

Youth, Evidence, and Agency

Mexican and Mexican American Youth at the Whittier State School, 1890–1920

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On October 24, 1911, nineteen-year-old Reynaldo Amaya carried out a daring escape from Whittier State School, California's leading reform school in that era.¹ According to the *Los Angeles Herald*, Amaya, a bright and accomplished musician, carefully planned his departure for that day, knowing that school officials would be preoccupied with commencement. Before he left, the *Herald* reported, Amaya took civilian clothing that "bore the trademark of a local dealer." In all likelihood, he planned to wear that outfit in place of his military uniform, attire all male wards had to don at Whittier. Next, he went to the school's printing office and "smashed the linotype machine" and "either stole or destroyed a [picture] of himself," expecting to outwit the authorities who used photos in searching for escapees. Finally, Amaya ran off, leaving behind everything he had come to know in the last couple of years.

Unbeknownst to him, the school had kept another photograph, and they used it when they called on police and the public to assist in the hunt for Amaya. But the local police and the reform school's staff never found him. He remained at large until his commitment expired at the age of twenty-one. A week after celebrating that birthday, Amaya wrote school administrators a brief note, reminding them of his majority. "Being 21," he said, "I consider myself out of your jurisdiction." Amaya knew the law and school officials could do nothing more than discharge him.²

The details surrounding Amaya's escape are significant for what they reveal about youth, evidence, and agency. Amaya employed creative means to subvert a well-entrenched state system of power and authority. In the

process, he, like many youths at Whittier, boldly challenged the institution as well as its rules and regulations. Yet, unlike most escapees from the reformatory, Amaya managed to outwit the authorities by remaining free. How and why he was able to do so remains a mystery. What is clear is that, in contrast to the majority of flights from the reform school, in this instance we know the calculated steps an escapee took to break away. Frustratingly, few of the school case records from which this case is taken provide equally illuminating scenarios.

Amaya's case suggests some of the problems and possibilities in gleaning the historical agency of children and adolescents, Mexicans and Mexican Americans in particular, who found themselves confined to an institution that granted them little if any decision-making power.³ Most scholars would agree that the ability to recover agency—that is, the thoughts and actions of historical subjects and the outcomes of those processes—depends on the source material. Indeed, what such evidence reveals and obscures ultimately shapes our knowledge and interpretation of the past. This discussion is concerned with how institutional records, such as those of Whittier State School, can aid us in recovering the experiences of a group of individuals who—because of their age, race, ethnicity, class, and gender—have been silenced and rendered largely invisible in the historical record.⁴

Studying youth, as most scholars of childhood and adolescence know, poses special problems, as one is trying to recover the experiences of a group of people whom historians have generally ignored, even though they make up a significant proportion of the population (West and Petrik 1992, 1–7). Children, because of their age, their dependent status in the family, and in the case of many youth of Mexican origin, their limited literacy in English, rarely figure in traditional sources; when they do, it is usually only in a partial way. They do, of course, appear in juvenile court records, which many scholars have used successfully to study juvenile delinquency, among other topics. But those sources, most often generated at the county level, are often difficult to procure because of privacy rules and regulations as well as poor record keeping.⁵ When youth occupy a lowly position in the ethnic, racial, and social class hierarchy, as Mexicans and Mexican Americans generally did at the turn of the twentieth century, this makes it even harder to find shreds of evidence that speak to their impressions, aspirations, and daily interactions. These challenges, I would argue, have limited the study of youth of Mexican descent prior to the World War II era and have constrained our knowledge of Chicana/o history in general.⁶

An examination of the records of Mexican and Mexican American youth at Whittier State School not only contributes to our understanding of their experiences and interactions with state power and authority but also sheds light on their encounters with the educational and legal systems in early twentieth-century California. As scholars of education have shown, the public school system in the Southwest all but denied Mexicans a fair and equitable education commensurate with that given to most Euro-Americans. At best, children and adolescents of Mexican origin attended segregated "Mexican" schools, designed to keep "backward," overage, and undereducated Spanish-speaking youth among their own kind. At worst, they went without schooling. Instead, they labored in the agricultural fields, picking fruit alongside their families, or worked on city streets, selling newspapers or hauling bricks (Reynolds 1933; George I. Sánchez 1951; San Miguel 1987; González 1990; Darder, Torres, and Gutiérrez 1997). The records from Whittier reflect these trends. Few Spanish-speaking youth who ended up at the reformatory had attended school beyond the primary grades, and most of those who labored did so at gender-specific, unskilled tasks.

Mexicans and Mexican Americans deemed "delinquent" and "dependent," the two primary charges brought against all wards at Whittier, also had to deal with an increasingly bureaucratized and professionalized legal welfare system in California that had little sympathy for, much less understanding of, ethnic, racial, class, gender, and cultural differences. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the authorities identified as delinquents those youths who transgressed Euro-American middle-class standards of behavior, as reflected in law and custom. Those who had little or no support in their families or communities and who led "an idle, dissolute, lewd or immoral life" were classified as dependents (Mennel 1973; Schneider 1992; Odem 1995; Hickey 1994; Schlossman 2005). Delinquency and dependency, officials and middle-class social reformers believed, were dangerous, for such youngsters were likely to become public charges or fall into a life of crime. Increasingly, probation officers and social workers scrutinized the homes, families, and neighborhoods of "problem" children and adolescents (Odern 1995). Often, these "experts" harshly criticized the seemingly foreign—largely immigrant—cultural beliefs and practices they encountered, blaming them for the adolescents' transgressions.⁷ Later, particularly in the 1910s and 1920s, they turned to scientific research to support the contention that juvenile delinquency was not only influenced by culture and the environment but also directly linked to heredity, intelligence, and race (Williams and Terman 1914;

Nelles 1914; Terman 1916; Chapman 1988; Zenderland 1998; Stern 2005). As a consequence, a significant number of delinquent youth of color were identified as "mentally deficient."

