

**ALIENATED CITIZENS:
“HISPANOPHOBIA” AND THE MEXICAN IM/MIGRANT BODY**

by

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DEDICATION

I humbly dedicate this dissertation to my parents José Jurado and Teresa Guzmán de Jurado.

To my father and for the endless days spent laboring under a relentless, hot Texas sun, dreaming of better days to come...

To my mother, who courageously left the country of her birth and her entire family, in search of a brighter future...

Les ofrezco este humilde obsequio por sus sacrificios. May this humble offering honor your sacrifices.

In Memory of...

Margaret (Maggie) Caygill-Brouwers, who passed away much too soon and before her time. You cross the finish line with each one of us whose lives you touched so profoundly with your immensely positive and courageous spirit.

Maggie, pensamos en tí siempre. Caminas con nosotras.

*

Nestora Bella Duran, phenomenal grandmother and matriarch who left her labor and youth, but not her courageous spirit in countless fields of these United States.

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c/s.

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INTRODUCTION

Alienating Rhetoric

While the Mexicans are not easily assimilated, this is not of very great importance as long as most of them return to their native land after a short time.

—The Dillingham Commission, 1911

No sense telling La Migra you've lived here all your life...Do we carry proof around like bellybuttons?

—Petra, *Under the Feet of Jesus*

The topic of Latino immigrant day laborers has resurfaced recently as a tense, if volatile, subject. In part, this is a result of the racial and social tensions that tend to accompany the emergence of such “day labor corners,” but also in part because the city corners in question are no longer a strictly Southern California fixture. Rather, the recent media buzz is largely informed by the locations of these corners, such as those now found in states like Louisiana and Georgia and various other “non-Southwest” geographic regions.¹ The manifestations of the racial tensions embedded within this issue run the

¹ Countless reports have focused on the “unexpected” locations for newly arriving immigrant labor. Some examples: the particularly informative report by Maria Hinojosa “Immigrant Nation: Divided Country” (Oct 2004) addresses the recent tensions with day laborers in Georgia; “Through Our Eyes’: A Focused Look at D.C. Latinos’ Experience,” *The Washington Post* (Sept 23, 2006), “Still on Corners: Laborers’ Shun Hiring Hall,” *The New York Times* (June 24, 2007), “Day Laborers, Silent and Despised, Find Their Voice,” *The New York Times* (July 10, 2006).

spectrum, from the attempted murders of two Mexican immigrant day laborers in Farmingville² to the recent controversy of banning taco trucks in Louisiana³ to the unlawful deportation of a mentally challenged American citizen (of Mexican ancestry) to Tijuana.⁴ These headline stories become markers of the volatile and often hateful tensions associated with immigrant laborers—particularly those of Mexican (or other Latina/o) ancestry.

Latina/os in general pose an interesting challenge to the U.S. national imaginary in that they comprise a large population that is a mixture of varying legal statuses that include but are not limited to: citizens, legal residents, and the undocumented. As noted in the first quote from the epigraph, when the Dillingham Commission reported on Mexican immigrants, it noted the community's difficulty in "assimilating," but telling of the era in which the report was written, it deemed that factor irrelevant if the laborers returned from whence they came. Nearly one hundred years later, I would argue that the same sentiment remains. My dissertation shows how the dehumanizing discourses deployed to discursively construct Mexican immigrant laborers at the beginning of the last century continue to burden the Latina/o community in the present day. In part, that long trajectory the United States has with Mexican immigration and its accompanying xenophobia is the focus of this dissertation. More importantly,

² Robert Gearty, "Beat Victims Tell Tale," *Daily News New York*, September 20, 2000. This hate crime was also the impetus for the documentary titled *Farmingville* by Carlos Sandoval and Catherine Tambini.

³ Emilie Bahr "Many taco trucks targeted by Jefferson Parish food-vendor restrictions have left the parish." *The Journal : the Community News of Jefferson Parish*, August 17, 2007, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed August 25, 2007).

⁴ *Day to Day*, NPR, August 8, 2007. Pedro Guzman, a 29 year old developmentally disabled Mexican American citizen was mistakenly deported to Tijuana and was only recently found in August 2007 after 3 months of wandering the streets of Tijuana, a city he had never been to.

however, this dissertation is also about the counter articulations that arise from within the Latina/o community that denounce and challenge such dehumanizing rhetoric during peak “Hispanophobic” moments. Thus, at its most basic level, my project is an effort to valorize critical analysis and deconstruction of such racializing conceptualizations in the Latina/o community. My dissertation focuses primarily on the Mexican im/migrant body in large part due to the fact that they comprise the majority of Latina/os living in the United States as well as the adjacency of the two countries by a particularly militarized and violent border. However, I strongly believe that such regionally and nationally specific analysis also sheds light on the Latina/o population in the United States, particularly because Latino/os tend to be conflated or collapsed into the most visible ethnic group.

In certain geographical spaces, such as the Southwest, the bodies of Mexican im/migrants remain discursively constructed as beasts of burden; a workforce that is at times either invisible or anonymous while at others conspicuously criminal, but always “foreign” and “alien.” This statement, unfortunately, still resonates with the way we think of Mexican immigrant labor contemporaneously, as disembodied hands, without faces or bodies. *Manos sin cuerpos de carne y hueso*. Devoid of the conceptualization of any concrete physicality and corporeality within dominant discourses, it is easier to erase, exploit and criminalize these bodies. In short, it becomes easier to strip these subjects of any basic sense of humanity. The recurrence of Mexicans as the object of such alienating discourse is the driving force behind this project. Ethnic

Mexicans (and by unfortunate extension, all Latina/os) in the U.S. are “alienated” in the sense that they are considered “foreign” and thus forced outside any conceptualizations of the nation. Further, I also want to play with the word to refer to the discursive construction of ethnic Mexicans as a monstrous “alien” Other.

Thinking about it now, the genesis of my project began well over a decade ago, years before ever considering a Ph.D. program. In 1994 I was an undergraduate at U. C. Santa Cruz witnessing in dumbfounded disbelief, along with thousands of other Californians, the passing of Proposition 187. Aimed at denying “illegal aliens” of medical care and education, the proposition was deceptively marketed as an issue of “fiscal common sense” and not racism. In California, the adjoining border left no question as to which ethnic group was being targeted as the problem. Despite intense organizing by anti-Prop 187 proponents involving door to door campaigning, countless editorials and protest marches the majority of California voters passed legislation that was inherently “Hispanophobic.” At the time, the socio-political climate was venomously charged and instinctively I knew that this legislation would have repercussions that would extend far and beyond that of only targeting undocumented immigrants. Furthermore, the question remained in all our minds: *exactly how were citizens to be differentiated from non-citizens?* It was inevitable to assume that all brown bodies would be rendered suspect, non-citizens and citizens alike.

As a child, I grew up hearing about my father’s childhood in segregated South Texas. My father, a second generation Mexican American, was once

detained while walking home from fieldwork with several *braceros*. The men fortunate enough to have carried with them their contract cards were immediately released, but those without contracts or without them in hand were detained along with my father. Being a citizen of the United States, my father did not carry a contract card though he worked alongside Mexican immigrant workers. Needless to say, my father's word that he had been born in the state of Texas was not enough. He was held until my grandmother was able to provide my father's birth certificate as proof of citizenship. By the simple fact and coincidence of his ethnicity, his body had been consequently scripted as "suspect" and foreign. In 1994 I had the uncanny, horrifying sense that the discrimination my father had described from his adolescence had re-surfaced. The danger of Proposition 187 went beyond the issue of immigrant scapegoating. The danger resided in the way the rhetoric of the legislation conflated all Latina/o immigrants and citizens in such a way that promoted the falsity of reading citizenship on the body as one might (equally falsely, I might add) be able to read race or gender.

This thought of "reading" citizenship on the body leads me to the second quote in the epigraph which is from the novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* by Helena Maria Viramontes in which Petra, mother of five and a migrant farm worker sensing her daughter's anxieties of feeling persecuted by authorities, poignantly asks, "Do we carry proof around like bellybuttons?"⁵ At once her question makes a truthful and powerful statement regarding the impossibility of identifying citizenship on the body and also highlights her painful awareness and recognition

⁵ Maria Helena Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus* (New York: Plume, 1995), 62.

of criminalizing rhetoric that scripts her as foreign and alien. I began to think about the ways in which “Hispanophobic” moments have marked the American historical landscape with tragic repetitiveness. While Latina/os are not the only immigrants who have endured such racism, my project will isolate the moments in which ethnic Mexican bodies have been the target of such discourses.⁶

Ultimately, my dissertation underscores the way in which discourses of the Mexican im/migrant body has circulated and changed little in the last hundred years, but perhaps most importantly, it also explores the way in which Latina/o cultural producers have contested this recurrent alienation and made claims for Latina/o bodies.

Latino scholars such as Francisco Balderrama, Juan Ramón García, George Sánchez, and David Gutiérrez to name a few, have provided detailed accounts of particular historical moments in which Mexican subjects were the primary, if not exclusive, target of xenophobic campaigns (typically in the form of deportations/repatriations) fueled by politically charged, nativist movements. By critically analyzing the deportation campaigns during three separate moments, they collectively document a historiography, if you will, of “Hispanophobic” moments that can be used as instruments to trace the ways in which the Mexican body became an ideological battleground that would affect the larger Latina/o community.

The repatriation campaigns of the 1930s have been extensively covered by Abraham Hoffman in *Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression:*

⁶ I will focus heavily on ethnic Mexicans as they have historically, and presently comprise the largest ethnic group of Latina/os living in the United States.

Repatriation Pressures, 1929-1939, as well as the work of Francisco Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez in their book *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriations in the 1930s*. Juan Ramón García has tackled the mass deportation campaign in the mid 1950s in his work *Operation Wetback: The Mass Deportation of Mexican Undocumented Workers in 1954*. The work of David Gutiérrez has further interrogated the impact such repatriation campaigns had on the identity formation of Mexican and Mexican-American subjects living in the United States in his book *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants and the Politics of Ethnicity*.

Other scholars such as Otto Santa Ana, Camille Guerin Gonzales, and Lisa Flores have further contributed to the historical research by carefully scrutinizing the ways in which the legal rhetoric and popular metaphors used to describe the Mexican (im)migrant subject during particularly xenophobic historical moments. The metaphorical construction of Mexican immigrants as “birds of passage” and the lasting impact this has had on the perception of ethnic Mexicans as foreign sojourners is a major component of Guerin González’s book *Mexican Workers, and American Dreams: Immigration, Repatriation and California Farm Labor, 1900-1939*.⁷ Santa Ana’s work *Brown Tide Rising* focuses on the metaphors of “dangerous waters” and natural disaster evoked in articles printed in the *Los Angeles Times* with regard to Mexican

⁷ As noted by Guerin-González and Flores, Mexican immigrant braceros were seen as transient workers in the United States that had no real desire to stay within American borders. In congressional hearings, braceros were frequently referred to as “birds of passage” that come to the United States to work and then like a “homing pigeon” would return to their home in Mexico. This was an important component in their argument for Mexican labor as they hoped to appease anti-immigrant proponents of the minimal threat that these laborers posed to the composition of American society.

immigrants/immigration in the 1990s. Most influential to my own analysis is the work of Lisa Flores whose scholarship has examined the dimensions of citizenship, race and nation as interpreted in the contested and contentious space of the Mexican immigrant body. I show in my analysis how the alienation that arises from social distance and ostracizing exclusion morphs into a much more literal dehumanized alien and I would further argue, monstrous body. Thus, bodies interpreted as “Mexican,” whatever their legal status, are rendered suspect and remain scripted as foreign, alien, and criminal. As Gutiérrez cogently argues in his work *Walls and Mirrors*, ethnic Mexican subjects in the United States have a long history of being conflated with newly arriving immigrants, thereby erasing the incorporation and existence of Mexican citizens. The “foreignness” of both Mexican immigrants and Mexican American citizens⁸ remains solidly in place as a result of the continuous erasure or blurring of the two categories in public discourse.

Building from such groundbreaking scholarship, I further develop this particular dialogue and provide a richer conversation with the incorporation of an analysis of popular cultural productions. By closely examining an eclectic variety of “texts,” I illustrate how during key historical moments, the Mexican im/migrant body became a site for contestation over the limits of nationalism, citizenship and identity. While many of these past scholars have documented the historical roots, as well as the rhetorical implications of anti-Mexican moments in American history, my work explores the often unaccounted for, but fruitful realm of popular

⁸ Throughout my dissertation I will use the term Mexican/American when indicating both Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans, as these two groups are often conflated. Likewise, the term im/migrant is used when referring to Mexican immigrants and Mexican American migrants.

culture (in a variety of forms) as an additional site for critical analysis. I will draw upon a broad spectrum of sources that will include novels, short stories, film, academic reports/writing, on-line digital media and political cartoons in order to better understand the rhetorical reactions by Latina/o culture workers to existing, dehumanizing discursive constructions of the Mexican im/migrant body. These texts or cultural productions by Latina/os locate and contextualize the instances in which the Mexican im/migrant body becomes a site for contested meaning. Furthermore, they reveal the ways in which specific typographies of Mexican bodies are constructed that speak to the larger questions of citizenship, human rights and the national imaginary.

While, as I noted earlier, there have been historical accounts of the historical events involving massive deportation and repatriation campaigns, I am most interested in critically engaging the literary and visual responses to “Hispanophobia” that are articulated in popular culture. This “Hispanophobia,” I argue, is the product of a process of “differential racialization” that has impacted Mexican American subjects since at least the turn of the century. Legal scholar Richard Delgado has coined the term “differential racialization” to define the often varying yet specific racializations of any disfavored group at different historical moments in time.⁹ He offers as an example the changing images of African Americans in the national imaginary. During slavery, images of African Americans were overwhelmingly that of happy, dependent, and child-like subjects. After emancipation, this image was radically different, even

⁹ See generally Richard Delgado & Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

oppositional. The subservient and docile slave is replaced by the image of a menacing, criminal and bestial (often masculine) black subject during Reconstruction.

Delgado's formulation of "differential racialization" is key when engaging in re-readings of the Mexican im/migrant body in literature, film and general media. Interfaced with legislative practices that range from immigration laws to public policies, one is able to see the implications such individual and regional occurrences have on a much more global perspective. Only through such multi-faceted analysis can one see the ways in which dominant discourses operate in concert to create both criminalized hyper-visibility and destructive invisibility. Cultural productions emerging within the Mexican im/migrant community, however, often counter these pathologizing discourses.

Because of the social, legal and discursive impact that this rhetoric has on the Latina/o community, I am partial to the term "dehumanization," as used by Patrisia González and Roberto Rodriguez. Co-authors of the on-line *Column of the Americas*, they use the word "dehumanization" instead of "racism" to talk about racial inequalities. They explain the reasons behind this conscious word choice:

For those who often ask why we use the word 'dehumanization' rather than 'racism'.....to dehumanize (including, but not limited to reasons of race) is to degrade, stereotype, caricaturize, trivialize, devalue, humiliate, invisibilize, alienize, scapegoat, criminalize and demonize. In effect, it's to make one less than human, not simply in society and the media, but also inside of the courtroom."¹⁰

¹⁰ Patrisia González & Roberto Rodriguez, "\$4,000: The Price of a Mexican," *Column of the Americas*, Aug. 2001, <http://www.voznuestra.com/Americas/2001/August/31> [accessed October 20, 2005].

The “Hispanophobia” that has marginalized Mexican/American subjects for well over a century represents a form of “dehumanization.” Much of the legal rhetoric and public discourse during these key moments stripped ethnic Mexicans of their humanity, rendering them foreign, abject and monstrous.

In the Southwest in particular, the conflation of the term “illegal alien” and Mexican is undeniable. Mae Ngai documents the historical trajectory of this conflation in her book *Impossible Subjects*. The discursive power and material residues of such a conflation I argue, has indelibly marked and manifest in cultural productions. Ngai cogently dissects the master narratives of immigration and citizenship analyzing the ways in which “illegal alien” subjects are constructed and subsequently racialized creating what she terms “alien citizens.” In Ngai’s words, “alien citizens” are “persons who are American by virtue of birth in the United States but who are presumed to be foreign by the mainstream of American culture and, at times, by the state.”¹¹ In my project I map how the rhetorical and discursive construction that creates “alien citizens” affect the cultural productions by and about ethnic Mexican subjects.

This is evidenced in a variety of “texts” by Latina/o cultural workers whose work, I argue, is emblematic of attempts to re-humanize the Mexican im/migrant body beginning in the early 1900s to the present moment. Many of the authors and artists I will look at actively engage in acts of “rehumanization,” through their chosen medium, be it fiction, film, websites or other media forums. Their rearticulations speak to an active contestation of the maligned im/migrant body,

¹¹ Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) 2.

rendered at best as anonymous hands and at worst as beasts of burden within public discourse. Through these acts of rehumanization these authors and artists reclaim the denigrated Mexican im/migrant body, rescuing it from a history of pathologizing inscriptions in popular culture.

My dissertation project focuses on cultural productions in which the Mexican im/migrant body is represented rhetorically in visual and literary forums. While my work is solidly situated within Latina/o Studies, it engages a variety of fields as it speaks to greater issues of national identity, citizenship and race relations through the scope of American popular culture. As noted earlier, I will explore a variety of mediums as “texts” for my analysis, including novels, films, print media and websites in order to examine the myriad representations of the Mexican im/migrant subject. I have found that these venues represent discursive spaces in which allegories and metaphors of the Mexican im/migrant subject are created and mobilized. Furthermore, these constructions provide a unique insight to the contradictions and tensions that are scripted on the im/migrant body by dominant socio-political discourses circulating at any given moment in time. Far from static, dominant constructions of the Mexican im/migrant body are fluid, ranging the spectrum from desired laboring body to diseased and criminal. Likewise, calculated oppositional responses from Latina/o authors and artists are accordingly versatile, at times engaging the same stereotypes. Thus, the ethnic Mexican body provides a useful signifier for larger national anxieties around who can claim citizenship. As I demonstrate, the Latina/o authors and artists in question isolate an unspoken but tangible

association between “humanness” and “citizenship” that becomes a recurrent trope which they continuously question, complicate and address within their works.

Manifestations of the Mexican im/migrant subject recur in a broad spectrum of mediums from characters in fiction to anonymous abstractions in headlines. At times their filmic interpretations are that of dignified immigrants, or monstrously parasitic aliens. Literary representations can also provide an alternative historical fingerprint of the allegorical and metaphorical trajectory of the contested territory of the Mexican im/migrant body. Not surprisingly, the internet enables yet another venue for the visualization and interpretation of this subject. Most notably, Lalo Alcaraz and Alex Rivera have created websites and short films, accessible on the internet, which clearly address the discursive constructions of the Mexican im/migrant and Latina/os in general.

Working within the premise that the socio-political climate at any given moment informs and dialogues with other cultural arenas, my work will explore historical moments in which the Mexican im/migrant body becomes highly visible in public discourse. More importantly, while certain bodies are criminalized, such as “illegal aliens” other bodies are simultaneously rendered invisible, namely non-immigrant, Mexican citizens. The fluid hegemonic constructions of the Mexican body shift accordingly, and as I will illustrate, authors and artists engage the multiple variations, reclaiming ownership of dehumanized, infantilized and criminalized bodies. At times these authors and artists deploy familiar stereotypes, albeit strategically, at others they reconstruct different versions of

the denigrated bodies. The body in question is overwhelmingly represented as masculine, in large part due to the significant impact the Bracero Program had in spotlighting Mexican male immigrant workers. As a result, many of the texts I will be analyzing focus on this specifically gendered body.

Indispensable to my analysis will be the isolation of three specific moments in American history that informed and shaped cultural productions in their production and reproduction of the Mexican im/migrant body. Three specific years, namely 1930, 1954 and 1994 propel my analysis throughout my dissertation. I have isolated these dates as they mark years in which one can easily trace a distinct peak in targeting the bodies of ethnic Mexicans. Nineteen thirty and nineteen fifty-four marked years in which the U.S. government orchestrated massive deportation and repatriation campaigns targeting ethnic Mexicans. Nineteen-ninety-four marks the year in which California passed Proposition 187. And while no “formal” deportation drive was orchestrated by the U.S. government, its intent was to severely limit Mexican immigration and exclude immigrants themselves from public spaces. In this way, I read 1994 as a year that engaged in a “deportation drive” on a discursive and rhetorical level. Each of these dates represents the culmination of a very specific and heightened anti-Mexican xenophobia—and might thus be termed “Hispanophobic.” This is not to say that elements of “Hispanophobia” are entirely absent outside this timeframe, but rather that in these historical moments, the Mexican im/migrant body becomes a highly visible and contested site of meaning making. The decades my dissertation will focus on represent historical moments in which the

Mexican im/migrant body becomes a highly visible and contested site of meaning making.

I agree with past scholars that have noted that the subsequent outcome of such targeting resulted in the categorization of all ethnic Mexicans living in the United States as undesirable residents and citizens.¹² But how does this manifest in the actual images, both literal and visual, that we see? How do Mexicans living in the United States respond to such discursive and rhetorical representations? By looking at the multiple, and often contradictory ways in which the Mexican im/migrant body is defined, produced and reproduced rhetorically, legally, socially and artistically --by both Anglos and Mexicans-- during these critical moments I hope to explore the dialogics of Mexican im/migrant embodiment. At the heart of this analysis lies the question of national identity thereby expanding the discussion over the transnational dimensions of “American,” Mexican and Mexican-American subjectivity.

Ultimately I intend for my dissertation to map emerging typographies of the Mexican im/migrant body within specific historical moments and cultural productions in order to speak to issues about national identity, citizenship and the construction of rhetorical boundaries. The three historical moments that I will be analyzing underscore instances in which the state and nation at large insist on reading citizenship on the body. They reveal the complex ways in which citizenship and race are problematically conflated and blurred particularly during politically charged times. But perhaps more importantly, these decades provide

¹² See generally Juan Ramón García's *Operation Wetback*, Camille Guerin-González's *Mexican Workers and American Dreams*, David Gutiérrez's *Walls and Mirrors*, Lisa Flores's "Constructing Rhetorical Borders."

a lens through which to analyze other issues including but not limited to the dehumanization of the Mexican-Latina/o body, national identity and the U.S. imaginary.

I want to pay special attention to this Mexican im/migrant body not simply to understand the contradictory space it inhabits in American history but also and perhaps most importantly, to pay homage to the basic human rights and complete physicality of this body, regardless of legal status. This body has for too long been persistently fragmented, dehumanized and erased both discursively and rhetorically. Hegemonic discourses have oscillated between reducing the Mexican im/migrant body to a mere pair of hands or creating of it a monstrous, alien Other. In either case, the immigrant's basic sense of humanity is obscured, his/her complete physicality compromised in one form or another. As the artists that I will be analyzing prove within their work, the Mexican-Latina/o im/migrant body is much more than mere pair of *brazos*. It is also constituted by *cuero entero y alma* in spite of what any man made laws may dictate.

