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Mexican Immigration to the US

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The United States has a long history of subjecting numerous racialized groups to various forms of hostile legislation that has resulted in the assimilation of most immigrants. Even, when the first colonialization occurred in the United States, the settlers had no intention to ever conform to the “native” way of life and instead decided that they were more superior and should therefore assimilate the natives into their way of life and models of thinking. Since America was founded by those building blocks, it is consequently the reason why the U.S. does not fully recognize any other culture then the white hegemonic culture that so called “founded this country”. Not only is the “white “ culture perceived to be the dominant culture, but it is also the principle race. According to Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s book, *Racial Formation in the United States*, they discuss that “race as an essence, as something fixed, concrete and objective but it is really a concept that signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies” (54-55). Race is often the most visible way to differentiate between people and is sometimes the easiest; with race, comes certain privileges and differential treatment depending on what others perceive your race to be, which leads to the idea of race as being something that is socially constructed. They state, “racial formation as a socio-historical process by which racial categories are created inhabited, transformed and destroyed” (55). Racial formations often lead to negative stereotypes and preconceived notions about races that just perpetuate white superiority over everyone else. One racialized group in particular, Mexico, has a long history of racial conflicts and immigration issues with the United States that explains why their relationship is different then most other immigrant groups that have been conformed. Mexico is the only successful racialized group that has been able to attain their language and keep their cultural traditions alive within the United States; there are many factors that are contributing to this including the close proximity to their homeland, the refusal to recognize “Anglo-Saxon” culture as their own and the disdain at other Mexicans if they identify with the white hegemonic culture that is responsible for racializing them.

There are numerous terms that are often hard to differentiate when talking about Mexicans. They can also be referred to as Chicano (if they are Mexican-American), Hispanic or Latino. It is very vague when one uses the terms Latino and Hispanic because most people use them interchangeably. According to the report, U.S. Census Bureau in 2002: *Hispanic Population in the United States*, written by Roberto Ramirez and Patricia de la Cruz, the terms Hispanic and Latino are interchangeable of one another and include Mexican, South and Central American countries, Puerto Rican, Cuban and other Hispanic countries including Brazil (1). The way the census classifies Hispanic and Latino’s demonstrates that the United States groups all Spanish-speaking countries together and does not think of them as separate entities. Most Hispanics classify themselves as Latino but in most Hispanic’s eyes, Brazil is not seen as Hispanic; Brazilians often do not like to classify themselves as Hispanic or Latino. In Helen Marrow’s article, “*To be or not to be (Hispanic or Latino) Brazilian Racial and Ethnic Identity in the United States*, she states, “ The official logic of Brazilians as non-Hispanics/Latinos and the self-identification logics of Brazilians as non-Hispanics (and non Latinos) often come into real conflict with the way that many U.S. native view foreign-born Brazilian immigrants as Hispanics/Latinos “(4). Most people in American society group south and central America,

Mexico, Brazil, Puerto Rico, Cuba etc. as one large group that have no disparities that make them different from one another, which has led to a tumultuous relationships between the different areas when they reside in the same areas. One of the biggest insults that are seen in the Hispanic and Latino communities is when someone refers to them as the wrong ethnicity. This is occurring because the people coming from Mexico and South America feel that “Latino” and “Hispanic” are vague terms that the Anglos created as a way to racialize them.

