

Constructing Rhetorical Borders: Peons, Illegal Aliens, and Competing Narratives of Immigration

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□ – *Recent work in immigration suggests interconnections among race, nation, and immigration. This essay examines these relations, noting the rhetorical dynamics through which symbolic borders emerge and shift, in part through national debates over immigrants. Turning critical attention to mediated representations of Mexican immigrants in the 1920s and 1930s, I argue that Mexican immigrant bodies provided rhetorical space for a national discussion of race and nation. I highlight, in particular, a deportation drive and repatriation campaign that resulted in the mass exodus of hundreds of thousands of Mexicans and Mexican Americans.*

How a nation treats the immigrant speaks volumes about the nation.

(Chang & Aoki, 1998, p. 310)

Questions of national identity emerge and disappear, seemingly in concert with times of crisis and stability. Across U.S. history, national identity has been wrought with ambivalence, as political leaders, citizens,

and visitors participate in conversations about who we are and who we should be. Such debate is heightened at times, sparked perhaps by economic shifts or political turmoil. Talk of war, for instance, may promote heightened patriotism, while moments of affluence and productivity can stimulate generosity. Whether the exchanges center on fears, such as those generated by threats of terrorism, or on growth, evidenced by open door policies, they often turn on and impact issues of immigration.

A cursory glance at U.S. history suggests that as a “people,” we have long struggled with the role of immigration in the nation’s identity and security. Tensions are evident, such as in the series of restrictive acts that occurred at the turn of the 20th century as well as in contemporary cautions about immigration and national security. Witness common topics and concerns raised today:

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- A *Los Angeles Times* article, profiling mayoral candidates, cites one campaign promise: the deportation of “illegal alien criminals,” regardless of the nature of the crime (Fox & McGreevy, 2002, p. 3).
- A concerned citizen protests undocumented immigration, arguing “anyone who is in this country illegally should be deported” (Sink, 2003, p. 17).
- Another letter writer argues for a national “compelling interest” in deportation of “unlawful entrants” (Saxon, 2003, p. 16A).

These typical fragments of a larger conversation point to a uniformity in the public vocabulary surrounding immigration and criminality. Whether invoked directly or indirectly, the figure of the “illegal alien” is hauntingly consistent, as is the quick turn to deportation.

Those who follow mediated rhetorics of immigration and nation probably find nothing surprising or new in these reports. Instead, they confirm a pattern identified by others in which immigrant and criminality are so closely connected rhetorically that the slippage from immigrant to criminal seems almost natural (Ono & Sloop, 2002; Santa Ana, 1999). Their work details the ways in which constructions of national borders, especially symbolic ones, have emerged on and through the bodies of racially marked immigrants (Palumbo-Liu, 1999). Such issues merit attention from communication scholars, especially those interested in media, for social debate over borders, boundaries and citizens often occurs in mediated domains (Ono & Sloop, 2002). Contemporary images of immigrants, such as that of the illegal alien, do not emerge in a vacuum. Instead, they are

part of our nation’s history of immigration, race, and nation; they bring with them varied meanings reflecting their origins and uses. Our understanding of them in the present requires our knowledge of their representational histories.

In this essay, I turn critical attention to the past and explore the complexities of Mexican immigration. In particular, I investigate mediated discussions of Mexican immigrants as they intersect with a deportation drive and repatriation campaign that resulted in a mass exodus of Mexican/Americans.¹ This deportation drive, concentrated in Los Angeles in 1931, sparked a nationwide repatriation campaign that extended throughout the decade and occurred across the southwest as well as in Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Minnesota. Deportation of immigrants had certainly occurred before this time (King, 2000); however, the concentrated efforts in both the drive and the campaign signaled a new moment in U.S. immigration history. As Guerin-Gonzales (1996) notes, “The 1930s marked the first time in the history of international migration between the U.S. and other countries that the federal government sponsored and supported the mass expulsion of immigrants” (p. 77). In an unprecedented act, concerted efforts were made to target and export a particular population—Mexican immigrants. Indeed, although Mexicans comprised only one percent of the immigrant population during the 1930s, they constituted half of those formally deported and 80 percent of voluntary departures (Ngai, 1999). The concentrated attention directed toward this particular group of immigrants suggests that prevailing arguments at the time, which emphasized racially-indiscriminate deportation motivated by

economic strife and job scarcity, served to conceal underlying racial motivations.²

Significant interdisciplinary research on immigration and anti-immigrant sentiment in the U.S. has been conducted, but relatively little attention has been given to the 1930s deportations and repatriations of Mexican/Americans (Balderrama & Rodríguez, 1995; Guerin-Gonzales, 1996; Hoffman, 1974). The research which does exist often highlights the economic factors that impelled deportation (Copp, 1963). While such arguments are not incorrect, neither do they fully explain the rhetorical dimensions. This absence is particularly meaningful given consistency in arguments that the drive was never designed to result in numerous deportations but was instead crafted to create a media-produced fear that would be the impetus for "voluntary" repatriation (Balderrama & Rodríguez, 1995). Hoffman (1973) identifies the motivation and strategies: "This apparent activity [publicity over deportations] will have tendency to scare many thousand alien deportables out of this district which is the desired result" (Visel as cited in Hoffman, 1973, p. 208). Herein lies the rhetorical dynamic; actual police or state force had at best a limited role in the deportation drive, resulting in a mere 110 formal deportations (Hoffman, 1973). Instead, it was mediated attention to deportation that served to mobilize mass numbers of Mexican/Americans, both during the months of intensive effort and ultimately throughout the decade, across the state of California and even the nation.³ Press accounts were common across many Los Angeles newspapers, including local Spanish-language newspapers, that encouraged repatriation, providing information on transporta-

tion and on the possibilities of assistance from the Mexican government. For instance, during the months of the deportation drive, the Los Angeles-based newspaper *La Opinion* included regular coverage of repatriation and often published stories encouraging Mexicans to repatriate so as to help their native country ("700 repatriados," 1931; "Saladra," 1931). This dynamic points to the intersection of state and rhetorical forces that, as Gramsci (1971/1980) argues, must work together to create the ideological climate in which governments can achieve their desired ends. Seen in this light, the deportation drive was an unqualified success, for those behind it in Los Angeles achieved their goal of "encouraging" Mexican/Americans to leave the country. Considerable debate continues over the number of repatriates; some maintain that totals approximated 500,000 (Guerin-Gonzales, 1996; Hoffman, 1974).⁴

I revisit this moment in U.S. immigration history and argue that the deportation drive and the repatriation campaign of the 1930s served to create rhetorically a border between Mexico and the U.S., between "Americans" and Mexican/Americans. In so doing, I extend the work of Ono and Sloop (2002), providing further exploration of the rhetorical processes through which nations and borders are constructed. My argument emerges out of analysis of approximately 200 texts from the national and regional press. I begin by outlining the centrality of media in rhetorical constructions of immigration and nation, arguing for a narrative analysis of mediated debates. I then turn to those debates, delineating prevailing narratives and their respective constructions of Mexican immigrants. I conclude with reflections on the mediated and rhetorical dy-

namics of immigration, nation, and race.