* * * *

In my first chapter, "An Historical Atlas of Fear," I provide an historical background, general contextualization and geneology of the socio-cultural landscape of "Hispanophobia." Apparent is the fact that "Hispanophobic" discourse and rhetoric is far from a novel idea grounded in the contemporary moment. Rather, dehumanizing discourse can be traced back to and documented in congressional halls as Mexican immigrant labor was hotly debated by nativist that wanted to restrict immigration, (especially from the

South) and agribusiness representatives that lobbied for Mexican labor, albeit using the same racist and dehumanizing rhetoric as the nativists. From Madison Grant in the 1930s to Samuel Huntington in 2000, these texts provide an atlas of social documentation that speak to an ever present “Hispanophobia.” The proximity of the U.S.-Mexico border and the long history the United States has with Mexico and the importation of Mexican labor has significantly informed the isolation of the ethnic Mexican body as foreign, alien and suspect.

In Chapter 2, “Dirty Bodies: Scripting the Mexican (Im)migrant in the 1930s,” I will explore the effects of dominant discourses about health, contamination and the “public menace” of Mexican immigration that created heightened visibility for Mexican immigrant bodies in the early 1930s. In this chapter I will focus on the ways in which Mexican citizens and Mexican-American subjects responded to this particular form of “Hispanophobia” through two primary cultural texts, namely Daniel Venegas’s novel *The Adventures of Don Chipote* (a serial novel written in 1928) and the public strategies employed by the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). I will highlight two responses from the Mexican community at the time that challenged the dehumanizing rhetoric of the “dirty” Mexican, although each does so in very different ways. The oppositional articulations, albeit different in both medium and opinion, of Venegas and LULAC to institutional, racializing discourses elucidate the orchestration of a very specific “culture of fear” against Mexican bodies in the thirties. The early 1900s is significant for Mexicans living in the United States

because it is at this moment that they are constructed as diseased and dirty.¹³ Anti-germ campaigns by the U.S. Public Health Service combined with the regulated delousing of Mexican immigrant subjects at the U.S. Mexican border managed to effectively single out these bodies as suspect, racializing them in the process. Not surprisingly then, the early thirties also brought about large scale deportation and repatriation drives of Mexicans orchestrated by the U.S. government. Scripted as diseased and dirty, these immigrant bodies were ostracized, marked and ultimately, easily rejected as potential citizens by the powerful associations circulating at the time.

I demonstrate how the Mexican American citizen subject that is overshadowed and to a large extent erased with the racializing discourse of the 1930s is exactly the subject that LULAC committed itself to make visible. Venegas, on the other hand, takes an equally risky but oppositional strategy as a response to the stigmatizing conceptualizations of the Mexican immigrant body. In many ways, Venegas's main character, Don Chipote, embodies all the stereotypical characteristics of the diseased and "dirty Mexican." However, through the evocation of these stereotypes Venegas skillfully manages to put a human face on the Mexican immigrant body with his employment of humor and satire.

In Chapter 3: "In/visibility and the Mexican Body in the Post War Era," I analyze the politics of in/visibility of the Mexican body provided by the landscape of the Zoot Suit Riots, the Bracero Program and Operation Wetback. I map out

¹³ See Alexandra M. Stern "Buildings, boundaries, and blood: Medicalization and nation-building on the U.S.-Mexico border, 1910-1930." *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 79, no. 1 (February 1, 1999), 41-81.

the tensions and contradictions about the Mexican im/migrant body that continued to circulate during this period. In particular, I look at two cultural texts that of Ernesto Galarza's *Strangers in Our Fields* and Herbert Biberman's *Salt of the Earth* through which I analyze visual representations of the ethnic Mexican laboring body. Galarza, a scholar, writer and activist is one of the first Mexican Americans to expose the exploitation of Mexican laborers within the Bracero Program through academic scholarship. Galarza published a commissioned report *Strangers in Our Fields* (1956), highlighting the worker's experiences of exploitation even as he revealed the inconsistency of U.S. government policy and the failure to uphold its side of the bargain. His report is a harsh exposé of government violations of the *braceros'* contracts that criminalizes the government as it humanizes the Mexican immigrant body, in large part due to his inclusion of photographs of the *braceros* themselves. Much more than a compilation of mere facts and data, Galarza recovers the very lives of *bracero* workers and underscores the desecration of their humanity by highlighting inhumane living conditions and every day injustices.

Biberman's now classic cult film *Salt of the Earth* produced in 1954 (the same year as Operation Wetback), while not a Latina/o cultural production, is included for its filmic representations of the actual Mexican/American strikers from the infamous 1950 Empire Zinc strike in New Mexico and because of its unconventional production process which included the Mexican/American community's input. A film that is produced with virtually no professional actors instead highlights the bodies of the real Mexican/American community it is

representing. Together, these cultural texts provide much needed visualizations of a *cuerpo entero*/complete body of the often erased Mexican laboring body.

Chapter 4: “The Politics & Poetics of ‘Borderless’ Space: Latina/o Responses to the Rhetoric of NAFTA,” focuses on the shifting border in the context of Proposition 187 in California and the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement. I argue in this chapter that the putative invisibility, in this case of the U.S.-Mexico border, embodied in the “borderless” logic of NAFTA neither renders Mexican im/migrant bodies visible nor brings about their acceptance in the public sphere. My primary texts for analysis are Helena Maria Viramontes’s first novel, *Under the Feet of Jesus* and Daniel Chacon’s short story “Godoy Lives” to explore this most contemporary “Hispanophobic” moment.

Viramontes’s novel is a *bildungsroman* centered on a 13 year old girl, Estrella that elucidates all the nuances of the malicious rhetoric espoused by California’s Proposition 187 that criminalized immigrants. For many Latina/o activists and artists, Proposition 187 brought to light the hypocrisy of this era that boasted a “borderless” hemisphere. It was apparent that the border was non-existent for goods and capital, but resolutely closed for any immigrants, regardless is the same agreement was rapidly economically displacing persons by the thousands. As in other historical moments, this “Hispanophobic” discourse irreverently blurred the line between citizens and non-citizens. In effect, as we see in *Under the Feet of Jesus*, it matters little if you are a citizen or not. All are criminalized equally. Viramontes’s text, however, poignantly makes

a case for a more universal conceptualization of human rights, regardless of your legal status. Similarly along this vein, Chacon's short story is about the survival and "chicanery" of Juan who crosses the border illegally as he poses and passes for a deceased Mexican American citizen named Godoy. Worried about being discovered for a fraud, instead, he is surprised to be embraced by Godoy's family on this side of the border. In effect, Chacon's story questions the ways in which American citizenship is constructed and poses its seemingly haphazard arbitrariness in this case as the undocumented immigrant ("illegal alien") is seamlessly incorporated into the family. The hidden fact of his illegality is essentially unimportant. This story raises the issues of the border, citizenship and national identity and ultimately highlights the basic human rights of undocumented persons in this provocative short story.

Chapter 5, "Borderless Space Revisited: Satire on the 'Net,'" continues the focus on the Proposition 187 moment by isolating the work of Latina/o artists Alex Rivera and Lalo Alcaraz, who mobilize a different "borderless space," that of the internet, within which to provide counter-articulations of the Latina/o im/migrant body. Through the irreverent humor and edgy political satire evident in their websites, Alcaraz and Rivera offer some of the most contemporary responses to dominant representations of this denigrated im/migrant body. Colleagues and frequent collaborators both have websites though Rivera concentrates predominantly on digital media and short films while Alcaraz is primarily a political cartoonist.

Rivera's short films *Día de la independencia* and *Why Cybraceros?* (co-created with Alcaraz), register sharp critiques of the most recent cycle of "hispanophobic" discourses circulating in the mid 1990s that dehumanize Mexican-Latina/o subjects. In *Día de la independencia* Rivera addresses the rhetoric of invasion found in several blockbuster science fiction films from the mid 1990s such as *Independence Day*, *Men in Black* and *X-Men*. Alternatively in his mockumentary *Why Cybraceros?*, he tackles the recurring evocation of Mexican-Latina/o labor as a mere pair of hands, void of body and humanity.

Alcaraz's website pocho.com is filled with relevant mock-news that continuously engages old and new stereotypes that circulate about the Latina/o community. For example, in one column, Alcaraz "reports" on the "Fiestas Repatrias Program" (playing on *las fiestas patrias*) in which Amtrak announces a "one-way special southbound to Mexico" effective until after the presidential elections. At once evoking humor, history and a little fiction, Alcaraz rearticulates the past, poking fun at the powers that be while empowering himself and the Latina/o community through the use of his satire.

Alcaraz and Rivera maintain a sharp eye on the pulse of the nation and given their digitized media outlet, make them forces to contend with. The likelihood of future guest worker programs between the United States and Mexico make Rivera's and Alcaraz's web-based, creative political commentaries on stereotypes a relevant and necessary critique. Their work both highlights and challenges the long historical trajectory of hegemonic representations of the Mexican-Latina/o im/migrant body.

During different historical moments, the Mexican im/migrant body has provided a contested, metaphoric landscape that has been discursively dehumanized by hegemonic discourses. This rhetoric of fear has changed little over the last century. Vestiges of the pseudo-scientific jargon of eugenics remain in contemporary anti-immigrant fears. Contemporary anti-immigrant, xenophobic rhetoric, while not sustained by any pseudo-science, nonetheless remains a powerful ideological force in social and juridical thought with very real repercussions that I analyze in each historical moment. In my dissertation I demonstrate that Latina/o authors and artists, past and present, have consistently and actively engaged these destructive constructions. Close readings of the representations provided by Latina/o cultural workers in a variety of mediums and forums, will show how they have re-written, re-imagined and re-visioned the maligned immigrant body. Their work in effect resurrects the element of humanity that is so often obscured by hegemonic discourses and rhetoric. At the heart of this analysis are the broader questions of rigid constructions of citizenship and national identity. This study maps the ways in which discourses of difference delineate and blur the distinctions between citizens and “aliens.” More importantly, the work of Latina/o authors and artists constitute vital counter-narratives that fill in the historical gaps, erasures and misconceptions that have continuously robbed Latina/os of inclusion into the national imaginary. I think of the cultural productions by Latina/os as discursive acts of resurrection in which the Mexican-Latina/o im/migrant body is restored to

un cuerpo entero, complete with the humanity so often obscured in hegemonic discourse.

CHAPTER 1

An Historical Atlas of Fear

Our great Southwest is rapidly creating for itself a new racial problem, as our old South did when it imported slave labor from Africa. The Mexican birth rate is high, and every Mexican child born on American soil is an American citizen, who, on attaining his or her majority, will have a vote. This is not a question of pocketbook or of the “need of labor” or of economics. It is a question of the character of future races. It is eugenics, not economics.

-American Eugenics Society, 1928

Mexican immigration is a unique, disturbing and looming challenge to our cultural integrity, our national identity, and potentially to our future as a country...

-Samuel Huntington, *Who Are We?*, 2000

Following September 11, xenophobic discourses about “foreign Others” reached new levels provoking a renewed, if not fanatic, wave of intolerance for ethnic groups perceived to be culturally different within the United States. Certainly, this is nothing new to the self proclaimed “nation of immigrants” that has always struggled with its master narrative that simultaneously romanticizes its immigrant roots while maintaining xenophobic assumptions about “foreigners.” While xenophobic ideologies about Other cultures know no boundaries or limitations (that is to say, no one is “safe”), for the purposes of this project, I would like to isolate those that relate to ethnic Mexicans. Given the fact that during the last decade or so, public intellectuals like Patrick Buchanan and

Samuel P Huntington have produced xenophobic texts that bear striking similarities to the eugenic texts of the previous century, I would like to situate my project historically by interfacing eugenics texts that crystallized public thought at the turn of the century with contemporary articulations of xenophobic discourse. The placement of these texts into dialogue with each other reveals the recurrence of fears about Mexican-Latina/o im/migrants. Despite their differences in terms of audience and genre (eugenics texts were couched in what was then a “science” and the more recent texts have been marketed as expressions of “political pundits”), the similarities in their rhetorical strategies to influence public opinion and public policy, is uncanny. If one looks at years past, it is clear to see that the “Hispanophobia” evident in California in the mid 1990s was simply the latest iteration of a cyclical narrative in which Latina/o subjects and especially immigrants, played a recurring role as dangerous “aliens.”

Eugenics ideology and scholarship constituted a strong ideological force in the early 20th century and its effects were far reaching, adding a scientific legitimacy to racist and imperial projects like Jim Crow segregation and colonial ventures in Latin America.¹ Eugenicists concern with the “unacceptable” and the “inferior” was mirrored in political discourse as nativist sought to bar entry to subjects they deemed “unacceptable” and “inferior.” Espoused by leading figures such as Madison Grant and his disciple Lothrop Stoddard, eugenics was focused on the basic question of hereditary characteristics. Out West, in California, C.M. Goethe was Grant and Stoddard’s counterpart in both influence and prestige.

¹ Alexandra Minna Stern Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) 13.

Thus, as leading eugenicists would vehemently argue, environment and education could do little in regards to “race betterment.” “Better breeding” was the only solution and the bedrock of eugenics logic. In this pseudo-scientific logic, even climate influenced genetic disposition: making people from warmer, tropical climates “intellectually and physically fat” or conveniently, more “able” to withstand harsh climates such as those demanded by agricultural work.²

A highly respected intellectual figure and a prolific writer, Madison Grant was a Yale graduate and later went on to receive a law degree from Columbia. He was best known for his work in eugenics, conservation and as a leading and outspoken advocate of anti-immigration measures. He authored one of the most widely read and foundational eugenics texts: *The Passing of the Great Race*, a book that was first published in 1916 with new and revised editions virtually every year until 1921. During these years immigration restrictions seemingly increased in tandem alongside the popularity of eugenics thought. As June Dwyer notes about the relationship between nativist rhetoric and legislative changes: “...during the period between 1890 and 1930 both U.S. law and nativist rhetoric easily used the findings of the eugenics movement to construct immigrants as deformed, diseased and deviant.”³ Grant’s thesis was simple and basic: he insisted that environment and education are poor seconds to the predisposition of heredity and race. In other words, the genes have it, and the ideal genes are

² Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race: Or the Racial Basis of European History* (New York: Scribner Press, 1921) 39.

³ June Dwyer, “Disease, Deformity and Defiance: Writing the Language of Immigration Law and the Eugenics Movement on the Immigrant Body,” *MELUS*, Vol 28, No 1, (Spring 2003), 107.

those of the “great” Nordic race most easily defined by blond hair and fair skin, but most exclusively by blue and gray eyes.

Grant criticized what he called the “folly” of the “Melting Pot” theory of assimilation, suggesting Mexico as an example of the inherent dangers in such a theory:

What the Melting Pot actually does in practice can be seen in Mexico, where the absorption of the blood of the original Spanish conquerors by the native Indian population has produced the racial mixture which we call Mexican and which is now engaged in demonstrating its incapacity for self government⁴.

It should be noted that then, as now, it was evident that nativist/anti-immigration discourses often competed with the needs of capitalism. Grant addresses this with his views on the dangers of immigration which, according to him promoted “race extinction.” As he argued: “The refusal of the native American to work with his hands when he can hire or import serf to do manual labor for him is the prelude to his extinction and the immigrant laborers are now breeding out their masters and killing by filth and by crowding as effectively as by the sword.”⁵ At once, Grant evokes some of the primary fears of eugenics discourse: disease (“filth”), fecundity (“crowding”) and criminalization implying that such conditions threaten the lives and livelihoods of the nation’s true “masters.” As it will be noted, decades later, in the mid 1990s, the fears of disease and overly fertile Mexicans will remain a primary concern, though no longer “scientifically” supported by eugenic thought. Grant’s work, typical of most eugenics literature,

⁴ Ibid, 17.

⁵ Ibid, 11-12.

was very apocalyptic, predicting the imminent destruction of the nation and its “American” identity should immigration not be curtailed.

Following in the footsteps of Grant was another leading intellectual by the name of Lothrop Stoddard, a Harvard graduate. His scholarship continued the eugenics rhetoric of genetic predisposition along with the increasingly alarmist element of immigration as a focal point. A prolific writer, Stoddard penned over a dozen books, all of which centered upon the threat of non-Whites to Western civilization. As the title of his most influential book indicated, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy*, Stoddard’s work focused on the threat of the “inferior” races of color that threatened the established civilizations (understood as Anglo/European) of the world. Indeed, Grant who wrote the introduction to *The Rising Tide of Color*, labels Stoddard a “prophet” in his apocalyptic warnings about the nation and national identity. Stoddard argued that Latin America was “mongrel ruled” and that “hybridization has been prodigious, the hybrids to-day numbering millions...the mongrelizing tide sweeps steadily on.”⁶ Thus, we see Stoddard adding to the anxieties regarding genetically inferior subjects the idea of what he perceives as an exceptionally fertile and rapidly reproducing population.

In California, wealthy land developer, philanthropist and avid eugenics supporter C.M. Goethe was likewise, very concerned with the reproduction of less desirable races, in particular that of ethnic Mexicans.⁷ Scholar Anthony Platt

⁶ Lothrop Stoddard, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy* (New York: Scribner, 1920) 128.

⁷ Anthony Platt, “What’s in a Name?: Charles M. Goethe, American Eugenics, and Sacramento State University,” report for Division of Social Work, California State University Sacramento,

notes that Goethe spent nearly one million dollars of his personal savings to promote writings and research in the field of eugenics. Furthermore, Platt notes that “[i]n the early 1920s, he formed the Immigration Study Commission in order to lobby government to prevent an influx of ‘low powers,’ especially from Mexico, into California. In sum, Goethe was a leader of campaigns to restrict Latin American immigration and to increase sterilization of the “socially unfit.”⁸ It was, in fact, after a trip to Arizona in which he surveyed “health and social conditions” that he founded the Immigration Study Commission with the purpose of illuminating the dangers Mexicans posed to the American nation.⁹ As is evident in the case of Goethe, this discourse of eugenics as a “science” was inextricably connected to nativist thought in the political arena. In effect, this eugenics inspired racist discourse infiltrated its way into congressional debates and hearings which further filtered into federal policy. This became increasingly apparent as congressional debates—particularly those dealing with Mexican immigrant labor—indicated all the tell-tale signs of eugenics logic, even when arguing for foreign labor. Tellingly, Alfred P. Thom, a representative for the American Railroad Association argued in 1928:

We are not employing men on account of their dispositions. We are employing them to have them exercise their strong backs at hard work. We are not employing them because they are of a high type of intellectuality [for] if we employed men because of their mental attainments, we could not employ either Mexicans or these colored

(February 2004). <http://www.csus.edu/cshpe/eugenics/legacy.html> [accessed September 14, 2007]

⁸ Ibid, 5.

⁹ Alexandra M. Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 68.

people. We employ these men because we have the world's work to do and we must do it well.¹⁰

While Thom is arguing in defense of Mexican immigrant labor, it is evident that his rationale is constructed from some of the leading tenets of eugenics rhetoric at the time. As it has been noted by other scholars, the aggressive debate over Mexican immigrant labor between nativists and agribusiness representatives was argued through the same stereotype of the Mexican laborer as a peon, dirty, docile and backward.¹¹ Unmistakably, the groundwork for many of the stereotypes that still exist today about Latina/os originated with the rhetoric of this Eugenics era.

Indeed, nearly one hundred years later, the same archaic rhetoric persists, virtually unchanged. In 2004, Harvard professor and chairman of the Harvard Academy for International Area Studies, Samuel P. Huntington, in his latest published, *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America's National Identity*, a work in which the same rhetoric of fear is reiterated. Huntington poses a rhetorical question that one might argue, is fundamentally more of a statement of fear than a query: who constitutes an "American"? Huntington's argumentation isolates what he sees as a lack of assimilation into mainstream American society as a destructive, if not fatal, threat to "American" national identity. His concern with "Hispanics" specifically is evident as he dedicates an entire chapter to this ethnic group in order to focus on the particularities of this—in his opinion--non-

¹⁰ David Gutierrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) 51.

¹¹ See generally David Gutierrez *Walls and Mirrors* chapter 2 and Mark Reisler, "Always the Laborer, Never the Citizen: Anglo Perceptions of the Mexican Immigrant during the 1920s," *The Pacific Historical Review*, Vol 45, May 1976, pp231-254.

assimilable population. “The driving force behind the trend toward cultural bifurcation,” writes Huntington, “has been immigration from Latin America and especially from Mexico.”¹² Reading Huntington’s text one is struck by the strong resonance it holds with Stoddard. While the contemporary xenophobic discourses are not accompanied with any “scientific” rationalizations, as eugenics texts were, they nevertheless operates discursively with the same ideological force.¹³

Defined as the “fear and hatred of strangers or foreigners or anything that is strange or foreign,” xenophobia has no “scientific logic” as its basis. However, contemporary xenophobic, anti-immigrant fears reveal many of the same dangerous and dehumanizing features of eugenics rhetoric. Founded in irrational fear of the Other, both have proven to be equally powerful in their rhetorical impact to change not just social opinions but influence governmental practices such as public policies and legislation. By looking at moments in which xenophobia is specifically directed at Latina/os (that I describe as “Hispanophobic”), I hope to further highlight the dialogical exchange between state and subject(s). As Stallybrass and White note in the *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*:

The result is a mobile, conflictual fusion of power, fear and desire in the construction of subjectivity: a psychological dependence upon precisely those Others which are being rigorously opposed and excluded at the social level. It is for the reason that what is socially peripheral is so frequently symbolically central...The low Other is despised and denied the

¹² Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America’s National Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004) 224.

¹³ For example eugenics societies had organizational structure with committees, chapters, symposia etc during its zenith of popularity.

level of political organization and social being whilst it is instrumentally constitutive of the shared imaginary repertoires of the dominant culture.¹⁴

This is certainly true in the case of Mexican *braceros* in the 1950s. Their labor was very much the object of desire while they existed on the most peripheral and marginal spaces of society. Neither citizens nor aliens, they were subjects that were tolerated *because* they were not thought of as bodies, but rather, working hands.

Huntington, however, is certainly not a solitary figure in his anti-immigrant rantings. He is kept company by a two other prominent figures, namely Patrick Buchanan and Peter Brimelow. Buchanan's two most recent texts focused specifically on such xenophobic discourses: *State of Emergency: The Third World Invasion and Conquest of America* (2006), and *Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization* (2002). Peter Brimelow's *Alien Nation: Common Sense about America's Immigration Disaster* (1997) is significant in that it maintained a position in the New York Times best seller list just a couple of years after Proposition 187 was passed in California. Brimelow in particular, centers his text upon this idea of "common sense." Instead of scientific proof of the Eugenics era, which has been debunked, "common sense" becomes the driving argument. Written during the volatile aftermath of Proposition 187, Brimelow's text attacks what he perceives as a destructive wave of Third World immigration. An immigrant himself, Brimelow has no qualms in blaming fiscal disaster and a changing sense of national identity on newly arriving immigrants. In fact, Brimelow is so anti-

¹⁴ Peter Stallybrass & Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), 5-6.

immigrant that he is unwilling to concede the historical and economical impact of immigrant labor in America, stating "...immigration is, and probably always has been, much less important to American economic growth than is conventionally assumed."¹⁵ An immigrant of British extraction, Brimelow clearly falls back into the problematic logic of assimilable vs. unassimilable immigrants. Of the unassimilable immigrants that he finds most threatening, Brimelow isolates "Hispanics."