As this essay reveals, social reform and juvenile delinquency were inextricably linked in early twentieth-century California. To uncover those links as well as those connecting discussions of youth, race, and agency, this essay begins by describing the ways in which the Whittier State School records contribute to our understanding of the experiences of Mexicans and Mexican Americans at the reformatory. Next, it focuses on escapes and attempted escapes as evidence of agency, that is, of symbolic and real moments of resistance to institutional authority. Despite the consequences, Mexican-origin youth ran away repeatedly, more often than African Americans and Euro-Americans. Sometimes multiracial and multiethnic groups attempted to escape together, and they occasionally used violence to gain their freedom. Though the staff at the reform school eventually foiled the plans of most escapees, a significant number of the youth managed to stay away indefinitely, thereby enabling them to take control of their lives, at least in the short term. Lastly, the essay focuses on the experiences of girls of Mexican descent and shows that, although a smaller proportion of females than males fled or tried to do so, girls did launch their own campaigns of resistance. Regardless of the odds against them, Mexican and Mexican American youth had the courage and the wherewithal to take charge of their destinies.

"Reading" the Whittier State School Case Files

Whittier State School, originally known as the State Reform School for Juvenile Offenders, was established in 1889 and opened in 1891 in Whittier, California. Fifty years later, in 1941, legislators changed the name to Fred C. Nelles School for Boys in honor of Superintendent Fred C. Nelles, a beloved administrator who served during the 1910s and 1920s until his untimely death in 1927. The Nelles School finally closed in the summer of 2004.

The sources detailing the experiences of youth at Whittier State School are rich and extensive. They include fifty-nine volumes of case files dating from 1898 to 1948. For this study, research was conducted on the first three decades of the school's existence, from 1890 to 1920, an investigation that produced nearly 4,000 case histories of boys and girls between the ages of nine and twenty. The majority of these youths—80 percent, or 3,056 of

3,816—were white, that is, native-born or foreign-born Euro-Americans, a reflection of the predominantly white population of California at the time.⁸ Mexican and Mexican American youth made up the second-largest group, accounting for 12 percent (459 of 3,816), while African Americans were 7 percent (280 of 3,816). Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Puerto Ricans each were less than 1 percent. The large majority of the youth, 84 percent, were boys, but girls constituted a significant minority at 16 percent (627 of 3,816). Relatively few girls ended up at the school's Girls' Department because of the state's decision to remove females from Whittier's jurisdiction in 1913 and place them in the newly established California School for Girls. Three years later, in 1916, a permanent girls' school was finally completed in Ventura County and the female wards were relocated to that institution, the Ventura School for Girls.⁹

In essence, case files are brief histories, no more than two pages, containing autobiographical and biographical information that is both qualitative and quantitative in nature. In the first twenty years of the Whittier school's existence, officials entered information, taken from the youths or others who knew them, about their personal and family histories; physical attributes, including marks and scars; employment histories; educational accomplishments; conduct while at Whittier; and progress while out on parole and after discharge. Photographs of the wards at the time of their commitment to, and sometimes discharge from, Whittier accompany almost all of the case files dealing with boys.¹⁰ Images of girls, on the other hand, are limited to the first couple of years of the 1890s. After that, officials ceased displaying them. Doubtless, they did so to hide the shame often associated with the presence of females in reform schools, since the majority of them ended up at Whittier for sexual behavior that transgressed social norms and sometimes, as in the case of prostitution, legal statutes.¹¹ Some case files also contain newspaper clippings, personal letters, or probation officers' reports to juvenile courts, particularly for records generated in the early 1910s as the child welfare and juvenile justice system expanded. These scraps of information provide invaluable insight into family dynamics in the youths' homes as well as the social and physical environment in the larger community.

Case files from the 1910s look essentially the same as those from previous years but also contain results from psychological, intellectual, and physical examinations. School administrators generated much of this information after J. Harold Williams, a doctoral student working under Stanford University psychologist Lewis M. Terman, carried out a

“psychological survey”—a series of intelligence tests—on Whittier boys in 1914. Williams did so at the request of Superintendent Nelles, who had initially requested the study as part of his broader effort to develop an individualized program at Whittier (Nelles 1914). The results of the survey, which was administered to the youths in English, seemed to confirm the researchers’ and Nelles’s theory that low intelligence, as measured through IQ, or intelligence quotient, was linked to juvenile delinquency. Countless similar “scientific” studies carried out in the United States and Europe in this era came to similar conclusions. This research was informed by the emerging fields of criminology and eugenics, the latter based on the belief that inherited traits determined behavior and that it would be possible to produce a better race through selective breeding. Toward this end, in 1915 the state of California established at Whittier State School a Department of Research, which became the California Bureau of Juvenile Research in 1917 (Stern 2005, 16–18). Its mission was to determine and, in turn, root out the causes of delinquency before they could produce criminal behavior.