Media, Rhetoric, and Narrative in Immigration Discourse

The study of the rhetoric of immigration directs attention to the interstices between the discourse and the practice of immigration, belying easy separation of the two. For instance, Ono and Sloop (2002) argue that “contemporary mainstream media ... provide a specific locale, a space, where social issues collide, where political issues are struggled over and subject positions ... are constituted” (p. 2). Hasian and Delgado (1998) concur, noting the materiality of mediated struggles over meanings of immigrants. This work demonstrates that publics come to understand immigration and to conceive of immigrants via participation in mediated discussions. Ono and Sloop (2002) make this powerful point: “[immigration] rhetoric *shifts* borders, changing what they mean publicly, influencing public policy, altering the ways borders affect people, and circumscribing political responses” (p. 5, emphasis in original).

The symbolic and political terrains of immigration are never neatly distinct, which makes attention to the mediated complexities of immigrants crucial (Lowe, 1996; Osajima, 1988). In public discourse, critics can uncover rhetorical dynamics that, as Shah (1999) explains, “help establish and maintain geopolitical and cultural boundaries of the nation and the racial criteria by which people are included in and excluded from it” (p. 252). And while all discourse potentially participates, regional and mainstream media have consistently been influential in

the public shaping of immigrants and immigration (Hofstetter & Loveman, 1982; Miller, 1994). Critical media studies of public discourse surrounding contested immigration practices reveal the centrality of rhetorical tropes (Mehan, 1997). For instance, Santa Ana (1999) uncovers the frequency of animal metaphors in immigration discourse and argues that such depictions enable publics to participate in anti-immigrant practices.

Mediated representations, then, can be powerful rhetorical forces. Regardless of whether a particular account offers a positive, negative, or neutral interpretation of immigration, it often rests, at least in a latent sense, on underlying racial assumptions (Ono & Sloop, 2002). It may be that “positive” representations reinscribe racial essentialisms that support a citizen/foreigner dynamic (Shah, 1999). These deeply embedded logics of race provide what Ferguson (1998) identifies as discursive reserves, or tropes, images, and figurations that are easily tapped. That such discursive reserves of race emerge is not surprising. Across U.S. history, notions of race and immigration have long been interconnected as immigrant access to citizenship, at least from 1790 to 1952, required that immigrants be legally recognized as white (López, 1996).⁵ Immigration laws were designed such that immigrant populations were characterized based on their racial fitness for membership in the national body (King, 2000).

While explicit causal relations between the mediated demonization of immigrants and restrictive immigration policies are difficult to sustain, casual dismissal of such connections appears short-sighted (Mondello, 1967). Streitmatter (1999) maintains, for instance, that Nativist publications

of the late 19th century fueled the stream of restrictive legislation that appeared in the early years of the 20th century. Similarly, Shah (1999) identifies correlations between mediated representations of the "Hindu conspiracy" and restrictions on Asian Indian petitions for U.S. citizenship.

Given such arguments, it is not surprising that critical media studies of immigration draw attention to embedded discourses of race and nation. Most significantly, Ono and Sloop (2002) detail mediated accounts of immigrants and immigration in public discourse surrounding California's Proposition 187. In so doing, they maintain that such representations have profound implications for public conceptions of race and nation. Arguing similarly, Palumbo-Liu (1999) traces (re)articulations of Mexicans and Asians, noting how the differential racializations of early 20th century discourses continue to emerge in later historical periods and to shape public responses to Mexican and Asian immigrants.

To a degree, scholars researching the mediated representations of immigrants offer insight into larger questions of ideological force, directing attention to Gramscian notions of consent. Clearly immigration laws and mediated discussions are distinct; yet Gramsci (1971/1980) identifies their interdependence, arguing that rhetorical arguments, circulating in society, serve as a type of back-up to the more explicit force of police and state institutions. Moreover, he maintains that police and state force could not achieve governmental ideals without rhetorical support. Distinguishing between civil society, comprised of intellectual leaders, and the state, Gramsci (1971/1980) argues that "the supremacy of a social group manifests

itself ... as 'domination' *and* as 'intellectual and moral leadership'" (p. 57, emphasis added). Lacking the support of intellectual leaders, overt force remains limited in its potential. Mumby (1997) clarifies this position: "Hegemony resides primarily in the realm of civil society ... [It] involves the production of a worldview, inclusive of a philosophical and moral outlook, that is actively supported and articulated by subordinate and allied groups" (p. 348). This account of hegemony draws attention to the rhetorical dynamics, suggesting that the combined strategy under investigation in this essay, of a state-supported deportation drive and a publicly mediated campaign, worked together. Various citizen groups, social organizations, and political leaders joined as members of that civil society in the construction of a worldview that lent moral support to the efforts of police and immigration officers. In this analysis, I focus on the role of narrative in that process.

Rhetorical studies of narrative abound, generating considerable debate (Fisher, 1985; Lucaites & Condit, 1985; Rowland, 1989; Warnick, 1987), but common among narrative studies is an interest in story-telling as a key rhetorical form (Bennett & Edelman, 1985; Fisher, 1984; McGee & Nelson, 1985; White, 1987).

Particularly compelling in studies of narrative are accounts of its seductiveness. The narrative, whether it emerges as a discrete whole or is comprised of cultural fragments, invites participation in its vision of the social world (Jasinski, 1993). Often relying upon archetypal notions, narratives provide explanations for past events as they create visions, desirable or not, of possible futures (Lucaites & Condit, 1985). Enticed by their desire to live in

a given rendition of the world, audiences seek to make real the social vision contained in narrative (Kirkwood, 1992). Lucaites and Condit (1990) maintain that culturally established narratives and their respective characterizations form a “public vocabulary” or social group ideology. This public vocabulary manages the taken-for-granted underlying personal and communal life. Public vocabularies, which include social narratives and myths, tap into what Fisher (1989) calls “narrative fidelity” as they circulate foundational ideas about a culture, its values, structures, and telos. Often captured in narratives, public vocabularies gain social credibility; they offer explanations for what a society is and how it functions (Condit, 1987). Seen in this light, cultural narratives serve to outline ideological positions and to garner assent for those public stances.

The public sphere generally maintains multiple and often competing cultural narratives. Central to their ideological functions are those characterizations at play within them. Lucaites and Condit (1990) explain that, “Characterizations are the labels attached to agents, acts, scenes, agencies, or purposes in the public vocabulary” (p. 7). A narrative obtains social force in part through the appeal and recognizability of its characterizations (Condit, 1987; Lewis, 1987). These characterizations, Hasian (1997) argues, become influential markers, instantiations of cultural ideals and woes. Carlson (1991) maintains that character-types “may alter an audience’s perception of a series of events” (p. 39). Further, as Parry-Giles (1996) notes, a public’s willingness to embrace a leader and his or her agenda is a function of the characterization of that leader. Goldzwig and Sullivan (2000) argue similarly, for as they note amidst

competing cultural narratives, those character-types who speak from positions of privilege can normalize their positions more easily than those marked as other.

Such studies convincingly point to the centrality of characterization in competing social narratives. If, as I argue here, the deportation drive aimed at Mexican immigrants was not simply a momentary solution to an economic crisis, but was instead enmeshed in competing public narratives about the place of Mexican immigrants in the U.S., then particular attention to mediated characterizations of Mexican and American will be crucial. As I argue below, when various populations can be caricatured as harmless foreigners who return home, they receive different treatment from the others who desire more permanent visits.