Not surprisingly, Buchanan's text is not much different and also echoes the cyclical trope of fear in that it relies on a fictional, static notion of national identity and culture, evident in the following statement: "Uncontrolled immigration threatens to deconstruct the nation we grew up in and convert America into a conglomeration of peoples with almost nothing in common—not history, heroes, language, culture, faith or ancestors."¹⁶

Interestingly enough, when speaking of Latina/os currently living and arriving to the United States both Huntington and Buchanan use alarmist language and rhetoric that suggest a "reconquest" of America. Such alarmist postulations create and instigate a culture of fear about ethnic Mexicans that was evident in both the 1930s and the 1950s. As Buchanan puts it, "Mexico has an historic grievance against the United States that is felt deeply by her people."¹⁷ All of the contemporary authors provide similar sensationalist demographic data that attest to the 'alarming' rapid growth of the "Hispanic" population.

¹⁵ Peter Brimelow, *Alien Nation: Common Sense About America's Immigration Disaster* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996) xvi.

¹⁶ Patrick J. Buchanan, *The Death of the West: How Dying Populations and Immigrant Invasions Imperil Our Country and Civilization* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002) 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 124.

It is shocking to recognize the echoes of the eugenics texts of the century before. While we may feel that we have come a long way from what we now clearly identify as the racist discourse of eugenics, the current wave of xenophobic texts about immigrants, in particular Latina/o immigrants, indicate that we have not come as far as we would have hoped. Indeed, the rhetoric disseminated by figures such as Grant, Stoddard and Goethe were thus part of the backdrop at the turn of the century as the first major deportation campaign against ethnic Mexicans began surfacing in the 1930s.

Mexicans, Mexican Americans and Citizenship: “Legal Illegality”

Contradictions exist during the “Hispanophobic” moments the United States has witnessed. They reveal a tragic-comic love/hate relationship that is cyclical and recurring, (though always contingent upon historical circumstances and market forces) in which the same (Mexican) body that is reviled and often deported is simultaneously desired as the object providing working hands. For example, in 1954, during the middle of the Bracero Program, the INS embarked on a massive effort to deport and repatriate Mexicans during Operation Wetback. According to INS figures approximately 500,000 ethnic Mexicans, citizens and non citizens alike that were forcibly removed or repatriated themselves “willingly.”¹⁸ Earlier in the century, the country had repeatedly increased restrictions on immigration through the passages of laws, even as it provided convenient legal loopholes—typically in favor of the Mexican immigrant laborer—

¹⁸ Juan Ramón García, *Operation Wetback: The Mass Deportation of Mexican Undocumented Workers in 1954* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980) 228.

in order to maintain an flexible workforce. For example, when literacy tests and head taxes were implemented on all immigrants with the Immigration law of 1917, Mexicans were often exempted.¹⁹ Such contradictions indicate moments of “legal illegality” for Mexican immigrant bodies that arise in the 1930s and then return again in the 1950s. By “legal illegality” I mean the ways in which competing discourses, in this case those articulated by agribusiness and Immigration Services engaged against and with each other in such a way that creates legal loopholes that will at once lure and restrict/deny the Mexican immigrant laboring body.

Thus, legal loopholes and legislative manipulation discursively construct a contradictory logic in which the need for working “hands” is linked with the simultaneous rejection of the bodies of these working “hands” as potential citizens. As a result, and by unfortunate extension, all ethnic Mexicans, (and one might further argue, all Latina/os) are discursively forced outside the imagined boundaries of citizenship. Given the various stages of residency of ethnic Mexicans living in the United States, locating emerging, dominant typographies of Mexican im/migrant bodies help us to clarify the ways in which discourses about undocumented Mexican subjects invariably inform discourses about Mexican citizen subjects and vice versa. Natalia Molina asserts the importance of scrutinizing not just those who are included in the national imaginary,

...social membership is usually equated with citizenship status, but it is important also to investigate how those who are not citizens negotiate a

¹⁹ Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors* 52.

sense of national identity, calibrating notions of citizenship and democracy in the process.²⁰

I would supplement Molina's observation that conversely, it is also important to see how those subjects that *are* citizens but still not incorporated into that imaginary social membership likewise negotiate national identity and notions of citizenship. Both of these statuses, analyzed together, can provide fruitful insight to traditional conceptualizations of nation and identity. As I demonstrate in my analysis of popular cultural texts, in blurring the distinctions between "citizens" and "aliens" these dominant typographies of Mexicans have set the stage for the continued economic, social and political marginalization of Mexican American (and Latina/os in general) in the U.S.

Moreover, as scholar Lisa Flores has noted of the 1930s, the Mexican immigrant body serves as a "rhetorical space for national discussions of race and nation."²¹ Indeed, the various and sometimes competing representations of Mexican im/migrant subjects offer a telling narrative of exclusion and inclusion that is embedded in the public discourse of nationhood and citizenship. Written on the one hand (hegemonically) by legislative restrictions and public policies (in some cases representations in mainstream film and media) and on the other hand (counter-hegemonically) by Latina/o authors in their novels and other cultural productions, this study documents a citizenry that has remained ostracized and persecuted due to the persistent ambiguity of their status as citizens within the national imaginary of the United States. Indeed, despite the

²⁰ Natalia Molina, *Fit to be Citizens?: Public Health and race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 3.

²¹ Lisa A. Flores, "Constructing Rhetorical Borders: Peons, Illegal Aliens and Competing Narratives of Immigration," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* Vol 20 No 4 (2003): 362.

incorporation of Mexicans into the United States at the end of the Mexican American War well over a century ago, ethnic Mexican subjects remain, in many ways, outside the parameters of the imagined American community. Regardless of their legal status, citizens and non-citizens alike are “alienated” from this exclusive imagined community on multiple levels, figuratively, rhetorically, and visually. Perhaps most vulnerable are the undocumented as they suffer the brunt of these multiple alienations, and are frequently denied the most basic of human rights.

The nexus between Latina/o cultural productions and im/migration discourse will provides insight into the ways in which Mexican Americans and Mexican nationals were continuously conflated, but more importantly these works exemplify creative expressions that insist on immigrant rights as human rights. The study of popular culture during these historical moments reveals the stereotypes (figurative and metaphorical) circulating in public discourse at the time. Popular culture also represents a discursive domain that remains accessible to politically disenfranchised communities, one that in many instances is the only forum available for agentic reactions and rearticulations of xenophobic discourse.

Conclusion

Time and time again, legal discourses and political rhetoric have constructed the Mexican im/migrant as disposable, temporary and fragmented (thought of only as a pair of hands, never a full body). How do these recurring tropes intersect with

popular culture? In what specific ways does the dehumanization of Mexican bodies get re-imagined, re-presented and re-articulated in novels and various cultural productions by ethnic Mexicans living in the United States? As evidenced in the work of the aforementioned scholars, Mexican subjects were the targeted scapegoat for a variety of national anxieties.

Understanding the persistence of xenophobic rhetoric aimed at Latina/os is critical to unveiling the political implications of Latina/o cultural production. The history of the U.S. Mexico border and the subjects it regulates is very particular given the acquisition of the southwestern territories. One thing that becomes apparent in reviewing these historical moments is that Latina/os have always negotiated the politics of a transnational existence. Particularly since the conflation of all ethnic Mexicans has been a feature of racial discourse vis-à-vis Mexican subjects since the acquisition of the Southwest. This forced self awareness or double consciousness is exactly the kind of awareness that is evident in many of the works that I will explore in my dissertation.

Latina/o cultural productions reflect an awareness that speaks to multiple subjectivities that they are forced to navigate within for daily survival. While the alienation that this community experiences as a whole produces some contradictory responses at times, it also brings them together. After all, this community that has been dealing with the ideological forces of capitalism and globalization for centuries. Dehumanization of indigenous peoples in the Americas begins with the Conquest and one could argue that the Conquest of

the Americas was the originary moment for what is typically considered a “modern” or “postmodern” phenomenon.

The work of Latina/o artists and writers that I analyze put flesh back on the body that has been erased, devalued, and dehumanized and in so doing, their work has far reaching implications for the scholarship and literature on human rights and citizenship. They reveal the multiple, multi-pronged strategies that are necessary in order to refute pejorative and harmful discourses. Furthermore, this awareness unearths a commitment on the part of these cultural workers to reaffirm and rearticulate a corporeal body that is multi-dimensional, complex and above all else—human.

CHAPTER 2

“Dirty” Bodies: Scripting the Mexican Im/migrant in the Depression Era

I'm not interested in being a citizen because first of all it would mean nothing to anyone—I would be a citizen in name only—with no privileges or considerations. I would still be [considered] a “dirty Mexican.”

--Quoted in David Gutierrez, *Walls & Mirrors*, 89

“A Mexican is a Mexican”

For weeks leading up to the afternoon of February 26, 1931, Los Angeles City and County officials worked closely with government offices from the Department of Labor to publicly announce the threat of imminent raids. Often accounted for in history books, the notorious La Placita Raid was emblematic of the socio-political tensions that existed between ethnic Mexicans and Anglos during the 1930s in the city of Los Angeles. Indeed, La Placita was far from a random, haphazard choice by authorities. Rather, it was a carefully chosen location, for as historian George Sánchez has noted regarding La Placita: “Although other ethnic newcomers to Los Angeles increasingly flocked to the Plaza...Mexicans remained the largest group in the historic Mexican pueblo

plaza area.”¹ In fact, Los Angeles, at the time, had the largest Mexican ethnic population outside of Mexico City.² The operation had been executed with precision to maximize the element of surprise, terror and spectacle. The events for that afternoon consisted of immigration agents in plain clothes (for an added element of surprise) and public questioning that was ostentatious enough to garner a large audience as the community gathered around at the blockaded entrance to the park.³ The raid resulted in the detainment of 400 persons, however, it only yielded the apprehension of 11 Mexicans, 5 Chinese and a person of Japanese descent, half of whom were eventually released after questioning.

Numerically, the net yield of undocumented persons detained that afternoon was an utter failure; however, the psychological terror that impacted the Mexican/American community signified success. Such acts of psychological terror were a clear indication of the existing rhetoric of fear that generally hovered around the unwanted bodies of undocumented immigrants, though clearly, in this case, ethnic Mexicans were the prime targets. The modus operandi for government officials at the park that afternoon (and I will argue, throughout this era) was one of basic, unadulterated racial profiling, seeking “suspect” and “foreign” looking bodies. Under such primitive and problematic guidelines, the logic was simple: “a Mexican was a Mexican,” at once conflating all ethnic

¹ George Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 151.

² Abraham Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression: Repatriation Pressures, 1929-1939* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1974) 2.

³ A reproduction of a picture from the Spanish language newspaper *La Opinion* is included in Hoffman’s text shows the subjects being questioned as well as the large crowd of locals from the community that gathered at the blockaded entrance to the park.

Mexicans and reducing them to the status of “illegal aliens.” By the early 1920s, it was clear that the term “Mexican” was racially inflected and used to “indicate race, not a citizen, or subject of the country.”⁴

As evidenced by the massive deportation campaigns in the 1930s, the early 20th century was marked by a culture of fear about ethnic Mexicans as a public menace. This particular form of “Hispanophobia” was fueled by several factors, one of which was the official establishment of the U.S. Border Patrol in 1924 and its ensuing inspection processes for Mexican immigrants. In this chapter, I will examine the ways in which the Mexican immigrant body was discursively scripted as diseased and dirty by dominant public discourse during this period. I will explore how the racializing procedures to which Mexican immigrants were subjected to at the U.S.-Mexico border ideologically promoted the conflation of all ethnic Mexicans as “dirty,” “suspect,” and “foreign.” This rhetoric and the procedures that crystallized it in the public imagination effectively dehumanized Mexican subjects. As noted earlier, in the words of Patrisia González and Roberto Rodríguez, to dehumanize is to “degrade, stereotype, caricaturize, trivialize, devalue, humiliate, invisibilize, alienize, scapegoat, criminalize and demonize. In effect, it’s to make one less than human, not simply in society and the media, but also inside of the courtroom.”⁵ The racist rhetoric and xenophobic state practices with regards to Mexican immigrants and Mexican

⁴ Mark Reisler, “Always the Laborer, Never the Citizen: Anglo Perceptions of the Mexican Immigrant during the 1920s,” *The Pacific Historical Review*, Vol 45, May 1976” 240.

⁵ Patrisia Gonzalez & Roberto Rodriguez, “\$4,000: The Price of a Mexican,” *Column of the Americas*, Aug. 2001, http://www.voznuestra.com/Americas/_2001/_August/31 [accessed October 20, 2005].

Americans instantiated in precisely this sort of dehumanizing process. Motivating questions for this chapter involve the mapping of the dialectical relationship between public discourse and Latina/o responses. How were hegemonic discourses of difference projected onto the Mexican body? And equally important, how were they challenged by the Latina/o community in the 1930s?

To address these questions, I will analyze two critical responses as case studies that emerged from the Latina/o community at the turn of the century in the works of Jovita González, a folklorist and scholar and Daniel Venegas, a playwright and fiction writer. While these responses are in many ways diametrically opposed to one another (both in content and in medium), when brought together they highlight the existing tensions of the socio-political landscape that became evident in the 1930s and thus, provide an insightful look at this moment. I hope to make clear not simply the existing tensions produced by racist rhetoric, but also to note how the Mexican/American community itself negotiated its own sense of identity and belonging as it carved out a rhetorical space through the cultural expressions highlighted here. The responses that emerged from the Latina/o community during the late 1920s symptomatically reflected the dehumanizing rhetoric circulating at the time, effectively foreshadowing the massive deportation and repatriation campaigns that would begin in the early 1930s. I will demonstrate how the Master's Thesis of *Tejana* folklorist Jovita González, evoking the language of rights and citizenship as posited by the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and the serialized novel by Daniel Venegas, *The Adventures of Don Chipote*, evoking the

language of empathy and humor together provide a powerful response that challenged “Hispanophobic” rhetoric of the 1930s.

These cultural expressions, I argue, speak to a specific discursive construction, that of a “dirty” and “diseased” Mexican im/migrant body.

Historian David Montejano has cogently argued that the stereotype of the “dirty Mexican” had multiple valences that went beyond a simple hygienic reference:

Concern with hygiene did not exhaust the meaning of ‘dirty Mexicans.’ Anglos commonly used the adjective ‘dirty’ as a synonym for dark skin color and inferiority. Another common but more complex use of dirtiness was as an expression of the class order in the farm societies. For some Anglos, dirtiness stood as an appropriate description of the Mexican’s position as a field laborer. Thus, farmers, when they talked about dirty Mexicans, generally didn’t mean dirty in any hygienic sense; they meant dirty in the sense of being an agricultural laborer, in the sense of one who ‘grubs’ the earth. For others who believed, as one bus driver did, that Mexicans were a ‘nasty’ people who lived in ‘bunches and shacks,’ dirtiness referred to the living conditions of Little Mexicos. Mexican dirtiness, in this sense, was a metaphor of the local class structure.⁶

This kind of explicit racialization in dominant discourses scripted the Mexican im/migrant body as inherently suspect and foreign. Jonathan Inda’s scholarship has further highlighted how notions of “foreignness” are scripted in multiple dimensions: legally as unlawful intruders, socially as culturally different, and even biologically as potential carriers of disease.⁷ The rhetorical and discursive associations that conflated all ethnic Mexicans as a public menace are evident in the cultural expressions that will be the focus of this chapter.

The general sentiment evoked in the statement “a Mexican is a Mexican” is one that summarizes the way in which all ethnic Mexicans were (and I would

⁶ David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994) 227.

⁷ See Jonathan X. Inda, “Foreign Bodies: Migrants, Parasites and the Pathological Nation” and “Biopower, Reproduction and the Migrant Woman’s Body,” *Discourse*, (Fall 2000) 46-62.

argue, still continue) to be imagined outside the national imaginary, with no distinctions made for legal residents, citizens or newly arrived undocumented immigrants. The work by González and Venegas at once both identified and challenged existing hegemonic representations. More importantly, however, their cultural expressions actively constructed new discourses and rhetoric to counter hegemonic representations of their communities in different ways that spoke to a much more complex understanding of their community.

LULAC provided the most vociferous and actively political response, as it was a young organization developing in the early thirties.⁸ The organization took to heart the conflation Anglos were making between race and nation, leaving all ethnic Mexicans outside the tenets of American citizenship. Thus, they organized to fight for their rights as citizens of the United States. Jovita González's Master's Thesis will be central as she carved out a space to interpret and showcase the voice and collective vision of this newly formed Latina/o organization. Furthermore, her inclusion of it in her scholarship permanently inducts such responses into the archives of knowledge through her thesis.

Precisely at that time of LULAC's genesis, Daniel Venegas was writing *The Adventures of Don Chipote: Or When Parrots Breastfeed*. Written in 1928 the novel follows its unlikely hero, an undocumented Mexican immigrant, and his trials and tribulations in the United States. Venegas' novel reflects a different humanizing strategy than that adopted by LULAC or Jovita González's interpretation of the organization. Most obviously, the difference resides in the

⁸ See generally, Benjamin Marquez, *LULAC: The Evolution of a Mexican American Political Organization* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993).

fact that Venegas's writing is a fictional narrative, but also because Venegas employs a risky but strategic move to create a fictional character that embodies all the horrible stereotypes Anglo American rhetoric had constructed about Mexican immigrants. The novel forces the reader to look closely at the dirty body of Don Chipote in order to see beyond the "dirt" as it effectively resurrects the humanity it is denied in public speech. Through the clever use of satire and humor, Venegas complicates the constructions of Mexican *braceros* and subsequently, the racial constructions of ethnic Mexicans in general. Albeit dramatically different, together, these two cultural expressions provide powerful and alternate responses to the racializing discourses about the Mexican (im)migrant body that were applied to all Mexicans at the time.

To illuminate the historical landscape of this volatile moment, I will first examine the socio-political factors circulating at the time. I will show how public opinion and juridical rhetoric worked to facilitate the racialization of all ethnic Mexican bodies, a conflation that prompted responses from the Latina/o community. As previously noted, one of the most prominent inscriptions for ethnic Mexicans at this time was that of the "dirty" Mexican. This stereotype at once evoked notions of cleanliness and disease but it was also inextricably linked with ideas of distrust, "foreignness," and general suspicion which was easily associated with an inherent criminality.

Dirty Inscriptions: Racializing the Mexican Immigrant Body at the Border

The transition of the proverbial “line on the ground” to the militarized border we know now is central to the racialization process that all ethnic Mexicans living in the United States then (and arguably still) had to negotiate. The early decades of the 20th century brought an onslaught of economic and political changes, including the establishment of the Border Patrol, new immigration restrictions, and the Depression, which provided a volatile nexus through which debates about the immigrant of Mexican origin circulated. Though, strong statements were made about setting strict limitations on immigration to the United States—through various legislative maneuvers—these statements were undermined at the moment of their articulation by legal loopholes that in effect made it possible to continue to recruit immigrant laborers from Mexico.

Through various governmental entities which included but were not limited to the Department of Labor and the United States Public Health Service, the bodies of Mexican immigrants were scripted as diseased and dirty resulting in a myriad of associations that rendered them suspect and inherently foreign. The denigration of the Mexican immigrant body through persecution and racializing discourse in turn translated into the disenfranchisement of all ethnic Mexicans in the United States, regardless of citizenship. These orchestrations in the form of scare tactics, local and state organized deportation drives operated to deny social inclusion through the discursive dehumanization of the Mexican immigrant body. The 1930s quite possibly marked the first time that the Mexican body was

isolated with such specificity. Writing of the medicalization of the Mexican immigrant during this time, Natalia Molina indicates that initially “Mexicans did not readily come to the attention of public health officials,” but asserts that, “this attitude would change during the 1910s, when migration from Mexico increased as a result of the Mexican Revolution...”⁹ The establishment of the Border Patrol, immigration restrictions and the rhetoric of Mexicans as a “problem” and a “public menace” all encouraged the literal and rhetorical desecration of the Mexican immigrant body that at once dehumanized and criminalized. I will demonstrate how this later had severe implications for all ethnic Mexicans, regardless of citizenship.

Though xenophobia had marked debates around immigration since the turn of the century, the so called “Mexican Problem” of the early 1900s peaked in the thirties with the inscriptions of Mexican immigrant bodies (and subsequently, all ethnic Mexican bodies) as a public menace in socio-cultural and even biologically specific ways. The question of the “Mexican Problem” most likely arose immediately after the Mexican-American War in 1848. It was certainly a central question in the decision to stop at the Rio Grande River and not go further, for even land greedy politicians had qualms about what to do with the “*mestizo* stock” of Mexico. The question of race being ever so threatening, challenged, and in this case overcame an equally powerful discourse, that of empire and acquisition. In the end, nearly 100,000 residents remained in the

⁹ Natalia Molina, *Fit to be Citizens?: Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 45.

newly acquired territory, their fates precariously secured by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.¹⁰

In 1924 two significant events occurred that would significantly affect the Mexican/American community living within and outside the United States: the Border Patrol was established and the National Origins Act was passed. As Ali Behdad has noted:

The border is not just a territorial marker of the modern nation state, defining its geographical boundary, but an ideological apparatus where notions of national identity, citizenship and belonging are articulated...the border is vested with tremendous symbolic power in defining the imagined community.¹¹

With regard to the Mexican immigrant body, legislative practices such as the National Origins Act of 1924, along with the institutionalization of the Border Patrol, rhetorically constructed contradictory statements that oscillated between punitive and indifferent. The National Origins Act effectively maintained a quota of 2% of immigrant groups entering the United States based on the 1890 census. Thus, it basically favored Western European migration while seriously restricting entry for peoples coming from the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe. Restriction and exclusion of “undesirable” immigrants to the nation was reinforced rhetorically through such legislative acts, but interestingly enough, this law did not significantly affect Mexican immigration. In fact, Mexicans were immigrating to the United States in “greater numbers than ever before,” as a

¹⁰ Rodolfo Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* (New York: Harper Collins Publisher, 1988), 19-20. Articles IX and X of the treaty promised all remaining residents citizenship as well as protection for their property though both articles proved to be ineffective in the protection they promised.

¹¹ Ali Behdad, “INS and Outs: Producing Delinquency at the Border,” *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, vol 23, no 1 (Spring 1998),109.

result of a legal loophole that allowed for immigration from the western hemisphere.¹² Thus, Mexican immigrant laborers were the exception to the rule. This had been seen earlier in the Immigration Act of 1917, which had placed a new head tax and literacy requirement to all incoming immigrants—though exceptions were once again made for Mexican immigrant laborers.

The contradictory impulses of legislative practices consistently maintained contradictions with regard to the Mexican immigrant as suggested by the U.S. desire for laboring “hands” and simultaneous distaste for their accompanying bodies as potential citizens. These legal manipulations in effect created instances of “legal illegality” for Mexican bodies. Here, the competing discourses of agricultural business and Immigration Services worked against and with each other. The profitable, if contradictory status of “legal illegality” for Mexican immigrant subjects allowed concessions for their presence when profitable. As the Dillingham Commission of 1911 of the decade before had noted, “While the Mexicans are not easily assimilated, this is not of a very great importance as long as most of them return to their native land after a short time.”¹³ This special panel on immigration reinforced the idea that Mexican immigrants were desired temporarily, but not permanently.

In truth, the racialization of the Mexican immigrant was also deeply rooted in another national space; that of congress. In heated congressional debates held exclusively over the question of the Mexican laborer, corporate agricultural

¹² Alex Stern, “Nationalism on the Line: Masculinity, Race and the Creation of the U.S. Border Patrol, 1910-1940,” in *Continental Crossroads: Remapping U.S.-Mexico Borderlands History*, ed. Samuel Truett & Elliott Young (Durham: Duke University Press), 300.