Interestingly and perhaps not surprisingly, the majority (more than 60 percent) of the Mexican and Mexican American males tested in 1914 scored as “feeble-minded”—that is, they were deemed unable to develop beyond the intellectual level of an average twelve-year-old (Terman 1916). Only about 45 percent of African American and 15 percent of Euro-American males scored this low. (Complete results from similar tests conducted at the California/Ventura School for Girls have not been located.) As scholars have suggested, inherent language and cultural biases undoubtedly influenced the outcomes, though Williams, Terman, and others denied such prejudices (Fernald 1914, 1916; González 1990; Zenderland 1998). As a consequence of the testing, researchers and school officials at Whittier discharged many Mexicans and Mexican Americans as well as other ethnic and racial minority youths identified as having a “low mentality.” Whittier’s administrators sent some youths home before their date of discharge and transferred others to the Preston School of Industry, a reform school for older boys in Lone, California. The remainder went to the Sonoma State Home and the Pacific Colony, hospitals for the feeble-minded established in 1885 and 1917, respectively. These state institutions sterilized their wards, as allowed by a 1909 California law.¹²

Research into the nearly 4,000 case files has allowed for the reconstruction of a profile of this group of children and adolescents, detailing their ethnic, racial, gender, class, and regional backgrounds as well as their personal and family histories. The records disclose, for instance, that most

of the wards at Whittier came from households where one or both parents were absent as a result of death, divorce, desertion, or separation. This held true for the Mexican-origin youth. Mexican girls (80 percent) in particular were more likely than boys (64 percent) to live in homes where an older sibling, aunt, or grandparent served as the primary care provider. Most of these young people relied on extended family networks for survival, but some turned to public and private charity. The sources also reveal that, regardless of ethnic or racial origin, most of the youths belonged to the impoverished and working classes, and many had previous institutional experiences in juvenile halls, orphanages, and detention homes (fig. 1). Wayward and/or destitute Mexican and Mexican American females often ended up at the Home of the Good Shepherd, a Catholic charity in Los Angeles, while many males went to the Spanish American Institute, a Methodist industrial school in Gardena. When they proved too unruly for those places, youngsters landed before the juvenile court and, finally, at the doorstep of Whittier State School.

Up until the mid-1910s, most delinquent and dependent youth committed to Whittier were sent there for “status offenses” and petty crimes. Status offenses included vaguely defined behavior seen as evidence of incorrigibility, such as begging, hanging out with “immoral” companions, and wandering the streets late at night, after curfew and usually unsupervised (Schlossman 2005). For boys, petty crime usually involved stealing bicycles or joyriding in stolen automobiles, while for girls it involved participating in sexual activity, regardless of whether they were victims or perpetrators of the “crime” (Odem 1995).¹³ In the late 1910s, as a result of the scientific research being carried out at Whittier and elsewhere, intelligence and heredity became significant factors in the identification of delinquent youth. In 1918, the *Los Angeles Express* reported the Department of Research’s “discovery that almost every case of delinquency is due to one or more of three causes—feeble-mindedness, insanity, and inferior home life.” Ultimately, the changing conceptions of delinquency and its causes meant that a significant number of children and adolescents of color found themselves confined to an alien environment, frequently for minor infractions and as a result of circumstances beyond their control.

The case files, though rich in many ways, have limitations as a tool for researching the lives of Mexican-origin youth in California in the period under study. To begin with, they represent only those young people whose troubled lives brought them into contact with the emerging juvenile justice system—a small sector of the overall youth population. Moreover,

they focus exclusively on the subset of offenders who eventually landed in the reform school. Scholars have shown that the majority of wayward youth of that era managed to avoid commitment to Whittier altogether. Emory Bogardus's study into the Los Angeles juvenile court records for 1912 reveals that a significant number of youths evaded confinement at Whittier or another state reformatory. That year, the authorities dismissed or placed on probation the majority of the juvenile court cases, while the remainder, "a small percentage," ended up at a state school such as Whittier (Bogardus 1914, 1). Only by linking reform school, police, and juvenile court records—a monumental task that would require multiple investigators and extensive resources—can we come to a greater understanding of the range of antisocial behavior carried out by boys and girls of Mexican descent in California.

Nevertheless, the Whittier State School case files provide an invaluable first step in recovering the historical experiences of a little-known sector of the Mexican and Mexican American population: troubled youth. The sources allow us to trace the origins and development of the treatment of "deviant" young people and examine how that treatment varied across racial, ethnic, class, and gender lines. A close examination of the school and its wards also enables us to see how Whittier and public officials put reform school ideals and state policies into practice and to see the extent to which that implementation failed or succeeded. And, most relevant for the present-day problems plaguing the juvenile justice system in California, a focus on the reformatory and its dealings with troubled youth provides us a window onto the early criminalization and racialization of youth of color, namely Mexicans and Mexican Americans as well as African Americans, a population that makes up the majority of juvenile inmates across the country today.¹⁴