Contested Borders: Immigrant Tales of (Un)Desirability and Access

Mediated narratives of immigrants and their place in the nation have a long and storied history, much of which entails negotiations of desirability. To assess the dynamics of rhetorical shifts in national borders, I chronicle two dominant narratives—the narrative of need and the narrative of the Mexican problem—surrounding Mexican immigrants in the 1920s and 1930s. As these narratives emerge, they intersect with existing prefigurations of immigration, for the nation had been debating the politics of the border for some time. Indeed, the controversy surrounding immigration had been particularly prominent and heated during the preceding 50 years. While the target populations

in question during that period differed, those narratives and their respective characterizations re-emerge in later talk of Mexican immigration. Given this rhetorical overlap, I trace briefly the prior tales of immigration and nation.

Immigrant Dangers and National Woes

In the mid to late 1800s, citizens of the U.S., particularly along the west coast, witnessed what they perceived as a dramatic rise in the Chinese population. A response to a desire for a cheap labor pool, Chinese workers entered the country in large numbers (Meyler, 2001). However, as the public was invited to accept the possibility that the Chinese workers were threatening the nation's resources, initial welcomes quickly turned to what Hing (1993) identifies as a "ubiquitous air of hostility" (p. 20). Chinese workers, often identified as "coolies," were configured in much public discourse, especially along the west coast, as economic competitors (Cole, 1978; Gardner, 1999, Gyory, 1998).

Anti-Chinese sentiment resulted in the nation's first act banning an immigrant population on the basis of race and national origin, the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, that initially barred immigration of laborers and then of all Chinese (Cole & Chin, 1999; Salyer, 1995). Such restrictions were not limited to Chinese, but ultimately included others (Chuman, 1981; Hing, 1993).

Fears of floods of immigrant hordes extended to southern and eastern European immigrants, who quickly became, in the public imagination, both unassimilable and undesirable (Higham, 1955/1994). While many variants of this fear emerged, the com-

mon story goes something like this: large populations of people with little knowledge of or interest in America arrived. These groups, unlike earlier western European immigrants, were likely to be the dregs of society. Illiterate, diseased, or morally suspect, these southern and eastern Europeans threatened to pollute and dilute the homogenous stock of America. These arguments were recycled in public circles. For example, Stockwell (1927) wrote: "This prospective tide [of immigrants] included several millions of people from the slums and ghettos of the Old World; it included vast numbers of the diseased and the decrepit, of hopeless cripples, and of the mentally deficient. This deluge of stricken people ... would have caused national disaster" (p. 745).

Complicating this rather grim picture was the belief that immigrants, with a penchant for radicalism and communism, were the primary causes for social degeneracy (Reimers, 1998). Allegedly prone to rioting, crime, and other suspect behavior in this tale, immigrants became public scapegoats for many societal ills, perceived or otherwise. For instance, the *American Standard*, a San Francisco weekly, would publish in 1888: "To hundreds and thousands of ignorant foreigners that have come to our shores, liberty means liberty to commit crime, freedom means freedom to be beastly and degraded. They contaminate everything they touch" (as cited in Streitmatter, 1999). The force of these narratives emerges most explicitly in changes in immigration law. Including the establishment of literacy tests, head taxes, and quotas, restrictive laws helped ease concerns about the immigration crisis and restored a narrative in which America controlled its bor-

ders and its identity (Higham, 1955/1994).

Interestingly, these traditional restrictionist narratives rarely discussed the problems of Mexican immigration. In large part, such absence is probably linked to the relative invisibility of Mexicans across most of the country. Prior to the 1920s, little effort was made to regulate Mexican immigration. Many of the workers in the southwest were considered to be temporary, rural workers who were planning to go home. However, by the 1920s, restrictionist narratives began to make room for an emerging figure, the Mexican, who crossed both material and symbolic borders.

The Mexican Peon and Controlled Immigration

U.S. efforts to seal its borders and population attracted significant public attention throughout the early years of the 19th century. However, the nation had not yet fully debated Mexican immigration. Journalists and public figures highlighted increases in the Mexican population, arguing that Mexicans were appearing in places once filled by other immigrants. Taylor (1931) described the situation: “With the stoppage of European immigration and the increased labor demands of the war the trickle of Mexican immigrants enlarged to a stream which ran its course for a decade” (p. 135). McLean (1929) commented similarly: “The expansion of our industries after the War, the growth of irrigation projects in the southwest, and the quota law of 1924, which barred all cheap labor except Mexican, have all combined to draw a stream of Mexicans from their country into ours” (p. 334).

Within these competing tensions, various narratives regarding Mexican immigrants emerged. Here, I discuss two prominent narratives, that of need and that of the Mexican problem. It is important to note that while both narratives take the string of restrictions as a starting point, particularly in arguments for Mexican immigrants, these arguments were not new. Instead, as Calavita (1992) explains, U.S. immigration policy and labor structure have often been in competition. One strategy for mediating these tensions was to highlight the advantages of a new immigrant population against the perceived ills of existing ones.⁶

Agricultural and industrial businesses working with journalists and political leaders crafted a narrative of need in which Mexicans became positioned as an ideal immigrant workforce. Indeed the interest in Mexican labor was so great that in some instances media characterized employers as fighting over Mexican labor: “Another Mexican war is on, and in the American Southwest again. But this time it is a fight for the Mexican, not against him; the prize of battle is the strength of his good right arm” (Thomson, 1926, p. 275). Seemingly cognizant of the need to present a rhetorical image of Mexicans that would not trigger restrictionist concerns, journalists and politicians emphasized a particular characterization—the peon laborer.

Central in a narrative of need, Mexicans were rhetorically characterized such that they were seen as meeting the goals of the nation without bringing with them the horrors associated with common characterizations of southern/eastern Europeans and Asians. They were constructed as ideal in a number of ways. First, Mexicans were configured as peons, which came

to constitute an uneducated laborer willing to work hard for little money. McLean (1930) described the situation: "growers ... have been content to use the peon He has been profitable because he has been ignorant" (p. 54). Second, they were depicted as an instant and short-term solution; they were a population to be tapped in times of emergency. Third, they were configured as a docile people, unlikely to strike or to bring with them radical and un-American ideas. In sum, the narrative of need claimed that Mexicans were ideal because they constituted a controllable workforce suited to the particular demands of agricultural labor.