Relational ties between Mexico and the United States are zealous because of the strong sense of nativism in the U.S.; they feel threatened by any immigrant group that is coming into their territory in immense amounts. In Juan Perea’s book, *Immigrant’s Out!: The New Nativism and the Anti-Immigrant Impulse in the United States*, it discusses the idea of nativism and how it perpetuates white’s dominance as the “majority to enhance its status as the ‘real’ Americans, those who belong, and rejects those currently deemed threatening to American values “ (1). Through the ideals of nativism, it establishes a racial hierarchy that puts the dominant class on top and subjects minorities to become second-class citizens because they often cannot attain the same power and privileges as the dominant race can. Because of these often-apparent class differentiations between Mexicans and Anglo-Saxon’s, Mexicans are often seen as second –class citizens because they are forced to take jobs that no one else will. Perea says, “because it is in the financial interest of those hiring undocumented to pay less, there is substantial demand for their underpriced services” (12). These jobs place them in submissive roles that often allow their employers to take advantage of them and not give them either fair wages or treatment because they are not entitled to the same rights as a citizen is promised. The practice of hiring “cheap labor” is a very common one that causes a lot of residual anger toward Hispanics immigrants from the rest of the U.S. citizens. Most people would rather spend less and get the same product as they would if they hired legal workers to do the job. It is interesting that American society solely fuels their anger toward the undocumented workers and not also on the people who hire them, many of whom belong to the Anglo-Saxon race.

Assimilation is a practice that nativist’s use that allows them to keep all the power and forces immigrants to adjust to a new set of culture, traditions and often a language that would be foreign to them. Perea states, “Nativists have long forced or pressured assimilation as a essential weapon in insuring the hegemony of whiteness and the Anglo culture over the immigrants who reside in the U.S.” (18). For one to fully assimilate, they must cut all cultural ties to their homeland and adopt the white hegemonic ideals. In the book, *Dropping the Hyphen? Becoming Latino (a)-American through Racialized Assimilation* by Tanya Golash-Boza, she discusses, “Assimilation entails the eventual loss of attachment to one’s country of origin and the disappearance of the ethnic distinctiveness of immigrants” (29-30). Without some type of culture, one has no link to others and no sense of belonging anywhere, so one automatically then conforms to the dominant race’s way of life. Another way that assimilation is used to change immigrants is the myth of the “American dream”. The American dream is a supposed tangible goal for any immigrant coming to the United States because it promises them that if they work hard and conform to the American lifestyle, they too will be as successful as the elite class is. In most cases, many Hispanic immigrants find themselves in lower class because they are not given the same opportunity as other immigrant groups are. She implies, “Latinos/as are seen as less intelligent, more prone to be on welfare and more likely to be involved in drugs or other criminal activity than whites or Asians” (*Dropping the Hyphen* 28). The United States shows preferential treatment to certain minority groups and holds them at a higher standard than they hold other minority groups at. This reveals the unfair treatment that many Mexicans and Hispanics receive because they are stereotyped to not be as productive as other groups, so they are constantly put in poor schools and underachieving classes so that it is harder for them to achieve the same success as a child belonging to the dominant race would. Another way that

American society is trying to assimilate Mexican immigrants is by trying to pass legislation that would make English the official language of the United States. Perea states, "In addition from the early 1980's to the 1990's an English Language Amendment to the U.S. Constitution has regularly been introduced in the U.S. Congress" (*Immigrant's Out!* 35). By trying to make English the official language, it exemplifies the white hegemonic ideals that hold all the power in the U.S. Luckily, these amendments never pass because America is a nation of immigrants and by passing this kind of legislation it would really make known the preferential treatment that lighter skinned (English speaking) immigrants get over darker skinned (non-English speaking) immigrants. Language is a pivotal tool in keeping one's culture alive and if the government tried to ban the plethora of languages that are spoken there, it would be sending a negative connotation out about the United States to the rest of the world.

