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# 'Not All Borders are the Same'
## *Immigration and the Racialization of the 'Mexican Menace' in the Midwest*

***by Dennis Nodín Valdés***
*University of Minnesota*

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***March 2008***

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## Abstract

Failure of academics to recognize a distant Mexican past and current Mexican presence outside the Southwest has been the result not simply of neglect, but also the racial biases that inform the paradigms of dominant knowledge, and have broad implications. Notions like region and border exist in historically specific and often highly political contexts...

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# ‘Not all Borders are the Same’

## *Immigration and the Racialization of The ‘Mexican Menace’ in the Midwest*

On Jan. 8, 1927, 34 White men who identified themselves as “Learned Americans,” submitted a prepared statement with recommendations to the United States House of Representatives during hearings on *Immigration From Countries of the Western Hemisphere*, published in the Congressional Record. The authors included C.C. Little, then president of the University of Michigan; professors Edward A. Ross, William H. Kiekhofter, J.E. Irelin, John R. Commons, and Henry R. Trumbower of the University of Wisconsin; and professors from other institutions, mostly from the Ivy League. Comprising leaders of the professorate from the most prestigious bulwarks of the Knowledge Factory of their day, they were joined by Madison Grant, President of the New York Zoological Society, Roosevelt H. Johnson and Leon F. Whitney, then President and Field Secretary, of the American Eugenics Society respectively.

They sought further restriction of immigration to the United States based on national origins to augment legislation passed in 1882, 1917, 1921, and 1924 that severely limited immigration from Asian and European countries. They were interested in curtailing immigration from nations in the Western Hemisphere, which historically had a special relationship with the United States. The “Learned Americans” made two particular recommendations. First, “We urge the extension of the quota system to all countries of North and South America from which we have substantial immigration and in which the population is not predominantly of the White race who, because of their lower standards of living, are able to compete at an advantage with American workers engaged in various forms of agriculture and unskilled labor.” Only two nations in the Western Hemisphere had substantial immigration flows with the United States in the 1920’s, Canada and Mexico. Since the “Learned Ones” considered Canadian people “predominantly of the White race,” the flowery language masked the intent of the authors to direct the change in the law at only one nation – Mexico.

The Learned White men of the north made a second point: “We believe that… the racial status quo of the country should be maintained (f)or a reasonable degree of homogeneity… Without such homogeneity, we firmly believe, no civilization can have its best development.” These public intellectuals created and sought acceptance for notions passing as knowledge that Mexican immigration was a menace to the racial purity and civilization of the United States.

At the end of the 20th Century, it would have been easy to find more than 34 White men who shared the sentiments of these “Learned Americans.” Perhaps the best known case was radio personality, author, and Republican politician Pat Buchanan, who has been announced as a candidate for President in the elections of 2000. In earlier campaigning he advocated a number of changes in U.S. policy regarding Mexico and Mexicans in the United States.

On the stump in 1996, in reference to immigrants from Mexico, he stated: “They’ve got no right to break our laws and break into our country and go on welfare and some of them commit crimes… [They’ve] got no right because they’ve got a lousy government down there [in Mexico], to walk across the borders of the United States with impunity, because this is my country” (Croft, 1996). He concurred with the “Learned Americans” of 1927 that the issue transcended economics, welfare and cheap labor. Ultimately, his concern was a defense of his race: “There is nothing wrong with sitting down and arguing that we are a European country” (Buchanan, 1995b). Along with the “Learned Americans,” he also considered the only knowledge of merit as that encompassed in the European tradition, and viewed others as threatening. In a campaign speech he referred to multiculturalism as: “an across-the-board assault on our Anglo-American heritage” (Gunter, 1996). Candidate Buchanan, University of Michigan President Little, and the American Eugenics Society could not have been in fuller agreement about dangers of a Mexican menace to their understanding of the American way of life.

Buchanan is equally frightened by the danger of hordes swarming across the border: "When you have one, two, three million people walking across your border every year, breaking your laws, you have an invasion" (Kenyon, 1996). He offers a more direct solution than the quota system the "Learned Americans" proposed 70 years earlier: "I will stop this immigration cold. Period. Paragraph… I'll build that security fence, and we'll close it, and we'll say, 'Listen José, you're not coming in'" (Verhovek, 1995). Buchanan's proposed security fence was not intended for traffic across the Ambassador Bridge to Canada.

His rhetoric reflects a constant in perceptions about national borders between the late 1920's and the end of the 20th Century. Buchanan asserts that a fence is necessary to separate White civilization and a non-White Mexican menace, to distinguish even more clearly the political border that gained increasing significance in United States popular culture in the past century and a half. He and the "Learned Americans" did not attach similar significance to the Canadian border. It is not a racial divide, so no massive security fence is necessary.