The reformatory's records also reveal, albeit in a limited way, what happened to the wards once they left the school's grounds. Whittier administrators often released or paroled youths to distant relatives or to members of the community rather than to an immediate family member, such as a mother or father, even if one or both parents survived. They did so, they rationalized, in order to avoid placing them in the environment that had landed them at the reform school in the first place. While on parole, the youths often worked in various labor-intensive and gender-specific tasks, such as farm work for boys and domestic chores for girls. After discharge, many of these young people married and had children and in general led "normal"—socially acceptable—lives. Others, particularly

males, joined the armed services, while the less fortunate and, arguably, unreformed found themselves in jailhouses. Indeed, many young men released from Whittier later committed serious crimes that sent them to state prisons such as San Quentin and Folsom, while those who carried out minor infractions did time at city and county jails throughout the state and across the country. The circumstances surrounding their imprisonment and careers behind bars are unclear. Fortunately, a select number of California state prison court case files do exist and can be found using the San Quentin and Folsom State Prison indexes. But, again, this is only partially productive, as the state of California destroyed most of the early inmate case files—nine of ten dated prior to 1910. Only the full state prison records dating from 1910 to 1947 are in existence and are useful for that time period.¹⁵

Perhaps the most frustrating aspect of the case files is the limited insight they provide into the youths' personal motivations, thoughts, and daily interactions. Indeed, we know little about these young people as influential actors at Whittier, as agents of their own destinies. Individual and family privacy codes, though recently relaxed in California, prevent us from contacting their descendants or representatives for oral histories. Recollections describing the impact of the reform school on the individuals and on family members would answer many questions about the youths' perceptions and understanding of the school and its administration during and after their time at Whittier.¹⁶

Gleaning Historical Agency

A useful approach in dealing with the challenges in recovering the voices, thoughts, and actions of institutionalized youth is to examine escapes and unexcused absences as well as riots or rebellions as expressions of agency in light of structural constraints. Following the lead of two Canadian scholars, Tamara Myers and Joan Sangster (2001), who studied three reform schools for girls in Ontario and Quebec, my approach is to treat escapes and attempted escapes as symbolic and real moments of individual and, sometimes, collective resistance. As Myers and Sangster observe, understanding the intent and meaning of such resistance is often difficult, for acts of defiance are "often dispersed, highly divergent, spontaneous, unfocused, and [include] both individual and group efforts" (670). Despite the difficulties, a close analysis of case files such as those of Whittier and their placement

within a broader institutional and historical framework elucidates the wide-ranging measures youth took in trying to take control of their lives.

The case files indicate that from 1890 to 1920, 32 percent (124 of 385) of Mexican-origin boys and 12 percent (9 of 74) of Mexican-origin girls committed to Whittier escaped or attempted to do so. Overall, 29 percent of Mexican-origin youth tried to flee. This is significant because it exceeds the proportion of Euro-Americans (24 percent) and African Americans (15 percent) who did the same. In other words, Mexican and Mexican American youth were slightly more likely than Euro-Americans and twice as likely as African Americans to run away and chance their freedom. Contrary to stereotypes of Mexicans as a docile, apathetic, and lazy people—perceptions held by many Euro-American middle-class professionals of that era, including employers, academics, social workers, and writers—Mexican-origin youth on average proved to be greater risk takers than their Euro-American and African American counterparts.¹⁷

The tendency of Mexican and Mexican American boys and girls to run away more frequently than others is probably explained, in part, by the extended family networks and community resources at their disposal. The sources indicate that the majority of Mexican-origin youths at Whittier were born in California and likely had lived with their immediate or extended families in the state for all or most of their lives. Over time, the number of Mexico-born wards at Whittier increased, but even so the majority of Whittier pupils of Mexican descent were California-born. As descendants of Spanish and Mexican settler families, some of whom had been in California since the eighteenth century, these youths had deep roots in and knowledge of the region. By the late 1880s and 1890s, as Euro-American and European immigration surged into California, people of Mexican descent became a relatively small proportion of the state's population. But Mexican Americans managed to hold on to cultural practices and to maintain clearly identifiable Spanish-speaking communities and barrios, despite economic hardships, political disenfranchisement, and rampant racial discrimination (Camarillo 1979; Chávez-García 2004). These communities, no matter how impoverished, likely appealed as places of refuge to many Mexican and Mexican American wards at Whittier, prompting some of them to chance a getaway in order to return to familiar sights, sounds, and places.

The relative infrequency of escapes or attempted escapes by African American wards at Whittier most likely reflects residential patterns among blacks in California in that era. The case files indicate that many

of the African Americans in the reform school had recently migrated to California. In the early 1900s the black population in Southern California was relatively small, but it expanded significantly from 1900 to 1920 as a result of migration from the South (De Graaf 1970; De Graaf, Mulroy, and Taylor 2001). A significant proportion of the black youth who ended up at Whittier came to the state during those two decades. Many did so with few immediate family members; some even came alone, “bumming” on railroad cars. They would therefore have had few, if any, sources of support in the region. Doubtless, African American children and adolescents, who knew they had few immediate or extended family members or friends from whom to seek assistance, thought twice about running away.