Racialization is an important factor on foretelling how others treat someone because the way people perceive one's race to be will contribute to whether or not they can assimilate. For Mexicans, they have two types of racialization occurring, the first one is the ability for some Mexicans to "pass" in the U.S. as being white or non-Hispanic, therefore making their life easier to assimilate into and the chance for more opportunity. Golash-Boza says, "Hispanics are viewed as white in the United States are less likely to face racial discrimination and more likely to follow a similar path of assimilation to that of Irish, Italian or Polish-Americans" (*Dropping the Hyphen* 35). Many Hispanic's that are able to "pass" as white or as more Americanized than their darker counterparts often may lead a life toward easier assimilation, but they can never fully assimilate because they still come from a different culture that has a long, resentful history of being racialized by the dominant group. They also cannot fully assimilate because even though others perceive them as being white, they are still not white in ancestry or culture and that is something that can never change. The second form of racialization that is occurring is "Hispanics who have the racial and cultural features that result in their being perceived as Hispanic are less likely to assimilate and adopt an identity as an American and more like to develop a hyphenated identity as Latino or Latina Americans" (*Dropping the Hyphen* 35). Mexicans are unique from most minorities that immigrate into the U.S. because they often still prefer to self-identify as being from their homeland instead of claiming to be American. Most Hispanics that you meet who are born in the United States and have Mexican roots identify themselves as Mexican-American, not just American. This is important because it shows why assimilation of Mexicans has not been as successful as the assimilation of other Hispanic and minority groups. Many of them refuse assimilation because they are treated badly by the rest of society and it is understandable that one would not want to conform to the ways of the people that are oppressing them. There is also an immense amount of internal conflict between Mexicans that immigrated into the U.S. and Mexican Americans. Golash-Boza states, "Latino's who do not the mestizo/mulatto image that people in the United States have of Latino's are more likely to experience ethnic than racist discrimination as Latino's" (*Dropping the Hyphen* 34). Mexicans often discriminate toward Mexican Americans because they have abandoned the culture of their ancestors and instead tried to identify with the white hegemonic culture that is responsible for racializing them. In the book *The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective from the USA* by Conzen et al., it discusses how immigrants themselves might never completely lose the traces of their origins, but like it or not, their children would become completely American in values and behavior (Conzen et al. 25). A Mexican-American and a Mexican are going to have two different cultures with some similarities intertwined in them because they live in two separate countries that have different ways of life. Realistically, the Mexican-American is going to have some aspects of Anglo-Saxonism in their culture because they are the dominant race so they of course are the most influential in shaping what American culture is contrived to be. In Pablo Villa's book, *Crossing Borders, Reinforcing Borders: Social Categories, Metaphors and Narrative Identities on the U.S.-Mexico Frontier*, he interviews an immigrant female from Mexico

who states, “ Ah but everyone here is very *malinchista* (unpatriotic) toward their Mexican roots” (133). Many Mexicans who come from Mexico feel that Mexican-Americans are unpatriotic because they do not always celebrate the same cultural traditions that Mexicans from Mexico celebrate. This is occurring because the U.S. as a whole has different traditions that they celebrate that do not always coincide with Mexico’s and this is leading to animosity toward the two groups. Another factor that is contributing to this divide is the reality that not all Mexican-Americans speak Spanish. Language is a vital component in keeping with your heritage, which is why there is so much animosity toward one that does not understand or speak Spanish. There is even the preconceived notion that if you do not speak Spanish, one is not a “real” Mexican; the language itself defines and places limitations on them. Spanish is a sense of comfort to the immigrants and is something that they want to keep and preserve because it is something that is keeping them connected to their homeland.

This debate over the importance of knowing Spanish and not conforming and learning English demonstrates the refusal of assimilation that is taking place between Mexicans and the dominant race. In the article, *The Hispanic Challenge* by Samuel Huntington, he discusses, “Mexicans and other Latino’s have not assimilated into mainstream U.S. culture, forming instead their own political and linguistic enclaves and rejecting the Anglo-Protestant values that built the American dream” (1). Mexicans are unique because they refuse to accept that the only way for them to be considered assimilated is to no longer recognize their Mexican heritage, they instead challenge this and make society celebrate their traditions and speak their language. Huntington also says, “Massive Hispanic Immigration Affects the United States in two significant ways: Important portions of the country become predominately Hispanic in language an culture, and the nation as a whole becomes bilingual and bicultural” (*The Hispanic Challenge* 7). Their refusal of the white hegemonic ideals not only preserves their culture but it also forces American society to recognize Mexican traditions and Spanish. In states that share a border with Mexico, most things can be found in English or Spanish and it seen as very beneficial in the labor market if you are bilingual in Spanish and English. Huntington states, “In 2000, more than 28 million people in the U.S. spoke Spanish at home, a sixty-six percent increase since 1990” (*The Hispanic Challenge* 5). Many people who are not Mexican even learn Spanish and at any high school in the United States, Spanish is available to be taken. There are also grocery stores, cultural centers and shopping centers that are catered to the Mexicans that are living in certain areas in the U.S. This is occurring because of the close proximity to their homeland from the United States, which allows them to stay connected to their roots.