¹³ Guitiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, 47.

businesses argued for the Mexican immigrant in a way that problematically constructed Mexican laborers as nothing short of dehumanized beasts of burden. George P. Clemens of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce argued in 1929 the racialized logic of Mexicans as ideal for agricultural labor due to “crouching and bending habits” and asserting that “the white is physically unable to adapt himself to them.”¹⁴ Congressional debates demonstrated some of the most troubling associations with the Mexican immigrant body and what he (at this time, always a gendered male body) could do for the U.S. with regard to labor. “We are not employing men on account of their dispositions,” confirmed one representative for the Railroad Association, “we are employing them to exercise their strong backs at hard work. We are not employing them because they are of a high type of intellectuality [for] if we employed men because of their mental attainments we could not employ these Mexicans or these colored people. We employ these men because we have the world’s work to do and we must do it well.”¹⁵ Thus, by the 1920s the rhetorical construction of a dehumanized Mexican immigrant was quickly coalescing in the powerful political forums of the U.S. Thus, these debates over the Mexican immigrant laborer in congress set the tone and lay the groundwork for the racialization of the immigrant body that was further stigmatized when the border patrol was created.

Official regulation and surveillance at the border indicated an active engagement on the part of the nation state to discursively reinforce a specified national identity. The imaginary line on the ground became a much more official

¹⁴ Ibid, 47.

¹⁵ Ibid, 48.

line of demarcation with the establishment of the U.S. Border Patrol in 1924. Beginning with 472 men, the Border Patrol had more than doubled in a force of over 1,000 by 1934. The men hired to guard the U.S. border were to have the combined attributes of “an expert woodsman or plainsman, a veteran soldier, and accomplished diplomat and an astute secret service operator.”¹⁶ It appeared that they had trouble finding the “accomplished diplomats,” as the Border Patrol had a high turnover rate, due in large part to the fact they few of the newly appointed Border Patrolmen had past experience in law enforcement. The Border Patrol was, in fact, very much inspired by the notorious Texas Rangers which had a long, violent history with ethnic Mexicans living in Texas. Once the Border Patrol firmly in place, the criminalization of “aliens” quickly began to take shape. Only five years after the Border Patrol was established, it became a misdemeanor to enter “unlawfully” and “unlawful re-entry” became a felony.¹⁷ Thus the criminalization of “alien” or “foreign” bodies was articulated through the institutionalization of legal language regarding the U.S.-Mexico border.

While the border stood as a real, physical and geographical structure of separation, it also had socio-cultural and even biological dimensions to it. As Alex Stern notes, “...the establishment of the Border Patrol coincided with, an intensified, and mounting focus on the southern border as a site of national anxiety and a concomitant rise in the perception that persons of Mexican origin were undesirables threatening to contaminate the body politic.”¹⁸ Practices at the U.S.-Mexico border by U.S. officials resulted in scripting Mexican immigrant

¹⁶ Quoted in Stern, “Nationalism on the Line,” 299.

¹⁷ Ibid, 305.

¹⁸ Ibid, 300.

bodies as dirty and diseased. The intersection of the historical events of Pancho Villa's anti-U.S. retaliations collide with the war on germs the United States Public Health Department was having on typhus and the stronghold that eugenic thought still had on the nation all come together to create the unfortunate elements for the racialization of the Mexican immigrant body. As Stern argues, "when the languages of medicine and eugenics—germs and genes—intertwined in the 1920s, they came together largely through the metaphor of blood, weaving a discursive web of sanguinity that embraced the antinomies of citizen/alien, national/foreign, forward/backward, purity/disease, intelligence/imbecility, and so forth."¹⁹

Delousing became a standard procedure for incoming Mexican laborers. In fact, laborers who regularly crossed into the United States had to be disinfected once a week.²⁰ Adding insult to injury, even clothing was disinfected, leaving many with wrinkled clothes that further stigmatized them as raggedy/unkept immigrants. The resulting Bath Riots of 1917 in Ciudad Juarez protesting the enforced 'bathing' underscores the frustration of an indignant Mexican community. Of course, the implications of such racializing/ medicalizing of the Mexican immigrant had serious repercussions for all ethnic Mexicans living in the United States, including citizens. Natalia Molina asserts:

...the post-1924 treatment of Mexicans, however, represents a significant break with the past. Mexicans go from typically receiving fairly casual medical scrutiny—relative to southern and eastern Europeans on the East

¹⁹ Stern, "Buildings, Boundaries and Blood," 74-75.

²⁰ Ibid, 69.

Coast and Chinese immigrants on the West Coast—to being the objects of intense, negative assessment and then exclusion.²¹

Thus, while border laws criminalized the Mexican immigrant, discourses about disease proliferated and further labeled the Mexican body as an infectious threat. Thought of as diseased and infectious, the U.S. Public Health Service implemented a “full scale quarantine” against Mexico that lasted well into the 1930s. Such racializing discourses proved very effective in dehumanizing the Mexican body, reaffirming a socio-cultural and biological “foreignness” that kept all ethnic Mexican subjects outside the imagined community of the nation. Thus, the Mexican/American community was made to feel that it did not “belong” which leads us to two differing responses to the racializing discourses about ethnic Mexicans. As I shall demonstrate, the Mexican and Mexican American community responded in different and at times contradictory ways. However, together, they provide a strong counter-articulation of the Mexican body/subject.

“American Mexicans”: LULAC and the Politics of Citizenship in the work of Jovita González

The racializing discourses orchestrated at the border and deportation drives targeting Mexicans were maneuvers that rhetorically functioned to script Mexicans as unwanted, foreign and non-citizens. In short, Mexicans did not “belong.” While their laboring bodies were tolerated through contradictory legal loopholes that secured their working hands, their corporeality as citizens or potential citizens was excluded from the national imaginary. As noted earlier,

²¹ Natalia Molina, “Medicalizing the Mexican: Immigration, Race and Disability in the Early Twentieth Century United States,” *Radical History Review*, Issue 94 (Winter 2006), 32.

despite all the new restrictions in legislation, Mexican immigration to the United States did not slow down in the 1910s or 1920s. The Mexican Revolution combined with the aggressive recruitment by railroad companies and agricultural businesses of Mexican immigrants were factors that maintained a steady stream of newly arriving Mexican immigrants. Tensions rose not only between Anglos and Mexicans, as Gutierrez has noted, but also between Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants. Indeed, the social stress brought on by the Great Depression forced the Mexican American community to make decisions about themselves as a political body within the United States. For some Mexican Americans, the idea of being incorporated into the social body of the United States was becoming more and more a point of frustration and contention between themselves and *los recién llegados*/the newly arrived. The conflation between the two communities would become not only a focal point but the cataclysmic force in the creation of LULAC.

The formation of the League of United Latin American Citizens in 1929 in Texas, was a consolidation of three of the largest, notable Mexican American organizations. El Orden Hijos de America, El Orden Caballeros de America, and the League of Latin American Citizens²² were different from *mutualista* organizations of the previous era in which citizenship was not a requirement and frequent cooperation between Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants was the norm. Comprised mostly of the middle class, their members typically included lawyers, teachers, and small entrepreneurs. In February of 1929 the three

²² Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, 82-85, Benjamin Marquez, "The Politics of Race and Assimilation: The League of United Latin American Citizens, 1929-1940," *Western Political Quarterly*, vol 42, no 2 (June 1989) 358.

aforementioned organizations merged to become the League of United Latin American Citizens. As Gutiérrez indicates, “LULAC leaders consciously chose to emphasize the American side of their social identity as the primary basis for organization.....LULAC’s leaders set out to implement general goals and a political strategy that were similar in form and content to those advocated early in the century by W.E.B. DuBois and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People: for ‘an educated elite’ ‘to provide the masses with appropriate goals and lift them to civilization.”²³

One of the first public and controversial stands that LULAC made as a newly formed organization was to oppose Mexican immigration.²⁴ LULAC members believed that they had to make such a controversial decision in an effort to stop the conflation that Anglos were making between citizens and newly arriving (possibly undocumented) immigrants. LULAC also maintained a strong pro-assimilation stance. They were convinced that the road to inclusion in the social body of the nation was hinged upon assimilation, though not without forgetting their cultural heritage. Unsurprisingly, such tactics from the organization provoked much controversy and discussion among the Mexican American community.

However, LULAC should be analyzed critically rather than be dismissed with an overly simplified reduction of them as an organization that was merely “pro-American” and “pro-assimilation.” At all times, LULAC maintained a rigid, non-negotiable focus on the issue of full-fledged citizenship rights as the main

²³ Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, 77.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 79.

goal and imperative.²⁵ The organization truly believed that prioritizing this would facilitate the solution of other concerns such as racial segregation and discrimination. First and foremost, however, they needed recognition and incorporation into the imagined community of the nation (read American citizenship) for those *rightfully* entitled. Because of this, not surprisingly, LULAC made efforts to disassociate themselves from the large influx of Braceros and undocumented Mexican immigrants by not addressing any of the social issues of this community.²⁶ Instead, they reacted to a hostile environment that discursively erased their rights as citizens because it conflated them with newly arriving, undocumented immigrants. Such conflation they decided discursively constructed Mexican Americans as non-entities and thus LULAC chose to focus on their citizenship rights and making themselves seen as equal citizens. In such a way, LULAC resurrected a whole citizen subject that has always been present despite discursive and rhetorical erasures.

LULAC's greatest contribution at the time resides in their adamant insistence at highlighting their citizenship rights in their public statements. They were making visible what popular rhetoric was erasing at the time, the Mexican American citizen. Although, problematically, they found themselves forced to ignore the undocumented segment of their own ethnic community, they cannot be simplistically dismissed as mere assimilationists. LULAC's vision of a new, Mexican American subject and their efforts in making visible that which was rendered invisible, stands as a testament of their opposition to dominant

²⁵ See Gutierrez, Chapter 3 *Walls and Mirrors*.

²⁶ Gutierrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, 87.

discourse. Their locked focus on their violated citizenship rights speaks to the implied, discursive or outright erasure of them within the national body. More importantly, however, their focus indicates what the single most threatening rhetoric circulating at the time, the erasure of their rights as subjects/bodies within the nation. After all, the erasure of their citizenship scripted them as non-entities in the eyes of the law, thus rhetorically erasing their bodies. LULAC aggressively highlighted their citizenship in an effort to claim inclusion into the imagined social body of the nation.

Jovita González and the Politics of Knowledge Production

Amidst the tensions of the Depression and LULAC's bid to create a new Mexican American organization and a new vision of the Mexican American subject, a young woman by the name of Jovita González was writing her Master's Thesis on Texas-Mexican history and society. Her thesis titled "Social Life in Cameron, Starr and Zapata Counties," is an interesting piece of work that stands as an alternative history of Mexicans in the Texas region that precedes the arrival of Anglo Americans. In it, she radically inverts the rhetoric of Mexicans as a social problem and instead historicizes the social value of Mexican culture and its historical presence in South Texas. González's first sentence in the introduction to her thesis addresses the "common tendency" of Anglo Americans to "look down" upon Mexicans, immediately addressing what is at the heart of her project and the personal investments that propel her project,

even if only partially.²⁷ González's thesis offers a fierce rebuttal to the implied rhetoric of Mexicans as "foreigners" in the United States and articulates a provocative analysis of race, culture, identity and citizenship. González's introduction boldly begins: "There exists in Texas a common tendency among Anglo-Americans, particularly among Americans of one or two generations' stay in the country, to look down upon the Mexicans of the border as interlopers, undesirable aliens and a menace to the community."²⁸ She goes on to ask of the reader who might have such an opinion to consider the following: that these "so called undesirable aliens" have lived in the state long before it was Texas, further asserting that, "these people were here long before these new Americans crowded the deck of the immigrant ship."²⁹ In a period when all Mexican/American subjects were discursively and rhetorically constructed as foreign, González's revised history instead identifies Anglo Americans as the more recent immigrants, essentially flipping the script of xenophobic discourse around "foreignness."

While González's thesis is solidly grounded on demographic, regional histories and social customs, there is a straightforward and unapologetic narrative behind her research and data collection. Most notably, her timeline begins in the 1700's, documenting the arrival of Spanish colonizers to the Texas area, then known as Nuevo Santander. The 1700 date overshadows the 1848 date of acquisition of that territory by over one hundred years. I read González's

²⁷ Jovita González, *Life Along the Border: A Landmark Tejana Thesis*, ed and introduction by Maria E. Cotera (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006).

²⁸ González, *Life Along the Border*, introduction.

²⁹ *Ibid*, introduction.

data and documentation as a fierce response in and of itself to the implied rhetoric of Mexicans as foreigners in the land. By turning back the clock, so to speak, González glosses over Anglo acquisition, highlighting instead the history of the community that has always already been there. While not without its own occasional problematic reductions, González's thesis is also a testament to a sense of belonging for the Mexican community. The sense of belonging to this land for an entire century before Anglos is important. The issue of belonging is connected to much more than occupation but speaks to the arbitrariness of ownership and instead implies a different sense of ownership and even citizenship. The arbitrariness of geographical borders is useless if not futile attempt to rob this community of its sense of belonging.

González's historical revisions are starkly evident in her chapter titled "What the coming of the Americans has meant to the Border people," in which she expands upon the implication made in her introduction by explicitly labeling Anglo Americans as the unwanted invaders and foreigners. In her words: "The counties in which these people lived were run by Mexicans, and everywhere, with the exception of Brownsville, the Americans were considered foreigners."³⁰ Gonzalez goes on to note that the few "American" families (read Anglo) that lived along the border in the late 19th century adapted to the local environment and became "Mexicanized." In this way, she makes use of the academic discourse she is privy to (her thesis) in order to make visible a Mexican citizen subject that is neither "dirty" nor "foreign." Rather she posits a Mexican subject that has historical roots that predate Anglo settlement by one hundred years and thus

³⁰ González, *Life Along the Border*, 109.

reclaims the oft denied sense of belonging. She paints a somewhat romanticized picture of a time in which the Texas community lived in harmony with the few Anglos that chose to reside in the region and respectfully and successfully incorporated themselves into it.

Her analysis of the racial struggle occurring in South Texas in the early 20th century is a unique insight that informs many of LULAC's principles. González dedicated an entire chapter to the formation of a Mexican American political organization that was to have a deep, if not controversial impact on debates over Mexican American citizenship, far into the future. In this section titled "Border Politics," González describes the founding of the organization and lists all 25 proposals made by the original delegates. González's interpretation of LULAC's political ideologies provide a different reading from the norm. Whereas the organization has traditionally been seen as strictly assimilationist, it is clear from González's analysis that she understands LULAC to be engaging in a much more nuanced and sophisticated bicultural vision of citizenship. For her, assimilation did not "necessarily mean that Mexican Americans should forget their racial origin and their language." Instead, this vision proposed by LULAC, as understood by González, rehumanizes the Mexican American citizen subject in the face of dehumanizing discourse that scripted it as dirty, foreign and diminished. The vision of bicultural citizenship as interpreted by González is echoed in a quote from one of González's anonymous sources: "...it is our place and duty now to learn American ways, to send out children to American schools, to learn the English language, not that we are ashamed of our Mexican descent,

but because these things will enable us to demand our rights and to improve ourselves. We understand our race, and when we are able to comprehend American ideas and ideals, American ways and customs, we shall be worth twice as much as they..."³¹ In effect, her conceptualization of what is in essence a new "American" subject that is much more fluid and multi dimensional that it almost seems to foreshadow a different world order.

Evident in González's thesis, particularly in these two chapters, is the construction of a much more modern and worldly Mexican American subject that is both native to South Texas and enhanced by a bicultural subjectivity. As read by González, LULAC's primary focus was to make visible the erased Mexican American citizen subject by public discourse and thereby reclaim inclusion into the imagined social body of the nation. Responding to the alienating rhetoric about ethnic Mexicans in the late 1920s and early 1930s, González's scholarly research utilizes her thesis as a rhetorical weapon. By providing space within her scholarship for the inclusion of the vision and principles of LULAC along with her revised historical accounts of the communities in South Texas, she effectively ushers these issues into the archive of knowledge and knowledge production.

No Laughing Matter: *Don Chipote* and the Poetics of the Mexican Immigrant Body

Carl Gutiérrez-Jones has noted that cultural productions often "challenge the implicit tenets of Anglo historiography as a whole."³² Maintaining this basic

³¹ González, *Life Along the Border*, 113.

³² Carl Gutiérrez-Jones, *Rethinking the Borderlands: Between Chicano Culture and Legal Discourse*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 6.

tenet posed by Gutiérrez-Jones, I likewise look to texts by Latina/os for counter articulations of the Mexican im/migrant body. Clearly deviating from the oppositional stance that LULAC maintained during the 1930s is author Daniel Venegas. His novel titled *The Adventures of Don Chipote: Or When Parrots Breast Feed* is set in that critical year of 1924.³³ Published in 1928 as a serial in a Spanish newspaper in Los Angeles, the text is a picaresque novel that vividly portrays the often comedic trials and tribulations of a Mexican immigrant and his sidekick Policarpo. In his introduction to the recently recovered novel, Nicolas Kanellos elaborates on the significance of the novel as “one of the few vestiges of the creativity and social and political identity of “Chicanos” in the early twentieth century.”³⁴ At the time of publication of the novel in 2000, Kanellos asserted that no other document to date had been found that provided the “socio-political analysis of the precarious existence of Mexican laborers in the United States during that period.” Given the format (serial novel) and venue (Spanish language newspaper), one can easily deduce that at least part of the intended audience were the same immigrant laborers Venegas wrote about. Very little is known about Venegas, but he did write, edit and publish a weekly satirical newspaper called *El Malcriado*. He was also a playwright and director of a Los Angeles vaudeville troupe that, as Kanellos notes, “seemed to perform in the more modest, working class houses of the city.”³⁵

³³ Daniel Venegas, *The Adventures of Don Chipote: Or When Parrots Breast Feed*, ed Nicolás Kanellos, translated by Ethriam Cash Brammer, (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 2000). Although this novel initially appeared in Spanish and in serial form, it has been translated into English which is the text I will be working from.

³⁴ Venegas, *Adventures of Don Chipote*, 1.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 12

Venegas documents (through fiction) the experiences of the most vulnerable of all, the undocumented Mexican immigrant, whom he represents in a stereotypical, if ironic manner. Venegas' characters are, on the surface, every bit the negative, racialized stereotype that dominant discourse would dictate: they are dirty, crass, not the brightest individuals and "illegal." Don Chipote and Policarpo are frequently described as being raggedy, unkempt, and at times unemployed—all reflecting the conventional construct of the "dirty Mexican." Venegas forces the reader to focus on the abject body of his protagonist; a protagonist that embodies the same stereotypes circulating in dominant discourse but that is also made loveable through various humorous antics. Humor is thus a significant tool that Venegas employs to humanize these bodies in a non-threatening manner by complicating hegemonic racializations through their magnification. The vehicle of fiction allows Venegas to historicize the reasons/factors behind the conditions of Don Chipote's dirty body.

An equally dominant trope in this novel is that of hunger and hungry bodies. Indeed, hunger becomes an internal compass by which these characters navigate and is the reason why they cross into the U.S. unlawfully. However, by strategically employing these stereotypes with humor and by historicizing the context of his character's situations, Venegas skillfully manages to invert the interpretation. Venegas forces the reader to see the physical corporeality of Don Chipote, as unpleasant as it may be in order to see through it and see the human face behind it. These characters are also exceptionally naïve and innocent, to the point of absurdity. In fact, Kanellos laments that the characters in the novel

“never escape their typology,” but affirms that the author becomes another character “who elicits sympathy” not only for Chipote but also other ‘real-life bracero immigrants.’³⁶ Indeed, Don Chipote does return to Mexico in much the same way he left, but the more powerful significance of the novel is human face that Venegas provides for his audience.

I want to posit an alternative reading of these characters as subjects that challenge, indeed explode the stereotypes of the Mexican immigrant body as dirty and criminal through the very use of the negative characteristics. In fact, Venegas’ novel not only turns on its head the stereotype of the “dirty Mexican” but also inverts the culpability of the undocumented problem and problematizes the criminalization of these subjects for crossing without legal papers. Humor is thus a significant component that helps to humanize these bodies in a non-threatening manner by complicating hegemonic racializations through embodiment of these stereotypes in the loveable scoundrel, Don Chipote. These bodies are not corrupt or criminal when they enter, rather, as Venegas illustrates, the United States exposes them to corruption upon arrival.

One of Don Chipote’s first ‘adventures’ once in the United States underscores his vulnerability and innocence. No sooner does he arrive when he is duped into an inebriated state (a state that the narrator claims was previously unknown to Don Chipote) by a woman of ill repute and as a result, robbed blind. A dazed and hung over Don Chipote awakens the next morning confused: “...he did not understand what had caused his unquenchable thirst.”³⁷ Here, his

³⁶ Venegas, *The Adventures of Don Chipote*, 6.

³⁷ Venegas, *Don Chipote*, 48.

innocence underscores how benign and harmless he really is. The humor in the novel in effect, counters the otherwise threatening Mexican immigrant body constructed in dominant discourses.

The fear and threat of diseased, “dirty” Mexicans, was a discourse that at times overshadowed the criminality associated with crossing the border. The actual border crossing is unremarkable within the context of the novel, however, Venegas does elaborate on the disinfecting of Don Chipote. As Venegas narrates: “Not satisfied with merely impeding Don Chipote’s passage, the officer took note of Don Chipote’s grimy appearance and directed him to the shower room in order to comply with the procedure that the American government had created expressly for all Mexicans crossing into their land.” The delousing practices at the U.S.-Mexico border consisted of sex segregated showers where persons were sprayed with a mixture of soap, kerosene and water. His lack of understanding is rewritten as innocence about the inherent racism in the actions by the U.S. government rather than stupidity. Confused at being taken to be deloused, his “compatriots” need to inform him why he has been taken there, to which Don Chipote thinks: “Don Chipote did not wait another second. He thought that if this was the only thing he had to do, it was not worth fussing over. After taking off his clothes, he was naked as a jaybird, putting his grubby little paws in a box of powdered disinfectant, then hitting the showers. There thou hast it: Don Chipote actually taking pleasure in the first humiliation that the gringo forces on Mexican immigrants!”³⁸ In some ways, Chipote can be seen as reclaiming an element of integrity, as he is completely unaware of the shame that

³⁸ Ibid, 35.

is imposed upon him, and thus a figure able to refuse denigration imposed by dominant rhetoric.