That Mexicans constituted peon labor served at least two goals in this narrative. First, peon labor was defined as poor, uneducated, and without ambition. Peon came to signify an interest in day-to-day life over a desire to get ahead. One writer noted that "Not only do these people [Mexicans] lack shoes, it seems, but everything else. They have nothing and expect nothing" ("Mexico's people," 1920, p. 68). This perceived lack of ambition in Mexicans made them, in this narrative, particularly well-suited to temporary labor, such as that needed in agriculture. Simpich (1920) wrote, "Mexicans are restless. The peons like to ride. Whenever they have saved money from a few days' work, they swarm up and down these lines to border towns ... running to and fro apparently as aimlessly as the inhabitants of a disturbed ant-hill" (p. 68). Further, unlike other undesirable populations, Mexicans were unlikely to save enough money either to move into semi-skilled positions or to be able to buy land or other permanent residences in the U.S. (Taylor, 1931). Commenting on their perceived shift-

lessness, Jenks and Lauck (1911/1922) maintained that Mexican immigrants were not as problematic as Asiatic laborers: "The Mexicans seem to be without much ambition or thrift, are content with the wage conditions, and their progress [in accumulating savings] in consequence has been slow, much more so than that of the Japanese or Chinese" (p. 227). They were a present-oriented people, we learn, whose main goals were "a five-gallon hat, a package of cigarettes, and a bowl of chile con carne" (as cited in Thomson, 1926, p. 277). Second, as peon labor, Mexicans were described as willing and able to do difficult manual jobs, such as picking cotton and grubbing land. In the common narrative, they charged less than Blacks or whites, and worked more quickly and efficiently. Teague (1928, p. 170) argued:

Mexican casual labor fills the requirements of the California farm as no other labor has done in the past. The Mexican withstands the high temperatures of the Imperial and San Joaquin valleys. He is adapted to field conditions He does heavy field work—particularly in the so-called "stoop crops" and "knee crops" of vegetable and cantaloupe production—which white labor refuses to do and is constitutionally unsuited to perform.

Similarly, Holmes (1929) summarized the attractive character of Mexicans: "Ignorant, tractable, moderately industrious, and content to endure wretched conditions of life which most white laborers would not tolerate, the Mexican peon has proved a great boon to employers in the Southwest" (p. 617).

Further enhancing the appeal of Mexicans was their purported docility. In general, Mexicans were presented in the public narrative as agreeable,

easily controlled workers. Allegedly because of their Catholicism, Mexicans were seen as willing and eager to submit to authority (Thomson, 1926). Simpich (1926), writing in the *The Independent*, alleged that “it is his docility and good nature that make the Mexican laborer popular with his American boss” (p. 239). Similarly, Handman (1931) described the Mexican character as “docile and timid and painfully eager to conform. In the main he is well behaved” (p. 166). This aspect of Mexican characterization was used to distinguish Mexican immigrants from other immigrants, who became those likely to bring radical un-American ideas with them. Batten (1930) clarified: “Mexican labor in agriculture is preferable to any other now available, and certainly introduces fewer elements of social and moral danger than the Filipino or Porto [sic] Rican” (p. 961). Fears of strikes, riots, and attempts to undermine American democracy could be laid to rest if Mexicans were allowed in, for the very peon character of Mexican immigrants made them interested only in earning enough money to provide for weekend entertainment. Politics and public issues were positioned as outside their frame of reference.

Finally, the narrative of the Mexican as the ideal worker relied heavily on characterizations of Mexicans as tied to Mexico and lacking interest in a life in the U.S. Mexican laborers, the narrative assured, would return to Mexico. Slayden (1921) commented that “usually ... [Mexicans] ... go back to Mexico to display or dissipate their earnings, for the average Mexican is as prodigal as the Negro who is, perhaps, the greatest spendthrift in the world” (p. 122). Mexicans, as Walker (1929) noted, had a love for their own “patria”: “The alien Mexican for the

most part is not interested in becoming naturalized. His idea is some time to return to his own and beloved Mexico—his first and only love” (p. 466). This perceived temporary nature of Mexican immigrants stilled the fears of an immigrant takeover and further distinguished Mexican immigrants from other immigrants. And as Sánchez (1993) maintains, there were grounds for the temporary argument in that a border culture existed which had an established pattern of movement back and forth between the U.S. and Mexico. Given arguments in this narrative that Mexican peons tended to spend wages as quickly as they were earned, the return of Mexicans to Mexico did not necessarily mean the loss of their income, for that money, the narrative assured, was already spent, often in frivolous weekend entertainment.

The narrative of national need painted a compelling picture. U.S. economic success and growth required a labor force, but not one that threatened national security or identity. Fears of growing numbers of unassimilable aliens could be eased with the importation of a Mexican labor force. Positioned as an ideal temporary labor force, Mexicans were rhetorically characterized as docile, obedient, and loyal to their Mexican nationality. Unlikely either to foster political unrest or expect to remain indefinitely, Mexicans became a controllable population that could be used as a labor force. At the same time, this argument was not uncontroverted. For instance, Rowell (1931) maintained that Chinese labor was preferable to Mexican labor. He argued: “The Chinese coolie is the ideal human mule. He will turn less food into more work, with less trouble, than any other domestic animal The Mexican peon is racially as alien

as the Chinese coolie, and is not so good a workman" (p. 180).

This rhetorical construction, which relied heavily on arguments of characterization, gathered force and appeal not only because it made Mexican labor accessible but because it was able to do so without threatening rhetorical borders and national identity. The attributes of the peon, as they appeared in this tale, confirmed control of the population of the U.S. and of the national body. Threats of Mexicans invading the nation, particularly in ways that would potentially shift its fundamental (racial) identity, were contained by rhetorical constructions that limited any active agentic dynamic. The trope of the laborer, as constructed here, "creates *body-men*, men whose body is a machine-body, that is fragmented and dominated, and used to perform one isolable function" (Palumbo-Liu, 1999, p. 37). The Mexican peon was a fundamentally passive creature manipulated at will. And yet, for all his appeal, he (Mexican immigrants were generally conceived of as male) was not universally desirable. Countering this narrative was that of the Mexican problem.

Border Breakdown: The Mexican Problem

While rhetorical configurations of Mexicans as docile peons interested in temporary jobs were persuasive to some audiences, others participated in a different narrative. Contesting the image of the controllable Mexican, a narrative of the Mexican problem elicited social fears and alleged vulnerability of the nation's borders. Depicting increased numbers of Mexicans and the dangers ostensibly wrought by them, the narrative of the

Mexican problem directed public attention to borders and the potential influence of Mexicans on the national body. This rhetorical attention was probably related to shifts in the economy. As the U.S. entered into a depression and jobs became scarce, the Mexican body became an easy target, and those able to marshal economic arguments of scarcity could counter others claiming labor shortages. Discourses of need were more prominent before the Great Depression, but those parties who favored retention of Mexican labor did not uniformly change their minds thereafter. Thus, discourses of need continued at a lower strength even as they were overwritten by discourses of the Mexican problem.

In almost direct contrast to the narrative of need, the Mexican problem defined Mexican immigration as significant and out of control. This argument occurred in part through depictions of allegedly increased numbers of Mexicans. Commentaries in the popular press discussed the presence of Mexicans across the country. Economist and labor expert Paul Taylor (1931, p. 135) wrote:

The Mexicans are here—from California to Pennsylvania, from Texas to Minnesota. They are scattered on isolated sections along our western railroads in clusters of from two to five families; they are established in colonies in the agricultural West and Southwest which form, in places, from one to two thirds of the local population. They have penetrated the heart of industrial America; in the Calumet steel region on the southern shore of Lake Michigan they are numbered in thousands; in eastern industrial centers by hundreds.

Similarly, Holmes (1929, p. 616) remarked upon the increased visibility of Mexicans in places where no one expected them to be:

Even cities as remote from Mexico as Omaha, Pittsburgh, and Milwaukee now have their Mexican quarters. The Mexican population of Chicago has recently swelled to approximately ten thousand. The growth of the Mexican population in Los Angeles has been phenomenal Anyone who has travelled [sic] through the Southwest during the last decade cannot fail to be impressed with the greatly increased number of Mexicans who are everywhere in evidence.

