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'Build That Wall!': manufacturing the enemy, yet again

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ABSTRACT

The 2016 presidential campaign and the election of Donald Trump has amplified divisive anti-immigrant sentiment and has further positioned 'Mexicans as enemy.' Trump's 'Build That Wall!' declarative has stoked nativist ire through manufactured narratives that rarely, if ever, consider the United States government's role in the increase of undocumented immigrants residing in our country. In this essay, the author connects the current administration's anti-immigrant, anti-Mexican proposals to historical legislation that, cloaked under the guise of 'national security' or a return to 'American values,' has aimed to maintain White hegemony. Additionally, the author examines anti-Mexican narratives that aim to criminalize Mexican immigrants' behaviors to justify imperialistic and unjust policies that further serve dominant-White political elites and their constituents.

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We find ourselves in a dystopian, Orwellian novel in which the basic freedoms underlying our democracy such as the right to peaceful assemblage, the right to free speech, the right to be secure against unreasonable searches and seizures, and the right to have equal protection of the laws are being questioned. In my own lifetime, I have never had to fight for my constitutional rights. It is not that I have consciously taken them for granted, rather I have never been in a position where my life, liberty, and freedom have been at stake. As a multiracial Mexican–American whose father entered the United States with a green card, I am struck by how fortunate my own life has been. Unlike my father, I have never had to prove my citizenship while living in this country. Unlike him, I have never been placed in special education because of my national origin or language. And, unlike him, I have never had to experience overt discrimination in the work place because of my Mexican heritage.

Instead, the most devastating experiences with prejudice I have faced occurred as a child in relation to my father's Mexican identity. In elementary and middle school, students constructed an ongoing narrative of my father as a wetback gardener and trash man who worked at their homes cleaning their yards or picking up refuse. These images mocked, objectified and, in essence, stripped away my father's humanity. By reducing my father to caricatures, my peers separated the idea of my father as 'Cristina's dad' from the societal 'problem' of the Mexican presence in the United States. Most likely, their insults parroted family members' and friends' sentiments rather than reflected a conscious understanding of the meaning behind the stereotypes. Yet, by casting my father as a *wetback*, *beaner*, *gardener*, and *trash man* in their deliberate narratives, they equated him as 'less than,' 'other,' and of little worth in spite of the fact that he legally resided in the US as a naturalized citizen, earned an Engineering degree, and worked as a Civil Engineer for the City of Los Angeles.

I write this paper to unpack and contextualize negative stereotypes that have been used repeatedly to form, mold, and shape 'Mexican' as the enemy. The derogatory slurs hurled at my father are reflective

of viewpoints that rarely, if ever, consider our country's complex, historical relationship with Mexico. Specifically, how our politicians and media have criminalized and marginalized Mexican people since the 1800s has vilified their diverse and rich heritage and undermined significant contributions Mexicans and those of Mexican heritage have made politically, economically, and socially. 'Build That Wall!' extends the mythology that we, the *American* people need to become gatekeepers in deciding – for our own protection – which Mexicans are identified, sorted, and sent back to the *other side*. Through this essay, I explore briefly the construction of 'Mexican as enemy' as threat to our country's security and economy through key historical events and current political rhetoric and politics.

Historical considerations

The ironies underlying US immigration laws and sanctions against Mexican people are connected to the degree to which US federal and state governments have contributed repeatedly to the obfuscation of what is 'legal' and 'illegal'. The US government's stance on a Mexican person's status in this country has been heavily influenced by economic gain and sociopolitical pressures (Massey, Durand, & Pren, 2014). Inconsistent and arbitrary policies on Mexican immigration have subjected millions of Mexican and Mexican heritage people to unfair vetting processes that exploit labor and undermine the path to naturalization or citizenship (Acuña, 2011). To gain popular support of these controversial practices and policies, the US Government aided by politically driven propaganda delivered via mass media outlets has carefully constructed and reified a narrative that locates the Mexican as poor, dirty, lazy, drunk, gang-banger, cholo/a, illegal, ignorant, and criminal (Aguirre, 2004; Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2015). The US Government has used this narrative as a scapegoat to justify deportation, unlawful search and seizures, and undue process of the law. The following paragraphs unpack these statements and provide context for why deliberate construction of 'Mexican as enemy' has been useful in promoting nativist agendas.