The rhetoric of Buchanan and the "Learned Americans" reflects a common thread in hegemonic popular and political culture and its scholarly circles, namely that Mexico and Mexicans are a racial menace to the White people of the United States. But this vision is not uncontested. There have been countervailing, often contradictory representations created by other purveyors of hegemonic popular culture, politicians, and their academic lackeys. A contrary thread has portrayed Mexican immigrants who cross the border into Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California as capable of assimilation into the American way of life and meritorious of citizenship. Even the contervailing representations typically retain a Eurocentric assumption that Mexicans should and must understand the world through a White prism. In addition to the limitations of a Eurocentric bias in dominant popular thought, I wish to address two of its related geographic constrictions, namely the overwhelming association of Mexicans residing in the United States with the Southwest and the United States-Mexico border. The overwhelming focus on a corner of the nation is similarly evident in Chicana and Chicano counter narratives.

Association of Mexicans with the United States Southwest dates from the United States conquest and subsequent acquisition Mexico's far northern territories. In the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848, the United States relocated the international border between the two countries and acquired half the territory of its neighboring republic. At the time of the Treaty, Mexicans in the United States were concentrated overwhelmingly in the former Mexican territories, not far from the international border. In subsequent years, and particularly during the course of the 20th Century, people of Mexican birth and descent moved in substantial numbers to every state in the Union. Unfortunately, most scholarship and popular thought, including that of Chicanos and Chicanas, accepts as common knowledge the geography delineated in the Treaty with Mexicans in the United States. At the end of the 20th Century, when millions of Mexicans and their descendants reside outside the Southwest, hundreds of miles from the border between the two countries, the geographic tropes of the Mexican border and the Southwest continue largely unchallenged.

In this essay, I focus on Michigan and the Midwest, and the border with Canada, which are also critical to understanding Chicana and Chicano experiences and Mexican-United States relations. First I examine moments in the history of the region prior to the arrival of Europeans to demonstrate the fallacy of popular assumptions that Mexicans are solely recent arrivals in the Midwest. I then examine the region in eras following contact between Europeans and Native-Americans to expose continued Mexican influence and its impact on ideas passing as knowledge in dominant popular culture.

Long before the United States established political control over the present-day Midwest, people from Mexico came to the region on many occasions. Unfortunately, the record they left has not been deciphered very well. In distant times, native peoples brought foods they and their ancestors domesticated in Mexico, including maize, beans, squash and peppers, to lands in the north. At a later time, when the Toltecs reigned supreme in central Mexico, their influence spread to the present-day United States Southwest. Mesoamerican archeologists refer to the era as the "late-classic" period, likely extending into the early "post-classic." At that time a number of ceremonial sites and cities appeared in present-day New Mexico and Arizona with undeniable markings

of the civilization associated with Tula in the present-day state of Hidalgo. In locations farther north, including the current Midwest, such massive ceremonial sites appeared less frequently and their stylistic forms show less immediate influence from Mexico. But there was a recurring link, the copper trade between the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and Mexican cultures farther to the South. The easy accessibility and purity of Michigan copper made it an item of trade into the present-day Southwest and Mexican interior (Smith, 1915).

Linguistic contributions from Mexico to locations in the northern United States have been more difficult to document. The problem stems in part from the less precise nature of language. It is also the result of a bias in dominant paradigms of knowledge that influence current anthropological models of linguistic exchange. But dominant visions were not always as narrow as they became in the 20th Century. Academic and popular opinions regarding Mexico's influence on the native people of the Midwest have ebbed and flowed since the rediscovery by archeologists of ceremonial sites and dwellings that long preceded the arrival of Europeans. One important phase occurred during the middle years of the 19th Century, when the formal discipline of archaeology was young and much important work was performed by amateurs. Many of these investigators had just discovered the writings on ancient Mexico, produced by such writers as William Hinkling Prescott. They attributed a great Aztec influence on ancient peoples of the region, a case in point being the Aztalán ceremonial site in Wisconsin. In later decades, as investigative work became more sophisticated and archeologists uncovered more details, they realized that Aztec contributions were less than previously imagined. Unfortunately, they often denied or downplayed Mexican influence apart from the Aztecs, as the new models they created discounted the likelihood of other exchanges.