Fleeing or attempting to flee was a significant move, for youngsters knew of the severe punishment that awaited them if caught. Before the modernization of the school during Superintendent Nelles’s administration, Whittier, like many reform schools throughout the United States, imposed a strict military regimen. “Cadets” in the Boys’ Department wore military uniforms and drilled on a daily basis. Penalties for infractions were harsh and fear became the driving force. Boys who fled or tried to flee and were caught faced a range of consequences including the guard line, in which the boy was forced to stand at attention, unable to move or speak to anyone, for an hour or more. They could also be placed in solitary confinement, imprisoned for hours or days at a time in a small, underground, dungeon-like cell, where they received only bread and water. Sometimes boys in “solitary” had to wear the so-called Oregon boot (fig. 2), a device that, according to Nelles, consisted of “two or more rings of iron, riveted around the leg, resting on the heel and instep of the wearer. Often this boot cut into the skin and led to sores that sometimes extended into the bone” (1914, 31). More frequently, they faced corporal punishment, usually ten, twenty, or more blows with a leather strap or rubber hose. For instance, following the escape and capture of two Mexican-origin boys, Anthony Cruz and Santos Arreola, in 1894 and 1895 respectively, they each endured ten lashes with a leather strap. According to reform school officials, Cruz, in particular, needed strict discipline, for he was a “troublesome” boy “if not kept strictly in his place.” He “seem[ed] bright,” they conceded, but often chose “the worst boys [at Whittier] . . . as companions.” The reprisal, though severe, seemed to have done little to deter Cruz from committing another infraction, for two years later, in 1897, he was “on the guard line as usual.”¹⁸

With the appointment of Nelles in 1912 and the broader effort to humanize the institution, school administrators implemented a new policy

of “friendly cooperation” that gradually eliminated the approach of “forcible reformation.” Nelles’s accomplishments included doing away with the use of fences, guards armed with guns and clubs, and the Oregon boot (Fenton 1931, 7; Schlossman 1995, 380). Instead, punishment consisted of confinement in a “lost privilege cottage,” or guardhouse, for several hours or days at a time, depending on the severity of the infraction. There, boys continued with their work duties and received medical attention, if needed, but could not speak to anyone other than staff. If they refused to abide by the rules, they lost meal privileges and received only milk and bread (Nelles 1916; Schlossman and Pisciotta 1986, 31–32).

Within months, Nelles claimed, policy changes in discipline and punishment had a “powerful effect” on the boys, enabling them to develop self-control and a new attitude (1916, 23–25; 1918, 12–13). Where once youths celebrated those who carried out “daring escapes,” viewing them as heroes, according to Nelles, later they saw such peers as weak, shameful “deserters” (1916, 31). “The hero worship of the boy who resisted longest and most vigorously no longer exists,” wrote Nelles. “The most respected boys now are the ones who are making the best records” (1918, 14). As a result, he argued, the number of boys going absent without leave, or AWOL, had fallen sharply.

The case files support Nelles’s contentions, revealing that the frequency of flights among Mexicans and Mexican Americans as well as among other racial and ethnic groups dipped from previous years. In the decade of the 1890s, 49 youths of Mexican origin attempted to escape or did escape; in the 1900s, 53 did the same; yet in the 1910s, only 27—about half the number of the previous decade—followed suit. African Americans also slowed their rate of AWOLs over same period, with 12, 23, and 8 flights in the 1890s, 1900s, and 1910s, respectively. The decline in escapes by Euro-Americans was less dramatic: they numbered 229 in the 1890s, 285 in the 1900s, and 232 in the 1910s, indicating that Nelles was perhaps less effective in reaching this population. Nevertheless, Nelles’s transformation of the policies and practices at Whittier State School apparently had some effect in quelling the boys’ desire to leave the school in favor of their homes, neighborhoods, or other places where the authorities would be unlikely to find them.

Though breakouts declined in the 1910s, they did not cease altogether. As the records indicate, Mexican and Mexican American boys often tried a second, third, or even fourth time to flee the school, both before and during Nelles’s administration. Throughout the first three decades of the

school's existence, at least 16 of the 113 boys of Mexican descent who ran away (13 percent) did so on three or more occasions (figs. 3 and 4). Gus Pascal, for instance, a fifteen-year-old Mexican American youth, attempted to take off repeatedly in the 1890s. In one month alone, November 1894, Pascal, the son of a Euro-American father and a Mexican mother, tried to escape three times. In one of those attempts, another boy went with him. On a separate occasion, during Whittier's annual summer camping trip to Catalina Island, where the youths spent a week camping, boating, and fishing, he disappeared for a week. For such behavior, Pascal acquired a reputation among the school authorities as uncontrollable. He "need[ed] constant watching," Whittier officials declared, for he was a "boy who [took] any chance to get away." For his transgressions—carried out before Nelles arrived—school officials flogged him and then put him in solitary confinement for two weeks. Such punishment, administrators knew, would do little to dissuade him from attempting to flee, for when punished he took it "without flinching."¹⁹

While the staff eventually caught Pascal, some of the boys stayed away successfully for days, months, and even a year or more at a time. Sixteen-year-old Jesús Arbiso, for example (fig. 5), a native of Mexico and resident of Los Angeles, escaped five times in 1914. During one of those flights, he remained free for a year. Eventually, the authorities apprehended and returned him to the school, though his subsequent stay was brief. According to his probation officer, school officials released Arbiso to his parents on "account of [his] having tuberculosis," a common and often deadly disease in the early 1900s.²⁰