Manifest destiny – 'White is right(eous)'

The sociopolitical construction of 'Mexican as enemy' in the United States extends back to the 1820s and 1830s when US colonists fought Mexican troops over the Texas territory. The most famous battle at The Alamo in 1836 resulted in the capture of General Santa Anna who, under pressure, signed over the large expansive territory of Texas to the Lone Star Republic. In 1845, under President Polk, Texas was annexed to the United States provoking Mexico's attempts at renegotiating Texan boundaries. As tensions between the United States and Mexico heightened, Polk committed military fleets at sea and soldiers on land to defeat Mexico. On 2 February 1848, *The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo* was signed and much of Mexico's land, power, and resources were lost. The treaty validated the United States' title to Texas and, additionally, ceded the massive areas of California and New Mexico territories while, simultaneously, 'converted a good part of [Mexico's] population into foreigners in its own land' (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996, p. 273).

The worst stereotypes that each country held about each other emerged during this period of the Mexican–American War (1846–1848). The United States framed Mexicans as 'backwards people' and justified the taking of Mexican land by invoking Manifest Destiny. Under this expansionist ideology, White Americans were God's chosen and had the right to claim land at the expense of those deemed undeserving. President Polk's statement on 11 May 1846 painted Mexicans, as 'menaces,' murderers, and instigators of hostile acts to justify warfare: 'After reiterated menaces, Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon American Soil. She has proclaimed hostilities that have commenced, and that two nations are at war' (PBS.org, n.d.). Mexico, in turn, became highly suspicious of White Americans and developed deep-seeded fears and mistrust leading to a type of 'pathological *Yankeephobia*' (Meyer & Sherman, 1991, p. 352) that would impact US–Mexico relations from that point on.

Ramifications of immigration laws

Polk's imperialistic chauvinism set a deleterious precedent in justifying White Americans' actions against Mexicans by criminalizing behaviors that, before the Mexican American War, were typical and accepted – such as residing on or entering into Texas territory. The insidious nature of Manifest Destiny tied violent, dispossessing acts to God's will and legitimized discriminatory behaviors that, over time and in specific cases, became systematized and institutionalized through executive, legislative, and judiciary actions. For example, in the 1880s and 1890s, in reaction to fear of foreign invasion – 'whether from armies during wartime or from foreign migrants during peacetime' (Ngai, 2003, p. 71) – the Supreme Court established the doctrine of plenary power giving legislative and executive branches sovereignty in regulating all aspects immigration in relation to individual's rights. With power centered in executive and legislative branches, elected representatives could write legislation reflective of theirs' and their constituents' views on which foreigners could 'assimilate.'

1920s

In 1917, 1921, and 1924 Congress passed a series of immigration acts that served to restrict, rather than regulate, the flow of immigrants into the US. These acts aimed to preserve the ideal of White American homogeneity by restricting or banning immigrants from specific countries (Reimers, 1981). Ironically, these restrictions did not apply to Mexican people or people from the Americas, yet numerical restriction, imposed in 1924, created a set of enforcement procedures and policies that had significant consequences for Mexicans. For the first time, legislators created a new class of person – the 'illegal alien.' Through the 1924 act, both mass illegal immigration and deportation policy resulted in heavier enforcement along the US–Mexico border (Ngai, 2003). Additionally, the concept of *illegality* disproportionately impacted Mexican people who were largely categorized as 'undesirable' (Inda, 2006, p. 68) as compared to Western Europeans and Canadians whose racialization as White, regardless of immigrant status, facilitated their national assimilation into American society (Ngai, 2003).

1930s–50s

In spite of greater immigration restrictions and US–Mexico border enforcement policies, the need for cheap labor during the 1930s and into the early 1960s created opportunities for Mexicans to enter the United States and return to Mexico in a circular and cyclical manner (Massey, Durand, & Pren, 2015). In particular, labor shortages in the United States resulting from World War II brought about The Bracero Program (1942–1964) through which over 4.5 million Mexican nationals were contracted to work in the United States in mainly agricultural sectors. Though millions of Mexicans were legally employed as *braceros*, they soon confronted poor treatment, low wages, and despicable work conditions. Yet, even more perfidious was the US government's direct hand in opening and restricting the border based on economic advantage. During deep labor shortages, the US Government opened the border fully without restrictions (and against the Mexican government's immigration laws) to allow millions to work the fields to close economic gaps. Conversely, in times of economic rebound or worker saturation, the US Government – especially under President Eisenhower – enforced harsher restrictions that included rounding up 'illegals' for deportation. These practices gained traction by portraying undocumented, bracero workers as 'dangerous, malicious, and subversive' (Acuña, p. 267), but they also fueled human rights groups to speak out against unjust government actions. In spite of these protests, the US–Mexico border, under Eisenhower, was militarized through 'Operation Wetback,' a campaign that provided funding for increased border patrol, new military equipment, and a 150-mile long fence to keep Mexicans out.