The diminution of Mexican influence on knowledge created by United States scholars in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries was the result of several additional factors. One occurred in the aftermath of the United States conquest of Mexico, as the conquering politicians increasingly emphasized the importance of a clearly delineated border between the two countries. The international border limited the geographic imagination in hegemonic United States popular culture, as writers and scholars increasingly emphasized differences that separated Mexican and United States American rather than finding commonality. Furthermore, the conquest of Mexico, along with conquests of other non-European people in subsequent generations, enhanced a sense of superiority among the purveyors of United States popular culture. Similar notions were articulated through increasingly sophisticated forms of scientific racism, including Social Darwinism and Eugenics that gained great influence in academic and popular thought. Theoretical possibilities for greater achievements by many Mexicans diminished proportionately with the degree that European-American and European hegemony remained unchallenged.

I can now examine Mexican influences in Michigan and the Midwest during a number of less distant historical moments, using some simple rules of logic. One is that in the absence of formal political borders, there were fewer impediments to imagining the likelihood of interaction and exchange material goods, ideas and cultural ways. A second is that European-based scientific models dominated by positivist, culturally narrow viewpoints have low expectations for Mexicans and are of little value.

I first address Mexican linguistic influence by examining the search for roots of the well-known term Michigan. Extant theories on its origins most often focus on place-names, presumably originating in the Ojibwa language. James L. Lanman claims that it was taken from "Indian words" of unspecified origin "Mitchisawgyegan," meaning, "A Great Lake." Author Hulda Hollands claims that the roots are from "Mish-mai-kin-nac," identified as the northernmost point of the Lower Peninsula and surrounding islands (*Michigan Gazetteer,* 1991). Meanwhile, Walter Romig, in *Michigan Place Names*, suggests the name was derived from two Indian words of unspecified origin, "Michi" (great or large) and "Gama" (lake) (Romig, 1973).

The interpretations offered by Laman, Hollands, and Romig, in comparison with some other possibilities, appear to take long stretches that do not readily conform with another rule of logic common in seeking linguistic derivations, the notion of

elegance, or simplicity and closeness of fit. I find two much more elegant roots for the term Michigan suggesting Mexican origins. The first is that it was a derivation of the word "Michoacán," an ancient Mexican kingdom and currently the name of a Mexican state. The term came from resident Tarascos, who associate it with water, as there are many lakes in Michoacán. Similarly, English-speakers seeking derivations associate the name Michigan with water. The Tarascos had a reputation as warriors, who unlike the Aztecs, had perfected the use of copper weapons. The metal arms permitting them to withstand invasions by their better-known central Mexican counterparts, who never conquered them. This suggests another link involving the ancient people of central Mexico and the copper mines of the Upper Peninsula. More recent Mexican immigrants to Michigan and their children called themselves Michicanos (Michoacanos), and still claim that they are in Michoacán del norte.

A second and even more elegant possibility linguistically has later chronological roots, deriving from shortly before the moment when English-speaking people officially adopted the term Michigan in its current form. It stems from a later phase of Mexican immigration to Michigan and the Midwest, when Mexico was still a colony of Spain. Instead of coming as indigenous people from Michoacán, this time Mexicans were called Spaniards, especially in English-speaking documents. They were part of the Spanish imperial drive to extend its hold and claims to the Louisiana territory, which Spain acquired in 1763 and controlled until the end of the 18th Century. Louisiana did not have a clearly delineated border in the north, but the Spanish Crown established several military and civilian settlements in current-day Missouri and Illinois. In an expansive phase of their northward thrust, while at war with England and during the time the United States was also fighting for its own independence, the Spanish established a Fort at San José, which the English called St. Joseph, Michigan in 1781 (Kinnard). The fort at San José appeared the same year that Mexicans under Spanish rule also founded the *Pueblo de Nuestra Señora de Los Angeles de Porciuncula* in Alta California.

In contrast with later waves of northward migration, these Mexicans were not portrayed as a menace by future United States Americans, because of their common enemy, the English. In England, however, they were represented differently. Like other Spanish-speaking people, they were depicted negatively in many ways, particularly through the English-based Black Legend. The hostile language of the Black Legend was not simply an isolated language of religious scholars and court historians, but was part of a propaganda campaign by England that accompanied its military ventures against Spain and other European nations to achieve imperial domination over the world.