When solo escapes failed, boys occasionally turned to collective action, sometimes violent action, to carry out their deeds. The case files reveal at least eight instances in which multiracial and multiethnic groups of boys planned to flee together. In two of those incidents, they resorted to violent behavior. In 1919 Perfecto (alias "Perfect") Guzmán, along with David Pelowski, Sam Ayres, and Ernesto Aguilar—two Euro-Americans and two Mexican Americans—planned and carried out an attack against a night watchman, Captain McDonough (fig. 6). According to the report by a fellow watchman, on the night of February 7, Guzmán, the ringleader, used a one-inch iron pipe to beat McDonough repeatedly. The assault occurred in the library where Guzmán and the three other boys sat in the evening, purportedly reading. As planned, Guzmán approached the captain, asking permission to get a book from a bookcase directly behind McDonough's seat. "Getting behind the Captain," the report continued, Guzmán "pulled the

pipe out of his shirt where he had concealed it" and struck the watchman over the head, "knocking him senseless." That ambush gave the boys the opportunity to flee the school's grounds. Most did not get very far. Within a few hours all but one, Guzmán, had been recaptured in Oceanside, about sixty-five miles southwest of Whittier. Afterward, administrators decided to transfer the three to the Preston School of Industry, citing age limits at Whittier.²¹ In all likelihood, the youths' behavior—their flagrant violation of school codes and their use of violence—rather than just their age contributed to their expulsion, for school officials frequently sent those who escaped repeatedly to Preston.²²

Guzmán, the lone successful escapee, remained at large for several years, despite efforts to locate him. In the end, school officials could do little but discharge him from the school's rolls. Nelles, who often commented publicly and proudly on the low number of escapes carried out during his administration, was at a loss for words. When a journalist from the *Los Angeles Express* interviewed him about the attack, he explained simply: "This is the first assault attempted at the school during the time [I have] been superintendent."

Guzmán's success in eluding capture was not all that unusual. The case files indicate that 16 percent (20 of 124) of the Mexican and Mexican American boys who absconded or attempted to do so in the 1890s, 1900s, and 1910s managed to remain free. In that same period, 10 percent (4 of 39) of the African American escapees and 19 percent (145 of 747) of the Euro-American escapees never returned. Many Euro-Americans and African Americans ended up in other parts of the United States, while some Mexican-origin boys made their way to Mexico, away from the jurisdiction of the school and the likelihood of recapture. Even when administrators knew that the boys had fled to Mexico, in no instance did they travel to Mexico to retrieve the runaways.

Unfortunately, the circumstances as well as the motivations surrounding most of these "success stories" remain largely hidden, for the records are silent as to how the youths managed to stay away and to what extent authorities made efforts to find them. The record of Virgilio Rodríguez's 1915 flight from the school does, however, disclose the impetus for the boy's departure. Rodríguez, a fifteen-year-old from San Diego (fig. 7), ran away on two occasions. The first attempt, in August 1914, ended in capture. The second, a year later in November 1915, met with triumph. Only six years later did school officials finally learn of his whereabouts and the reasons for his escapes. In 1920, at the age of twenty-one, Rodríguez returned to Whittier "to square

himself with the school and try to clear his record," he explained. He left the school out of loneliness, Rodríguez continued, "in a fit of despondency due to the inability to learn anything of my family." Clearly, in this case, longing for and separation from family had compelled him to break out.²³

An examination of case files from the 1890s, 1900s, and 1910s demonstrates that Mexican and Mexican American girls as well as boys took the initiative to end their confinement. As noted above, girls attempted to run away less frequently than did boys: only 12 percent (9 of 74) of girls of Mexican descent went AWOL. But this was true of female wards of all ethnic groups: 11 percent (4 of 36) of African American girls and 12 percent (60 of 517) of Euro-American girls attempted to flee, figures on a par with the rate among Mexican-origin girls. What is significant is that girls of Mexican descent, often perceived by Euro-American middle-class professionals as passive and compliant with male authority figures, were just as likely to attempt daring breakouts as girls of other ethnicities. They not only defied the law but also disrupted gender and ethnic conventions when they ran away.

Lisa Arellano, age fourteen, was one girl who ran away repeatedly. In 1912, she attempted three times to break from the confines of the school, managing to stay away for a total of five days. Though we know the school staff eventually caught her, we know less about how she fed, sheltered, and cared for herself during the escapade. Doubtless her life experiences as an abandoned child, who spent much of her early childhood in different home placements, taught her how to be resourceful.²⁴

Before full implementation of the changes instituted by Nelles, Mexican and Mexican American females who escaped Whittier faced harsh punishment for their actions. They, like the males, confronted the possibility of the guard line, solitary confinement, and blows with a leather strap. Unlike the boys, girls sometimes also had their heads shaved or their hair cut short as punishment. A much-publicized incident in 1903 reveals that the use of corporal punishment continued even after its ban in the Girls' Department in 1898 and the superintendent's declaration that such practices "belong[ed] to the Dark Ages" (Van Alstyne 1898, 34, 38). In late 1903, the *Los Angeles Examiner* reported that a male employee had whipped Maude Salazar, a Mexican American girl, for an undisclosed offense.²⁵ According to a follow-up report in the same newspaper, the incident triggered a scandal that led to a statewide investigation into mistreatment and cruelty at Whittier. The result was that male employees could no longer whip girls nor cut off or shave the hair of those who violated reform school codes. Five years later, in 1908,

still reeling from the fallout of the inquiry, officials continued to deny the use of corporal punishment, which "is in no case resorted to here [in the Girls' Department]" (Whittier State School 1908).