Another factor that is leading to this resistance is that immigrants from Mexico are often living in predominately Latino neighborhoods. This is because of socio-cultural factors that make it impossible for them to live in another area with people who are not from Hispanic descent, so they do not feel the need to change or assimilate because everyone around them comes from the same background. This housing situation that is occurring all over the southwestern United States can be perceived as also a negative impact on the immigrants because these areas are lower- income, so there is more violence, drug, gang activity and poorer schools. This often diverts the children that are living in the area because since they are surrounded by all this crime and are not getting an adequate education, many of them choose a life of crime, which further perpetuates the stereotype of the Mexican “criminal”. In the book, *The New Nativism: Proposition 187 and the Debate over Immigration* by Robin Jacobson, it discusses, “the higher rates of arrest and incarceration, combined with publicity of these facts perpetuated the link between criminal conduct and Mexican origins” (154). This linking of Mexican and criminals is a blatant attempt to produce hysteria over Mexicans by the dominant race so that they can ultimately criminalize Mexican migration in the United States and get rid of them because they are threatening the power that the Anglo-Saxons currently have their. Jacobson says, “Because

Mexicans are linked to as being 'criminals' or 'troublemakers' they are assumed to be the group that is making the most trouble and should therefore always be assumed as undocumented" (*The New Nativism* 54). Mexican and undocumented have now become synonymous with each other and society now presumes that if you claim you are Mexican you are not a citizen. These ideologies are further perpetuated by the media, which plays a pivotal role in the criminalization of Mexicans because there are many negative news reports that are placing false ideologies about Mexicans into mainstream society. Jacobson states, "The Los Angeles Times featured stories about the threat to the body, specifically on the border, from immigrants" (*The New Nativism* 57). News propaganda is used to make society fearful and resentful of Mexican immigrants, which only fuels the madness that is already directed toward them and leads to the government passing laws that are blatantly directed at getting rid of the Hispanics in the country.

The criminalization of Mexican migration that is occurring in the United States is not a new craze, the U.S. has a long history of using Mexico for their own personal gain and then passing harsh legislation that deports them back to Mexico. It is not just the immigrants that are at blame for the increased presence in the U.S. in the last seventy-five years; the U.S. government is also to blame for the current immigration situation that causes such an immense amount of strife in the country. The criminalization of migration is occurring on two levels, the national level and the state level. An example of the national level criminalization that is occurring would be in the forties, the United State's first attempt to try to regulate immigration with the passage of the Bracero Program. The Bracero Program was from 1942-1964 and it was where more than 4million Mexican farm laborers came to work in the fields and it was one of the most significant contributions made to U.S. agricultural economy (Marentes). The Bracero Program was seen as a great opportunity in the Mexican immigrants eyes because it allowed them to enter the U.S. legally and have the chance to make a better life for themselves. In reality, the U.S. used the program as an opportunity to profit from cheap labor and it led to an influx of illegal immigration because everyone wanted to be part of the program. To handle the illegal immigration problem that they had created, the U.S. used Operation Wetback as a means to get rid of the illegal Mexican immigrants. Jacobson states, "Operation Wetback led to the forcible repatriation of thousands of Mexicans and Mexican Americans and left the question of legitimacy of their presence at the forefront" (*The New Nativism* 59). Operation Wetback, an example of criminalization on the state level that occurred in Arizona and California, was a blatant use of racial profiling that allowed the government to get rid of all the laborers that they had brought over. It therefore instilled a new realm of understanding that Mexicans are disposable and can be taken advantage of because they will do any work that is offered to them. Another form of legislation that incriminates Mexican migration on the national level would be the 1986 Reform and Control Act. Huntington states, "The Immigration and Control Act contained provisions to legalize the status of existing illegal immigrants and to reduce future illegal immigration through employer sanctions and other means" (*The Hispanic Challenge* 3). This law also targets Mexican immigration because it exclusively dealt with illegal immigration and that has ultimately become synonymous with Mexicans. In Douglas Massey et al.'s piece, *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration*, they discuss, "the 1986 Immigration and Reform Act ushered in a new era of restrictive immigration policies and repressive border controls that transformed a functioning system into a dysfunctional machine that generated a host of unanticipated outcomes that were in neither country's interests" (2). The cause of these bills was due to the increased amounts of Mexicans immigrating to the United States but one has to wonder why Mexican immigration has only been a problem in the last century, one of the main contributors of the current immigration issue was because of the passage of NAFTA (North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement). On the United States Department of agriculture website, it states, "That under NAFTA all non-tariff barriers to agricultural trade between the United States and Mexico were eliminated" (North Atlantic Free