Although the Spanish Crown decided to abandon Fort San José, the fates and the influence of the Mexican soldiers in the Lower Peninsula of Michigan and other parts of neighboring Spanish Louisiana territory, merit further examination. Without much risk of speculation, it is not difficult to surmise that many Mexican soldiers, dissatisfied with conditions and brutal treatment by their superiors, deserted in large numbers, as they did elsewhere. Many former soldiers remained in the region and intermingled and intermarried with native people, and with English and French-speaking people of European origin. Through that interaction, their representations might have influenced the creation and adoption of the term Michigan by English speakers entering the region in the late 18th Century. The United States Congress decided to accept the term in 1804, during deliberations that resulted in the formation of the Michigan territory in 1805. This decision occurred only four years after the Spanish Crown ceded the Louisiana territory to France. The United States acquired the Louisiana Territory from France by purchase in 1803, and its former inhabitants were allowed to maintain their language, customs and lands, a model for the future Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

The presence of Mexicans in Michigan at this time might also have influenced Nicolas Perrot, who made a claim in an 1864 study that the term Michigan could be traced to French documents. He asserted that in 1653, a group of Huron, fleeing Iroquois pursuers from the Green Bay, "retreated to Méchingan, where they constructed a fort" that successfully withstood a two-year siege (Perrot, 1911). Although Perrot claims the term has Ojibwa origins, the spelling is perfectly

consistent with another possibility in Mexican Spanish, and the English spelling is identical. Linguistically, it is the most elegant of all the possibilities. The interpretation that Mexican soldiers from Spanish Louisiana are responsible for the name also has an advantage of being close in time to its official adoption in English. English speakers might have heard Mexican soldiers or former soldiers settled in the area, reflecting on the experience of being conscripted into the army, brought to the distant shores of a Great Lake, and their treatment by superiors. According to this interpretation, English speaking Michiganians adopted the term for their state verbatim from Mexicans, but added an accent mark in an inappropriate place, as often happens in translation. Like Perrot they thought they heard Méchingan when the Mexicans were saying *me chingan*.

Relations between English- and Spanish-speaking in North America shifted again in the second quarter of the 19th Century. Anglo-Americans had been invited to take up residence in far northern Mexican territories and accept Mexican citizenship, but soon overextended their welcome by invading, declaring war and conquering Mexico. Through the war of conquest in 1846-1848, the United States acquired a vast territory and sought to maintain permanent control, which involved efforts to demarcate the international border. The conquering nation also incorporated its first large Mexican population, an estimated 100,000-120,000 former citizens of Mexico, residing primarily in the vast region between Texas and Alta California, which became the Southwest of national popular culture.

The conquerors faced a dilemma regarding how to deal with and represent the conquered former Mexican citizens residing north of the newly established border, a quandary that has perplexed them and their descendants to the present. They might encourage Mexicanos to assimilate and be incorporated into the political and popular culture of the nation, in the same manner of immigrants from Europe. At the other extreme, they might subordinate them like conquered Native-Americans and enslaved Africans and their descendants, in which case representing them as a race apart would serve a purpose. In fact, the conquerors responded with trepidation and ambiguity. On the one hand, in the peace agreement of 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, they permitted Mexicans who remained in the U.S. to become citizens automatically, to retain their land, and to enjoy all the rights of White citizens. On the other, they wrote laws and created a legal mechanism enforced by police and other elements of the state, and behaved in other ways to dispossess Mexicans of the overwhelming majority of their former land holdings. The conquerors simultaneously denigrated Mexican culture, while they failed to enforce their own laws that mandated the establishment of public schools for all children, in a manner similar to their treatment of a majority of African-Americans and Native-Americans. As a consequence, only a few of the Mexican upper class attended schools regularly until the 20th Century.

English-speaking European-Americans expressed similar inconsistencies in ways they represented Mexicans, a profound aspect of identity formation for the conquered people. Some of the early Anglo soldiers and *politicos*, lusting after the wealth of the Mexican upper class (the ricos), used flattery, called them Spaniards and married their daughters, which enabled them to take possession of the lands. Most conquerors, and their successors who followed them from the east, however, were more contemptuous of Mexicans. Disparaging their appearances, they referred to Mexicans as greasers, half-breeds and Indians. They also represented *Mexicanos* as *bandidos*, criminals and lawbreakers. Joaquín Murrieta, Tiburcio Vasquez, Juan Cortina, "3-fingered" Jack García, and Padre Jurata were only a few on the long list of Mexicans portrayed in newspapers, novels, and state and territorial legislatures as a menace to the safety and security of European-Americans and White civilization. Such representations helped those who lusted after fortune in the Southwest and California to apply different standards in their treatment of Mexicans in the application of laws and customs, thereby excluding them from effective United States citizenship. Thus Mexicans were incorporated as citizens with substantially fewer rights and privileges than individuals and groups recognized as White.