Girls of Mexican descent not only escaped and received punishment for doing so but also participated in at least one rebellion against institutional authority. Riots, as Myers and Sangster observe in their work on reform schools in Canada, evince collective agency in the face of authoritarian control, though the rationale behind such acts of rebellion is often unclear (2001, 669–97). The sources indicate that five girls of Mexican origin along with six other unidentified girls carried out a revolt in an attempt to flee. That incident occurred not at Whittier but at the Home of the Good Shepherd in Los Angeles in 1909. The girls included fourteen-year-old Juana Solís, a native of Mexico; eighteen-year-old Carrie Walters, a girl of Mexican and Irish descent; seventeen-year-old Florence Miller, of Mexican and German origin; and seventeen-year-old Delia and Lucy Vásquez, Mexican American twin sisters from San José. Though the details are sketchy, the sources indicate that Solís, a girl known to the authorities as having a "violent temper," led the melee, while Walters, Miller, and the Vásquez sisters followed her lead. The immediate result was a successful escape. In the long run, however, the staff at Good Shepherd apprehended all of the girls and most of them ended up in the Girls' Department at Whittier State School. For Walters, a reputed prostitute who had spent more than ten years in and out of institutions, her commitment to the reform school represented one step in a long journey through California's nascent juvenile justice system. When the revolt broke out, she had been on parole from Whittier for more than four years. Despite the odds against these girls, their effort to escape, through riot and rebellion, reveals their determination and will to take control of their lives.²⁶

Conclusion

Rebellions, escapes, and attempted escapes by Mexican and Mexican American youth reveal their resolute efforts to overcome constraints and gain control of their immediate and future lives. As dependents within their families and minors in the larger society, all children and adolescents exercise little power in their households, schools, and communities, their primary places of socialization. As wards of the state, the youths at Whittier State School were even more powerless. Nonetheless, these young people took the initiative to shape their destinies even when such bold moves defied institutional power and authority and ran the risk of severe consequences.

The Whittier State School records, though rich and textured in many ways, provide only a narrow glimpse into the historical experiences of youth of Mexican descent in the era before World War II. Though we know a significant amount about the “pachucos,” or zoot suiters, of the 1940s and their interactions with authorities, we know less about the Mexican-origin young people of earlier generations.²⁷ The burden is on the researcher to find bits and scraps of evidence that provide insight into the youth of early twentieth-century California and to analyze those “facts” in a way that opens a window onto larger patterns. Case files such as those of Whittier State School, if taken as a whole and employed innovatively, can contribute to the larger project of recovering the historical agency of Mexican and Mexican American youth in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In many ways, analyzing the experiences of children and adolescents of Mexican origin raises larger questions about the ways in which we, as Chicana and Chicano studies scholars, interpret the actions and thoughts of young people who transgressed social and legal codes of behavior. Can we cast these youth as “heroes” in light of our understanding of the social, economic, and political inequality of the times, as well as the discrimination suffered by people of Mexican descent in the legal, educational, and correctional systems? Given their circumstances, were these youth indeed “heroes of their own lives,” to borrow the phrase of historian Linda Gordon (1988)? Or do they represent an unruly and uncontrollable bunch of youngsters whose delinquency was curbed by a well-intentioned state and who deserved the fate they received?

Clearly, characterizing escapees and would-be escapees in binary terms—as heroes or criminals—negates their historical agency and flattens the complexity of their everyday lives and their interactions with state authority and power. I have attempted to provide a complex reading of the varied influences and constraints shaping the decision to flee, a choice full of uncertainty and risk. As their records show, the majority of these young people landed at Whittier because of circumstances beyond their control—usually a lack of adequate familial, community, and institutional support and supervision. Yet the youngsters remained or at least tried to remain in charge of their persons, at least in the short term. Despite the attempt of Whittier authorities to reform and remake them to conform to Euro-American middle-class standards of propriety and citizenship, Mexican and Mexican American youth had the courage to resist institutional power and authority and to carve out their own destinies.

Notes

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1. Reynaldo Amaya, like other names of Whittier wards in this essay, is a pseudonym. According to the California Government Code Section 12237, "all items seventy-five years or older that are on deposit in the State Archives shall be accessible to the public." In other words, all of the records, including photographs, used in this study are open to the public. Because I would like to protect the privacy and confidentiality of my subjects, all of the names of Whittier State School wards have been changed in this essay. However, the racial, ethnic, and gender identity of each youth has been retained. Names of public officials and private individuals who are not wards have not been changed.

2. For Amaya's case, see Fred C. Nelles School for Boys (hereafter cited as Whittier) Case File 2398, Youth Authority Records Collection, California State Archives.

3. For the purposes of this essay, I use the term "Mexicans" to mean persons born in Mexico. "Mexican Americans" are persons born in the United States who have at least one parent of Mexican nationality. "Mexican origin" and "Mexican descent" are broad identifiers that encompass both the preceding categories.

4. For more on recovering the agency of historical subjects, see, for instance, Gordon (1988), Myers and Sangster (2001), and Schlossman (2005).

5. For studies that use juvenile court records successfully, see, for example, Schlossman and Wallach (1978), Schneider (1992), Odem (1995), Knupfer (2001), and Tanenhaus (2004).

