

Placing Mexican Immigration within the Larger Landscape of Race Relations in the United States

In 1930 Roy Garis, a professor of economics at Vanderbilt University, submitted his "Report on Immigration," an intensive study of Mexicans in the United States, to Representative John Box of Texas, a diehard opponent of Mexican immigration. Box presented the report in the House of Representatives' extensive hearings on three bills with the same goal: to place immigration quotas on countries in the Western Hemisphere, just as the 1924 Immigration Act had placed quotas on European countries. Reducing immigration from Mexico in particular was a major priority; one bill suggested limiting immigration from Mexico to 2,500 persons per year, a significant reduction from the average 57,346 Mexican arrivals to the United States between 1923–1926.¹

The study was comprehensive, canvassing the Southwest, where the majority of Mexicans settled for work, and examining their economic, political, and social impact. Garis's arguments carried great weight, and parts of his report were reproduced in the popular magazine *Saturday Evening Post*. Garis established in his opening paragraph that Mexican immigration would cause a long-term racial problem by linking it to slavery: "Abraham Lincoln once said that 'this country could not endure half slave and half free.' When one considers the present effects of immigration from the countries to the south of us, especially from Mexico, he is forced by the logic of the developments to conclude that the United States can not endure part citizen and part foreign."² Garis attempted to persuade his audience by explaining that while Mexican immigration provided a cheap labor source, it also had negative sociopolitical and cultural effects on U.S. society, just as slavery had.

Garis also connected Mexican immigration to past immigrant groups. He cited both the commissioner general of immigration and the secretary of labor (the Department of Labor housed the Immigration and Naturalization Service) and concluded, "We barred the gate to Europe and closed the door to Asia, but the entrance to the South has remained open. The restrictive program is thereby virtually nullified, for to admit peons from Mexico and similar types of immigrants from the other non-quota countries while restricting European and excluding oriental immigration is not only ridiculous and illogical—it destroys the biological, social and economic advantages to be secured from the restriction of immigration."³

Garis's comments refer to how the 1924 Immigration Act most drastically affected Europeans, notably southern and eastern Europeans, whose immigration numbers were capped, and Asians, who were completely barred from immigration to the United States. Nativists sought to limit the large number of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe because they were believed to pose social, political, cultural, and economic problems to the United States. To mitigate the perceived problems, Progressive-era reformers developed Americanization programs to assist with health, education, housing, and child and maternal welfare, but many of these programs were based on the notion that these immigrants were inferior to Anglo-Saxon Protestants.

Immigrants who spoke out against the government, espoused socialist or communist politics, or organized in unions or political machines were seen as inassimilable and labeled enemies of the government.⁴ These attitudes intensified after the United States entered World War I in 1917 and fueled a "Red Scare." The U.S. government perpetuated fear of immigrants by developing programs, such as a campaign led by Attorney General Mitchell Palmer, which targeted immigrants as radicals, subversives, and communists and led to their arrest and, in some cases, subsequent deportation. The Ku Klux Klan, which had declined by the end of Reconstruction (1865–77), was revived in the 1910s and spread to the North, now targeting both blacks and immigrants (many of whom were Catholic or Jewish). The KKK espoused its tyrannical hatred against those they thought were destined to destroy the racial and religious homogeneity of the nation.⁵

Mexicans escaped much of this targeting of immigrants in the 1910s and early 1920s. They immigrated in smaller numbers, mainly to the Southwest, and a large number were sojourner laborers who worked for a season and

then returned home to Mexico. This meant that they did not tend to settle down, join unions, naturalize, or vote. These reasons, coupled with the lobbying power of large-scale employers from agriculture and industry as well as diplomatic and trade interests, had ensured that no quotas were imposed on immigrants from countries in the Western Hemisphere. Capitalist needs eclipsed desires for a racially and culturally homogenous nation. But Garis's analysis of the new racial order that would arise from changes to immigration policy prompted him to argue that Mexican immigration was just as threatening if not more so than southern and eastern European immigration.

After the passage of the 1924 Immigration Act, it was as if people looked around them and questioned why the United States had curtailed immigration from Europe and not from Mexico. In the aftermath of the passage of the Act, the discourse around Mexican immigration shifted, first, because the demographics of Mexican immigration had changed. In the two years leading up to the 1924 Immigration Act, Mexicans made up 10.9 percent of the total number of admitted immigrants; in the three years after passage of the Act, their numbers jumped to 16.1 percent; by 1927 Mexicans were second only to Germans in numbers of new immigrants. A long view of the 1920s reveals that in that period, Mexicans constituted over 11.2 percent of the total immigrants admitted to the United States.⁶ Second, Mexicans moved farther into the interior of the nation in search of work, farming sugar-beet fields in Denver, toiling in Chicago's factories, and laboring in the steel mills of Pittsburgh.⁷ Third, while Mexicans had long been seen as a racially inferior but generally malleable workforce, now stereotypes of Mexicans as criminal, a social burden, diseased, and inassimilable intensified. As such, attempts to curtail Mexican immigration increased.⁸

In this chapter and throughout this book I argue that one of the key ways to establish Mexican immigration as a problem was to use racial scripts to compare Mexicans to racialized groups already familiar to Americans. As a result, Americans increasingly began to look at Mexicans through a relational lens. In the post-1924 period, both proponents and opponents of Mexican immigration regularly compared Mexicans to other racialized groups in order to portray them as more or less desirable. For opponents, these racial scripts provided a shorthand with which to construct Mexicans as inferior. It was common, for example, for white Americans to discuss Mexicans as "the Negro problem" of the Southwest. White Americans argued that Mexicans

were not like them, and the best way to make this point clear was to compare Mexicans to other groups who had already been defined and established as nonwhite, nonnormative, and unfit for self-government. As Mexicans became thought of as another "other" and as outside the body politic, they were increasingly positioned alongside Indians, Asians, or blacks in immigration discourse. Discourses about these racialized groups were key in informing Americans what Mexican meant. When it comes to immigration, we understand each new "other" in relation to groups with which we are already familiar. As such, this chapter demonstrates a central premise of racial scripts: racialized groups are linked across time and space. Once attitudes, practices, customs, policies, and laws are directed at one group, they are more readily available for and hence easily applied to other groups.