The early 20th Century marks another phase of Mexican history in the United States, highlighted by the incorporation of a massive wave of Mexicans who crossed the border between the two countries, initially to work. This migration occurred in conjunction with the flowering of the Industrial Revolution in the United States, an essential feature

of which involved establishing an empire. Despite their reluctance to admit the reality, creators of hegemonic popular thought in the United States could not deny that their nation had become the leading empire in the world. The empire was partly formal and political, as in the conquest and acquisition of Puerto Rico and the Philippine Islands, incorporated as territories. Cuba, under the Platt Amendment (1902-1933), became a Protectorate – defended by the United States, the only country from which it needed protection. In some countries the imperial relationship was less formal, maintained by political manipulation, economic coercion, and occasional invasion, in particular for Mexico and other nations of the Caribbean and Central America. The territories and subordinated nations provided the United States with raw materials for industry as well as sugar, coffee, tobacco and other drugs to keep workers in its factories alert; and food to sustain them. The formal and informal colonies also offered the captains of industry markets to sell and distribute their surplus production — including mining equipment, utilities, and railroad lines. Another feature of imperialism involved the supply of labor by these nations for industrialized agriculture, railroads and factories controlled by entrepreneurs from the United States. Mexicans formed the largest group in this unequal relationship and they worked for U.S. capitalists in Mexico and the Southwest, as well as Michigan and other Midwestern states.

Mexicans first came to Michigan in large numbers when the United States entered World War I, precisely when the flow of cheap labor from Europe was being cut off. The single most important employer was the sugar beet industry, and in the 1920's, Mexican workers spread out in rural locations, concentrated most heavily in the Saginaw Valley and the Thumb, and extending into Isabella County. Mexicans also worked on several railroads, living in boxcars and slums popularly called "jungles" along the tracks throughout the region. In the cities they found employment in steel mills, meatpacking plants, and in Michigan, the automobile industry — especially for Henry Ford. They formed *barrios* in major cities of the region — Kansas City, Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee, St. Paul, Toledo, Saginaw, Flint, Gary, East Chicago, Indiana, and scores of smaller settlements close to work.

Mexican immigration to the Midwest originated mostly in the central and west-central states of Guanajuato, Michoacán, Jalisco, Zacatecas and Mexico City, typically via Texas. Preceding the migration, hegemonic representations of Mexicans adopted from the 19th and early 20th Centuries appeared in novels, short stories and the youthful silent picture industry of Hollywood. The most popular images were of *bandidos* and related criminal types, and wild-eyed *revolucionarios* who had participated in the Mexican Revolution. As a United States government report noted in 1927, even in the smallest Midwestern towns where few *Mexicanos* dared to tread alone, "pictures of Mexican bandits made people's hair stand on end" (Edson, 1927). The government report did not assume that Mexicans or African-Americans merited inclusion as "people," a term it assumed to be interchangeable with popular representations of "White people." Another hegemonic representation at this time associated Mexicans with drugs, particularly a native Mexican plant, cannabis sativa, which reportedly spread throughout the region, planted in lowlands along river valleys by railroad maintenance workers and farmworkers. In the largest urban districts, including Chicago, Mexican crime was also represented as a threat to serenity and the American way of life, while the heart of the barrio in Indiana Harbor (East Chicago) was portrayed as "the bucket of blood" because of the supposed frequency of knifings (Edson).

The "Learned Americans" in 1927 agreed with many reporters and politicians who referred to this wave of immigration as "the Mexican Invasion," rather than workers following the demands of an international labor market dominated by United States capital. Their anti-foreign sentiment had also been whetted during World War I by one strand of the intensified "Americanization Movement" popularly referred to as "100% Americanism," a campaign by government bureaucrats, educators, and many employers to assimilate foreigners to unquestioning adoption of American ways. However, the "Learned Americans" and other proponents of Eugenics, and related strands of dominant popular thought considered Mexicans, Native-Americans, Asians, and African-Americans incapable of such assimilation. They considered what they called the "Mexican Problem" as best resolved by an immediate halt to immigration.

Two groups of English-speaking people opposed such restrictionist efforts and challenged the harshest representations of Mexicans. One was composed of a segment of capital, identified by their opponents as "cheap labor advocates." They invested in industrial agriculture, railroads, and some urban industries. They were happy with the workers they employed and portrayed them as contented and docile, while they contested critics who claimed that Mexicans lowered the standards of living for all. A second group, dominated by educators and social workers, espoused a somewhat looser view of assimilation that accepted Mexicans. They included educator John Dewey and his student, Horace Kallen, who coined the term "cultural pluralism," and whose ideas are still popular among academics, educators, social workers, and some politicians. Proponents of this view claimed that Mexicans could make good citizens if only given a chance. They suggested a few semi-autonomous spaces for Mexicans to speak Spanish, practice their folk arts, take a few classes in practical subjects and Mexican culture, and celebrate the "5 de mayo" and "16 de septiembre." While the theories supported by the cultural pluralists gained popularity among academics and educators in subsequent generations, the practices espoused by the "Learned Americans" of 1927 and Pat Buchanan continued to reign supreme in most public school and university curricula three generations later.