These accounts, unlike those in other discussions, commented on large numbers of Mexican immigrants; here Mexican immigration had to be rhetorically defined as immense. Olson (1989) explains that definitions are “strategic responses to situations” and that their use by rhetors is designed to advocate “adherence to the particular definition and the perspective sponsoring it” (p. 131). Most important in this definition of Mexican immigration was the practice of drawing attention to the numbers of Mexican immigrants such that they appeared to be everywhere. This rhetorical definition of Mexican immigration as significant drew on existing fears of immigration. Public perception was that the European immigration/race problems had been largely solved; however, fears that unassimilable and undesirable aliens might pollute the stock and dilute the character of Americanism had not disappeared. Thus, these fears could be easily drawn upon and transferred to Mexicans. Unfortunately, the commentaries and tropes that had highlighted the supposed problems of degeneracy, illiteracy, and other forms of pollution could now be transferred from the Asian and European menace to the characters in the narratives of the Mexican problem.

The narrative of need relied on characterizations of Mexicans as tem-

porary, docile, peon laborers. Interestingly, this narrative strategy enhanced arguments by those advocating restriction, for when the temporary nature of Mexican immigrants was threatened by accounts of their increased presence in major cities across the country, fears of a Mexican threat on national identity could be tapped. As one journalist recounted:

It will prove a real catastrophe if a state with the remarkable natural resources and advantages of California allows an insoluble alien problem to become fastened upon it . . . there is a real Mexican problem on the West Coast. For the first quarter of 1931 it was announced that one of the important counties of Southern California, Riverside County, had more Mexican than white children born within its borders. (“The old mistake,” 1931, p. 24)

Strikingly absent from these discussions were recognitions of historical factors shaping the Mexican population in the southwest, not least of which was the actual political southward shift of the U.S./Mexico border as a result of the U.S./Mexico war, ending in 1848. A percentage of the Mexican population in California, for example, had roots extending back to when the land was part of Mexico (Almaguer, 1994).

Importantly, the narrative of need did not position Mexicans as permanent additions to the national population. Instead, it carefully constructed Mexicans as outside of the national body. Critics who worried about these newly discovered exigencies could come up with a host of biological and cultural reasons that would help explain just why the characteristics of Mexicans precluded them from becoming an enduring part of America’s future. These visitors lacked both the puritan work ethic and the democratic

ideals of American-ness. Mexicans, as docile and peon, were no more assimilable than eastern European or Asian immigrants. By contesting the temporary dynamic, the Mexican problem narrative could compel concern. In this tale, the nation's laws, once championed as progressive acts helping control the rising tide of European immigration, were positioned as only partially effective. Eugenical arguments enhanced this narrative by identifying supposed biological differences.

The narrative of the Mexican problem, like the narrative of need, relied on characterization in its arguments, but the common descriptors of Mexicans shifted from docile to diseased and criminal. The mainstream American presses of the late 1920s and early 1930s were filled with commentaries on the pervasiveness of social contagions. Tales of Mexicans with illness appeared, and the Mexican threat was depicted as both numerical and visceral, as medical and social metaphors were used. In a typical commentary, Holmes (1929, p. 620) argued:

That the presence of numerous Mexicans in our midst is a constant menace to public health is shown by an abundance of evidence. Tuberculosis is common among them, and there has been a good deal of complaint on the score of syphilis Not infrequently virulent smallpox, and in a few cases typhus, has been brought in by the Mexicans.

It is perhaps not surprising that these attributions of disease to Mexican immigrants made no mention of the role European colonizers played in bringing these and numerous other diseases to the continent. Diseases such as syphilis, smallpox, and measles were relentlessly and carelessly spread by Europeans to natives, and resulted in decimation and genocide (Churchill,

1997; Stiffarm & Lane, 1992). While such reports questioned the health-related dangers of Mexicans, others drew attention to Mexicans' purported penchant for criminality ("Alien sent to prison," 1930). Such was the case with Los Angeles newspapers, which described the condition of a detective who was "critically wounded" after being shot by a Mexican alien ("Detective shot," 1931, p. 9; "Mexican offender," 1931).

The emphasis on dangers, especially those contained in the Mexican body, is strikingly reminiscent of allegations leveled at other immigrant populations. Consistent across this discourse is the fear, not just of the numbers of immigrants, but of the threat to the nation. These undesirable immigrants were invested with social powers of change; they threatened racial purity and superiority. Here again, the rhetorical use of characterization was central as the discourse surrounding Mexican immigrants, across both dominant narratives, constructed a foreign body, distinct from and distasteful to an American body. The emphasis on disease, in particular, positioned Mexican immigrants as reproductive bodies that would potentially infect that national body. As such, disease metaphors are an effective means through which to express border vulnerability, for the diseases spread in ways that cannot always be regulated. Further, as Ono and Sloop (2002) explain, they necessitate a legislative response, such as expulsion. These configurations of Mexicans served rhetorically to generate concern over Mexican immigration. The Mexican body, racialized as other, was constructed such that Mexican immigration threatened the nation, its borders, and its people.

Closing the Gate: Restrictions, Deportations, and Illegal Aliens

By 1930, attention to Mexican immigration was firmly established in the public domain. Those participating in the narrative of the Mexican problem emphasized two main issues: 1) How to prevent future immigration?; and 2) What to do with the Mexicans already living in the U.S.? Strategies for the prevention of immigration generated considerable attention. Debates over the restriction of Mexican immigration were already taking place (McLean, 1929; "The Mexican conquest," 1929). Many simply urged greater attention to and enforcement of available laws (Batten, 1930; McLean, 1930; Thomson, 1927).

Concerns over the existing population drew more complex answers, reflective of the tensions between the two prevailing narratives—need and problem. When Mexicans could be considered temporary workers, they may have crossed the physical borders but not the social borders of the American civic polity. As long as [white] Americans were known to be workers who refused to work like peons, then Mexican labor was necessary. And such arguments were part of the public conversation. Taylor (1931), quoting a farmer, illustrates: "I would rather have Mexican tenants than either Negroes or whites. You can't tell the whites so well what to do. They think they are on an equality [sic] with you" (p. 136). Curiously, these conversations rarely addressed inherent contradictions, such as arguments over the availability of jobs for Americans versus arguments that only Mexicans would accept certain jobs. Yet the presence and increasing visibility of Mexican immigrants required a great deal of psychic and social support for

the creation of new borders or for stricter enforcement of the physical borders between the U.S. and Mexico. These rhetorical creations would help authorities deal with past, present, and future immigration policies, and they would help with the surveillance of Mexicans who were already living in the U.S.

Civic leaders and regional planners engaged in rhetorical acts to create clearer borders between the U.S. and Mexico, between Americans and Mexicans, often relying on the strict enforcement of existing immigration laws. However, these strategies addressed only part of the Mexican problem, as considerable attention was being directed at the "brown tint" spreading across the country (McLean, 1931; Rowell, 1931; "The old mistake," 1931). Mexican immigration was defined as a national issue, encouraging all Americans to be on the lookout for foreign invaders. Controlling these various borders necessitated a series of performative acts to reduce the numbers of Mexicans in the U.S. While various strategies were adopted, here I focus on three: 1) the criminalization of Mexican/Americans; 2) the deportation drive; and 3) the creation of a hostile climate. While these strategies often overlap, I separate them here for purposes of discussion.