Both those for and against Mexican immigration drew on racial scripts, and paying attention to the conditions under which these scripts emerge—the social structure, the material conditions, and the historical context—explains what is at stake in a racial script. Mexican immigration was (and continues to be) primarily labor migration. The fact that Mexicans escaped the quotas of 1924 does not signal their acceptance as immigrants; instead they fulfilled the country's need for low-wage laborers. Examining the long immigration debate era reveals that what was at stake was not the purported maintenance of U.S. racial purity but the need to manage labor. This gets at a key tenet of the history of the United States: despite the deep tradition of racial hierarchy and racial exclusion built into the American system, the dynamics of capitalist expansion always worked at cross-purposes to the goal of racial and cultural homogeneity. In other words, as the United States expanded both territorially and economically, the demand for labor almost always trumped the social desire to maintain racial purity.⁹

In this chapter I use the concept of racial scripts to examine the constructions of Mexican that emerged under a new immigration regime during post-1924 immigration debates and that are still with us today. Specifically I examine the nearly two dozen bills proposed by the House and Senate restricting immigration from countries in the Western Hemisphere from 1925, when many expressed their outrage that Mexican immigrants were not subject to the same quotas as Europeans, through 1930, by which time the Depression had set in and repatriations, voluntary and involuntary, and restrictions on visas severely curtailed Mexican immigration. I refer to this period as the long immigration debate era.

These long, intense, and sustained conversations on race shaped the meanings of Mexican during this phase of the immigration regime (and for years to come). Historian Mae Ngai's foundational work is key to understanding how the deportation policies developed during this period helped make some undocumented immigrants legal (such as European immigrants), while marking others as illegal (mainly Mexicans), even though Mexicans had escaped quota restrictions.¹⁰ Yet much more work needs to be done to better understand how the category Mexican came to be so demonized during the interwar period, and immigration policy and discourse is a rich site for this.

Employing the concept of racial scripts, I widen my perspective to look at various other groups that were discussed in the hearings, debates, correspondence, and newspaper articles on Mexican immigration to argue that blacks, Indians, Asians, and colonial subjects had a strong presence in these forums to cue people on how to think about Mexican immigration, as if giving them a racial script. Thus racial scripts refer to more than just a stereotype. They show how power is always at stake in racial categorization and how, once formed, those racial categories can easily be transferred to new groups. To put it simply, racism builds on past racial acts.

When looking at the history of Mexican Americans, we cannot point to landmark Supreme Court cases that clearly mark them as inside or outside legal or social citizenship, as we can for blacks and Asians.¹¹ Mexicans have been considered legally white and eligible for naturalization since the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. Their racial exclusion is not marked in the same way as that of blacks and Asians, who were written out of whiteness and, at different points in history, citizenship, in absolute terms.¹² Yet we need to learn to read race not just in the rulings but between the lines. Despite their access to citizenship, Mexican Americans' indigenous background marked them as culturally nonwhite. It also linked them to Native Americans, who were not only seen as racially other but who had a different relationship to U.S. citizenship and civil rights because of their sovereignty and rights purportedly guaranteed by treaties, which were commonly violated. Thus we must turn to key periods, such as the long immigration debate era, rather than only landmark legal decisions to understand the racial formation of Mexicans in the United States. In the next three sections I examine racial scripts that reoccurred regularly during the long immigration debate era to argue that they contributed to negative cultural constructions of Mexicans, even in the face of failed legislation.

THE RACIALIZATION OF MEXICANS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Before I examine racial scripts that circulated during the long immigration debate era, I turn to the longer racialization of Mexicans in the United States so that we may establish which scripts emerged in the nineteenth century that may have affected the racialization of Mexicans into the twentieth century and beyond. After the U.S. War with Mexico (1846–48), Mexicans entered the United States linked to two competing racial scripts: indigeneity and whiteness. The war and the ideology of Manifest Destiny that justified it highlighted Mexicans' inferior racial position due to their indigenous roots. But in the aftermath of the war, under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexicans residing in the acquired territories were offered U.S. citizenship, a privilege extended only to whites at the time. These conflicting scripts that simultaneously marked them as legally white but socially and culturally "other" and inferior would serve to complicate their status for generations to come.

Moreover Mexicans were entering the nation at a time when other racial scripts were already in circulation and were written into the very fabric of American society. Racial difference had been codified in U.S. founding documents. The Naturalization Act of 1790 deemed only those considered "free white persons" to be eligible for U.S. citizenship. In addition, the Constitution continued to allow for slavery, including the importation of slaves, until 1808 (Section 9, Article I), while the fugitive slave clause (Section 2, Article IV) required that escaped slaves be returned to their owners. For taxation purposes, whites were counted as "whole persons," but indigenous peoples were dismissed simply as "Indians not taxed" and slaves counted as "three fifths" of a person (Section 3, Article I).