Struggles over representations of Mexicans within dominant political and popular culture took a critical turn with the outbreak of the Great Depression. One group led by the Republican Party and President Herbert Hoover, the United States Department of Labor (which was responsible for federal immigration policy at the time), and the media they controlled, including the Chicago Tribune and the Detroit News, blamed Mexicans for the Great Depression. It portrayed Mexicans as a threat to the livelihood of United States' Americans, not only in the Southwest, but even in the Midwest. Had there been no Midwestern Mexicans, politicians would have been hard-pressed to portray Mexicans as a national problem. Campaigns to remove Mexicans took place in local communities throughout the country, including the Midwest. The repatriation and deportation from the Midwest and the Southwest afforded the Mexican border still greater meaning as a result of this campaign, for the individuals and agencies involved were satisfied that their task was complete once they dumped the repatriates across the line in Mexico. There was no similar effort on the United States' northern border, and not a single campaign directed at any European immigrant group.

The repatriation and deportation campaign suggests a further step in hegemonic representations of Mexicans as a race apart. They were singled out among all racial and ethnic groups as incapable of assimilation with White people and transferred across an international border in order to prevent contact with the White people, who were represented as the bearers of United States American civilization. The perception of the Mexican Menace was also intensified at this time because politicians enacted laws and policies restricting employment to non-citizens and nonresidents of local communities. Bureaucrats often selectively applied these acts to Mexicans to make establishment of residency more difficult. The campaign achieved its success politically in large part because conservative restrictionists, including supporters of Eugenics, gained support from ostensibly liberal social workers and welfare agents who formerly considered Mexicans assimilable. The bureaucrats were more concerned about rising taxes as a result of increasing numbers of Mexicans applying for relief, and about their taking jobs and welfare from more deserving "Americans." Thus conservative restrictionists and liberal bureaucrats joined to reduce the clout of conservative "cheap labor advocates." According to many observers in the dominant culture, the early 20th Century Mexican presence in the northern United States was thus merely a "a passing phase" in the history of the nation, and they expected Mexicans as a distinct group to soon disappear from the Midwest. This again confirmed that in the hegemonic popular imagination Mexicans in the United States belonged only in the Southwest and close to the Mexican border.

The politicians and bureaucrats failed to consider the possibility of independent agency by Mexicans, particularly children, most of whom were adamantly opposed to and frightened by the prospect of returning to a Mexico they had never seen, since the vast majority were born and grew up in the United States. Nor did they account for the influence of adult Mexicanas attentive both to their children and to the individual freedoms and material comforts of life in the Midwest. If we believe hegemonic representations,

children and mothers had to contend with fathers and husbands who, having lost their jobs and unable to support their families, were inclined to return to the homeland. If dominant representations of an omnipotent macho Mexican culture were accurate, children and mothers would be no match for fathers in this major decision in the life cycle of the entire family, whether to stay in the United States or go to Mexico. Children and their mothers overwhelmingly had the upper hand, as a majority of Mexicans remained, especially those in which the immediate family members resided in the United States.

By the late 1930's, Mexicans finally established a permanent presence in cities and towns throughout the region. They quickly joined industrial unions when permitted and formed new social and cultural clubs and organizations that served important functions beyond helping to create a sense of community. They used their organizations to demand enforcement of laws protecting their rights and requiring that their children attend school, and they protested against discrimination in public places and at work. Because they were organized as residents and citizens, they also were able to more effectively challenge hegemonic representations of them as a menace.

With the World War II economic boom, Mexicans entered factories producing machinery, motor vehicles and weapons at Willow Run, Detroit, Ypsilanti, Pontiac, Saginaw, and elsewhere in the Midwest. Those reaching adulthood joined the Armed Forces in greater numbers than any other ethnic group in the United States. They were not necessarily more loyal citizens, but few had sufficient political influence to obtain draft deferments, employment in those industries considered vital to the national defense, or the class standing to qualify as farmers. Proletarian farmworkers were not eligible for deferments. A well-known case is Hero Street, a Mexican neighborhood located on the edge of a former railroad camp in Silvis, Illinois, surrounded by the Quad Cities of Bettendorf, Davenport, Moline and Rock Island. The dingy little colonia had the highest proportion of recipients of Medals of Honor, and of deaths, of any street in the USA, not only in WWII, but also in Korea and Vietnam. The actions of Mexican soldiers contradict the representations of presidential candidate Pat Buchanan that "Hispanics" were not "victims of 100 years of racial discrimination. There were few Hispanics even in the United States 40 years ago. How, then, can the feds [sic.] justify favoring Hispanics over sons of White Americans who fought in WWII or Vietnam?" (Buchanan, 1995). As in so many cases, Buchanan's language and his representations of knowledge are not consistent with readily-accessible facts.