In a move that would have considerable impact, not only at the time but in much future discourse on immigration, Congress passed a law in 1929 making undocumented entry a felony (McLean, 1930). For Mexicans, this law would dramatically change the dynamics of immigration. Prior to the late 1920s, little regulation of Mexican immigration existed (Taylor, 1930). Instead, Mexicans were often exempted from the enforcement of re-

strictionist policies, such as the head tax and the literacy laws (Hoffman, 1974), and border patrols paid little attention to the crossings of Mexicans (Balderrama & Rodríguez, 1995).⁷ Thus, large Mexican populations existed in the U.S. and especially across the southwest (Sánchez, 1993); many of these had no formal papers for they had migrated at times in which such formalities were ignored. These practices changed with the criminalization of undocumented border entries.

Criminalization also occurred through the media campaign of U.S. Secretary of Labor, William N. Doak, in which he stressed economic and social arguments. Doak, who easily equated many types of immigration with criminality, asserted in the public press that immigrants were responsible for many of the nation's dilemmas, including crime, communism, drug activity, and unemployment (Jackson, 1931). This was not an atypical argument; it was voiced by many others (Lewis, 1931). Newspapers proclaimed that laws against "foreign criminals" and "imported vermin" would bring relief as they indicated efforts to control the border ("Alien 'dope' dealers," 1931). This language was not exclusive to representations of Mexicans, but also appeared in later discourse, such as during the Holocaust (Perry, 1983). In the case outlined here, headlines linked immigrants and criminality with such proclamations as "Alien criminal bans speeded" (1931) and "Alien dope bill given Hoover" (1931). Concerned citizens also joined the debate. For instance, one letter to the editor asserted that criminal immigrants were "more of a menace to our land ... than the threat of any war" (Jones, 1931, p. 12). Another letter writer maintained that "fully 80 per cent of the criminals and paupers of

the entire country are either foreigners or the children of the first generation of these foreigners" (Grubbs, 1931, p. 12). Attention to criminality was heightened on January 5, 1931, when newspapers stressed Doak's request that Congress "provide automatic deportation for any alien convicted of a major crime" (Lewis, 1931, p. 1). Headlines carried Doak's allegation that "there are 400,000 aliens now in the U.S. unlawfully, and that of this number 100,000 are deportable" (as cited in Lewis, 1931, p. 1). Supporting this position was the rhetoric advocating cleansing the nation of communism through deportation, again locating evil on the immigrant body ("Ask alien," 1931). Such arguments citing communism were undoubtedly linked to attacks on labor unions, considered by some to be fostering communism via arguments on unfair labor policies (Jacobson, 1998).

The emphasis on criminality and the criminalization of entry combined to provide a rhetorical space in which the Mexican body became a criminal body. Virtually gone were references to Mexicans as peons, as docile, as necessary farm labor. Replacing this discourse was a narrative in which Mexicans occupied the space of criminal. These reports helped to characterize Mexicans as threatening the physical safety of Americans. Because docility was so central to the narrative of need, Mexicans had to be radically reconstructed into criminal and dangerous. For instance, reports appeared of Juan Cortez, arrested for drunkenness and carrying a loaded gun ("Alien sent," 1930) and of Detective James Beck, presumably white, fighting for his life after being "shot down by a Mexican" ("Detective shot," 1931, p. 9).

Also adding to the criminal nature of Mexicans were those accounts equating criminality with illegal entry. The language of “alien” and “illegal alien” appeared in late 1930 and early 1931 with regularity. Headlines announced “Ban aliens” (1930), “Detective shot by alien” (1931), and “Alien criminal bans speeded” (1931). Here, the significance of the criminalization of entry is clear, for it was through this move that the figure of the illegal alien was invented. Configured as “stealing in as burglars might enter our homes,” immigrants became criminal/illegal aliens (“Illegal-alien,” 1931, p. 1). Their theft included the taking of jobs and other limited resources from deserving Americans (“Veterans favor,” 1930).

The inherent ambiguity surrounding the construction of the Mexican criminal is rhetorically powerful. Criminality here carries a range of possible meanings or causes, from undocumented entry to theft of jobs to potential drug and gang activity to alleged murder. The emphasis on the criminality of entry, however, allows for linkages between Mexican and criminality such that Mexican immigrants become almost inherently, even naturally, criminal simply by virtue of their migration to the U.S. Rationally, there are considerable differences between the newly criminal act of undocumented entry and murder or drug activity. The ambiguity in the catch-all term “criminal,” however, allows the criminal nature of Mexicans to be tapped whenever rhetorically needed, constituting Mexicans as potentially significant threats.

With immigrants, and particularly Mexicans, framed as criminal illegal aliens, deportation was not only understandable, it was necessary. Drawing again on the national deportation

campaign spearheaded by Doak and made spectacular through headlines announcing that 100,000 deportable aliens were within the U.S. (Jackson, 1931), Los Angeles officials and media engaged upon their own deportation drive. Announcements of co-operation between Los Angeles political and legal officials and the U.S. Department of Labor appeared in the local press (“Deport aliens,” 1931).

In the early stages of the drive, media emphasis was placed on economics and crime as the reasons for deportation, which was offered as a means of securing jobs for unemployed Americans.⁸ For instance, one article noted that “The Independent Order of Veterans of Los Angeles today went on record as favoring the deportation of all aliens residing in the United States illegally as a jobless relief measure” (“Veterans,” 1930, p. 3). Readers were notified of an emergency joblessness situation in the country that required action on immigration (“House action,” 1931). President Hoover entered the narrative as he “added a vigorous alien deportation drive to the immigration restriction policy adopted to conserve employment for American labor” (“Hoover pushes deportations,” 1931, p. 4). Drawing on the need to “protect American workmen,” (“House action,” 1931, p. 4), the conflation of criminality and residence status positioned Mexicans as part of the problem and the solution.