The humor and innocence exhibited in Don Chipote renders him wholly human, in spite of Venegas' usage of the stereotypes about Mexicans. In that same passage as Chipote initially attempts to legally cross the border, Venegas writes: "It was no small task for Don Chipote to scrub off all the grime that covered his body. An advocate for the saying that 'the bark protects the tree,' the washings that he had given himself were few and far between, and even those only came when a storm had fallen upon the fields. Be that as it may, however, he enjoyed having stripped off the husk he wore, and even more so when he figured that this was all he needed to do to cross into American territory."³⁹ Venegas pokes fun at Don Chipote's "dirty" constitution asserting his less than desirable hygiene habits, but Venegas's gently mocking tone is leavened by his explanation of the class circumstances from which Don Chipote emerges. In fact, he has no natural aversion to bathing or cleaning himself up and happily does so. Adding to the humor and detail is the description of the return of Chipote's clothes. After being steamed for disinfection, they had shrunk considerably, but "since he had nothing else to wear, he had to put them on and become the laughingstock of all those who saw him."⁴⁰ Essentially through the fictional figure of Chipote, Venegas historicizes the lives of thousands of *braceros*. Fictional narrative allows for the descriptions of situations such as the steaming of Chipote's clothes, a documented occurrence, that are typically

³⁹ Venegas, *Don Chipote*, 36.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 36.

obscured in the reduction of the stereotype of a raggedy dressed immigrant. In this manner, Venegas situates and contextualizes the reasons for the laboring Mexican immigrant's disheveled appearance, and thus brings back a sense of humanity that is often erased.

As we know from the legal rhetoric previously discussed, the early 1930s marked a moment of restrictions and enforcements that conveniently shifted. Many restrictions and regulations were overlooked if, for example, a contracted, Mexican immigrant. Venegas reflects this oversight as well in his novel, only our hero is not so fortunate "A victim of circumstance, he endured the embarrassment and followed others to the office where they prepared their immigration papers and had to pay the eight dollar fee.." Of course, not speaking any English, Don Chipote requires an interpreter upon which he informs the agent of his full name, Chipote de Jesus Maria Dominguez, and that he cannot read or write or pay the eight dollar head tax. As one might recall, the 1917 Immigration Act required for all entrants to pay a head tax as well as be able to read and write in their native language. Exceptions were made for *braceros*, but being that Don Chipote was not one of the lucky ones to be granted a contract, he was attempting to cross in spite of it. Rejected at the border, Don Chipote then schemes a different way to get across to the United States, and so he crosses illegally with the help of a *coyote*. Thus, Venegas contextualizes, albeit fictively, Don Chipote's actions, demystifying the stigmatizing rhetoric about Mexican immigrants. Venegas' fiction presents an alternative reality about the lives of *braceros* that complicates the narrative perpetuated by dominant history.

As mentioned, hungry bodies are a recurring motif in Venegas' novel. Once again through the descriptive passages in his narrative, the stereotypes embodied by these characters are complicated and problematized in such a way that moves away from pathologizing and toward humanizing these bodies. Initial scenes in Mexico with Don Chipote highlight the meager meals he is able to provide for himself and his family. Venegas writes, "...having an appetite that made him feel as though he were hog-tied, he began to cram his face with 'dinner' if one can call a puddle with three beans, a mortar of chili sauce, a jug of *atole* and some tortillas 'dinner.'"⁴¹ Indeed, it is hunger which motivates the migration path for Don Chipote, and not any other sinister, pathological objective. Descriptions of this hunger abound throughout the novel as evidenced in the following series of passages: "Don Chipote did not stop to tie his knapsack before flying the coop...because he was hungry,"⁴² "...because he was already taking a ride on the hungry train, he had no choice than to blow the last of his loot to quell his stomach's yearning,"⁴³ "...and when they finally saw their much anticipated food before them, they dove in like pigs to slop,"⁴⁴ and "since food was his reason for leaving he went straight to the restaurant..."⁴⁵ Clearly, hunger and food dominate Chipote's and Policarpo's journey. This state of hunger does not change for Don Chipote upon entering the United States. Don Chipote and Policarpo are mostly motivated into their adventures as they find ways to secure work in order to eat. In a passage describing our hero and his companion

⁴¹ Venegas, *Don Chipote*, 22.

⁴² *Ibid*, 34.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 41.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 100.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 118.

procuring a not so regular breakfast, Venegas writes, “nothing more was heard than the thundering of teeth and the splashing around of tongues making room for the saliva to get to the ‘hameneg.’” Such descriptive passages about hunger abound in the novel. The frequent representations of hunger not only make the reader acutely aware of the immigrant body, but it also functions as a reminder of historical reasons for migration. Venegas acknowledges the dire economic state of a post Revolutionary Mexico and also accounts for the continuing hardships experienced by the immigrants upon arrival to the U.S. –information that is explicitly reinforced by the author.

Overall, these characters are very likeable, harmless and innocent. The humor in the novel helps to accentuate a basic human need and their subsequent harmlessness rather than any inherent depravity. Described through the lens of humor, the hunger scenes serve to highlight a universal and basic human need, creating empathy without pathologizing. More importantly, all these descriptions redirect focus onto the body, making it a feeling body that is visible and tangible and not something abstract and inhuman as certain discourses would have it. Thus, Venegas is able, through the figure of Don Chipote to reconfigure a sense of “wholeness” and humanity to the denigrated body of the Mexican immigrant through picaresque humor.

Conclusion

The hypervisibility of the Mexican immigrant body during the 1930s was exacerbated by multiple factors including the racialization of the Mexican body at

the border, the heavy recruitment of Mexican laboring “hands” for low skilled jobs, their erasure and invisibility within the body politic as citizens or potential citizens. These factors worked to erase the subjecthood, corporeality and a sense of belonging for the ethnic Mexican community. Even in the midst of the legal exceptions for Mexican *braceros*, the powerful rhetoric of agribusiness to allow laborers into the U.S. provided limited and provisional tolerance for Mexican laboring bodies which only reinforced the stigma of “foreignness” for all ethnic Mexicans.

Such dehumanizing rhetoric, however, was not left unchallenged. While coming from different forums, the vision and prerogatives of LULAC and the creativity of a fictional novel provide at least two examples of cultural expressions challenging racializing discourse in different ways. Both expressions sought to resurrect the erased, fragmented elements of the Mexican immigrant body that were otherwise maligned in public discourse. LULAC opted to make visible the citizen subject and tackle head on the juridical language that erased them. For this reason they saw the conflation of undocumented Mexican immigrants and Mexican American citizens as a serious political impediment to their claims to citizenship. LULAC countered this with a vision of a more cosmopolitan citizen subject; one that was radically more progressive and better suited to adapt in the world because he was bicultural. Unwilling to compromise on this matter, LULAC hoped that magnifying their legal rights and citizenship would dispel the stereotypes and alienating rhetoric the Latina/o community had been forced to endure until then.

Venegas, on the other hand, effectively embraces all the stereotypes that LULAC fought so hard to discredit. He does so in an effort to humanize the Mexican immigrant laborer. Strategically he directs readers gaze onto the “dirty Mexican” for a much closer look and in so doing, manages to uncover the humanness beneath the “dirt.” These representations reflect the confluences being made between immigrants and citizens, for as LULAC’s response demonstrates, citizens were being affected by the legal rhetoric that was supposed to be directed exclusively to undocumented immigrants. Venegas takes perhaps the most challenging and risky position by deploying the racist stereotypes constructed in public discourse in an effort to complicate the racial politics of this era. While taking drastically different stances in opposition to State inspired discourses, read together Venegas’ literary production and González’s scholarly intervention provide a rhetorical force that resists the pejorative, hegemonic constructions that characterized anti-Mexican xenophobia during this historical period. The cultural responses highlighted here by the Mexican origin community of the 1930s suggest that they actively engaged in projects of *rehumanization* and in so doing, rhetorically resurrected the maligned body of the Mexican origin subject, both citizen and immigrant.

CHAPTER 3

In/visibility and the Mexican Body in the Post War Era

The beginning of World War II ushered in the official end to the Great Depression, and in the process, the revitalization of the American economy and industry. Women joined the workforce in large numbers in order to fill the spaces left behind by men who joined the armed forces, thus radically changing their pre-war gender roles. The booming war industry provided a surplus of employment, at times even opening positions for a small percentage of ethnic minorities that otherwise might not be available to them.¹ However, while some Americans capitalized in the positive economic changes brought about by World War II, others were not as fortunate.

In this chapter I will analyze the visual representations of ethnic Mexican bodies in the post war era as they provide fruitful ground from which to understand competing discourses about Mexican/Americans at this time. The second massive deportation drive of ethnic Mexicans instigated by the U.S. government was prefaced by the much visualized bodies of *pachucos* and

¹ Arnolde De León & Richard Griswold del Castillo, *North to Aztlán: A History of Mexican Americans in the United States*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 126.

braceros. And it is the visualizations of *pachucos* and *braceros* at this time that inform the contestatory responses articulated in Ernesto Galarza's report *Strangers in Our Fields* and Herbert Biberman's film *Salt of the Earth*.

World War II, not surprisingly, heightened an inflated sense of patriotism resulting in a nativist backlash that hastily criminalized bodies presumed un-American. And so it is that this era marked the shameful internment and relocation of thousands of Japanese Americans. These actions by the U.S. government clearly indicated that, for many Americans, not least those in powerful positions, the loyalties of Japanese-Americans were considered questionable, even as their bodies were subjected to punishment via confinement and isolation. African American and Mexican American communities also suffered egregious injustices as their soldiers came home to the same racism they had left, regardless of the loyalty demonstrated in their honorable service to the United States. One of the most noted examples in the Mexican American community is that of Private Felix Longoria from Three Rivers Texas who was denied burial services in his home town's only chapel as a result of his Mexican descent.² The owners of the Three Rivers Funeral Home cited as the reason for their decision the fact that "whites would not like it." Not surprisingly, this refusal to bury a soldier who had earned a purple heart among other distinguished medals caused an uproar in the Mexican American community as the post-war reality of old, familiar racist social hierarchies settled in.

² David Gutierrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants and the Politics of Ethnicity*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) 154.

Things were not much different in other areas of the southwest, such as Los Angeles, where tensions erupted as conflict between Navy personnel and Chicanos escalated into the mis-named “Zoot Suit Riots” (1943). Interestingly, the Zoot Suit riots coincided with the initiation of the Bracero Program, which was implemented in 1942 as part of the war effort.³ With these tensions in the 1940s it is no surprise that a decade later, the U.S. government initiated its second deportation campaign aimed at ethnic Mexicans. Operation Wetback in 1954, would mark the second time the U.S. government would orchestrate a large deportation sweep that targeted ethnic Mexicans almost exclusively.⁴ The convergence of these events suggests another moment of heightened visibility for Mexican/American bodies. During this period, visual images of ethnic Mexicans circulating in the public domain were focused on, albeit for different reasons, the *pachuco* and the *bracero*.

The Post War period, in other words, represented a historical moment in which the visibility of Mexican bodies in urban spaces intersected interestingly with the visibility of Mexicans in rural spaces. In urban areas, the *pachuco* was prominently displayed and likewise, prominently attacked, as evidenced in the vicious and highly visible attacks on young Mexican American males during the Zoot Suit Riots.⁵ In rural areas, however, the attack was of a different nature, as it worked to render the bodies of workers voiceless and invisible. Indeed, to a certain extent Mexican immigrant laborers were rendered body-less and, as a

³ Gutierrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, 142.

⁴ De Leon & del Castillo, *North to Aztlán*, 135.

⁵ Mauricio Mazón, *The Zoot-Suit Riots: The Psychology of Symbolic Annihilation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984) 9.

result, easily exploitable. For *braceros* and other agricultural workers the attack constituted a corporeal erasure. Be it through the hyper visibility in the case of *pachucos*, or in the invisibility in the case of *braceros*, both were scripted as unwanted and foreign during this heightened patriotic moment.

The emblematic bodies of the *pachuco* and the *bracero* became figures that were circumscribed by historical events of World War II. *Braceros*, while clearly undesirable as potential citizens, were justified by the U.S. government as a necessity for the war effort. *Pachucos*, on the other hand, were interpreted as an affront to this war effort because of their extravagant attire and their prominent display of silk suits during a time when conservation of such materials was strongly advised. The critical analysis of ethnic Mexican bodies in both rural spaces (*braceros*) and urban (*pachucos*), reveal intricate and telling connections that speak to ideological constructs about these subjects and the spaces they inhabited at this particular historical moment. While Mexicans were technically not subject to Jim Crow laws, they were nevertheless, relegated to segregated spaces in both urban centers and rural spaces. Given this specific backdrop of *pachucos* and *braceros*, the “texts” produced by Galarza and Biberman reflect a conscientious mediation and renegotiation of ethnic Mexican bodies and belonging.⁶ At the heart of these two cultural productions resides a critique of the implicit and explicit ways that dominant media sources represented the bodies of both Mexican American *pachucos* and Mexican *braceros* at a moment when the second largest deportation of ethnic Mexicans in the nation was

⁶ I place the quotation marks around text to indicate that I will be reading Biberman’s film as a text.

initiated. More importantly, however, Galarza's and Biberman's work present their own visualization of the ethnic Mexican body that rehumanizes what is attacked or erased in the public domain. Thus, the nexus created by zoot suit culture (and the subsequent riots), the Bracero Program and the massive deportations of Mexicans with Operation Wetback provide the back drop to both Galarza's and Biberman's rearticulations of ethnic Mexican bodies within their respective cultural productions. The visualizations of Mexican bodies in their work evoke the sentiment of human integrity and dignity sorely lacking in the dominant media representations of *pachucos* and *braceros*.

Braceros: Erasing the Laboring Body

While the bodies of *pachucos* were hyper visible, as they were saliciously profiled in newspaper accounts, the bodies of *braceros* remained, for the most part, strangely invisible. Despite the thousands of Mexican immigrant bodies that filled the American landscape as they toiled in agricultural fields of the Southwest, in the minds of most Americans their actual bodies were eclipsed by the fruits of their labor. Indeed, the focus very much remained in what their hands could produce without much consideration of the accompanying body and person. These subjects were indeed carefully constructed but primarily confined within the realm of legal and political discourse as temporary and disposable, labor. They were quite simply, field hands—*brazos sin cuerpos*—quite literally, hands without bodies. The *bracero's* counterpart, the “illegal” immigrant, was more visible on account of his criminalization in large part due to the media

campaigns of Operation Wetback.⁷ In general, however, these conversations regarding Mexican immigrant labor remained very much in the realm of legislative discourse about the Bracero Program. And it was not until the work of Ernesto Galarza presented in his report titled *Strangers in Our Fields* in 1956 that the body of the bracero as a human being, and not as an expendable commodity to be rented, bought or sold, was made visible. Not surprisingly, as Galarza recounts, there were vicious attempts to discredit the report by prominent and powerful agribusiness representatives.⁸

Over the course of its twenty-two year span, the Bracero Program became increasingly tailored to the wants and needs of the growers whom it served.⁹ In the words of Juan Ramón García: “The growers still maintained the belief that ethnic composition was a rationale for their continued exploitation of agricultural migrants. They continued to believe that they were entitled to a large supply of cheap labor, and that in fact they had an inherent right to it.”¹⁰ However, this is perhaps most evident in the long, over drawn duration of a program that was initiated as a “war time effort.” Indeed, World War II came and went and the Bracero Program remained long after the cessation of national hostilities. In effect, it had become institutionalized by default through a series of extensions and renewals. At this time, the discourse on the Mexican *bracero* remained

⁷ See generally, Kitty Calavita, *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration and the I.N.S.* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

⁸ Ernesto Galarza, *Strangers in Our Fields. Based on a Report regarding Compliance with the Contractual, Legal and Civil Rights of Mexican Agricultural Contract Labor in the United States, made Possible through a Grant-in-aid from the Fund for the Republic.* Second ed., Washington: 1957.

⁹ Calavita, *Inside the State*, 42.

¹⁰ Juan Ramón García, *Operation Wetback: The Mass Deportation of Mexican Undocumented Workers in 1954* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980), 20

confined primarily within government spaces. In the legislative halls of the U.S. government, *braceros*, were in many ways, being negotiated as a commodity to be bought and sold and never considered as potential citizens. In fact, their status was constructed mostly through negations: they were not citizens, they were not legal residents, they were not permanent residents, and they were not “illegal.” Instead, they inhabited a space created by the convoluted legal discourse of the U.S. government as a temporary and disposable resource. Such discursive constructions severely restricted any semblance of personhood for these *braceros*. The conceptualization of these laborers as beings with wants, needs, desires and dreams was undercut by the defining discourse of negations constituted by the U.S. government. They were not intended to become potential citizens; they were here to work, end of story. Implicit in this logic is the possibility that the mass recruitment and relocation of thousands of immigrants could be so uncomplicated. Furthermore, this thought process demands that the immigrants in question have no thoughts, no voice, no opinions, no desires or dreams for anything beyond the work in front of them. It is as if they are expected to be mechanized in labor and thought. Inherent in this discourse as imagined by U.S. agribusiness is a laborer that should be unwilling to hope for a different future, for doing so would require them to think of themselves as persons with free will, ambitions and aspirations.

“Instead of individuals,” García affirms, “the ‘wetbacks’ came to be viewed as a faceless mass.”¹¹ At best, Mexican *braceros* were seen as beasts of burden as all discussion and speculation focused on their labor and their working hands

¹¹ García, *Operation Wetback*, 144.

that effectively disembodied these workers. When asked about “lower class Mexicans” one employee from the Texas Employment Commission who boasted a Master’s degree on education in Mexico stated: “They have behind them five hundred years of burden bearing and animal like living and just can’t adjust to civilization in the way a white man does.”¹² And it was precisely this discourse about the *bracero* that made him a vulnerable target for abuse and exploitation from growers fixated on bottom line profits.

Legally speaking, *braceros* were not “illegal,” nevertheless, their mobility was severely restricted by a legally binding contract with the U.S. government.¹³ Because of their temporary status and their inability to ever become citizens, they were, in many ways, quite simply another resource, bought and paid for by the United States. That these “resources” happened to be persons seemed to be of little consideration or consequence in the manner in which they were negotiated and acquired by the U.S. government. As Kitty Calavita has noted, “working conditions were often so strenuous and the *braceros* hands so ‘badly scratched’ that efforts to obtain the fingerprints required for FBI clearance frequently failed, with the incomplete forms stamped ‘unclassifiable’ and returned to Washington.”¹⁴ Such descriptions make it impossible to overlook these incidents as literal and figurative erasures of the *bracero*’s identities. In some cases, they literally had no “identity” that could be physically documented in the traditional, legal manner. Tragically, their discursive treatment as non persons translated literally in real life. One *bracero* described the contract process in the following

¹² García, *Operation Wetback*, 149.

¹³ Calavita, *Inside the State*, 56.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 63.

way: “If your name is called, you may have a job...if it is called you take a physical. After that someone pats your back, someone shakes your hand...it is all so friendly, you think the first time. Actually they are finding out if you back is strong and your hands rough, as if they were buying a horse.”¹⁵

Far from the invisibility of these “strangers in our fields,” Mexican American youth were becoming a highly visible threat to American values in the urban spaces like Los Angeles. Indeed the 1940s and 1950s witnessed what seemed to be diametrically opposed performances of youth culture between Anglos and Chicanos. Anglo youth boasted their quick paced jitter-bug and their fast moving hot-rods, while Chicano youth danced the significantly slower paced “pachuco hop” (involving minimal movement by the zoot suiter, lest the suit get wrinkled) and prided themselves in rides that ran “low and slow.” Clearly, the two youth communities defined themselves against each other.¹⁶



Fig. 1 Standard Pachuco attire.¹⁷

¹⁵ García, *Operation Wetback*, 53.

¹⁶ See James Sterngold, “How the Lowrider Evolved from Chicano Revolt to Art Form,” *New York Times on the Web*, Feb 19, 2000, <http://www.lowrider.com/information/history/nytimes.php> (May 2007)

¹⁷ www.elpachuco.com (May 2007).

Their suits and cars were banners of pride. With regard to the cars, Chicano youth were taking what were often older, “junk” cars of their parent’s generation and restoring them to mint condition. In some ways, this was born out of practicality and class circumstances—these “junk” cars were inexpensive to purchase or hand me downs (as opposed to the latest, newest, sports car). Instead, the hand me down jalopies were reconstructed to showroom quality, typically with distinctive *pachuco* flair and style.

The meticulous detail in sporting a zoot suit was no different. Like lowrider cars, these suits were designed to be ostentatious and attention drawing. Above all, the zoot suit was meant to look sharp and zoot suiters prided themselves in immaculately pressed suits. The suits consisted of meticulously tailored oversized pants and jackets, often with a flashy, equally long chain.¹⁸ This stylized attire was not exclusive to Chicanos—African Americans also had their own fancy zoot suit and low riding culture—but in Los Angeles in particular, the zoot suit unequivocally signaled an emergent Chicano youth culture.¹⁹ These visual manifestations of style within the context of Anglo-American and Mexican American relations at this time must be taken into serious consideration as they indicate the ways in which these groups identified themselves against each other. Not surprisingly, the extravagant attire of the zoot suiter or *pachuco*, was considered an affront to mainstream Anglo-American culture as silk and other

¹⁸ For a colorful and interactive website on Zoot Suit culture see the PBS “Zoot Suit Riots/American Experience” at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/zoot/index.html> [accessed May 2007]

¹⁹ See Shane White, *Stylin: African American Expressive Culture from its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press) 1998 and Stuart Cosgrove, “The Zoot Suit and Style Warfare,” *History Workshop Journal*, vol 18 (Autumn 1984) 77-91.

materials used in the manufacture of the zoot suit were rationed as a result of the war. When women were being encouraged to hand in their panty hose for the war effort, zoot suiters were proudly displaying their excessive outfits. In some ways it seems as if the *pachuco*'s immaculate and ostentatious style challenged the already established stereotype of the "dirty" Mexican. In truth, visually speaking, the zoot suit was an extreme, even hyperbolic, representation of being "dressed to the nines." However, the distinguished appearance the *pachucos* prided themselves in during the early 1940s did not always garner positive reactions. Indeed, the ostentatious and highly conspicuous style of the zoot suit came to be interpreted as un-American and un-patriotic and provoked the hostility evidenced by the events that led up to the Zoot Suit Riots.

Contrary to the implication in the name, the Zoot Suit Riots were largely instigated by navy personnel. While it was often navy personnel that purposely went out seeking zoot suiters, easily spotted with their distinctive attire, the conflict and subsequent "riots" that ensued were attributed to the zoot suiters. As noted by some scholars, there were a series of incidents involving servicemen with other service personnel and civilians in the days leading up to the conflicts with the Mexican American community, however, it was the interactions with the *pachucos* that were followed intensely by the media. In fact, days before, there were 18 reported scuffles between Navy servicemen and civilians. As Mazón notes:

The zoot suit menace pales when compared with the violence taking place between civilians and servicemen throughout southern California. Consider the following: Between 1 May 1943 and 6 June 1943 there had been eighteen major incidents involving servicemen, seven of which

resulted in death: (1) on 15 May a soldier killed a sailor; (2) on 20 May a sailor was held in the slaying of a civilian; (3) on 21 May a soldier was shot and killed by a civilian; (4) on 25 May a soldier was knifed by a civilian and died later of the wounds; (5) on 25 May a soldier was killed by a civilian; (6) on 29 May a marine was killed by a hit and run automobile; and (7) on 30 May two sailors killed a taxicab driver. None of these incidents involved zoot suiters.²⁰

In the navy servicemen outings, they searched the streets for the tell tale dress of zoot suiters. The attacks often went beyond a mere confrontation in that the acts of violence upon the *pachuco* and were meant to be pointedly humiliating. It was not uncommon for *pachucos* to have their hair shorn (the traditional ‘duck tail’ they sported, cut off) and perhaps more importantly, to strip them from their zoot suits—literally stripped to their underwear and left in such a state on public streets. The stripping of clothes, referred to as “unpants[ing]” zoot suiters; was unequivocally a figurative, if not literal, emasculation of the *pachuco*.²¹

What should be underscored here is the way the bodies of zoot suit wearing *pachucos* were strategically placed in the public eye to shame, ridicule and tarnish.] In the words of Mauricio Mazón, “[t]he zoot suiters, attacked by servicemen and civilians in June 1943, were symbolically annihilated, castrated, transformed and otherwise rendered the subjects of effigial rites.”²²

²⁰ Mazón, *Zoot Suit Riots*, 68.