During World War II and the following decades, an economic boom again convinced employers to encourage accelerated Mexican immigration to the United States. Some workers came as braceros (contract laborers) employed in agriculture, and in lesser numbers on the railroads and factories, in Michigan and other parts of the country, initially for the duration of the war. Many settled permanently, others returned to Mexico briefly but often joined hundreds of thousands of workers from Mexico who came to the United States to fill employers' demands for labor. Immigrants from Mexico were joined by Tejanos to work in the fields and factories of the Midwest. They settled not only in the larger cities, but formed colonias and barrios in medium-sized and smaller towns.

Mexicanos' Midwestern roots sank even deeper during this generation, contradicting the increasingly popular representations in popular culture and among politicians that depicted them as undocumented "wetbacks" breaking laws to enter the country, or non-resident migrant farmworkers. The images, which often passed as "common" knowledge, by focusing on the weak legal standing and lack of roots, served again to weaken the political presence and legal standing of Mexicans. Yet the rapid growth of the resident population, in conjunction with events in the national and international arenas, set the stage for the Chicano Movement in the 1960's and 1970's. The organized youth made many impressive material achievements, established a deeper cultural presence and challenged long-established hegemonic negative portrayals of Mexicans.

A final cycle in the history of the Mexican Midwest began in the late 1960's and 1970's with an economic restructuring highlighted by the dismantling of the "modern" large-scale factory system. Perhaps the classic case involves the massive steel industry, previously the major employer of urban Mexicans in the Midwest, while other industries also closed down or sharply reduced employment. Employers transferred their plants away from the large industrial

cities, where workers were organized, sending hundreds of thousands of jobs south to Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean and elsewhere in the Third World. They simultaneously moved some operations to smaller towns and rural locations in the South, the Southwest, and the rural Midwest.

The restructuring had contradictory effects on the residents of the region. On the one hand, it permitted a small number of investors and capitalists to acquire vast fortunes. On the other, it resulted in stagnating incomes for European-American workers, and sharp declines for African-Americans, Mexicans, and Native-Americans. There was more work at lower wages, contributing to the increasing popularity of two-income families and a sharp increase in the individual work week. Employers intensified their efforts to lure workers directly from Texas and the Mexican border for the new low-wage, non-unionized jobs available throughout the Midwest. Migration from several Latin American countries, overwhelmingly Mexico, reached record levels. By the end of the century Chicago's population approached 25% Mexican. Elsewhere in the Midwest, many new urban barrios, small-town colonias, and trailer park pueblos appeared. The migration has resuscitated dying neighborhoods and even cities in decline. In the ten states the U.S. Census Bureau refers to as the Midwest, in the twenty years since 1980, Mexicans were responsible for the majority of population growth, indicating that the rapid increase of Mexicans in the nation is not confined to the Southwest.

Assimilationist predictions of narrowing gaps between Whites and people of color simply have not occurred in the past generation. According to the 1990 census, of the population over age 25, 81% of European-Americans graduated from high school, compared with 67% of African-Americans, and only 52% of Latinos. Income data is similarly bleak. The per capita income for European-Americans in the US in 1991 was $15,510, while for Blacks it was $9,710, and for Latinos it was $8,662.

Politics during the most recent generation was profoundly influenced by the Southern strategy initiated during the Nixon administration, which involved in part selective use of data as a basis for increasingly strident and crudely racialized representations of economic, social and political trends. Politicians seeking electoral power overlooked the material improvements and political empowerment achieved by non-White people during the period of the Movement and tried to reduce or contain their influence. The strategy recalled that of the Learned Americans of the late 1920's and early 1930's, representing non-White people in the United States, as well as the Mexican nation as responsible for the stagnating conditions of the White working class as a whole. It also involved an overt attack on "affirmative action" and supportive social services, particularly for undocumented and non-citizens, again on the grounds that they were causing damage to more deserving "Americans." The creation of new negative racial representations in popular culture included a refashioned Mexican Menace.