Deportation was initially outlined as intended only for “undesirable aliens” (“The Hearst,” 1930, editorial page). That such language was used without definition or reference suggests that the language of desirability was already well ensconced in the public imaginary. As the Mexican government responded negatively to announcements of wholesale

deportations, the Los Angeles media were quick to announce that the deportation efforts were neither racially motivated nor capricious. On January 30, 1931 W. E. Carr, District Director of Immigration, explained:

It has never been the policy of the State Department to direct its activities against any one race . . . we are going to deport aliens convicted of crimes first, rather than honest laboring men who may be technically illegally in this country. (Cited in "Mex. stirred," 1931, p. 1; see also "Deny plan," 1931, p. 1)

As announcements of the drive continued ("U.S. and city," 1931), the line between criminality and unlawful entry blurred. A mere five days after Carr's assurance that those honest laborers who might be technically illegal would not be the focus of the drive, L. A. co-ordinator for the citizens' committee on relief of unemployment, C. P. Visel, conflated criminality with illegal entry: "Aliens become deportable through such acts as illegal entry, Communistic activities and commission of certain crimes" (as cited in "Outline drive," 1931, p. A4). By mid February, reports of success in the deportation drive appeared; these reports now only referred to entry and citizenship. The *Los Angeles Evening Express*, in an article entitled "13 aliens arrested; Nabbed on suspicion of having entered United States illegally," listed the names of the 13, 12 of whom were Mexican ("13 aliens arrested," 1931, p. 3). Similarly, the *Los Angeles Herald* reported on the successful arrests: "In a drive to round up and deport aliens illegally in the United States, federal offices and deputy sheriffs today arrested 13 men who were held pending investigation of their status as to citizenship" ("Drive to deport," 1931, p. A4). Both reports, along with listing

the names of the arrested, highlighted the areas of the city where the arrests were made. Soon after, it was reported that "one out of every twenty-three foreigners investigated is illegally residing in the country . . . [thus] nightly raids on foreign quarters will be continued . . . until a systematic search of the county is completed" ("Sheriff begins drive," 1931, p. 16; see also "Arrest 200 aliens," 1931). The criminalization of entry and residence status continued throughout February, with residence status and undesirable coming together: "With 13 assertedly undesirable aliens in custody the drive by local and Federal officials against hundreds of persons declared to be in this county without authority continued today" ("13 aliens held," 1931, p. 11; see also "Congress body," 1931). Almost without exception, Mexicans were singled out in newspaper accounts: "hundreds of aliens, mostly Mexican, were illegally residing here [Los Angeles]" ("Drive on aliens," 1931, p. 6).

This media attention to Mexican bodies also served in the third strategy for generating a rhetorical border, the creation of a climate of hostility and surveillance toward Mexican/Americans that impelled many, regardless of residency status, to leave. McLean (1931) maintained that the threat of deportation was a powerful impetus: "Many [Mexicans] have been living in fear for months lest some day a uniformed man call at the door, or they be stopped upon the street. For them the strain has become unbearable" (p. 183). How exactly did this process work? Certainly publicity of the scope of the drive along with the repeated listing of names and nationalities of those arrested contributed to the sense of surveillance. In addition, subtle and explicit threats appeared in newspaper

accounts. For instance, one newspaper reported:

A survey has shown the peaceful exit of deportable aliens would release many jobs for legitimate residents and urges foreign-born Americans and those with first papers to assist in speeding the departure of deportable aliens of the same race on the ground that since they must go sooner or later now is a good time. ("Ousting of aliens," 1931, p. 5)

Journalists highlighted potential legal changes in the processing of possible deportation cases, including deputizing field agents with the power to sign warrants of arrest for deportation. Added to this publicity were reports of laws banning aliens from public employment and owning a residence in Los Angeles ("Illegal-alien," 1931). Details of the efforts of President Hoover and Congress to strengthen deportation laws became common topics ("Alien-ousting bills," 1931; "Hoover pushes," 1931), as did reports of bills restricting immigration to 10 percent of existing figures ("Immigration cut approved," 1931; "New alien ban," 1931). Further, proposals for registration and finger-printing of all immigrants entered the public domain ("Alien deportation," 1931). Finally, employees at welfare and charity agencies contributed to the creation of a hostile climate, encouraging Mexican/Americans to leave before they could be officially deported and barred from any future re-entry (Hoffman, 1974). Bogardus (1933) found this strategy to be particularly effective: "Many Mexican immigrants are returning to Mexico under a sense of pressure It takes only an insinuation from a welfare official in the United States to create widespread fear among Mexican immigrants" (p. 174).

While the deportation drive received considerable publicity, relatively few arrests occurred. Hoffman (1973) notes that 110 Mexican nationals were deported during the drive. By the end of 1931, between 50,000 and 75,000 Mexican/Americans had left Los Angeles for Mexico (Hoffman, 1973). At the end of the decade, approximately 500,000 Mexican/Americans had left the U.S. The disparity between 110 deportations and 500,000 "voluntary" departures draws attention to the rhetorical dynamics at play. It seems that the threat of deportation, largely perpetrated in mediated discussions, was a mobilizing factor. From various sides and groups came a similar message; alliances among police, immigration officials, political leaders, veterans, social service organizations, concerned citizens, journalists (including those writing for the Spanish language paper *La Opinion*), and even the Mexican government enabled this consistent support of repatriation. Approximating what Condit (1994) identifies as "singularizing," this discourse simplified complex histories, attitudes, needs, and social problems by equating Mexican, immigrant, and criminal.

By the early 1930s, the Mexican body came to signify illegal alien and, potentially, every Mexican/American became a walking target. Both whites and Mexicans knew that brown bodies were suspect and foreign. Both English and Spanish language papers reported the indiscriminate arrests of Mexican/Americans, and tales of deportations of citizens and those lawfully in the U.S. were common. While such reports might have drawn attention to the problematic nature of the deportation drive, they also legitimated a public accusation of Mexican/Americans. The effects of such fears were

calculated in the significant loss of business among those sections of the city heavily populated by Mexican/Americans.

This characterization of Mexicans as illegal aliens carried significant rhetorical force. Drawing on multiple narratives, the characterization connected economics, crime, and existing stereotypes. Economic arguments pervaded discussions of Mexican immigration, and various groups and individuals voiced their concerns over the alleged loss of jobs to aliens. City officials participated too, banning aliens from employment on projects that relied on state or federal funding. The repeated use of the term "illegal" then created a particular kind of immigrant, one who came only to take jobs or to engage in criminal activities.

The redefinition of Mexican immigrant away from peon laborer to illegal alien served in part to reconfigure unemployment so that it was a result of immigration rather than an economic crisis. This narrative portrayal ultimately worked both to encourage anti-Mexican sentiment and to reassure the unemployed that their economic distress was being addressed. Such arguments tapped into existing anger among many whites about job competition from immigrants. Reports of physical and verbal attacks by whites on Mexican and Filipino workers provided further support for the idea that immigrant labor was responsible for unemployment among whites and that such immigrants could be made to leave their jobs ("Mexicans agree," 1931; "Orientals flee," 1931).

Conclusion

I have traced competing and complementary narratives and characteri-

zations of Mexican/Americans as they emerged in the public media of the 1920s and 1930s. My story details recurring themes that reveal linkages between mediated discussions of Mexican immigrants and prevailing tales of other contested immigrant populations. It chronicles, as well, rhetorical strategies that consistently constructed Mexican bodies as foreign and often distasteful, if sometimes ambivalently desirable. The inconsistencies in these narratives are intriguing. How do we make sense of these sometimes diametrically opposed characterizations, such as notions of Mexicans as docile versus tales of Mexicans as dangerous and criminal? Narrative scholars maintain that public narratives are rarely neatly coherent, but are instead often fragmented and contradictory, reflecting social contentions over complex social issues (Goldzweig & Sullivan, 2000). Yet narratives can gain force, Carlson (1991) contends, when elements of competing narratives are mixed together such that, for all the seeming disparities, underlying aspects of coherence appear.