Trade Agreement). This was detrimental to the Mexican agriculture business because it eliminated taxes on all exports to the United States, which then made it impossible for small farmers to keep doing agricultural work in Mexico. In Angeles Villarreal's report to Congress titled, *NAFTA and the Mexican Economy*, he discusses, "One of the most controversial aspects of NAFTA has been its effect on the agricultural sector in Mexico and the perception that NAFTA has caused a higher amount of work displacement in the agricultural sector than in other sectors in the economy"(13). NAFTA ultimately drove out small farming in Mexico because they were no longer turning a profit, which led to in pouring of Mexican immigration into the United States. Massey et al. state, " NAFTA created a black market for Mexican labor, lowered the wages of legal U.S. residents, increased U.S. income inequality and worsened conditions in the U.S. labor markets (*Beyond Smoke and Mirrors* 2-3). NAFTA caused an immense amount of strife between American citizens and the immigrants pouring in from Mexico and it led to the passing of harsh laws that ultimately tried to strip the immigrants of their basic rights that one attains just living in the country legally or not.

Another example of criminalization of migration on the state level that implemented harsh laws toward Mexican immigrants was the passage of California's Proposition 187. Proposition 187 was referred to as the Save the State Initiative and it had five major aspects to the bill. It made it illegal for the undocumented to use California schooling system, it refused access to health-care in the state, refused access to government assistance programs, the police had to determine the legal status upon someone being arrested and lastly, "the making and use of false documentation is a state felony" (Prop 187 Approved in California). It is important to outline the major points of the bill so that one can fully understand how this bill was a blatantly targeting the undocumented and went to inhumane lengths to make sure that the undocumented were not able to reap any of the benefits of living in the state of California. Jacobson states, "supporters of Prop 187 constructed Latino's interests as being in direct competition with white's interests and American interests" (*The New Nativism* 35). American perceived the Mexicans as a threat because they were "invading" the country and using government services without allegedly paying taxes. This law was passed because of the negative connotations that are associated with Mexicans that are put out by the media to make people fear Mexicans instead of welcoming them; prop 187 was an example of contemporary American society's racism against immigrants that refuse to assimilate. In the article by Michael Alvarez and Tara Butterfield titled, *The Resurgence of Nativism in California? The Case of Proposition 187 and Illegal Immigration*, people in favor of the prop believed "illegal immigration was needed to halt the spread of disease, eliminate overcrowding in schools, and prevent wage rates from dropping still further as unemployed illegal's competed for scarce jobs in the shrinking economy" (1-2). Supporters of that prop clearly believe that Mexicans are of a lower class than them if they think that they are going to carry diseases into the U.S. like an animal would. By connecting Mexican immigrants to animals and savages, it leads to the assumption that all non-white Anglo-Saxon people are of lower standing and do not deserve the same rights and privileges that white people attain just because of their skin color.