²¹ Mazón, *Zoot Suit Riots*, 86.

²² *Ibid*, 1.



Two pachuco zoot-suiters, one stripped to his underwear, lie beaten and humiliated in a Los Angeles street.²³

Fig 2 Pachuco youth beaten and stripped of their clothing.²³

Furthermore, the attacks by the servicemen were described in military jargon, using terms such as “taxi cab brigade,” “landing party,” “blitzes,” “guerrilla warfare,” and “mopping up operations” to name a few.²⁴ In a memo by Commander Clarence Fogg, senior patrol officer in downtown Los Angeles, he states: “Hundreds of servicemen prowling downtown Los Angeles mostly on foot—disorderly—apparently on prowl for Mexicans.”²⁵ It became very clear that such public and unrestrained assaults on Chicano youth—predominantly American citizens—were implicitly understood as “patriotic” acts. Asserting this connection between the backdrop of World War II and the pachuco attacks, Mazón writes: “The anxieties of wartime generated psychological adaptations that merged so tightly with the distortions of the periods as to give neurotic behavior a semblance of patriotic normalcy. It was not uncommon for the worker and serviceman to use the prerogatives of patriotism as a shield for aggression.”²⁶ Thus, the attacks functioned as both spectacle and public humiliation presented for an audience of passersby. Often, as Mazón notes, the

²³ Photos printed in Stuart Cosgrove’s “The Zoot Suit and Style Warfare,” *History Workshop Journal*, vol 18 (Autumn 1984) 77-91.

²⁴ Mazón, *Zoot Suit Riots*, 79

²⁵ *Ibid*, 73.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 59-60.

attacks initiated by servicemen were done in full military attire—indicating no fear or shame. This action speaks volumes of the normalized ideological discourse on *pachucos* and Chicano youth in general. Their bodies were clearly read or interpreted as un-American and subject to unwarranted violent assaults.



Fig 3 U.S. Servicemen patrolling the streets.²⁷

Indeed, *pachucos* were being attacked and humiliated in an effort to demonstrate, through violence, that they were NOT patriotic or one of “us,” instead they became the “enemy.” Picking up on this exclusionary discourse, the media spotlighted the bodies of *pachucos* as spectacles of difference and interpreted their mode of dress and personal style as un-patriotic and decidedly un-American. Thus, during the post war era, public media discursively attacked the bodies of both *pachucos* and *braceros*, rendering them either hypervisible or entirely invisible. In both cases, such discursive constructions revealed broader ideological assumptions about the ethnic Mexican community.

***Cuerpos de carne y hueso: Ernesto Galarza’s Strangers in Our Fields*²⁸**

I have recently become especially interested in photographs in books not intended as art books. I have become quite partial to them because I think they have something to tell us—about the scholar whose book they

²⁷ <http://www.ncdemocracy.org/book/print/1146> (accessed May 2007)

²⁸ “Bodies of Flesh and Blood,” my translation.

are in, about a panoply of feelings that may be the thick context within which the author's analytic slant makes sense...²⁹

I begin this section with the quote from the article titled "For a Politics of Love and Rescue" by Virginia Dominguez because while Ernesto Galarza's 1956 report on *braceros* was not meant as a "creatively artistic" project, this quote speaks to the way in which the report is nonetheless very much shaped by the inclusion of photography. Furthermore, the photographs are not credited anywhere in the report, yet the photographs are without question, central to the rhetorical force of the charges Galarza makes against the U.S. government. They buttress his argument with emotive power in ways that would be unimaginable without them. Indeed, it would not be excessive to think of Galarza's report as one fueled by Dominguez's "politics of love and rescue." One need only to look at the breadth and scope of his scholarship to see that the Mexican/American community (himself a Mexican immigrant) meant so much more than sociological project. And as Dominguez so lucidly argues in this quote, that the choice of photographs in a text can and do, reveal so much more than a sociological study. Galarza's expose report on U.S. compliance with the contractual regulations stipulated by the Bracero Program (bilateral agreement) poignantly begins with the voice of a *bracero*: "In this camp," one Mexican National told me, "we have no names. We are called only by numbers." This quote is accompanied by a vivid example of just what Galarza's informant means: a photocopy of a pay stub, showing the number "107" listed after the

²⁹ Virginia Dominguez, "For a Politics of Love and Rescue," *Cultural Anthropology* Vol 15, No 3 (August 2000) 368.

heading “Name/Nombre.” Galarza continues: “During recent years Mexican Nationals have worked in more than one half the states of the United States. Yet most U.S. citizens are probably not even aware of their existence.”³⁰ This telling entry point highlights Galarza’s purpose to make the voices of the mostly invisible Mexican laborers heard. Galarza is not only concerned in revealing the U.S. government’s exploitation of these workers; he is equally, if not more interested in making this community visible as real people *de carne y hueso*. The narrative written by Galarza often indicates this, as do the accompanying photographs.

It must be noted that the Fund for the Republic, which commissioned Galarza’s *Strangers in our Fields*, also hired magazine photographer Leonard Nadel to create a photo essay of the *bracero* experience.³¹ A selection of the photographs taken by Nadel were included in Galarza’s report.³² Thus, Nadel’s photographs compliment Galarza’s investigations about the U.S. government’s negligence in providing many of the basic contractual agreements made under the Bracero Program. A significant portion of Nadel’s photographs, along with some comments and notations made on the back of the photographs, are available online through the Smithsonian’s digitized exhibit titled “America on the Move.”³³ The captions that Nadel provided are just as telling. Some of his

³⁰Galarza, *Strangers in Our Fields*, 1.

³¹ Smithsonian Institution, “America on the Move: The Bracero Experience, http://infoshare1.princeton.edu/libraries/firestone/rbsc/finding_aids/ffr/index.html [accessed Feb 2007]. The Fund for the Republic is a civil liberties think tank that was founded in 1952 through the Ford Foundation.

³² Though no credit is given to the photographer of the photographs on the published pamphlet, the digitized archive produced by the Smithsonian cites and documents Leonard Nadel’s involvement in the project.

³³ http://americanhistory.si.edu/ONTHEMOVE/themes/story_51_5.html (May 2007). In fact, the Smithsonian website notes the following about Nadel’s photographs: “Unhappy with the

photographs have become representative of the dehumanization of Mexican *braceros* in the 1950s. In one shocking picture taken by Nadel in which *braceros* are being fumigated at the U.S. Mexico border, the handwritten caption for the photograph reads: “Much in the same manner and feeling used in handling livestock, upon crossing over the bridge from Mexico at Hidalgo, Texas, the men are herded into groups of 100 through a makeshift booth sprayed with DDT.”³⁴ Given the urgent poignancy evident in his photography, it is no surprise the Leonard Nadel’s photographs continue to be actively and overwhelmingly used by contemporary scholars who write about the Bracero Program.

While Galarza’s report is very much rooted in the format and methodological approach of a conventional sociological project, his narrative breaks at times in ways that provide a humanistic approach. In one such example, Galarza ends the segment titled “Their Rights” with the following: “What are the facts? Do theory and practice come even reasonably close? Unfortunately, the answer has to be negative. Anyone who thinks otherwise should talk to the *braceros* themselves as I did.” Here again, he makes the live persons and their lived experiences the center attraction of his evidence. His interviews with hundreds of *braceros*—direct quotes from their conversations—are consistently interspersed throughout the report. As much as he is able to do so, he attempts to let the *bracero* himself speak through his report. In another section titled “As They See It” another *bracero* speaks of the awareness that

lackluster public response to his report *Strangers in Our Fields*, the Fund hired magazine photographer Leonard Nadel to produce a glossy picture-story exposé.”

³⁴ This picture was not included in Galarza’s report, but remained a part of his photo essay on the *bracero* experience.

braceros have of their contractual rights and the subsequent denial of them by some foremen:

“Some of us have read the contract but it cannot be mentioned to the boss,” a Mexican National told me, in a typical complaint. “The contractor laughed and he said ‘The contract is a filth of a paper.’ If you want to know how useless is the contract, try to see somebody about it. This is the first time we have talked with anybody who has listened to us. The sheep over there in that field are better than we are. They have a shepherd to watch the flock and dogs that protect them instead of biting them. Here in the camp it is one bite after another. They bite your wages and they bite your self-love.”³⁵

The inclusion of the *bracero*’s reference to “self-love” comment is significant to note here. It stands out because it speaks to Galarza’s commitment toward this community that goes beyond the need to simply reveal the broken laws and promises of the U.S. government. He is, in effect, recognizing the heart and soul of this person and breaking away from the discursive dehumanization of him as a pair of hands, as often referred to in the media.³⁶ Galarza’s report demonstrates how the Bracero Program, when not carefully supervised, can serve to foster inhumane exploitation and make the lives of *braceros* that of “modern slaves.”

Surely, Galarza must have also recognized the powerful, supporting evidence that Nadel’s photographs would provide for his report. Interestingly, it is not only pictures of people that make the report so moving, but also the inclusion of photocopies of artifacts that were representative of their daily lives.

The photographs of the pay stubs, the dilapidated living quarters, unsafe

³⁵ Galarza, *Strangers*, 18.

³⁶ The indictment that Galarza has for the U.S. government is made blatantly clear with the inclusion of a photocopy of a headline from a Spanish language newspaper of the time. “*Esclavos Modernos: En pleno siglo de libertades los Braceros Mexicanos son objeto de las mas inhumanas explotaciones,*” the paper reads. Roughly translated into: “Modern Slaves: In the midst of an era of civil rights, Mexican braceros remain the objects of inhumane exploitation.”

transportation vehicles and payroll logs, all function as documents of evidence to the everyday lives of *braceros*. They provide the testimony to their stay and their struggle within a contractual agreement that unfortunately all too often operated at the expense of their exploitation and erasure. In one such photocopy, Galarza show the incomprehensible payroll log from the D'Arrigo Bros Co. that reflects a *bracero* receiving a check for "\$00.00" after injured workers from an overturned truck were charged for their meals.

Galarza's report attempted to make visible what had been rendered invisible in the feverish demand for labor: the *bracero's* body. More importantly, Galarza provided a legitimized venue for the voices of *braceros* and he showcased their experiences and lives with the inclusion of Nadel's powerful photographs. With the emotive photographs taken by Nadel, Galarza in effect, visually articulated a counter narrative of the existing discursive constructions about Mexicans at the time as beasts of burden—a mere pair of hands to work in the fields during the war. Instead, the accompanying photographs provided proof of the individuals that for so long remained faceless and nameless, giving a body to a segment that for too long remained invisible in plain sight.

Salt of the Earth: "Reel" Bodies on the Silver Screen

As noted earlier, 1954 marked the year that Operation Wetback was implemented resulting in the deportations of thousands of ethnic Mexicans. Not unlike the deportations of the Great Depression, Operation Wetback was technically aimed at "illegal immigrants" but resulted in racializing all ethnic

Mexicans as suspect. Deportation sweeps ensued, and although they were primarily focused in Texas and the general area of the Southwest, they reached out far and wide into the Midwest. While exact numbers are difficult to assert, various scholars place the number as high as one million persons that were deported during the operation.³⁷ Though, as Juan Ramon Garcia notes, the numbers may have been exaggerated for sensationalist impact,³⁸ making it clear then, as before in the 1930s, that the component of fear provoked by the deportation operation was equally, if not more, important than the actual numbers.

Such scare tactics proved to be beneficial for the government in more ways than one. In Hollywood, a different scare—the Red Scare of the McCarthy era—spearheaded by the House of Un-American Activities Committee and resulted in the blacklisting of a group of directors that would come to be known as the Hollywood Ten. “Those who were either publicly or privately denounced as members of the American Communist Party,” as one scholar noted, “found it almost impossible at least for a decade to get employment in the motion picture industry.”³⁹ Herbert Biberman was one of these directors. In 1954 Biberman directed the now classic film *Salt of the Earth*.

Salt of the Earth fictionalizes an historical 15-month strike that took place in 1950 at the Empire Zinc Mine in New Mexico. Frustrated with the economic

³⁷ Kelly Lytle Hernandez, “The Crimes and Consequences of Illegal Immigration: A Cross Border Examination of Operation Wetback, 1943-1954” *The Western Historical Quarterly*, Vol 37, No 4 Winter 2006.

³⁸ García, *Operation Wetback*, 227.

³⁹ Arthur Eckstein “The Hollywood Ten in history and memory.” *Film History* Vol. 16, no. 4 (October 1, 2004): 424-436.

inequality, a result of wage differences between Anglo and Mexican/American crews, the Mine-Mill Local 890 of Bayard, New Mexico decided to strike. Little did they know as they embarked upon this decision that this would lead them to 15 months of struggle. The Mexican-American mine workers demanded economic equality, as there were wage differences between Anglo crews and Mexican-American crews. While the film addresses the issue of economic equality, it chooses to focus on the men's mine safety and the women's sanitation concerns, although by scholar James Lorence's account, these were not the "major points of dispute."⁴⁰ This detail of creative license notwithstanding, the film maintains a commitment to the most remarkable element which is the intimate connection between racial equality and gender equality.

The film itself is unique in that only a smattering of professional actors were enlisted to participate. Rosaura Revueltas, a Mexican actress, was given the lead role of Esperanza Quintero, but the role of her husband Ramon Quintero was played by the local 890 president, Juan Chacón, with the remaining parts played by the miners themselves.⁴¹ The film project was a collaborative project on the part of Biberman, Michael Wilson (screenwriter) and producer Paul Jarrico. Reportedly, it was Jarrico who first became aware of the zinc mine strike while on a family vacation in New Mexico.⁴² I have included this film as one of my central texts for analysis (despite it being non-Latina/o produced) in part

⁴⁰ Lorence, *Suppression of Salt of the Earth: How Hollywood, Big Labor and Politicians Blacklisted a Movie in Cold War America*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press), 26.

⁴¹ As a result of all the hostile commotion surrounding the film, Rosaura Revueltas was deported a few weeks before production finished resulting in scenes being adjusted as a result of her physical absence. Her character was based on Juan Chacon's real wife, Virginia Chacon.

⁴² James Lorence, *The Suppression of Salt of the Earth: How Hollywood, Big Labor and Politicians Blacklisted a Movie in Cold War America*, 56.

because the film has become a classic in the field of Latina/o Studies but also because of its non-conventional production. As Chicano scholars De Leon and del Castillo have concurred, “Even though it was produced and directed by non-Mexican Americans, this film’s genesis and history make it a classic in Mexican American cinema.”⁴³ During a period in which actual Latina/o cultural productions were few and far in between, this film stands out in its portrayal of the Mexican-American community. The film uses actual miners—in effect real Mexican-American laboring bodies—from the actual Empire Zinc Mine. Furthermore, the commitment by Biberman, Wilson and Jarrico to produce a film that truly represented the voice of the predominantly Mexican/American community is evident in both behind the screen as well as on the screen details.

First and foremost, the miners were not just figures on the screen, but were often included in negotiations as the screenplay was being crafted by Michael Wilson who returned to New Mexico in 1952 (while writing the screenplay) to hold an open meeting at the union hall that resulted in a number of suggested revisions after consultations with the community. As Lorence writes, “...to ensure the prospective film’s truthfulness, extraordinary steps were taken to consult the men and women of the Bayard mining community; indeed, Wilson insisted on approval of film content from the people of Local 890.”⁴⁴ At this meeting the community made it clear that they did not want any “Hollywood shenanigans.”⁴⁵ These community based negotiations resulted in the removal or

⁴³ De Leon & del Castillo, *North to Aztlan*, 155.

⁴⁴ Lorence, *Suppression*, 58.

⁴⁵ *Ibid* 58.

significant re-editing of scenes that were considered as stereotypical portrayals of the Mexican-American community.⁴⁶

Secondly, the fact that the film incorporates the Spanish language in various dialogue exchanges throughout the film—without any translation subtitles—needs to be commended and recognized for the statement it makes. I would argue that by doing so, the film takes, what was at this time, a non-traditional stance by prioritizing a bilingual audience such as the one it was representing on screen. Lastly, the film complicates the pursuit of racial equality by highlighting the issue of gender equality alongside this struggle. After a restraining order was issued, prohibiting the union members from picketing, a remarkable struggle ensued within the striking miners that ultimately resulted in the miner's wives taking to the picket lines. On this note, Mario Barrera notes the he would categorize this element as “the idea that the struggle for equality is indivisible, and extends into our daily lives.”⁴⁷ Indeed, it was this element of gender struggle inextricably connected to racial and labor struggles that strongly influenced the narrative arc of the film.

Tellingly, the film opens with the stark image of a woman's body chopping wood, tending to hard physical labor. This is significant, particularly since so much discourse of the Mexican laboring body during the 1950s focuses primarily on male labor. The reasons for this are obvious, given that the Bracero Program was an exclusively male program. However, this does not mean that women (and children) were not also working in the fields at this time because

⁴⁶ Ibid, 59.

⁴⁷ Mario Barrera, “Story Structure in Latino Feature Films,” in *Chicanos and Film: Representation and Resistance*, ed Chon Noriega (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 230.

they were, just not under the auspices of the Bracero Program. The voice-over narration that follows the opening scene is that of Esperanza (played by Revueltas) as she situates the New Mexican landscape by asserting her (and by extension, the entire Mexican-American community's) claim to the land by stating that "in these lands [her] great grandfather raised cattle before the Anglos ever came." "Our roots go deep in this place, deeper than the pines, deeper than the mine shaft," she continues, noting how many things changed, have changed since the arrival of Anglos, including the name of San Marcos to Zinc Town, a disturbing renaming that shifts the focus upon the material those in power profit from.

This point of belonging is underscored a second time, once the strike has begun, when a pair of sheriffs observing the strikers points out Ramon noting that he "claimed" his grandfather owned that land. We have from the outset the historical backdrop of a Mexican-American community that is now the poorly paid wage workers to the land that once belonged to them. Much like Jovita González's thesis project, the film begins by firmly establishing the Mexican/American community's sense of belonging, if not legitimate claims to the land. Furthermore, while the notable lead figures are undoubtedly Esperanza and Ramón, they truly share screen time with the entire cast of miners. There are countless scenes in which the camera pans to show scores and scores of Mexican-American men and women. From the filled-to-the-brim union hall town meetings to the picketing lines, the bodies of Mexican-American workers are

continuously spotlighted. The visual representation of a collective community—the “body” of an entire community—if you will, is constantly evoked.

In one such community centered scene (based on actual events), which takes place in the county jail, the picketing women—62 to be exact, along with 17 children (one which was one month old)—are detained. Once apprehended, the women are enticed with the promise of release if they sign pledges indicating that they will not return to the picket line.⁴⁸ The women refuse. As the camera widens to reveal the small cinder cell overcrowded with women, all forced to stand due to the limited space. The close up shots of the children’s faces behind bars in this scene functions as an indictment against the police authorities that would cross such an unethical line. But the women are only incited further to loudly, collectively, demand for food, beds and baby formula, which shortly thereafter results in their release. Recalling this particular event, Virginia Chacón (Ramón Chacón’s wife) recalls how the women resolved on their united front: “We said, ‘We’ll all go together or not at all.’ He [the district attorney] came about 6 o’clock and said, ‘Well, I’m going to take you girls home.’ And so we all shouted ‘We’re going straight to the picket line.’ And they hired a bus, a chartered bus. And they left us off at the picket line.”⁴⁹

Once home, the feeling of invincibility is evident in Esperanza as she is shown smiling, almost giddy, high on what can only be interpreted as recognition of her new-found agency. Ramón, however, is not as enthusiastic and the argument that ensues is one of the film’s most poignant and notable scenes.

⁴⁸ Lorence, *Suppression*, 33.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 33-34.

Responding to Ramón's lack of encouragement and enthusiasm, she asks "Do you still think you can have dignity only if I have none?" She acknowledges his struggles as a brown man in a white world, astutely noting "'stay in your place you dirty Mexican' that's what they tell you, but why must you say to me, 'stay in your place'? Do you feel better having someone lower than you? Whose neck shall I stand on to make me feel superior? I am already low enough..." At once the sense of personhood, dignity and integrity that Esperanza demands of her husband is mirrored against the demands Ramón makes of his Anglo bosses. Thus, the film refuses to disentangle the rights of personhood that Esperanza seeks within the nucleus of her family with those of Ramón as he demands them of an Anglo dominated society. Esperanza's impassioned plea simultaneously rehumanizes the woman as it rehumanizes the laborer in this scene.

As mentioned earlier, the critical significance of this film resides in the hiring of non-actors in order to recreate the documentary effect. Intentional or not, this fact redirects focus on to the "real" bodies of Mexican/American laborers. The at times awkward and stilted dialogue exchanges between the characters portrayed by the actual miners, works for them rather than against them. The stops and starts rupture any "fantasy world" that the film may be creating. Indeed, Mario Barrera notes: "this film has at times been criticized for melodramatic scenes and its use of some nonprofessional actors, but my experience in showing it in the classroom is that it invariably provokes a strong emotional response from its viewers."⁵⁰ To clarify further, what under any other circumstances might be considered as a flaw that would effectively "ruin" the

⁵⁰ Barrera, "Story Structure," 231.

cinematic creation of fantasy and verisimilitude, in this case, serves to create an “alternate verisimilitude,” that indeed references the “real” world and not a fictively created one. In short, their “real” bodies as represented in *Salt of the Earth* upstage the fictional element of the film in remarkable ways. All in all, the end product of the film results in being an unconventional, creative production that seems to merge docu-drama and neo-realist aesthetics by using real miners (non-actors), while fictionalizing historical events, that places the film in a “borderlands,” of genres.

Conclusion

During the post war era seemingly contrasting visions of the Mexican im/migrant body took center stage: portraits of criminalized, un-American and hyper-visible *pachucos* contrasted against the corporeal erasure of the disembodied, working hands of *braceros*—each of these constructions were very much shaped by the historical circumstances of the “war effort.” While the representations of these bodies were contradictory, in both cases, they served to alienize and dehumanize the Mexican/American community at large.

These discursive constructions functioned in such a way as to leave no doubt about how these subjects were situated within national imaginary of U.S. society at the time. In the texts analyzed, the visualization of bodies in *Strangers in Our Fields* and *Salt of the Earth* provide is done so in a way that dignifies the oft maligned ethnic Mexican body at this time. Visualizations of their actual bodies become central components within their text. Galarza achieves this by

accentuating his report with interviews with the *braceros* themselves and providing pictures of their everyday experiences under the often inhospitable Bracero Program. Biberman does something similar in that he uses the actual bodies of the miners from the Empire Zinc Mine strike in his filmic recreation of the historic event in Mexican/American history. For Galarza, his report was much more than research and likewise, for Biberman his film was more than just another aesthetic accomplishment. Both of these projects dwell in uncovering and recovering what I can only describe as the “human” core of their subjects. What emerges from their works are portraits of real persons, and of a community that despite all efforts to the contrary, would not be relegated to faceless anonymity or be silenced.