This systematic and institutionalized racism directed at blacks and Indians in relation to citizenship, property, and systems of unfreedom meant that when Mexicans were forcibly incorporated into the United States, they were stepping onto an uneven playing field. With this kind of ideological and institutional framework, racial scripts that deemed racialized bodies inferior were easily transferred to Mexicans once white Americans began to come into regular contact with them in the 1810s and 1820s, especially during the 1830s and the Texas War of Independence from Mexico, and then again, of course, during the actual war with Mexico, as well as in the framing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

Indigenous Racial Scripts

Manifest Destiny was used by politicians, officials, and journalists beginning in the 1840s to justify westward expansion. As an ideology it expressed a belief that those who were taking over the land were spreading democratic institutions for those who were not capable of self-government. Jingoistic politicians, journalists, writers, and citizens alike singled out Native Americans especially, and those of non-European origin generally, as not fit for self-government. Furthermore they argued that Native Americans would eventually disappear in the Southwest after the U.S. takeover because they were not as biologically fit as white Americans. *Eugenicism*

These claims extended to Mexicans because their indigenous heritage and largely feudal political economy marked them as racially backward. Thus Manifest Destiny served as a rallying cry to justify the U.S. War with Mexico. Interestingly the notion that Mexicans were racially inferior (and their being Catholic) also contributed to anti-imperialist politics. In other words, some Americans preferred to leave Mexico's land off limits so that nonwhites would not have to be incorporated into the nation.¹³ As such, Manifest Destiny is inherently a racial ideology in that it pivots on ideas of who is deemed worthy of access to resources and fit for citizenship.¹⁴

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the war, provided the United States with new land and also laid out the terms of citizenship for the 75,000 to 100,000 Mexicans living in the Southwest. Mexico lost nearly half of its territory, including all or part of California, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. Continental expansion satisfied the U.S. need for more land for cotton production during slavery, highlighting how systems that worked to oppress groups were linked. Mexicans could choose to return to Mexico or stay in the United States. If they stayed, they could choose between Mexican and U.S. citizenship. If they did not declare a choice, within a year they would become U.S. citizens.¹⁵

Everything changed for Mexicans in the United States after the war. Overnight they went from living in Mexico to living in the United States and from being Mexican citizens to being U.S. citizens. Many lost their own land. In addition, their culture, language, and religion were now seen as inferior to those of white Americans. Various historians have looked at the aftermath of conquest and have detailed the ways that legal disenfranchisement

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and land dispossession and extralegal vigilante violence turned Mexicans into outsiders in what had once been their own land.¹⁶

Given their racial heritage, Mexicans were linked to Indians. U.S. policy toward Indians was marked by war, genocide, and the taking of Indian lands. Anthropologist Martha Menchaca demonstrates how hollow the category of citizenship was for Mexicans deemed more Indian than white. In California, for example, the state constitution contained a racial restriction that allowed only whites to vote. Because many Mexicans were of Indian descent or *mestizos* (of Indian and Spanish descent) this made the majority of Mexicans in California ineligible to vote.¹⁷ These moments shed light on how Mexicans formally entered the United States as citizens but remained in a subordinate racial position.

Whiteness as a Racial Script

Because Mexicans were afforded U.S. citizenship, which was otherwise available only to whites, it is important to understand the meaning of whiteness during this period. Scholars such as Reginald Horsman and Matthew Frye Jacobson have demonstrated the many fractures in whiteness during the nineteenth century.¹⁸ White was not a monolithic category but a hierarchical one, with shades of whiteness. Anglo-Saxons were on top; Celts, Slavs, Jews, and Mediterraneans were below them. As Americans increasingly defined themselves against Mexicans through jingoism, popular literature, and foreign policy in the mid-nineteenth century, the label *Anglo-Saxon* began to incorporate these once stratified groups and came to be seen as a racial category.¹⁹ Anglo-Saxons were defined by what they were not: black, Indian, and, as the United States came into more contact with its southern neighbor, Mexican. After all, these groups were not considered white in any way, racially, culturally, or politically. The increasing rise and authority of scientific racialism only confirmed such beliefs. Thus the hierarchy of races shifted to include Anglo-Saxons, still on top, and Mexicans, Indians, and blacks below them.

For Mexicans, access to whiteness often depended upon various factors, notably class and region. Mexicans were considered nonwhite because of their indigenous heritage, but access to resources, land, and money helped them move up the social hierarchy. As historian David Montejano has argued, "money whitens." In his study of the Texas frontier, he found that Mexicans were not considered a monolithic group but were divided into

landed and landless, with the landed finding more acceptance among Anglos. For the landless, performing low-scale, segmented labor helped solidify the notion of Mexicans as an inferior race.²⁰ Similarly scholar Laura Gomez examines Mexicans' "fragile claim to whiteness" in the aftermath of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. She demonstrates how Mexicans occupied an in-between status; they were legally white, which served Anglo elites who wanted to lighten the demographics of their territory to increase its chances of statehood, but socially Mexicans remained a distinct racial group.²¹ Historian John Nieto-Phillips argues that New Mexicans themselves embraced a white identity in a move to distance themselves from a Mexican or indigenous past as a way to buffer themselves from the rapidly changing society that marginalized those groups.²²

In Southern California beginning in the 1880s, local boosters developed a racial script, now referred to by historians as a "Spanish fantasy past," as a way of erasing the region's violent recent history.²³ The Spanish fantasy past established a historical narrative for the region, projecting a romanticized Spanish past replete with images of charming señoritas and handsome caballeros on horseback. This idealized past masked the reality of the U.S. War with Mexico and the period of intense vigilante violence immediately afterward. This script left out Mexico's rule in the region and also omitted Indian societies' prominence before American, Spanish, or Mexican rule. This script was all the more powerful because it emerged at a time of demographic decline in the Mexican population. With Mexicans' commensurately waning political power, there were few challenges to this invented past. With the stroke of a pen, Mexicans were transformed from conquered subjects to picturesque denizens. As historian Bill Deverell gracefully writes, "In this imagery, a Mexican boy posed atop a burro selling flowers becomes less an indication of urban poverty than an unwitting actor in a period romance."²⁴ Taken in the aggregate, these historical moments demonstrate that what emerged from a politics of imperialism was a racial script of Mexicans as white in name only. Though Mexicans with access to resources may have had more success climbing the racial hierarchy, for the most part Mexicans were branded as inferior and unsuitable for self-government.

These interweaving racial scripts of Mexicans as legally white but racially other codified their position as unequal citizens for generations to come. Moreover they gave rise to yet another racial script, one of unequal citizenship, which would shape how other groups entered the United States. Mexicans

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were the first racialized group to be granted citizenship. Until then, only whites had access to citizenship through birthright or naturalization. But Mexicans were not afforded the full benefits of citizenship. Stripped of their land and the economic and political wherewithal that accompanies land ownership, they were effectively denied equitable access to resources. In short, the Mexican American experience laid the groundwork for citizenship in name only.