Herein perhaps lies a crucial insight into the larger significance of these early stories of Mexican immigrants. While communities debated Mexican immigration, some advocating access to Mexican laborers while others called for strict restrictions, consistent across these debates was an underlying argument about the nation and its membership. On this question there was little, if any, debate, at least with regard to Mexicans. The various characterizations that emerged across these tales constructed Mexican character so that it had no permanent place in the national body. The alleged attributes of the peon, such as lack of ambition and docility, run counter to American values. This seemingly positive narra-

tive, which lauds the benefits brought by Mexicans, poignantly illustrates Ono and Sloop's (2002) argument that positive and neutral discourses often rely upon essentialist logics. Here, the construction of the Mexican peon draws on racial assumptions about differences between primitive and civilized peoples and, in so doing, it precludes Mexican access to American-ness (Sheridan, 2002). Indeed, the narrative of need strengthens the Mexican problem narrative, for it provides fodder for arguments of danger. The narratives come together to construct an inescapable dilemma of constant desire and disgust. One agricultural boss captured the sentiment as he responded to a Mexican's job query: "When we want you, we'll call; when we don't—git [sic]" (as cited in Galarza, 1931, p. 181).

Carlson's (1991) argument that narratives gain strength when they modify and extend existing characterizations helps us understand the contemporary significance of these early stories. To those who study immigration, the characterizations I uncover, such as docile, diseased, criminal, and illegal, should ring familiar. They continue to prevail today, providing motivations for such policies as California's Proposition 187 (Ono & Sloop, 2002). This consistency in constructions of immigrants merits sustained attention, particularly from those interested in immigration and in critical media studies. The ease with which these constructions appear suggests that they have become deeply embedded within the cultural commonsense. Today, as in the past, the visual imagery of the illegal alien can instantly evoke arguments for restriction and deportation (Ono & Sloop, 2002). Because the very term "illegal alien" equates Mexican, foreign, and criminal, its use marks the

suspect Mexican/American body as being fundamentally outside the national body. The threat of deportation is a powerful rhetorical force. This threat, captured in the idea of the illegal alien, creates a vulnerability and exploitability. Suspect bodies carry the border on them. These bodies, even when present at physical locations quite distant from the geopolitical border, are susceptible targets (Chang & Aoki, 1998). The rhetorical force relies upon widespread public participation in the construction and definition of the illegal alien. Here, again, the centrality of mediated narratives is made clear, for unless publics have opportunities for social conversations about these invaders, they have limited cultural resonance. Common images of dark figures darting across the border, such as those used in commercials by proponents of Proposition 187, capture this sense of danger (Mehan, 1997), inviting publics to contribute to social surveillance and control.

The force of these lingering constructions emerges also through that which is rarely named—race. The narratives surrounding Mexican immigration in the 1920s and 1930s framed the discussion in language that was, on its surface, non-racial. Arguments addressed economics, labor needs, disease, and criminality. These rhetorical strategies hid the underlying racial arguments that surrounded immigration. This framing of attitudes toward immigration as centered on questions of national strength rather than on race had serious implications at the time. Most notably, it allowed communities across the country to participate in efforts to exclude forcibly and coercively a population they had, in many ways, invited in. But even more significantly, the explicit separation of race and nation in public commen-

taries, which occurred prior to this period and extends to the present, has provided rhetorical space for constructions of citizen and foreigner that belie reliance on legal definitions of citizenships. Through these racialized categories, the nation has engaged in such acts as the internment of thousands of Japanese Americans in the 1940s, the deportation of over a million Mexican-Americans in the 1950s, the militarization of the U.S./Mexico border

in the 1980s, and the recent spate of California-led legislation such as Proposition 187 and Proposition 209.⁹ In each of these instances, the nation participated in the symbolic shifting of borders, containing the undesirable by regulating their access. The histories of these enactments of nation should provide reminder enough of the necessity for continued scholarly attention to the intersections of race, nation, and immigration.

Notes

¹ While contemporary language might indicate the appropriateness of terms such as Chicana/o or Latino/a, that language was not part of the public vocabulary in the time periods discussed here. Thus, in this essay I use the terms Mexican, Mexican American, or Mexican/American as neutral identifiers of nationality. Mexican(s) refers specifically to Mexican citizens and Mexican American(s) to U.S. citizens of Mexican descent. The term Mexican/American(s) includes both Mexican nationals and U.S. residents and citizens of Mexican descent.

² Citing concern over growing unemployment among Americans, the Los Angeles police department and city council identified immigrants, specifically illegal immigrants, as taking jobs that should go to Americans ("Unified effort," 1931). While the potentially racially-inclusive term "American" was commonly used, critics speculate as to its implied racial specificity, noting that tactics employed in the drive targeted Mexican-Americans irrespective of residency status (Guerin-Gonzales, 1996).

³ Throughout the 1930s, Mexican repatriation occurred across the country with the most intense efforts in the early 1930s. Hoffman (1974) notes that from September 1930 to August 1932, Mexican repatriations exceeded 6,000 per month. In each succeeding year numbers dropped considerably so that by 1935 annual figures were approximately 15,000 and by the end of the decade were less than 10,000. Unlike deportation, repatriation was not necessarily a governmental affair. Instead, individual cities, counties, and states designed and implemented their own efforts. Most repatriation campaigns included various groups, such as individuals, welfare agencies, and local businesses. Incentives included greatly reduced and even free transportation into Mexico and money for food during the trip. Most accounts indicate that the Mexican government supported repatriation efforts, co-operating with many U.S.-based efforts and promising assistance (Guerin-Gonzales, 1996). Most Mexicans returned either by train, in their own cars, or by foot. However, in some instances, Mexicans were returned by ship and air.

⁴ Because of the distinction between formal deportation and "voluntary" repatriation, figures vary widely. Monroy (1999) gives the totals from Los Angeles at around 35,000, while Balderrama and Rodríguez (1995) give 1,000,000 as a conservative national figure.

⁵ Following common practice in whiteness studies, I intentionally do not capitalize white.

⁶ For instance, Takaki (1989) argues that as Chinese labor fell out of favor, it was replaced by Japanese labor, which was then replaced by Filipino labor. Arguments about the (un)desirability of these immigrant groups were recycled, and there was considerable overlap between arguments for and against various Asian laborers and Mexican workers.

⁷ While the 1848 war between Mexico and the U.S. established the currently agreed upon national border, little attention was paid to it. Prior to 1924, there was no border patrol, and the impetus for its establishment was the desire to regulate Chinese immigration, not Mexican immigration (U.S. Department of Justice, 1952). Thus, even the establishment of the border patrol did little to regulate Mexican immigration. And while distinctions between documented and undocumented Mexican immigration existed, efforts to ensure only documented immigrants entered the U.S. were minimal at

best. As Taylor (1930) explained, Mexican immigration was “unrestricted until 1929” (p. 612). Simpich (1926) provided more insight, noting that the extent of the border and the limited resources available to patrol it made for easy entry.

⁸ The racial motivations of the drive emerge in part through the arguments over job shortages. Guerin-Gonzales (1996) notes that Mexican/Americans were often identified by relief roles and most of those on relief were citizens and long-term residents whose children were citizens. Their legal status did not protect them from arrest or coercion.

⁹ For details on internment, see Takaki (1989), on deportations of Mexicans in the 1950s, see García (1980), on the militarization of the border, see Dunn (1996), on recent California legislation, see Ono and Sloop (2002) and Moran (2000).

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