pace,

²⁰ Gratton and Merchant, "An Immigrant's Tale," pg. 537

²¹ Gratton and Merchant, "An Immigrant's Tale," pg. 542

²² Gratton and Merchant, "An Immigrant's Tale," pg. 542

²³ Thornton, Christy. "Diplomacy of Immigration Restriction in U.S.-Mexican Relations." *Diplomatic History* 46, no.4 (September 2022): 826-29. doi:10.1093/dh/dhac026, pg. 826

during the Great Depression. The need for labor in certain industries, coupled with ongoing migration patterns, ensured that Mexican workers continued to play a significant role in the American workforce. As individuals fought for their rights and dignity in the face of exploitation, the legacy of Mexican immigration during this period laid the groundwork for the emergence of organized labor movements and civil rights activism within the Mexican-American community. Many sought alternative employment opportunities, adapted to changing economic conditions, and forced solidarity within their communities to navigate the challenges of the Great Depression. The cultural values of perseverance, family, and community support provided a foundation for resilience and hope in the face of adversity,

Mexican immigrants brought with them ideas, experiences, and cultural practices that other groups incorporated into their social and economic lives. Immigrants altered residential and employment patterns where their presence sometimes made it possible for communities to survive and even thrive.²⁴ However, the economic and social expectations of a Mexican field worker in the U.S. were very different from those of a white American farm owner, and these differing expectations informed the way individuals within these two social categories understood freedom and how it should be protected and preserved. Repatriation exposed the racial limitation of the American dream for Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans who found that they were considered foreign in the U.S., no matter how many generations they had lived in the country. It brings about a crisis of identity and legitimacy for Mexican Americans, destabilizing ideas about the American dream.²⁵ The conflict over who is entitled to economic opportunity in the United States revealed two very different concepts of the American dream. State power struggled to perpetuate an essentialized, normative image of who was American

²⁴ Guerin-Gonzales, *Mexican Workers and American Dreams*, pg. 1

²⁵ Guerin-Gonzales, *Mexican Workers and American Dreams*, pg. 97

based on racial ideologies of white individualism, while Mexican farmers fought to reinscribe a promise of America that was dynamic and inclusive.²⁶ Thus, the American dream was not one dream but two dreams, each transformed through contestation for cultural, ethnic, and racial leadership among different immigrant and native-born groups. Mexican immigration during the Great Depression can be characterized by a violent conflict over the cultural, social, and political meanings of the American dream.

The American dream took on different shades of meaning for different people. For European immigrants, it represented the promise of opportunity and upward mobility. Yet, for Mexicans, the American dream remained elusive, overshadowed by systemic barriers and discriminatory practices that denied them the full realization of their aspirations. This dichotomy underscores a fundamental truth: the lines between legality and illegality are not fixed but fluid, molded by societal norms, prejudices, and power dynamics. In exploring the complexities of Mexican immigration and the American dream during the Great Depression, it becomes evident that the quest for a better life is intricately bound up with questions of power, privilege, and belonging. Mexican immigration during this period within the context of race is crucial, though, despite the racist rhetoric, the atmosphere that surrounded them was also one of weighing economic benefits and costs. Mexican immigrants may not have easily attained the American dream with a reach of the hand, they have continuously worked towards gaining equality and opportunities in the United States. By interrogating the social constructions that underpin notions of legality and illegality, we can begin to unravel the tangled threads of history and work towards a more inclusive vision of the American dream, one that embraces the diversity of experiences and honors the humanity of all who seek for a better life.

²⁶ Gratton and Merchant, "An Immigrant's Tale," pg. 533

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