THE LONG IMMIGRATION DEBATE ERA

In the 1920s white Americans were once again heatedly debating the place of Mexicans in U.S. society. It is during this time that we see how established racial scripts were adapted to support a depiction of Mexicans as outside of U.S. social membership despite the fact that their numbers were not restricted, they were citizens or eligible for citizenship, and they had a long history in the Southwest. I first discuss how and why Mexicans once again began to occupy a central place in American discourse and then explain why this period is crucial for understanding the long-term implications of the post-1924 immigration debates for the racial construction of Mexicans.

After the U.S. War with Mexico, with the Mexican population in the United States on the decline and their subordinate position in the racial hierarchy solidified, Mexican immigration did not occupy a central place in public debate. But beginning in the 1910s the Mexican population in the United States increased for a variety of reasons, including flight from the instability caused by the Mexican Revolution and, for those seeking work, the increased ease of transportation accompanying the expansion of the railroads.

As Mexican immigration increased, so did methods to circumscribe Mexicans' place in the United States. The passage of the 1917 Literacy Act increased immigration requirements, but these were aimed primarily at southeastern Europeans who sometimes attempted to enter the country through its southern border.²⁵ Nonetheless the Act's imposition of a head tax proved to be a financial burden for some Mexican immigrants, and many looked for places to cross the border away from the supervision of a border checkpoint to avoid paying it.²⁶ With the creation of the border patrol in 1924, Mexicans experienced even more difficulty in crossing the border. Even though a limited budget and understaffing rendered the border patrol generally ineffec-

tive during its first years, its existence signaled that Mexicans were not welcome in the United States. In addition, negative cultural representations of Mexicans circulated more readily. The image of Mexicans as carriers of disease that threatened both the health of the nation and its charity system and as a fertile population ready to overtake the nation resulted in humiliating medical inspections at border-crossing stations, making crossing the border even more punishing.²⁷ Thus the post-1924 period marked a shift to new mechanisms of exclusion.

Birds of Passage or Mexican Invaders?

In the 1910s and 1920s industry and agribusiness leaders in the Southwest who depended on low-wage laborers rallied against harsh immigration restrictions on Mexicans. They argued that Mexicans were not a threat to U.S. society because they were "birds of passage" who would work hard for low wages and then return to Mexico. But as immigration debates continued even after the passage of the 1924 Act, the notion that Mexicans, like blacks, were a population ready to spiral out of control was a popular racial script for portraying Mexicans as unsuitable newcomers. In these post-1924 debates about Mexican immigration, politicians and everyday citizens alike regularly raised the specter of slavery. They argued that, like slaves, the Mexican population would increase at unprecedented rates and create a multitude of problems.²⁸

The emphasis on comparing Mexican labor to slavery reminds us that there is always something at stake when racializing a group. Slavery was a political economic system designed to extract the greatest profits for whites. Regarding blacks as racially inferior helped whites justify using them as slaves.²⁹ The low-wage labor Mexicans engaged in in the Southwest was in no way comparable to slavery; the thread that runs through both political economies, however, once again places an emphasis on the profits for those at the top of the power structure while disregarding those doing the labor, showing the contradictions between capitalism and a liberal democracy. Thus comparing Mexicans to slaves was not just a racial comparison but was fundamentally about how to continue to fuel the political economy while maintaining a racial hierarchy.

None other than the chairman of the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, Albert Johnson, employed the use of such racial scripts. Congressman Johnson served as the chairman for six consecutive sessions,

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from 1919 through 1931. He was also the president of the Eugenic Research Association.³⁰ During this period he worked steadily to pass restrictive immigration legislation. He was the primary author of the 1924 Immigration Act, which he justified as a way to stem the tide against "a stream of alien blood, with all its inherited misconceptions respecting the relationships of the governing power to the governed."³¹ After the passage of the Act, Johnson continued to use this racialized biological reasoning to support restrictive immigration.

Johnson compared the situation with Mexican immigration to slavery to help enact quotas on immigrants from countries of the Western Hemisphere, including Mexico. In 1926, during an immigration hearing on extending quotas to Mexico, Johnson argued, "Who would have thought at the time that a fearful racial problem would have come, leading to a great war, from the introduction of those blacks? This committee knows that 1 person in every 12 in the United States is black skinned."³² Johnson's comments clearly are meant to invoke the image of a population explosion, which resonated with eugenic thinking of the time that advocated that only certain populations be allowed to reproduce (positive eugenics).³³ He intensified the image of a population out of control, relying on racial scripts, by referring to "those blacks," which brought to mind images not just of a significant black population but of miscegenation.

In a later immigration restriction hearing, in 1930, Johnson presented a report to his congressional colleagues designed to sway them to join him in supporting the bill.³⁴ Johnson quoted testimony from Dr. H. H. Laughlin, a leading eugenicist and director of the Eugenics Record Office. Laughlin was an ardent supporter of strict immigration policy and a frequent expert witness for anti-immigration forces in Congress. He argued against importing Mexican labor by using the example of slavery. According to Laughlin, during two hundred years of slavery, about 333,000 blacks had been forcibly brought to the United States. In 1930 blacks numbered approximately 10 million, thirty times their population when slavery was abolished. "That makes a racial problem of the first order, and it is extremely difficult to solve," Laughlin argued, the implication being, of course, that Mexican immigration would result in a similarly intractable problem.³⁵ Thus Mexican immigration could readily be identified as a major race problem by connecting it to slavery, which both Johnson and Laughlin attempted to recast as a population problem, not a labor solution.