1960s–1990s

In 1965, under President Johnson, the Amendment to the Immigration Act was implemented as one of the many acts passed under the 'Great Society.' This act changed admittance policy significantly. Instead of admitting immigrants on the basis of national origin, immigrants were given higher quota preferences if they had family members in the United States (Acuña, 2011). Additionally non-White

populations, specifically Asians and Central American refugees were granted legal entry. Prior to the act, national quotas limiting the number of people from individual countries did not apply to Latin-American populations including Mexicans. However, in 1965 this policy changed, placing a cap of 40,000 people from any one nation.

In spite of these restrictions, between the 1970s and 1990s, there was a 137% increase in the foreign-born population who consisted, in large part, of non-White immigrants and their children (Acuña, 2011). The majority of these immigrants migrated to five states (CA, FL, IL, NY, TX) changing these states' demographics dramatically (Batalova & Terrazas, 2010). During the 1970s–1990s, these changes sparked a national return to nativism whereby US citizens 'authorized themselves' as gatekeepers of 'American identity' by weighing in on immigration policy (De Genova, 2005, p. 62). This nationalistic flavor of nativism created a distinctive 'us' versus 'them' binary to ground specific legislation intended to further criminalize and punish 'illegals.'

The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 encapsulated this nativist sentiment. If not before, surely by the 1980s as anti-Mexican forms of racism rose, the concept that all Mexicans were 'illegal' and all 'illegals' were Mexican took hold of the White American psyche (Chacón & Davis, 2006; Chávez, 2008). The intent of IRCA was to squelch the flow of unauthorized (undocumented) Mexican immigration by (a) increasing US border enforcement; (b) legalizing only certain 'undocumented aliens' who met specific residency and character criteria; and, perhaps most significant, (c) penalizing those who knowingly recruited or employed 'illegals.' These strict requirements, however, did not deter Mexican immigration into the US; they only changed the behaviors and channels through which Mexican immigrants entered the country and navigated their way toward employment. The US Government did not take into account deliberate recruitment of cheap, unauthorized labor by US businesses or the strong social and familial networks located in the US that supported Mexican immigrants both financially and socially (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996).

The new nativism: post 9/11

The 11 September 2001 attacks by 'foreigners' on domestic soil heightened fears that no one was safe and that American protection relied on stricter restrictions targeting Muslim and Arab 'terrorists.' Though 'illegal' Mexicans had never been associated with terrorists, anti-immigrant policies including 'expanded surveillance, mass arrests ... indefinite incarcerations, [and] deportations' (De Genova, 2005, p. 63) had devastating repercussions for them and other Latino/a immigrants. Post-9/11 apprehensions of Mexican people, along with Central Americans who used Mexico as a crossing point into the US, increased sharply as did mass workplace-raids (De Genova, 2005; Inda, 2006). Conducted under the name of 'national security,' these actions targeted 'deportable' aliens whose unlawful physical presence on US soil was framed as a threat.

In 2003, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) – which had been created under President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933 to address deportation procedures and legalization measures – was replaced by The Department of Homeland Security (DHS). One of its main goals, as stated above, was to detect and apprehend 'deportable aliens' in addition to the responsibilities deployed by two of its units, the US Border Patrol and Investigations Division. The former focused on safeguarding US entry points by land or sea and the latter enforced immigration laws within the US by investigating criminal activity and inspecting work sites that employed 'illegal' immigrants (Inda, 2006).

Part of the strategy used by the DHS (and previously by the INS) to deport mass numbers of 'illegal' immigrants was gaining political and public support. This strategy involved enumerative and surveying practices that, when compiled statistically, was used not only to criminalize 'illegal' immigrants' behavior, but also to portray their presence as dangerous. Enumeration, in practice, counted and made publicly available the number of aliens arrested in violation of US immigration laws. In addition, surveying routines provided data to shape the public's understanding of illegal immigrants' impact on the labor market and public services (Inda, 2006). Politicians and their constituents depicted illegal immigration negatively using descriptors such as 'flood,' 'out of control,' and 'invasion' (p. 74). Moreover,

many politicians glossed over the fact that undocumented immigrants paid billions yearly in state and local taxes (Soergel, 2016). Additionally, they perpetuated a potent mythology that illegal immigrants drained the economy and competed with low-wage American workers in the labor market (Inda, 2006).

The 'caging effect'

To understand why Trump's 'Build That Wall!' imperative gained immediate traction among millions of Americans throughout the 2016 presidential election campaign, we must consider not only existing derogatory narratives already described, but also examine demographic changes nationwide. As stated, in post-9/11, harsher immigration policies in the interior and along the borders increased. The search for dangerous criminals, 'lawbreakers,' 'terrorists,' and other 'threatening' populations included Mexican 'illegals' who, by the 2000s, also were equated with drug cartels as either those trafficking drugs or those being smuggled with drugs (Campo-Flores, Campbell, Kovach, & Gekas, 2007; Hall, 2005; November 17). Fear of these criminals as well as anger of their *growing* presence strengthened nativist beliefs that a 'Great America' meant a Whiter, more 'wholesome' America (Covert, 2016, May 16).