CHAPTER 4

The Politics & Poetics of “Borderless” Space: Latina/o Responses to the Rhetoric of NAFTA.

Don't let them make you feel you did a crime for picking the vegetables they'll be eating for dinner. If they stop you, if they try to pull you into the green vans, you tell them the birth certificates are under the feet of Jesus, just tell them...

- Petra, *Under the Feet of Jesus*

Latina/o cultural productions, as this dissertation has continually asserted, provide a site that not only registers but rearticulates dehumanizing language and rhetoric from the public domain. In the 1990s this language and rhetoric (particularly in California and the Southwest) was indicative of a surge in nativism which marked the most contemporary “Hispanophobic” moment that I will be addressing. This decade ushered in a new “borderless” logic that was primarily espoused by the rhetoric that promoted the North American Free Trade Agreement. The alleged “invisibility” of the U.S.-Mexico border as circumscribed by NAFTA, as I will illustrate, simultaneously criminalized and heightened the visibility of Mexican im/migrant bodies. NAFTA essentially approved of the exchange of business and capital between Canada, the U.S. and Mexico but

rejected the reciprocal exchange of bodies. When Proposition 187 was enacted in California in 1994, during the height of the conceptualizations of a new, “borderless” hemisphere, ironically, though not surprisingly, it also criminalized the bodies of Latina/o immigrants migrating across the much celebrated “invisible” border.

Like most juridical language, the rhetoric of NAFTA and Proposition 187 likewise suggested a sense of “race neutrality” that elided a different reality in practice. In the case of NAFTA it gestured toward a democratically progressive, borderless hemisphere. However, this surface appearance belied the disruptive measures it would eventually place upon Mexico. What was hailed as (among other things) the solution to “illegal immigration” in fact only further aggravated the influx of undocumented immigrants by producing a whole new segment of economically displaced immigrants. In the case of Proposition 187, it claimed to isolate only “illegal” immigrants (whether Chinese, Latin American, European etc.) but the lived, everyday reality was the explicit racialization and persecution of Mexican immigrants. The Latina/o cultural workers that I critically engage in this chapter reveal not only the complexity of the on-going debate on immigration from south of the border, but also expose the falsity of “race neutral” juridical language. Their work demonstrates that such legal rhetoric and discourse was complicit in the racialization and dehumanization of Mexican im/migrant, and by extension, all Latina/o bodies.

The quote I begin with is emblematic of one of the prominent tropes that I wish to explore critically in this chapter. Namely, the process of *rehumanization*

through which Latina/o cultural workers “put flesh” on the maligned ethnic Mexican im/migrant body that is discursively dehumanized in legal and public discourse. In this chapter, I focus on the works from Helena Maria Viramontes, Ester Hernandez and Daniel Chacon in order to analyze the rhetoric of dominance prevalent in the mid 1990s. In her novel *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Viramontes takes on the issue of criminality and the tendency in hegemonic discourses to conflate all Latina/o subjects, regardless of legal status. Her novel highlights issues of in/visibility and the Mexican im/migrant body as she illustrates the repercussions of the hypervisibility of Mexicans as criminal subjects. In the process, she makes visible other things that are normally invisible, such as the laboring bodies of im/migrant workers. In this manner, her novel brings back a sense of humanity that is sorely lacking in legal discussions of guest workers and undocumented immigrants, not to mention the thousands of legal, migrant workers in agricultural fields. Alongside Viramontes’s novel, I will be including a brief analysis of a specific art piece titled “Sun Mad” by the Chicana artist Ester Hernandez because of the uncanny parallel between Viramontes’ text and her piece. “Sun Mad” echoes visually some of the same issues that the novel addresses via literature. I end with a short story by Chicano author Daniel Chacon titled “Godoy Lives,” in which the main character, an undocumented Mexican, cleverly challenges all constructions of citizenship, notions of im/migration and the limited conceptualizations of the “American” imagined community.

Latina/o im/migrant bodies are alternately rendered invisible in times of need and hypervisible in public discourse as evidenced during deportation/repatriation campaigns in the 1930s and 1950s. The shifting U.S.-Mexico border has, likewise, influenced the discursive construction of Latina/o immigrant subjects. Consistently competing capitalist and nativist discourses orchestrate such in/visibility of the Mexican im/migrant body. During the 1980s and 1990s cultural productions by Latina/os and non-Latina/os alike responded to public anxieties regarding a criminalized, pathologized Mexican im/migrant subject.

Their work responds to, what Leticia Garza-Falcón has defined as a “rhetoric of dominance.” As she explains in her critique of historian Walter Prescott Webb, “Webb’s brand of history serves an excellent example of how scholarship considered academically sound during a particular epoch can be revealed as a justification for racism and to anesthetize a national consciousness.”¹³⁰ Her main objection to Webb and scholars like him, is centered on the ways in which their legitimized scholarship contributes to mythmaking of the American West. In the same way that Garza-Falcón describes a dominant history and its accompanying rhetoric, NAFTA and 187 also constitute part of a larger narrative of a historical legal landscape that directly affects all Latina/os living in the United States. Together, they evoke mythical notions of “borderless” space and juridical neutrality that belie the racialization of Latina/os as a whole. The Latina/o cultural workers I will be

¹³⁰ Leticia Garza-Falcon, *Gente Decente: A Borderlands Response to the Rhetoric of Dominance*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 1.

examining provide alternative re/visions of hegemonic histories that respond to the existing rhetoric of dominance in the 1990s. Their works are cultural utterances, a “talking back” if you will, to hegemonic narratives.

The “Dirty” Politics of NAFTA and Proposition 187

While in the early twentieth century racial discourses on Mexican immigrant subjects focused on “dirt” and “disease” the rhetoric espoused by Proposition 187 and NAFTA in the 1990s suggested an inherent criminality for all Latina/o bodies. This is not to say that notions of criminality were never present with regard to Latina/o immigrants before. Clearly the deportation drives of the 1930s were guided by racist claims about the supposed foreignness and criminality of Mexicans. However, by the 1990s anti-immigration proponents were no longer relying on arguments based on blatantly racist, (and by then, thoroughly debunked) scientific discourses like eugenics. The 1990s anti-immigration discourse was translated into much more politically correct form, focusing on practical issues of fiscal “common sense” and the nation/state’s inability to absorb the supposed flood of immigrants coming from south of the border both financially and culturally.

In an era marked by the rise of neoliberal ideologies and the economic forces of globalization, the North American Free Trade Agreement was a period marked by “agendas for economic deregulations, the retreat of the state, the dismantling of the public sphere and the ascendancy of the private interest.”¹³¹

¹³¹ Richard Robeson, Introduction, *The NEO-Liberal Revolution: Forging the Market State*, editor Richard Robison, (New York: Palgrave, 2006), xii.

The idea was that such orchestrations would eventually bring about a more “democratic” allocation of resources globally. After long, peaceful negotiations between Canada, the U.S. and Mexico, on Jan 1st 1994 NAFTA was enacted and eliminating trade tariffs between the three countries. The agreement had formerly begun in 1991 with then heads of state: American President George H.W. Bush, Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gotari and Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. Two years later, despite initial signs of potential defeat, President Bill Clinton successfully lobbied NAFTA and it passed with a comfortable margin in 1993. NAFTA was widely promoted in the U.S. as a treaty that would “meaningfully” raise the standard of living in all three countries. However, it was Mexico that would incur the most changes due to their prior, relatively closed economic system. NAFTA immediately eliminated 60% of the tariffs between Mexico and the U.S. with the remaining tariffs phasing out within the first 8 years.¹³² The idea was to increase foreign direct investment (FDI) within Mexico and thus reduce Mexico’s debt, create employment in manufacturing and spur economic growth.

As an added selling point to U.S. citizens, it was claimed that such prosperity in Mexico countries would only help limit illegal immigration. In the Southwest, particularly in California, the economic dependency on the cheap labor provided by undocumented immigration is paramount. In actual fact, NAFTA exacerbated immigration from Mexico to the U.S. as Mexico “became extremely dependent on not only imports but also on external sources of capital,

¹³² John Cavanaugh, Sarah Anderson, Jaime Serra, J.Enrique Espinosa, “Debate: Happily Ever NAFTA?,” *Foreign Policy*, No 132 (Sep-Oct 2002), 62.

making it highly vulnerable to changes in the global economy.”¹³³ By 2002, nearly a decade after the agreement was ratified, real wages in Mexico remained lower than the year NAFTA began.¹³⁴ Josefina Saldaña-Portillo cites what she calls “fictions of development” with regard to the expectations of NAFTA in Mexico. As Saldaña-Portillo has noted, “NAFTA was promulgated under the operative fiction that territorial borders could be porous to goods and capital but closed to those laborers whose impoverishment is often the result of NAFTA-style development.”¹³⁵ The “success” of NAFTA in Mexico continues to be debated amongst economists, however, as Saldaña-Portillo notes, there are several realities that remain unquestionable:

Mexican peasants who traditionally farmed basic grains simply cannot compete against the cheaper imports in foodstuffs that have flooded the national market. The passing out of price supports on basic grains such as bean, corn and rice, was legally required by NAFTA. In addition, the United States insisted on the removal of constitutional protections against the selling and renting of communal-land holdings. These changes have combined to displace a significant number of the agricultural population.¹³⁶

The economic theory behind NAFTA, as promoted in the mainstream media, was a far cry from the way in which it was practiced and from the every day lived reality of it for the people of Mexico. Thus, a different story can be seen evolving from the realities of NAFTA in Mexico and it speaks to displacement and diaspora of Mexican nationals.¹³⁷ Indeed, NAFTAs produced the opposite of

¹³³ Lyuba Zarsky & Kevin P. Gallagher, “NAFTA, Foreign Direct Investment, and Sustainable Industrial Development in Mexico,” Americas Program (Silver City, NM: Interhemispheric Resource Center, January 28, 2004) <http://www.americaspolicy.org/briefs/2004/0401mexind.html> [accessed May 2006].

¹³⁴ Cavanaugh and Anderson, “Happily Ever NAFTA?,” 62.

¹³⁵ Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, “In the Shadow of NAFTA: *Y tu mamá también* Revisits the National Allegory of Mexican Sovereignty,” *American Quarterly*, Vol 57, No 3 (Sep 2005) 757.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, 756.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, 757.

everything its supporters claimed with regards to strengthening the Mexican economy and immigration. What has resulted is a clear profit gain for the United States in general, but the same cannot be said for Mexico.

Nineteen-ninety-four also marked the year that the State of California witnessed one of its most heated anti-immigration debates in recent history. Despite the celebratory discourse about “free trade” in North America, and the claims of a new “borderless” hemisphere that embraced a future “without borders or walls,” this same moment marked the relentless persecution of “illegal” border crossers. The highly polemical Proposition 187, crafted by a group of “concerned citizens” using the acronym of “S.O.S” (Save Our State), was proposed and passed overwhelmingly by the California electorate. One of the main draft writers, Barbara Coe, claimed to have been outraged by a visit to the social services office in which she saw “illegal aliens” speaking other languages who qualified for services that her (Anglo) friend did not. In particular, Coe impressed upon the public the inherent criminality of “illegal aliens”:

You get illegal alien children, Third World children, out of our schools and you will reduce the violence. That is a fact...You're not dealing with a lot of shiny face, little kiddies...You're dealing with Third World cultures who come in, they shoot, they beat, they stab and they spread their drugs around in our school system. And we're paying them to do it.¹³⁸

This connection between criminality and “illegal aliens,” as previously mentioned, became the dominant trope in the anti-immigration debates of the 1990s,

¹³⁸ Kevin Johnson, “Immigration Politics, Popular Democracy and California’s Proposition 187” ed Richard Delgado & Jean Stefancic, *Latino Condition: A Critical Reader*, (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 114.

distinguishing them from earlier debates around immigration from the 1930s and 1950s.

Though Proposition 187 used race-neutral language when referring to the subjects it wished to bar from the U.S., it effectively targeted Mexican-Latina/o immigrant almost exclusively. Often referred to in popular discourse as the “anti-illegal alien initiative,” Proposition 187 purported to isolate any and all “illegal immigrants.” However, the proximity of the Mexico border left little to the imagination as to which ethnic group would most likely be targeted. In other words, despite the fact that Proposition 187 was a law that in theory was applicable to *all* undocumented immigrants. However, its everyday application rendered all Latina/o bodies suspect. As immigration studies scholar Juan Perea asserts on this issue:

[T]he public identification of “illegal aliens” with a person of Mexican ancestry is so strong that many Mexican Americans and other Latino citizens are presumed foreign and illegal. When citizens and aliens look alike, then all are presumed to be alien and foreign and undermining of the national character. This is an old theme in American politics.¹³⁹

Predictably, anti-immigration sentiments soared in California despite the fact that Proposition 187 was immediately challenged, taken to court and shortly thereafter, deemed unconstitutional. Unfortunately, by then the damage had already been done. Proposition 187 had validated and at least temporarily sanctioned xenophobic attitudes against Latina/o im/migrants. On multiple planes, ideologically, conceptually and metaphorically this legislation was

¹³⁹ Juan Perea, *Immigrants Out!: The New Nativism and the Anti-Immigrant Impulse in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 2.

asserting the denial of human rights to Latina/o immigrants through the justification of their criminality as law breakers upon entering the country illegally.

As the convenient and ideal scapegoats of a down turning economy, Latina/o undocumented immigrants became the political pawns of California's gubernatorial race during at this time. Then gubernatorial candidate Pete Wilson effectively fueled nativist anxieties in his favor, securing the race against Kathleen Brown. Widely promoted by Wilson, Proposition 187 intended to deny education and health care to undocumented persons along with other social services that he claimed were creating a dramatic financial drain on the state. Often working from a premise of "fiscal common sense," many proponents of Proposition 187 tried to avoid any overt racializing language, claiming that state revenues were being drained by "illegal aliens" who were overburdening public services like education and health care. Indeed, the central purpose of Proposition 187 was to rid California social services of "outlaw" clients, non-citizens who strained already limited resources. Consequently, the Proposition required teachers and health care professionals to monitor the individuals under their care. This proposal was in effect requiring that school teachers and health officials become surrogate INS agents. As discussed in Chapter 1, Peter Brimelow's text *Alien Nation* was emblematic of this rhetoric of "common sense" rhetoric that made much more palatable ideas that were blatantly racist and attacked the basic human rights of people living in the U.S. Furthermore, it focused on a rhetoric that asserted each undocumented body as always already criminal because the initial act of crossing illegally made them such.

“Illegal Citizens”: Criminality in Helena Maria Viramontes’ *Under the Feet of Jesus*

In her work *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, Mae Ngai painstakingly documents the U.S. government’s creation of the category “illegal alien” via legislation and juridical language. More significantly, Ngai’s cultural and political analysis specifically highlights the repercussions this has on two particular ethnic groups that live within the United States: Asian/American and Mexican/Americans. Ngai has coined the term “alien citizen” to speak to the status of certain non-White citizens that are not incorporated into the imagined community of the U.S. As she elaborates upon this term:

...illegal immigrants are also members of ethno-racial communities; they often inhabit the same social spaces as their co-ethnics and, in many cases are members of ‘mixed status’ families... Indeed, the association of these minority groups as unassimilable foreigners has led to the creation of ‘alien citizens’—persons who are American citizens by virtue of their birth in the United states but who are presumed to be foreign by the mainstream American culture and, at times, by the state.¹⁴⁰

This term of “alien citizens” that Ngai has identified has also been identified by Latina/o culture workers in the 1990s and is evident in their work, albeit presented in different ways.

I want to begin with a close examination of the chapter epigraph, which is a passage from Helena Maria Viramontes’ novel *Under the Feet of Jesus*, because it poignantly describes the discursive construction and interpellation of

¹⁴⁰ Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 2.

Mexican im/migrants as criminals. We have seen the responses to the conflation of all ethnic Mexicans, regardless of citizenship, in works by Jovita Gonzalez in the 1930s and sixty years later, this criticism by Latina/o culture workers, continues. With an ever increasingly diverse U.S. Latina/o population, what is discursively constructed about Mexican immigrants, positively or negatively, is almost always applied to all Latina/os, regardless of ethnic background or legal status. Published in 1995 and set in California, *Under the Feet of Jesus* is the story of a family of migrant workers. It is also a coming of age story of 13 year old Estrella, who travels with her mother (Petra) and four other siblings as they migrate through a traditional circuit that follows crops according to season.

The actual time frame of the story line is not immediately transparent and rather somewhat difficult to assess. Viramontes plants a few ambiguous clues in the narrative in the form of the age difference (37 years) between Petra (who is 35) and Perfecto (her partner, who is 72) and the birth date of 1917 for Perfecto which is described as coming to him in a dream, and thus one can deduce that the novel takes place in 1990. One cannot help but interpret the ambiguity of the time frame in Viramontes's novel as an intentional effort to make a point about the static, abject working conditions of migrant workers in the U.S. For readers familiar with other canonical works in Latina/o literature that deal with the plight of migrant workers such as Tomas Rivera's *Y no se lo trago la tierra/And the Earth did not Devour Him*, Viramontes's text provides a wonderful and much needed female-centered counternarrative describing the condition of migrant workers in the United States. And although it describes the lived reality of migrant workers

in the 1990s, Viramontes's novel is shockingly similar to Rivera's which is set in the 1940s and 1950s.

The novel's title establishes a serious tone with the religious imagery that is difficult to ignore, one that speaks directly to the vulnerability of these subjects. As noted earlier, the birth certificates of the children are located under the ceramic figurine of Jesus (hence the title) that Petra travels with and sets up as a tiny altar in all of their relocations. The birth certificates become incredibly important within the narrative as they represent both proof of the family's citizenship and their uselessness of such documentation in that that Petra and her children are not automatically guaranteed their rights and privileges as citizens because they are not presumed to be so. Implicitly and explicitly, this image invokes another narrative that of one of the most familiar and iconic criminalized figures: Jesus Christ. I don't mean to oversimplify or reduce the association between the figure of Christ with the characters within the novel, however, I do think that the reference functions to establish and underscore their persecution and criminalization.

Indeed Petra and her family are the "wretched of the earth," invisible, hard-working, poor, they (as the novel eventually demonstrates in its heart-wrenching denouement) are the underprivileged hands behind our overprivileged lifestyle. Cycling from field to field, they live fractured lives linked to the needs of agribusiness and, like Don Chipote, the urgencies of survival. This disorientation is highlighted when Estrella, Petra's daughter, is walking home from working in the fields:

She startled when the sheets of high powered lights beamed on the playing field like headlights of cars, blinding her...The border patrol, she thought, and she tried to remember which side of the fence she was on and which side of the wire mesh she was safe in. The floodlights aimed at the phantoms in the field. Or were the lights directed at her? Could the spectators see her from where she stood? Where was home?¹⁴¹ (59-60)

Estrella's confusion about which side of the border she is on, and more importantly, on which side she is supposed to be not only "safe" but at "home" highlights her marginalization within the imagined community of the nation. This is particularly significant, when readers learn that Estrella is in fact, a citizen—her birth certificate proving so, is located under the ceramic figurine of Jesus, under which Petra has placed all the birth certificates of her five children. The ways in which Estrella has internalized a criminalized subjectivity is painfully clear in the description of her fear and panic. The floodlights of the baseball field that spotlight and startle Estrella are mirrored in Viramontes' writing as she "spotlights" the issue of criminalization for the reader. She spotlights the standing assumptions of public discourse of Latina/os as criminal and "illegal." Estrella's immediate reaction of fear to the lights is symptomatic of the way in which she, at 13 years of age, has already internalized criminalizing discourses about Latina/o im/migrants.¹⁴²

Viramontes's prose artfully demonstrates an interesting play with words within her narrative. Descriptions of the baseball field and Estrella's work in the fields collide and mesh in her description. As Estrella reaches the baseball

¹⁴¹ Helena Maria Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus*, (New York: Dutton, 1995) 59-60.

¹⁴² Not to be overlooked is the publication date of 1995 for the novel. In the wake of public rhetoric that circulated a parasitic "illegal alien" that was pathologically invading the U.S. to drain state revenues, the descriptive images that Viramontes provides for her readers is in stark contrast to such dehumanizing descriptions.

diamond at dusk, she witnesses what seems like a serene, pleasant evening at a little league game, taking note of the “bleached white uniforms,” and the parents and spectators with their ice chests. The scene oscillates between the leisure of the game and Estrella’s confusion and fear:

A player ran the bases for the point. A score. Destination: home plate. Who would catch the peach, who was hungry enough to run the field in all that light? The perfect target. The lushest peach. The element of surprise. A stunned deer waiting for the bullet.¹⁴³

The staccato and performative nature of Viramontes’ writing style in this passage embodies the confusion and conflation of different spaces of the respective “fields” she is describing. The baseball field representing a pleasant, leisurely game is juxtaposed next to the “field” of work that Estrella is coming from. These two fields have very different contexts but are in some ways, as Viramontes tries to demonstrate, inextricably linked. The leisure of one group depends on the labor of another. A peach replaces the baseball and hunger becomes the motivating factor to run. The scenes of these two “fields” are tightly woven together so that it is unclear where one begins and the other ends in a very literal sense, but also metaphorically. In fact, descriptions of migrant workers laboring in the field are prominent throughout the novel, making strikingly visible what is frequently rendered invisible in public discourse: immigrant labor. Viramontes takes the spaces (that of fields of labor and fields of leisure) that have been removed from each other and makes transparent how interlinked they really are, indeed how one depends on the other.

¹⁴³ Viramontes, *Under the Feet of Jesus*, 60.

In the midst of all these rushing thoughts Viramontes captures the vulnerability of Estrella and other im/migrants like her noting that Estrella felt like “[a] stunned deer waiting for the bullet.” The novel leaves no question to her sense of feeling hunted like an animal. Upon arriving home, panic stricken and looking for a weapon for protection, Estrella finds a pry bar, and tells her mother that “someone’s trying to get [her].” Without further questioning, Petra understands immediately, responding “..it’s La Migra. Everybody’s feeling it...” The intuition that Petra demonstrates in this particular scene is just as revealing as Estrella’s fearful panic. Just seeing her daughter racing home, stumbling on the front steps as she frantically searches for a weapon, triggers an immediate understanding of the shared sense of persecution. “Don’t let them make you feel you did a crime,” Petra tells her daughter, “for picking the vegetables they’ll be eating for dinner.” Petra’s stern admonishment to her daughter is in actuality a loving gesture that warns her about internalizing a sense of criminality. Her statement at once refuses the stigma of shame that society would impose upon them and instead highlights their labor. It provides a critical inversion of popular notions about Latina/o im/migrants in that the criminality made *hypervisible* in the media is *backgrounded* to their labor which often remains invisible is *foregrounded* instead.