Other attacks on Mexican immigration came from those advancing arguments based on Mexicans' perceived biological inferiority and inability to self-govern. C. M. Goethe was a prominent West Coast businessman, a eugenicist, and the founder of the Immigration Study Commission.³⁶ Looking to extend quotas to Mexico, which he characterized as "pathetically hybridized," he wrote to Representative John Garner of Texas to share his collected correspondence on Mexican immigration.³⁷ Representative Garner in turn shared Goethe's archive at the congressional hearings on Mexican immigration. One of the letters contained newspaper clippings that highlighted stories of white "girls" who married blacks and Koreans. Goethe asked if Mexicans might also have such intentions. He described the Mexican Indian's "hopes of gaining for his children the precious genes of Nordics, that the latter may become mestizo," and went on to ask, "Does our failure to restrict Mexican immigration spell the downfall of our Republic . . . ? Athens could not maintain the brilliancy of the Golden Age of Pericles when hybridization of her citizenry began. Rome fell when the old patrician families lost their race consciousness and interbred with servile stocks."³⁸

Goethe relied on past racial scripts once directed at Mexicans in the mid-nineteenth century to racialize a new generation of Mexican immigrants. He appropriated and recycled familiar Manifest Destiny claims to assert that Mexicans were biologically inferior due to their indigenous heritage. Unlike those who were in favor of Mexican immigration for their labor and had depicted Mexicans as "birds of passage," Goethe depicted Mexicans as a miscegenation threat, a cultural representation that was untried in relation to Mexicans and not commonly circulated until the post-1924 period. He employed this racial script as Mexicans were becoming a more permanent population in the United States and thus represented a different kind of threat, especially given that they had access to citizenship.

Similarly the notion of blacks as a miscegenation threat circulated widely in the post-Reconstruction era, during which blacks demanded social, political, and legal equality and whites fought to reestablish a system of social control to replace the slave system. Depictions of black men in particular as a miscegenation threat, followed up at times with lynchings, was a particularly violent and powerful way of circumscribing them. Antimiscegenation discourse and legislation was also directed at Asian men, purportedly to protect white women. Asian men's lives were circumscribed by immigration laws that did not allow them to bring their families to the United States, as

Public displays of violence with Mexicans to criminalize racialization

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well as by the racism that limited where they could work, live, and recreate. These factors, combined with obstacles limiting the immigration of Asian women, meant that Asian men often lived in bachelor communities or engaged in transient labor. Though these conditions were not of the men's own making, they gave rise to societal anxieties of an unattached and sometimes roving male Asian population that needed to be monitored and controlled. Depicting Mexicans as the new miscegenation danger demonstrates the power, utility, and multipurpose nature of racial scripts in that past depictions of men of color could so readily be transferred onto Mexicans.³⁹

This sort of rhetoric came from the country's elite but was employed readily by everyday people. Racial scripts served as shorthand to swiftly link Mexicans to other undesirable racial groups to garner support for the Box Bill. In 1928, in correspondence between George Clark Sargent, an attorney in San Francisco, and his congressional representative, W. E. Evans, Sargent expressed his support for the bill: "We already have a negro question in the southern states, which is going to take all the ingenuity of our best minds to solve. The Mexican peon is nine-tenths Indian, and would be a greater affliction than the negro."⁴⁰ By linking Mexicans to blacks, he suggested that if Mexicans were afforded the opportunity to become a permanent population, they would develop into yet another labor problem, thus requiring the establishment of systems of social control just as the South had done with the creation of Jim Crow laws beginning in the 1890s. By connecting Mexicans to blacks and Indians, he indicated that Mexicans too were racially inferior to whites. His emphasis on Mexicans' indigenous background readily tapped into a racial script formed in the mid-nineteenth century that deemed Mexicans inferior because of their *mestizaje* (mixed indigenous and Spanish ancestry). Sargent did not explain his claim, and, for all intents and purposes, he did not need to do so. That is the power of racial scripts. One does not need to explain such claims when a preexisting U.S. racial sensibility readily links these groups together.

Both nativists rallying against Mexican immigration and employers who lobbied for their continued immigration regularly referred to Mexicans as "peons." The word harkened to a past in Latin America, where the word referred to inferior, low-paid, unskilled laborers with few rights and little autonomy. But the term also invoked another system of labor coercion, debt peonage, which was instituted in the South with the abolishment of slavery,

thus ideologically linking Mexicans to blacks as menial laborers. Peons, like blacks in the post-slavery South, were described as dependent and accused of undercutting the "free labor" engaged in by whites. Many opposed slavery not on moral grounds but for economic reasons, arguing that free labor was economically and socially superior to slavery. A central tenet of capitalism is that a worker is independent and free to negotiate labor contracts.⁴¹ Thus Mexican laborers were not just a "racial problem" but anathema to a capitalist economic system.

Similarly, in a letter addressed to the editor of *H. Patriot*, the writer argued that those who were pro-immigration

"urge[d] on behalf of the employment of this poor [Mexican] laborer similar reasons to those advanced for the bringing of negro slaves into the country, and if they are permitted to have their way they will curse the nation with another race problem. Better curb this menace while it is capable of being peacefully curbed, rather than wait until it reaches such proportions as will once more array one section of the country against another. There were wise men in the early days of our nation, men like Thomas Jefferson, men who saw the danger attending the entry into our country of an alien race. And there are wise men here today, men like John C. Box, who seeks [sic] to prevent the United States from repeating the mistake it made previous to 1808 of importing members of an alien race after which date (but all too late) Congress banned the importation of slaves."⁴²

This letter is interesting on various levels. The writer chooses to deploy his own version of history, one that upholds his narrative. He casts Jefferson as a bulwark against slavery, when in fact Jefferson owned over 650 slaves himself and is rumored to have fathered children with Sally Hemings, one of his slaves.⁴³ The writer also claims that although Congress banned the importation of slaves in 1808, this action was "too late." What he decries is not the great tardiness in righting a moral wrong but rather that this slow response provided blacks with the opportunity to increase their numbers through reproduction. This line of thinking resonates with the arguments employed against Mexican immigrants in the late 1920s. Whereas prior opponents of immigration had stressed that the Mexican population in the United States would increase through immigration, they now drew attention to the growing birth rates of Mexicans as a new means by which the population would increase.⁴⁴ Influenced by eugenic discourses of the time, many people framed their concerns over immigration in terms of how an over-

population of Mexicans might affect what they saw as the racial homogeneity of the nation.