But why was *their* presence growing? With stricter penalties against 'illegals' and greater, more expansive, border control, why were their numbers increasing? Ironically, the answer is that through harsher immigration policies targeting 'illegal' Mexican immigration – especially along the US – Mexico border – the US Government created a 'cage' in which the historical, cyclical flow of immigration to and from the United States from Mexico stopped and was, instead, replaced by a unilateral one (Massey et al., 2014). This one-way current meant that once undocumented immigrants (from Mexico and increasingly from Central America) entered the United States they settled for fear of never being able to return if they left. The pattern of the temporary or seasonal male worker who entered the US for employment only to return home was broken (Sellers Campbell, 2008). Now, entire families journeyed precariously across non-traditional border entry routes and into the United States to join other family members or friends (Massey et al., 2014, 2015). Recruited by agricultural sectors and other labor industries throughout the United States, many undocumented families located to cities and towns never before inhabited by such large numbers of Mexicans and other Latinos (Massey, Durand, & Pren, 2016). The mythology of being invaded and taken over felt real as many White Americans scrambled to restructure educational, medical, and other systems to accommodate these 'foreigners,' albeit reluctantly (Longazel, 2012).

Trump's nativism: 'extreme vetting'

The assumptions underlying the 'Build That Wall!' declarative is that America is under siege by 'radical Islamic terrorists,' Mexican 'rapists,' and 'bad hombres,' and other 'criminals' intent on dismantling the core fabric of what makes 'America Great.' According to Trump, America was 'great' post-World War II during the late 1940s and 1950s when there was 'entrepreneurship' in industry and Americans 'were not pushed around' and 'respected by everybody' (Krieg, 2016, March 28). Building a massive wall along the US–Mexico border and 'extreme vetting' measures such as ideological tests given to 'foreigners' before US entry are reflective of the Trump administration's drastic, pumped-up approach of wielding a 'big stick' without much thought to the consequences.

Trump's 'extreme vetting' ideology is reflected in his 6 September 2015 tweet: 'My grandparents didn't come to America all the way from Germany to see it get taken over by immigrants. Not on my watch.' This problematic statement is demonstrative of historical amnesia, a conscious effort to gaslight by revising US–Mexican history, and a complete ignorance of historical events and facts. If however, we examine this statement through an extreme nativist lens we uncover two things. First, in his view, German immigrants are of a different type or class from the immigrants he is alluding to in this tweet. Second, the *other* 'immigrants' – who are presumptively non-White, non-Western European – are to be feared. The message is that if 'we' – White Americans – do not act soon we will be 'taken over' by non-desirable and dangerous foreigners. 'Not on my watch' is his promise to White America that 'being American' and making 'America Great Again' means strengthening Whiteness and all the privileges and power it affords.

Though millions of people around the globe have been shocked and disturbed by Trump's wanton comments and actions, the truth is, we shouldn't be. His actions and words are directly aligned with President Polk's though reiterated to resonate with current times. In some ways, we should be thanking Trump for unearthing – in such a brazen and outlandish manner – all the racist, sexist, and classist practices hidden beneath 'democracy's' surface. As a Mexican-American woman, I, along with so many others, have witnessed in horror his administration's attempts at steeper vetting measures intended to sort Brown America from White. As I review our government's actions toward Mexicans since the 1800s, I realize we have evolved very little in our acceptance of one another. However, under Trump, we are forced to confront the ugliness of our American character by reassessing 'core American values' that have aimed to exclude rather than integrate. It is now – it *has* to be now – that we, the American people, re-envision 'democracy' for the good of *all* its people. We cannot keep repackaging White American privilege and elitism as 'democracy' or 'American' with slogans like: 'Manifest Destiny,' 'The Great Society,' 'Kinder, Gentler Nation,' and 'Make America Great Again.' We *will not* be duped another time. Not on my watch.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Cristina C. Santamaría Graff, PhD, is an assistant professor of special education at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI). Her research and pedagogy center on inclusive and equitable practices for students with disabilities, particularly Latinx students. Specifically, her work collaborating with families of children with disabilities is focused on parents' expertise as stakeholders in the educational decision-making processes that involve their children. She believes repositioning families' assets and strengths as core components in developing curriculum and instruction is a critical step toward transformative, systemic change in both teacher education programs and in pre-K-12 classrooms.

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