In addition to Pat Buchanan's portrayals, we recall Ross Perot's claim that Mexico was unfairly taking jobs from U.S. workers, which he identified as the "Great Sucking Sound," perhaps the catchiest sound-byte from the 1992 election. Other political pundits hopped on the bandwagon to alert the English-speaking public of a new danger of immigration from Mexico, which Representative Lamar Smith (R-Texas) asserted was "the emergent issue of the 1990's, not just the influx of illegal aliens, but their cost to American taxpayers and workers" (Puente, 1993). The strategy aimed at an exponential increase in the size of the border patrol and raids on undocumented individuals in the workplace. Politicians justified the expanded border patrol by focusing on negative features of life in Mexico and conceived operations that drew attention to the border between the two countries with names such as, "Gatekeeper," and "Hold the Line" (Herrick, 1996). The international borders and the US' neighbors were not treated equally, as politicians did not seek to fashion negative images about their northern neighbor or the line that separated the United States and Canada. The border patrol engaged in a surge of activity in the second half of the 1990's and the apprehension rate of undocumented workers by the INS in January, 1996, more than quadrupled from a year earlier [from more than 42,000, compared with 9,500] (Seid, 1996). Politicians and border agents consciously racialized the foreign menace, and focused almost exclusively on Mexicans even in the Midwest, where they form only a small

portion of the undocumented. In slightly more than a decade beginning in the mid-1980's more Mexicans were hauled away from Midwestern factories and shops, and the raids are reported more frequently than in the preceding 80 years combined.

## Conclusion

Popular representations to the contrary, Mexicans have recent and ancient histories in both the Southwest and the Midwest. Their histories belie the theoretical assumptions on which a great deal of "common knowledge" about Mexicans has been based. For several generations scholars and politicians have sustained an essentialist geography associating Mexicans in the United States with the Southwest and the United States-Mexican border. Chicana and Chicano scholarship and literature tends to accept and buttress the dominant themes, commonly overlooking the explicit and implicit political implications of dominant geographical notions. Mexicans in Michigan, the Midwest and many regions outside the Southwest had links with Mexico long before the war between the United States and Mexico, when current notions of region and the border between the two countries approached is present form. Hostile portrayals have been set the stage for dominant acceptance of many anti-Mexican political acts for over a century. Recent arguments by conservative politicians for tightening or closing the border, by implication the United States-Mexican border, has created in the imaginary line separating the two nations another variation of the Mexican Menace. Yet not all borders are the same, as politicians of various persuasions along the boundary between Michigan and Ontario realize. They do not see many Mexicans participating in international bridge traffic, although the Ambassador Bridge, the Detroit-Windsor Tunnel, and the Bluewater Bridge are the 4th, 5th, and 14th most important crossing points by land between the United States and a neighboring country. Nor do the *politicos* of the Water Wonderland fear an invasion of boat people crossing Lake St. Clair or *mojados* wading across the Detroit River.

Like other politicians many of them also find racial polarization strategies against Mexicans increasingly difficult to sustain. Many are also concerned about offending a growing sector of the electorate, aware that Governor Pete Wilson of California and other Mexican bashers were badly defeated in recent electors, in part because their efforts unwittingly helped mobilize a Latino, primarily Mexican population to vote in record numbers. Even Michigan Senator Spencer Abraham, who some consider a voice of reason and moderation on immigration issues, belongs to the ultra-conservative Federalist Society, which seeks all precedent for action in the original United States Constitution. If Federalist Society members were to follow ideas prevalent when their Founding Fathers first came to power, they would adopt a relaxed attitude toward borders and immigration. In the 1780's immigration to the United States was fairly open, and neither its northern nor southern borders had much meaning in political, social or cultural terms. Furthermore, many of those Founding Fathers relied on immigrants, including slaves from Africa to perform onerous tasks. The Federalists of the 1780's and Senator Abraham, like the capitalists of the 1920's, might more accurately be considered "cheap labor advocates." Although conservative on many issues, they were unwilling to accept the hypocrisy of the restrictionists of their day, simultaneously aware that they would be hard pressed to find replacements for their immigrant housekeepers, cooks, and nannies, dishwashers and lawn keepers to care for their sprawling estates. Furthermore, like the early Federalists, they would not be inclined to accept notions that Mexicans, even represented as Spaniards, were a dangerous race when they shared with Spain a common enemy in England.

Failure of academics to recognize a distant Mexican past and current Mexican presence outside the Southwest has been the result not simply of neglect, but also the racial biases that inform the paradigms of dominant knowledge, and have broad implications. Notions like region and border exist in historically specific and often highly political contexts, as the Learned Americans of the 1920's were well aware. One dangerous trend that has crept into some Chicana and Chicano literary works has been to accept an essentialist notion that "nada existe fuera del lenguage" (nothing exists outside of

langauge). Struggles against racist and anti-Mexican notions in the 1920's by academics opposed to Eugenics were not resolved in texts alone, but simultaneously took place in a much broader arena. There will be more scholars to fabricate the knowledge of the Learned Americans and new politicians to perform the role of Pat Buchanan. They can be created at the drop of a hat, or purchased for dollars. It is dangerous not to challenge any language that appears under the guise of knowledge that permits characterizations of a race or people as a menace.

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