The Deportable Mexican

The cultural representation of Mexicans as noncitizens, and thus as a disposable population, was invoked over and over in immigration hearings. In the 1920s, especially after 1924, as we saw earlier, the rhetoric of Mexicans as "birds of passage" declined as their permanent population increased. Such a shift required new solutions in terms of how to deal with Mexican laborers, and deportation was increasingly offered as a ready solution. If Mexicans no longer willingly returned to Mexico at the end of their seasonal work, they could be forced to leave. Changes in immigration policy supported such thinking. The 1924 Immigration Act removed the statute of limitations on deportations for entering without a visa. More significantly historian Mae Ngai demonstrates how the Act was applied unevenly, allowing European immigrants to avoid deportations through loopholes while simultaneously enforcing the law against Mexicans and hence linking them to illegality.⁴⁵

Lest the public not realize the advantages of a deportable workforce, leaders from various sectors strategically contrasted Mexicans with other racialized groups who had citizenship, mostly Puerto Ricans and blacks, as a way of highlighting Mexicans' desirability. While the "birds of passage" stereotype underscored that Mexicans would return home, the comments made by these leaders showed that if they did not go back, they could be forcibly removed, which would not be possible if they were U.S. citizens.

Many of the most vocal supporters for Mexican immigration were agribusiness and industry leaders from California. The Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, the businessman's booster club in a city built on boosterism, actively fought restrictions on Mexican immigration, and in Dr. George Clements, head of the Chamber's Agricultural Department, they had an ardent member and supporter. Clements highlighted Mexican laborers' lack of citizenship as a strong advantage. He shifted attention away from biological notions of race that positioned Mexicans as inferior to highlight what made them desirable as laborers. In a letter to his representative, W. E. Evans, Clements wrote:

Arguments have been offered in a vain endeavor to show the Mexican laborer as a menace to the blood stream of the United States. Since this source of labor is alien, it is controllable. Should this which is our present source of alien labor be

closed to us we would be forced to employ Porto Rican Negroes who would without question complicate and threaten the biological problem as we see it, particularly since the hybrid negro while offering few identification marks as to his race has all the habits detrimental to his progenitors. Again, he is an American citizen, and once brought into the United States, the full obligation as such must be accepted by the United States.⁴⁶

Clements underscored Puerto Ricans as a biological threat, arguing that "while they all have negro blood within their veins, the greater part of them are without these physical markings which can only protect society. They are red-headed, freckle-faced, thin-lipped negro hybrids with all the vicious qualities of their progenitors."⁴⁷

Clearly, for groups such as Puerto Ricans and blacks, citizenship was a hollow privilege; it was repeatedly trumped by their race, which marked them as undesirable. Puerto Ricans' second-class citizenship is highlighted by Clements's characterization of the obligations of citizenship taking effect once one is in the United States, as if citizenship rights were limited to the country's continental borders. He categorizes Puerto Ricans as foreigners, even though their homeland is a U.S. commonwealth and despite the fact that as of 1917 (with the passage of the Jones Act), U.S. citizenship had been conferred on all citizens of Puerto Rico. In addition, by emphasizing Puerto Ricans' "negro" origins, Clements invoked a racial category that was denigrated in America. He played on this by portraying the Puerto Rican as a sort of racial Trojan horse, harboring "negro" characteristics that, though temporarily hidden, might emerge at any time. Clements's remarks underscore how race and citizenship could be at odds and are important reminders that de jure citizenship did not guarantee social citizenship.

Clements's comments also demonstrate the stakes in a racial script. Although he characterized arguments that portray Mexicans as a biological threat as flawed, he took up the same racial script when portraying Puerto Ricans, thus demonstrating that what was at stake had much less to do with maintaining some sort of racial purity in the United States than effectively managing labor. He demonstrates that racial logic does not have to be logical. One can dismiss racial scientific reasoning for one group but then embrace it to disparage another.

Other notable players highlighted Mexicans' desirability by comparing them to groups that could not be characterized as "birds of passage." Harry Chandler, the owner of the *Los Angeles Times* and a well-known proponent

of Mexican immigration, testified at hearings before the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization to extend quotas to Mexico and other countries in the Western Hemisphere in January 1930. Chandler argued that, as Indians, Mexicans would be less of a problem than "any other people brought into the country," such as Filipinos or Puerto Ricans. Unlike these other groups, he added, "our Indians [do] not make a problem."⁴⁸

Chandler's comments reveal how one could also use racial scripts to portray a racialized group positively, if only for the self-serving purpose of continuing to guarantee a cheap labor force. As residents of a U.S. protectorate, Filipinos were considered "colonial subjects" and allowed to immigrate to the United States; Puerto Ricans were U.S. citizens. As potential laborers, each group posed challenges.⁴⁹ Furthermore he played on constructions of Mexicans as Indians, racialized groups who had been contained to a large degree through genocide, forced assimilation, and reservation policies, and thus were not seen as a looming threat. As a longtime resident of California, Chandler was likely referring to Indians in that state when he spoke of "our" Indians. This population had been colonized under the Spanish and made to work and live in the mission system established by the Franciscans, either by force or what the *padres* saw as benevolent assimilation. Their population had already seriously declined by the time of the U.S. takeover, so it is no wonder Chandler presented them as a benign population. This characterization had long been fueled by a nineteenth-century Spanish fantasy past that privileged depictions of gentle Indians in bucolic pastures in cultural texts, such as Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona* (published in 1884) over the reality of the violence inherent in the mission system and U.S. takeover. Chandler's testimony before Congress demonstrated that mid-nineteenth-century racial scripts had a long shelf life, with the ability to influence policy well into the twentieth century. The same script that served to justify a U.S. takeover in one century ensured a cheap labor supply in another.