The United States still has many deep-rooted issues toward people of color and they are not the color-blind society that they claim to be; this is evident in the passing of Arizona's SB 1070 law in 2010. In Rick Su's article, *Overlooked Significance of Arizona's New Immigration Law*, he states, " the most controversial provision is the requirement that all law enforcement officials take steps to verify the immigration status of any individual they encounter if there is reason to suspect that the individual is in violation of federal immigration law" (1). The law is just another example of the racial profiling that is happening in the U.S. that is directed at Hispanics. The law clearly states that one must only be required to show your citizenship status to a police officer if they believe that you fit the profile of what an illegal immigrant would look like.

Therefore in Arizona, people are assuming that anyone who has darker skin and Hispanic features is then an illegal immigrant. Anyone who is white in Arizona will probably not be asked of his or her citizenship status if they were stopped by the police because society is not linking illegal immigration with being white, it is only linked to having dark skin and being Hispanic.

Presently, the United States has also exhibited instances where the Latino community is being vocal about the racial separatism that is occurring and are trying to implement legislation that is in favor of immigrants; the Dream Act and the California Prosperity and Opportunity Act are exemplary of this. The article, *The Dream Act*, by Janet Lopez states, "The Dream Act (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors) allows undocumented the students to attend university and college for in-state tuition nation-wide"(1). This act would have allowed illegal immigrants the opportunity to obtain a higher education if they wanted too. It would ultimately make them move up the racial hierarchy ladder because they would receive the same amount of education as the dominant race does. The Act was passed in the House of Representatives but was not passed in the Senate, so illegal immigrants cannot further their education past high school. Many teens do not find out that they are of illegal standing in the United States until their parents tell them that they cannot apply to college because they are an illegal immigrant. This act would have no longer divided citizens and non-citizens from higher education and made it possible for immigrants to no longer have the option of being only second-class citizens in the U.S. According to the California Prosperity and Opportunity Act website, the bill would establish, " new laws that gives qualified unauthorized residents who pay state income taxes the option to enter a program whose participants may gain relief from federal enforcement and whose labor may be decriminalized" (Fuentes). This initiative challenges the ideology that illegal immigrants reap off of government services and do not pay taxes because some do pay the state and therefore should be protected from deportation.

Mexican's are a very complex issue in the United States because they make their refusal of assimilation known and instead promote their own cultural traditions instead. The is in turn, puts them in a constant battle with nativist ideologies that in return target the citizenship of all Mexicans, even the ones that were born in the United States. The United States has a long history of trying to racialize Hispanics, which has in turn caused a divide between those who can "pass" as white in the United States and those who are racially targeted because they fit the stereotypical Mexican profile. The legality of Mexican immigration is something that will always be debated because the influx of immigration that is arriving from across the border is putting pressure on the government and they have not created a stable way of handling illegal immigration without racially profiling them. Laws like SB 1070 and Prop 187, show the lengths that not only the government will go to, to restrict access to the U.S. from Mexicans, but also the lengths that U.S. society will go to take away basic human rights to people who are undocumented. Through the passage of these harsh legislations, it has led the Hispanic community to work together and take a stand against U.S. policies that are targeting their people. They are also currently developing their own legislations that give undocumented immigrants the same rights as a U.S. citizen attains. Meanwhile, anti-immigrant organizations like the Minutemen, exemplify the notion that racialization is still alive and well in U.S. popular culture and is only progressing toward harsher implications for the undocumented. This organization consists of a group of Americans that patrols the border and alerts Immigration officials when they see illegal immigrants trying to enter the U.S. illegally. Politically, immigration stances are dependent on party policies and are often deciding factors on whether or not someone will vote for them. Racialization is still alive in the U.S. and dependent on the upcoming 2012 presidential election, one can decipher the direction the country is leaning toward because the two front-runners have two very different stands on how to handle illegal immigration. In the end, the U.S. would not only have to make some major legislative changes

when dealing with immigration but also change the way the public perceives Mexicans in order to learn from their past transgressions and create a more immigrant-friendly persona for the future.

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