6. For recent studies that examine the historical experience of Mexican-origin youth prior to the 1940s, see González (1974, 1990), Griswold del Castillo (1984), San Miguel (1987), Monroy (1990, 1999), Ruiz (1992, 2000), Escobar (1999), and Leyva (1999). For ethnographic studies carried out in the early twentieth century focusing on Mexican-origin youth, delinquency, and criminality in California, see the works of Emory S. Bogardus and his students, for example, Bogardus (1914, 1929, 1934), Drake (1927), and Mason (1929).

7. Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of studies have been written on the role of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century social reformers and psychologists in identifying and dealing with "problem" youth in the United States. See, for example, Platt (1969), Nasaw (1979), Schneider (1992), Odem (1995), Freedman (1996), and Knupfer (2001). For a sample of the reformers' and psychologists' writings, see, for instance, Hall (1905), Addams (1910), and Dewey (1916).

8. All the figures presented in this essay come from my calculations of the data in the case files.

9. The records of the Ventura School for Girls are part of the Youth Authority Records Collection of the California State Archives. To date, few studies have examined the history of Mexican-origin girls at the California School for Girls and its successor institution, the Ventura School for Girls. For one such work, see Escobedo (2004).

10. The photographs played an important role in the reform school, particularly during Fred C. Nelles's administration. Nelles used the photos to show the supposed transformation the boys went through while at Whittier, evident in the "before" and "after" photos contained in the case files. The photos taken upon commitment show boys dressed in uniform, often looking frightened, worried, or simply emotionless. Those documenting the boys upon release reveal smiling youths dressed in suits and hats, often carrying suitcases and waving goodbye. Such photographs were doubtless used to affirm the reform school's positive role in disciplining, reforming, and transforming boys into productive citizens. For more on the social role of the reform school and prisons in general, see Foucault (1977).

11. This finding reflects larger regional and national trends at the time. Most girls who ended up at reform schools in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did so for sexual behavior deemed antisocial or criminal in nature. See, for instance, the work of Schlossman and Wallach (1978), Brenzel (1983), Kunzel (1993), Alexander (1995), Odem (1995), and Knupfer (2001).

12. Dozens of studies have been written on the role of eugenics in the sterilization of the so-called "unfit." For disturbing accounts of the rationale for sterilizations in early-twentieth-century California, see Popenoe and Gosney (1929) and Human Betterment Foundation (1930). For recent studies on sterilization in the United States, see Reilly (1991), Larson (1995), Selden (1999), Kline (2001), and Stern (2005).

13. For the kinds of status offenses that could potentially land a minor before the courts in California, see State of California (1915), chapter 631, sec. 1, 1225–26.

14. Since the 1980s, numerous federal and state-sponsored studies have attempted to address the issue of "disproportionate minority confinement." See, for instance, Austin, Dimas, and Steinhart (1992), Cox (2000), and Hamparian and Leiber (1997).

15. See San Quentin State Prison, "Inmate Case Files, 1890–1958" and "Inmate Indexes, 1851–1940."

16. For one work detailing the recollections of a former inmate, not of Whittier but of a similar institution, the Preston School of Industry, see López and Pérez-Torres (2005).

17. For perceptions about Mexican-origin people in the early 1900s, see Bogardus (1934), Reisler (1976), George J. Sánchez (1993), Gutiérrez (1995), and Deverell (2004).

18. For Anthony Cruz's case, see Whittier Case File 32, and for Santos Arreola, see Whittier Case File 858.

19. For Gus Pascal's case, see Whittier Case File 757.

20. For Jesús Arbisó's case, see Whittier Case File 3059. For more on tuberculosis and other health problems affecting Mexicans in Southern California, see Deverell (2004) and Molina (2006).

21. According to the 1915 California juvenile court law, delinquent and dependent youth sixteen years and younger belonged at Whittier, while those over sixteen went to Preston. For the juvenile court law, see the California Statutes (State of California 1915), chap. 631, sec. 6, 1232. Also see Schlossman and Pisciotta (1986).

22. For more on Perfecto Guzmán, the ambush, and the escape, see Whittier Case File 3555. Unfortunately, Guzmán's picture does not appear in the case file.

23. For Virgilio Rodríguez's case, see Whittier Case File 3012.

24. For Lisa Arellano's case, see Whittier Case File 2903. None of the girls discussed in this essay had their photograph taken at the time of their commitment.

25. For Maude Salazar's case, see Whittier Case File 1653.

26. For evidence of the riot, see the case files of Juana Solís, Whittier Case Files 2351 and 2411; Carrie Walters, Whittier Case File 2015; Florence Miller, Whittier Case File 2403; Delia Vasquez, Whittier Case File 2562; and Lucy Vasquez, Whittier Case File 2634. For reference to Walters's status as a prostitute, see the records of Ronald Smith, Whittier Case File 2365.

27. It is also worth noting that we know much more about the male pachucos and zoot suiters than about their female counterparts, the pachucas. For more on the pachucos and zoot suiters, see, for instance, Griffith (1948), Mazón (1984), Escobar (1999), and Pagán (2003). For more on the pachucas, see Ruiz (1998), Ramírez (2000), and Escobedo (2004).

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Whittier State School Case Files

The case files of the Fred C. Nelles School for Boys (Whittier State School) are part of the Youth Authority Records Collection of the California State Archives in Sacramento. The names given below are the pseudonyms used in the essay.

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