Special interests, such as agricultural organizations, formed their own immigration committees to advocate on behalf of continued Mexican immigration; they used a similar comparative strategy and readily shared it with their elected officials. For example, in California the Ventura County Farm Bureau's immigration committee chairman contended that if Mexican workers were not available, Puerto Ricans and blacks would fill the labor gap: "Negroes would create a much greater social problem and school problem than do Mexicans since the latter are not American citizens and a very large



FIGURE 1. "Harry Chandler, publisher of the *Los Angeles Times*, dons a gay sombrero to receive greetings from his little Olvera Street friends." Courtesy of *Los Angeles Times* 1938, photographic archive, Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, UCLA.

percentage of them return annually to Mexico."⁵⁰ The Bureau highlighted two other important points: as noncitizens, Mexicans could more easily return to their home country and did not have the same rights as blacks (inequitable though they were). Ralph Taylor, executive secretary of the Agricultural Legislative Committee of California, delivered a comparable message to the California Farm Bureau Federation, but took it further. Referring to

Mexicans, he argued, "Unlike the American or Porto Rican negro, he can be deported if it becomes necessary," thus emphasizing the power the U.S. government could exert in controlling capital's workforce.⁵¹ The comments left no doubt that "birds of passage" was not just a trope but a political reality, albeit a potentially forced one. Even if Mexicans successfully passed border examinations, paid head taxes, obtained visas, and found jobs and performed them well, they remained in a vulnerable limbo of being deportable.

Consistently contrasted to blacks and Puerto Ricans based on citizenship status, Mexicans were cast as immigrants, which invariably led to a dominant perception of Mexicans as foreigners. Because distinctions were rarely made between Mexicans and Mexican Americans, it left the impression that all Mexicans, including Mexican Americans, were immigrants. Asian American studies scholars have skillfully demonstrated that a group constructed as "perpetually foreign" is seen as undeserving of citizenship rights and culturally marginalized.⁵² I would not argue that Mexicans are racialized as foreigners in the same ways (for reasons including that they are legally white and can sometimes pass for white), but with few counterscripts to challenge a dominant discourse of Mexicans as immigrants, we see, even today, assumptions and stereotypes that depict Mexicans and Mexican Americans alike as new arrivals.

Violence as Discourse

Legislation was just one way to restrict Mexican immigration. Opponents also suggested violence. Those who had used violence before, such as the Ku Klux Klan, and even those who only knew this history of racialized violence, now advocated using such tactics on Mexicans. Such suggestions were in keeping with a long documented history of violence against Mexicans in the United States, including by the Texas Rangers, a loosely organized force that patrolled Texas from the 1830s into the twentieth century; the U.S. Border Patrol, which relied on legal and extra legal forms of violence in their dealings with Mexicans; and vigilantes who lynched Mexicans.⁵³

One should note the ease with which people suggested violence as a form of control to lawmakers. It highlights a key tenet in racial scripts: that the tactics used against one racialized group can be readily transferred to another group. Racial scripts naturalize racist tactics when they get recycled and, in the process, appear justifiable. The fact that these tactics had been used before made them more familiar and thus placed them, if not necessarily within

the realm of acceptable behavior, alongside actions that were permissible and without consequence; hence constituents felt comfortable sharing these ideas with their elected officials.

Long before the controversies of the 1920s, those in the western United States had used both legal means and violence to suppress the Asian population, mostly Chinese and Japanese, and a minority Filipino population. These campaigns included the massacre of Chinese in 1871 in Los Angeles, the Alien Land Law Acts of 1913 and 1920 that prohibited Asian immigrants from owning land or leasing it for more than three years, and the development of various zoning laws aimed at circumscribing the businesses of Chinese business owners.⁵⁴ This history of violence against and containment of Asians informed the views of Madison Grant, a leading eugenicist and the author of *The Passing of the Great Race*, in his 1923 letter to the House Immigration Committee chair, Albert Johnson. Grant built his case against Mexicans with very few words but great certainty, based on his credentials as a scientific "expert." "Some friends of mine are collecting for publication the data about the Chinese Exclusion fight of fifty years ago," he wrote to Johnson. "The case with Mexicans today is exactly the same as it was with the Chinese fifty years ago."⁵⁵ Support from Grant and other leading eugenicists of the time was key to the passage of the 1924 Immigration Act's restrictive legislation, and thus Grant's words, which invoked the massacre of Chinese fifty-two years earlier, carried great weight with the chairman.

Others expressed views along the same lines. One resident of Los Angeles, Eva Martin, wrote to Chairman Johnson, "We are literally swamped with Mexicans, Japs, Chinese and Negroes. . . . More and more are being born here." Her comments highlight the shifts in these immigrant populations increasingly settling in the United States and gaining citizenship. She did not, however, urge the passage of more restrictive legislation. Instead Martin proposed, "There should be a new Klan composed of all real Americans."⁵⁶ Linking racialized groups could provide people not only with a definition of what constituted a problem but also with what might serve as a solution.

Organized opposition to Mexican immigration also came from Ku Klux Klan chapters. The Klan's overt support of the Box Bill in 1928 is an example of how racial projects often overlap. The secretary of the Los Angeles chapter of the Ku Klux Klan wrote to the chairman of the House Immigration Committee to express his organization's support for restricting Mexican immigration: "I am talking restriction of Mexican immigration to ever one [sic]

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I meet."⁵⁷ His letter suggests that mechanisms for controlling one population can also control others. Traditionally the Klan is associated with the South and with vigilante violence directed against blacks. In this case, the Klan was based in Los Angeles and worked openly and within the system to control Mexicans through legislation. They in fact became established in L.A. during the peak years of Mexican immigration and increased restrictions against Asians at the local, state, and national levels.⁵⁸ These actions raise questions about the degree to which western politics, usually portrayed as relatively progressive, actually differed from southern politics, and serves as another example of how the lives of people of color are linked, which the concept of racial scripts stresses.

Whiteness as a Racial Script

During this same time period, Mexicans and Mexican Americans fought back on various fronts, joining labor unions, choosing not to naturalize, and hoping that their children would not assimilate American ways, which they perceived as too permissive.⁵⁹ But Mexicans also fought to be recognized as white because whiteness afforded them certain rights.⁶⁰ Although they were legally white, they were clearly not afforded full social citizenship, and even their legal classification was at times contested. By fighting to be recognized as white, Mexicans were in a sense accepting the U.S. racial hierarchy. They were not challenging the terms of the debates but rather saying that they were on the right side of the color line. Their strategy was to combat the racism directed at them by protecting the rights they had. Mexicans were not often invited to participate in the debates on immigration during the long immigration era; thus we must turn to different sites to examine Mexicans' responses and actions around these questions.

Historians David Gutiérrez and Neil Foley have written about the large-scale organizing in which Mexicans engaged through organizations such as the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) in Texas and California.⁶¹ Unlike most other Mexican organizations in the United States in the 1920s, whose main concern was immigrant mutual aid, LULAC's mission was political. The organization aimed to help naturalized Mexicans and Mexican Americans to claim their rights as U.S. citizens. Formed in 1929 by Mexicans who had been born or come of age in the United States (including some who had served in the U.S. armed forces during World War I), LULAC

pursued an agenda of assimilation, excluding from membership Mexicans who were not U.S. citizens.

Confronted with the possibility of losing the little ground they had around citizenship rights, Mexicans fought back. Historian Mario Garcia tells the history of the move by the El Paso city registrar and the city health officer to change Mexicans' racial classification from "white" to "colored" in El Paso in 1936.⁶² At the time, El Paso had a high white infant mortality rate, which would reflect badly on any city, but especially one such as El Paso that was working to establish itself as a health resort. With the help of LULAC, Mexicans in the city mounted a campaign against the reclassification and won. Because El Paso city officials had justified the reclassification by citing the precedent set by the U.S. Census Bureau to place Mexicans in a racial category of their own, the Mexican activists continued their fight in Washington, D.C., where they compelled the Bureau to once again classify them as white.

Another history-making moment occurred in 1931, in Lemon Grove, San Diego, when school officials segregated Mexicans into a separate school. Enlisting legal counsel and the help of the Mexican Consulate, the Mexican community organized and took their fight to the Superior Court of California in San Diego. Roberto Alvarez v. The Board of Trustees of Lemon Grove School District was the first successful school desegregation court decision in U.S. history, predating the 1954 landmark Supreme Court case, Brown v. Board of Education.⁶³

Mexicans fought discrimination through social and cultural means as well. Historian Gabriela Arredondo argues that the Mexican community in Chicago had a more ambivalent attitude toward remaining in the United States permanently and thus tended to turn less to civic participation, preferring to combat discrimination through everyday acts, such as joining sports teams and developing local festivals and parades. Arredondo also describes how Mexicans, cognizant of how racial positioning operated, tried to establish themselves as superior to blacks. For example, some Mexicans chose not to shop in black-owned stores or socialize with their black neighbors and Mexican children ignored black classmates on the playground.⁶⁴ While these tactics may appear severe, Mexicans knew how racial scripts operated and that if classified as "colored" they would face severe consequences in areas such as housing, school, and employment discrimination, which many already experienced as a result of de facto segregation.

thus, the beginning of intragroup territory

THE ENDURING POWER OF RACIAL SCRIPTS

Nikhil Pal Singh argues that the “story of nationhood must be told over and over, because there is nothing natural about the nation or the fashioning of its predominant civic identities. Nations . . . [are] lived primarily through the techniques of narration and representation.”⁶⁵ In the case of Mexican immigration, every new bill introduced on the subject, every hearing, every testimony became a way of telling who was and was not part of the nation. In order to establish whether or not Mexicans “belonged,” it was important to articulate who else did or did not belong. Aligning Mexicans with these groups brought into stark relief their place in the racial order. Anti-immigrationists appropriated America’s usable past, its failed racial experiments, and the specter of the racial other to advance their cause. Supporters of immigration countered with their own scripts of America’s racial past. To discuss Mexican immigration was therefore to reveal where groups stood in the U.S. racial order and to reinforce, justify, and naturalize that order.

This chapter detailed the myriad ways in which opponents of Mexican immigration sought to block, curtail, and control Mexican immigration. The next chapter discusses how they fought this battle on a different front: naturalization. Like their efforts to control Mexican immigration, racial scripts were key in the efforts to deny Mexicans the ability to naturalize. Opponents marshaled legal cases and precedent to extend restrictive measures to Mexicans and exclude Mexicans from U.S. citizenship.

CHAPTER 2

“What Is a White Man?”

The Quest to Make Mexicans Ineligible for U.S. Citizenship

What is a White Man? This is a question which will presently begin to worry and perplex all persons with one-half of one per cent or more pigmentation in their skin. None of the existing rules of anthropologists and biologists henceforth count; a person is white if he is recognized by the “man in the street” as white. If he is not so recognized, he is to be considered black or brown or yellow or some other tint which makes it impossible for him to qualify for American citizenship.¹

So began an editorial published in *The Nation* in 1924. The editors were responding to recent Supreme Court decisions and pending cases that pivoted on understandings of race and citizenship. According to the Naturalization Act of 1790 and its revision in 1870, only those who were deemed white or black could become citizens, so there was much at stake in how one answered “Who is a white man?”² The Supreme Court had ruled that neither Japanese persons nor Asian Indians were white in *Ozawa v. United States* (1922) and *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* (1923). Moreover since Section 13 of the 1924 Immigration Act restricted immigration to persons eligible for citizenship, an immigrant needed to be from a group considered white not just to naturalize but to even immigrate to the United States.

Particularly after the *Ozawa* and *Thind* rulings, white supremacists saw an opportunity to nullify Mexicans’ eligibility for U.S. citizenship by insisting these landmark citizenship decisions made previous racial designations of Mexicans null and void. They hoped to apply the racial scripts designed for Asians and South Asians to Mexicans. The ultimate aim of the proponents