This laboring body is one that is honored, humanized and paid homage to in the novel. Sketches of people as they stream out from the fields are prominent in the novel. Indeed, much of the novel takes place out in the fields as Estrella works alongside her mother and younger siblings. Viramontes provides poignant

descriptions of the bodies of these workers at the end of the day as a “patch quilt of people charred by the sun.” She describes what she sees as “brittle women with bandanas over their noses,” and young teens, children and old men so old they are thought to be dead when they slept. The image of the tired and exhausted procession of workers is powerful and focused on their moving bodies out from the fields. Women and men, children and the elderly alike work side by side; all expected to do the same exhausting work. Estrella notes one body in particular, that of a pregnant woman: “The mother showed pregnant and wore large man’s pants with the zipper down and a shirt to cover her drumtight belly. Even then, the mother seemed old to Estrella. Yet she hauled pounds and pounds of cotton by the pull of her back, plucking with two swift hands...” Estrella’s awareness of the working bodies around her continues poignantly onto her own body. One particular scene stands out for its detailed, corporeal references that emphasize the experiential sensations of the laboring body. Viramontes describes Estrella’s work in minute detail as she works harvesting grapes:

Carrying the full basket to the paper was not like the picture on the red raisin boxes Estrella saw in the markets, not like the woman wearing a fluffy bonnet, holding out the grapes with her smiling, ruby lips, the sun a flat orange behind her. The sun was white and it made Estrella’s eyes sting like an onion, and the baskets of grapes resisted her muscles, pulling their magnetic weight back to the earth. The woman with the red bonnet did not know this. Her knees did not sink into the hot while soil, and she did not know how to pour the baskets of grapes inside the frame gently and spread the bunches evenly on top of the newsprint paper. She did not remove the frame straighten her creaking knees, the bend of her back, set down another sheet of newsprint paper, reset the frame, then return to the pisca again with the empty basket, row after row, sun after sun. The woman’s bonnet would be as useless as Estrella’s own straw

hat under a white sun so mighty, it toasted the green grapes to black raisins.¹⁴⁴

Though lengthy, I wanted to include this passage in its entirety because the portrait Viramontes paints so lovingly to do justice to the erased labor of Latina/o im/migrant workers. In this manner, the humanity that was erased in the heated and volatile debates around “illegal labor” in the 1990s is salvaged and rewritten by Viramontes.

The scene’s engagement with the Sun Maid logo of the raisin box is notable in this passage. Viramontes deploys the image of a raisin box--an instantly recognizable image to most readers and one that seems both innocent and benign—to unveil the systemic injustices behind such “innocent” marketing. As with her juxtaposition of the twin fields so central to California rural culture (the baseball field and the agricultural field) in this passage Viramontes reveals the ways in which advertising images of the “good life” (like the Sun Maid logo) actually erase the harsh lives of the people who make the California lifestyle possible. Viramontes makes the hidden labor of these people visible through the descriptive, minute detail of Estrella’s working body. Moreover, the passage not only makes her body and labor visible but it also provides a loving element of humanity that is otherwise missing in dominant discourse about im/migrant labor.

The physical exhaustion and pain required for such labor is carefully traced in her passage, with the references to Estrella’s physical body: the bend of her back, her creaking knees, and weight of the baskets that her muscles resist. The heat of the sun and the evocation of the repetitiveness of this

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 49-50.

strenuous physical labor comes to life in the narration. Viramontes visualizes the connection to a larger capitalist system that benefits from im/migrant labor, a simple fact that does not easily translate into public discourse, as demonstrated in the reference to the flat, two dimensional portrait of the Sun Maid raisin logo. It is Viramontes' narrative that unveils such connections. Indeed, she puts flesh back onto these laboring bodies as it were. Throughout the novel, Estrella's awareness of her body is constant and heightened for us as readers. "Don't cry," she tells herself as she works and finds it difficult to think beyond her aching body. "She stepped forward," Viramontes writes, "her body never knowing how tired it was until she moved once again." Thus, this scene becomes a much more sinister inversion of the conventional, happy Sun Maid logo; one that shows a darker story and a different reality.

Interestingly, the deceiving innocence of the Sun Maid logo has also been used in a silkscreen by Chicana artist Ester Hernandez, though her work predates the novel by several years.

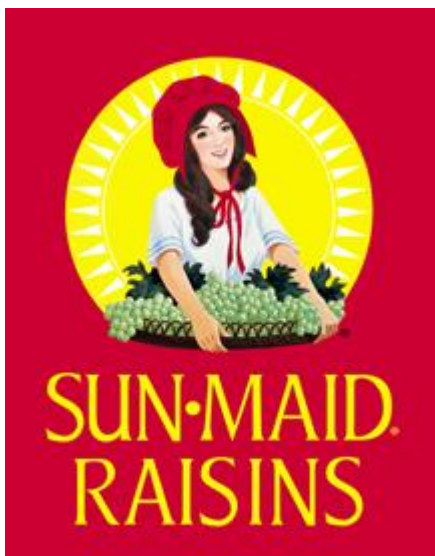


Fig. 4, Sun Maid logo.

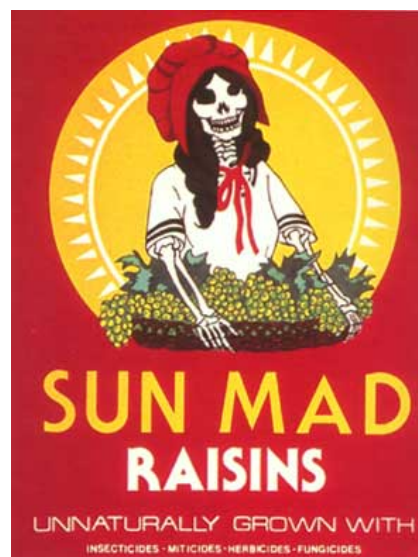


Fig 5, *Sun Mad*, Ester Hernandez, 1982.

It is reasonable to assume that this piece was something that Viramontes was aware of and possibly influenced by given the earlier production date. The art piece does similar work in that Hernandez makes transparent the process of labor that advertising erases. In Hernandez's piece, the process of production and the consumption of food are exposed by highlighting the alternative reality of the women and men who labor in our pesticide-drenched fields, and whose labor, often remains unacknowledged and hidden. The message is clear: the fields can be deadly for the segment of the population that participates in this work. It makes transparent the utter disregard and erasure of their bodies and is unwilling to erase this reality in the visual representation of it. Furthermore, the clever twist in words, by turning the word *maid* into *mad*, gestures toward a sense of action, as opposed to passivity.

In previous chapters I have discussed the notion of Latina/o culture workers as "putting flesh" on the dehumanized body of the im/migrant. Despite the macabre image of a skeleton, in this case, I would still argue that Hernandez's work is indeed "putting on flesh" upon the dehumanized im/migrant body. In some ways, it acts as a literal manifestation of what market forces and dominant discourses are already doing but she deploys it to speak truth to power and in doing so, the image of death reaffirms the value of the lives of these migrant workers. Analyzed alongside Viramontes's text, Hernandez artwork illustrates how this concern over the bodies, rights and health of im/migrant workers remains a virtually unchanged danger in the present.

Petra crystallizes the blatant racialization she experiences when she rhetorically asks: “Do we carry proof around like belly buttons?” This question that Petra asks is particularly poignant because it at once unveils the way in which the body itself is made to bear the burden of proof for citizenship and that citizenship, even when possessed, means little for certain ethnic groups in American society. For as Petra’s statement makes unequivocally clear, citizenship *cannot* be read on the body, despite the common tendency by mainstream society to do so.

The novel becomes a loving, written testament to the lives of im/migrant workers in America’s Southwest. The novel itself echoes the concerns of Alejo, another one of Viramontes’ characters, who yearns to be remembered. His love for the study of geology and the permanency of stones resonates with Viramontes’ act of writing.

He loved stones and the history of stones because he believed himself to be a solid mass of boulder thrust out of the earth and not some particle lost in infinite and cosmic space. With a simple touch of the hand and a hungry wonder of his connection to it all, he not only became a part of the earth’s history, but would exist as the boulders did, for eternity.¹⁴⁵

Likewise, the bodies that are erased, forgotten and criminalized are breathed into life through painful, but life affirming descriptions of their labor. Alejo yearns for not just being seen (made visible) but also yearns to be remembered. In likening himself to a “solid mass of boulder” his desire to be recognized as a person being worthy of being noted and recorded is evident in this passage. As Viramontes’ characters prove, “legitimate” legality and citizenship status means little to dominating ideological constructions. Instead, as demonstrated in various

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 52.

passages within the novel, the characters are made to feel as if they are criminals. They must continuously struggle against the saying “a Mexican, is a Mexican,” as noted earlier in chapter 2 that is understood as conflating all Mexicans as “foreign” and “illegal.”

“Godoy Lives”: Redefining “alien citizenship.”

Like Helena Maria Viramontes, Daniel Chacon thematizes the destabilizing and continual shifting of the Mexican/American subject as an object of discourse. Chacon is a relatively new, up and coming Chicano author in the literary scene. Born and raised in Fresno, California, Chacon graduated from Fresno State, Oregon State University and is currently a professor at El Paso University where he teaches creative writing. His writing debut, a collection of short stories titled *Chicano Chicanery*, revolve around the “wily” survival mechanisms of his Latina/o characters. I would like to focus on one of his short stories in particular, “Godoy Lives,” which is about a Mexican national who impersonates an American citizen in order to cross into the United States. The main character, Juan, is given the opportunity to cross into the United States using the green card of a certain Miguel Valencia Godoy, a deceased American legal permanent resident who happened to look like him:

The age of the man was the same as Juan’s, 24, and the picture on the green card strikingly similar, sunken cheeks, small forehead, tiny, deep-set eyes that on Juan looked as if everything scared him, but that on the dead guy looked focused, confident. “You could use this to come work here,” his cousin wrote.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ Daniel Chacon, “Godoy Lives,” *Chicano Chicanery: Short Stories*, (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 2000), 5.

Nervous about crossing under such pretenses, but pressured and motivated by his dire economic situation which includes two hungry children and a wife, Juan struggles to memorize the biographical facts of the deceased Miguel. Feeling he has no choice, he embarks upon his journey to *el norte*, under false pretenses.

The story unfolds after Juan makes it to the border and upon reaching the front of the line to cross, the Chicano border agent questioning him eyes him suspiciously after looking at his identification card. Much to Juan's relief, and dismay, the border agent suddenly grins broadly and exclaims "Primo!" Because the agent has not seen his cousin since childhood, he is not at all put off by Juan/Manuel's obvious lack of recognition. In an unexpected twist of irony and humor, Juan, the "illegal alien" is warmly welcomed into the United States, and as "family." Thus, from the outset, the story clearly sets out to challenge the constructions of citizenship, national identity and "Americanness."

Throughout the rest of the story Chacon plays with the ideas of "family" and "strangers" in that time and time again Juan is assured in one way or another that belongs there. Juan virtually steps into a life that is ready and waiting for him and he finds himself beginning to think of himself as Manuel. Once at his cousin Pancho's home, he sees a picture of them as children. Juan inspects the picture:

It was Pancho and the dead man as kids. Juan looked closely. The similarities between the child and how he remembered looking as a child were so great that it spooked him as if he had had two lives that went on simultaneously. He almost remembered that day playing cowboys.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 10.

This initiates a series of shifts that occur within Juan as he begins to think of himself as Manuel which is significant since Manuel represents not only a much more confident person, but it also begins to blur the identities of a “legal” subject with an “illegal” one. And while we have already seen this type of conflation occur within hegemonic discourses, the way in which this operates within the context of this story by a Chicano author, warrants critical analysis.

When Juan/Manuel tells Pancho that he plans to head to the Fresno area where he has some connections for work in the fields, Pancho’s immediate response is to laugh and exclaims “[t]hat’s wetback work.” Instead, Pancho secures another, better paying job at a luxurious country club where he would earn considerably more than in picking produce in the agricultural fields. And slowly, we begin see Juan/Manuel begin to think of wishing and wanting more for himself. Whereas at the beginning of his odyssey he is very timid and wishes to remain invisible because of his “illegal” impersonation of as a legal permanent resident, he eventually feels more like a human being with rights. He begins to take on the persona of confident and single Manuel, and begins to date Pancho’s sister-in-law. At one point Juan thinks of Pancho and his wife, “...these two seemed so familiar, so much like family. It occurred to him that he could keep this up for a long time, maybe forever. Maybe they would never know. Juan, quite frankly, was having a good time.¹⁴⁸” Within this context, the blurring of Juan and Miguel underscore the most basic and universal desire for *both* subjects to enjoy certain inalienable rights. He begins to feel the right to desire for a better life.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 15.

The story climaxes at the end, when it appears that Juan's impersonation might be revealed. Pancho decides to "surprise" Miguel by arranging to bring Miguel's estranged mother to visit. "The world fell on him," Juan thinks, "It was over. A mother would always know who her son was." Juan goes back to his room and begins to pack his duffel bag to flee, however, in another twist of irony and humor, it turns out that Miguel's mother has gone senile. There is no way to expect that she would recognize him at all. Juan's reaction is euphoric:

Juan paced back and forth with a burst of energy. When he heard the truck pull up onto the gravel, he said to himself, "Here we go." He looked at himself in the mirror. He saw staring at him Miguel Valencia Godoy. Clean-shaven, handsome, lean bodied, confident. But then he glimpsed something that bothered him, a dull gleam in his eyes, something that didn't belong to him. Insecurity. It was Juan. He shook it off and went out into the living room to see his mother.¹⁴⁹

Again, the blurring of "legal" and "illegal" subjects within the context of this short story provide a much more complex if not resistant response to the standard, hegemonic conflation of im/migrant subjects. Juan is technically still Juan, the undocumented immigrant. However, the way in which he perceives himself provokes dramatic changes within him. Furthermore, the circumstances sketched within the construct of this short story also challenge the rigid and inflexible conceptualizations the United States government has regarding "citizens" and "aliens." Juan is considered "family" to Pancho and his wife. Clearly, proper legal papers have nothing to do with the person that Juan is, thus reaffirming the basic rights of human beings, regardless of their legal standing.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 19.

Conclusion

As *Under the Feet of Jesus*, *Sun Mad* and “Godoy Lives” demonstrate, though the Mexican im/migrant body has provided a contested, metaphoric landscape that has been discursively dehumanized by hegemonic state discourses, works of creative imagination can engage these pejorative constructions and propose alternative, creative venues within which to reinscribe the denigrated Mexican im/migrant body. These Chicana/o culture workers have re-written, re-imagined and re-envisioned the same body that has been dehumanized through anti-immigrant rhetoric and juridical discourse as criminal and instead offered much more human portraits. Their works provide narratives that fill in the historical gaps, erasures and misconceptions that are scripted in what Leticia Garza-Falcón has called the “rhetoric of dominance.” These works stand as agentic responses that evidence a history of counter-discourse. While taking drastically different approaches within their work, read together, Viramontes, Hernandez and Chacon, provide a rhetorical force that resists the destructively dehumanizing constructions and existing discourses of laboring im/migrant bodies. I read these culture workers, and others like them, as actively engaged in projects of *rehumanization* as they resurrect the maligned Mexican im/migrant body in creative and artistic venues.

CHAPTER 5

“Borderless” Space Revisited: Satire on the ‘Net’

It seems incredible when I am rebuked for promoting immigrants’ rights. Some folks have asked me if I wouldn’t be happier in my “home country.” I usually reply, “Dear moron, the U.S. is my home country and yes, I wish I could be happier here.”

-Lalo Alcaraz, editorial cartoonist, *Migra Mouse*

Sometimes life is so absurd—particularly lately—that the best thing you can do in response is to laugh. It’s a survival mechanism.

-Alex Rivera, digital media artist, *Santa Fe Reporter*

The “borderless” space promulgated by NAFTA, as we have seen, was a porous one for capital and goods, but not for immigrant bodies—including those who were directly displaced economically by the hemispheric agreement. In this final chapter I conclude by addressing a different space, that of the internet which provides the working canvas for two Latino media artists in particular: Lalo Alcaraz and Alex Rivera. Alcaraz and Rivera often deploy satire and humor in their work as a rhetorical strategy to combat the criminalization and racialization

of Latina/o im/migrant bodies. These Latino artists mobilize the “borderless” space of the internet to counter the “neutral” and decidedly humorless legal language that dehumanizes Latina/o bodies. Whether working independently or together, their work reflects a critical engagement with the dominant discourses circulating in the public sphere with regard to Latina/o im/migrant bodies.

Alcaraz and Rivera collaborated together on a short film, but each has independently of each other produced an impressive body of work that hinges upon the intersections of immigration, globalization and human rights. Thus, in this chapter I will analyze both the work they have created individually as well as their collaborative effort titled *Día de la independencia*. Rivera’s short digital film *Why Cybraceros?* is a humorous yet critical response to the United States government’s long history with “guest worker” programs and the exploitation of Mexican immigrant labor. Among Rivera’s most interesting projects is the mock-website he created promoting “RLS”: Remote Labor Systems (a line from this purely satirical-fiction website reads: “Those who may not be our citizens, can be our customers.”), which hailed tele-robotic technology to maximize profit from cheap immigrant labor--without ever allowing them *within* American borders. This fictional website led to a serious inquiry from a reporter of one of the largest Spanish language newspapers in the country, *La Opinión*, and resulted in an article on the front page of their business section.

Alcaraz, likewise, relies on humor to criticize the pejorative representations of Latina/os in the media. His broad body of work is impressive, running the spectrum from film to radio broadcast. However, of particular interest

for the purposes of this chapter is his compilation of editorial cartoons in his book titled *Migra Mouse: Political Cartoons on Immigration* and his participation in the short film *Hispanics for Wilson*, about a group described by Alcaraz as a “fake self-deportationist group of Republican Latinos” who whole heartedly supported (then) gubernatorial candidate Pete Wilson’s anti-immigration platform.

Amazingly, they managed to get air time on *Sevcec*, a Spanish language Telemundo broadcasted show. Each of these works demonstrates his commitment to creating counter-hegemonic responses to nativist discourse. The variety of mediums within which Alcaraz’s works in reflects not only his versatility as an artist, but also speaks to a multi-pronged strategy to reach different audiences through different venues.

In the short film they co-created, *Día de la independencia*, Alcaraz and Rivera make use of the science fiction genre to respond to the “Hispanophobia” of the 1990s. Their satirical use of the science fiction genre with satire results in a powerful critique of dominant anti-immigrant discourses that circulated in the media at the time. Particularly since the decade was marked by several high-profile, mainstream blockbuster hits like of *Independence Day* and *Men in Black*. By their own admission, their short film is a direct response to the “cinematic obsession of alien invasions.” In the end, their work provides an accurate deconstruction of dehumanizing metaphors present in both legal language and popular culture alike.

Like Viramontes’ *Under the Feet of Jesus*, the work of Alcaraz and Rivera addresses the simultaneous erasure and criminalization of Latina/o immigrant

bodies. Despite the fact that these cultural productions use many of the same pejorative stereotypes that circulate in public discourse, they deploy humor in such a way as to make transparent the absurdity of such ideological constructions. These satirical creative projects are examples of what scholar Carl Gutiérrez-Jones calls “engaged humor.” As Gutiérrez-Jones makes clear, Chicano culture has a long standing history of building from the traditions of political humor derived from Mexico.¹ Together, their work constitutes a strong satirical front as a rhetorical response to dehumanizing discourses. The stories their works tell are important denunciations of a racist rhetoric that is hidden in legal discourse, political agendas and in mainstream popular culture. It becomes clear that the absurdity is not so much solely of their creation, but rather already present as they merely expose the absurd “logic” in racist dominant discourse. Thus, their satirical productions provide portraits of alternative versions of history as experienced by subjugated subjects and communities that serve to complicate “legitimized” histories.

“Laugh Now, Cry Later”: The Works of Lalo Alcaraz and Alex Rivera

From a cultural studies point of view, the concept of humor becomes considerably more revealing when examined for its imbrication in dynamics of power and historically situated processes of social mediation.²

¹ Carl Gutiérrez-Jones, “Humor, literacy and trauma in Chicano culture.” *Comparative Literature Studies* 40, no. 2 (January 1, 2003), 113. <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed May, 2006).

² Gutiérrez-Jones, “Humor, Literacy & Trauma,” 120.



Fig. 6, The Same Bracero Program, Alcaraz, 2001 Fig. 7, The Perfect Bracero Program, Alcaraz, 2001.

Lalo Alcaraz, the son of Mexican immigrants, grew up in San Diego, California and currently resides in Los Angeles. As an undergraduate, he attended San Diego State University where he received a B.A. in Art and Environmental Design and later earned a M.A. in Architecture from U.C. Berkeley. He began his career drawing editorial cartoons as an artist for the San Diego State college newspaper, *The Daily Aztec*. During his time at Berkeley he co-founded the magazine *Pocho* with friend Esteban Zul, which was later transferred onto the internet as the e-zine *pocho.com*. Always interested in the performative nature and power of humor, he was also co-founder of the comedy acting troupe the Chicano Secret Service. Most recently, his cartoon strip *L.A. Cucaracha* was syndicated by Universal Press in 2001. Since then, Alcaraz has primarily been busy as an editorial cartoonist. However, his creative interests have spanned a broad spectrum of genres. From film shorts to radio broadcast shows (on Pacifica's KPFK 90.7 FM: *The Pocho Hour of Power*--'Cervesa Soaked Satire!') to collaboration with Latino academics like Ilan Stavans to create a cartoon history of Latina/os in the U.S.

Alcaraz's website, *pocho.com*, tackled every socio-political issue that was affecting Latina/os in the 1990s.³ From jabs at Elian Gonzalez (touted as "America's smartest *mojado*") to hate crimes against migrants (based on real incidents that occurred in San Diego) to addressing the most vocal, conservative political pundits (the likes of Lou Dobbs, Tom Tancredo and Patrick Buchanan), Alcaraz' website fearlessly tackled all issues affecting the Latina/o community. The website was set up as a parody "news source" along the veins of the more recognizable *The Onion*. But *pocho.com* was about much more than promoting cheap laughs. There was almost always exceptional critical engagement with the anti-im/migration discourses and in the process, the exposure of the absurdity in much of the circulating logic. For example, during the frenzied media hype over the 2000 census as the projections estimated that "Hispanics" would be the new "minority majority" Alcaraz posted an "article" titled "This Cesar Chavez Day: Latino Farmworkers are Out of Work." The article goes on to say that now that "whites are a minority," in California, Anglos are taking the agricultural jobs in California. "Upon hearing that Census 2000 figures indicate whites are no longer the state's ethnic majority," the article reads, "hordes of white Californians began streaming to the fields and applying for crop picking jobs."⁴ The article criticizes the irrational fear of "Hispanics" as the new majority but more importantly, it points out how power structures (regardless of any numerical shift in demographics) remain the same. The fact that there is an increase in numbers in the Latina/o population does necessarily correlate into a

³ The website was actively maintained in the mid 1990s, however, it is currently no longer regularly maintained up to date.

⁴ www.pocho.com/news/2001/cesarchavezday/farmworker.html, [accessed Feb 20 2002].

shift in power. The article underscores the reality of the Latina/o population in the United States remains severely disenfranchised community that is under represented politically.



Fig 8, "Why Chicanos Shouldn't Say 'Wetback,'" Alcaraz, 1994.

In another, more serious article, Alcaraz highlights a hate crime against a Mexican migrant worker in San Diego in 2000 that received some media attention. At this time, California had just passed the harsh Proposition 21, a proposition that was designed to increase criminal penalties against "criminal youth." Also known as the "anti-gang" initiative, this proposition would easily funnel youth into the adult criminal system. The article reads: "Prop 21 Backfires: District Attorney arraigns White teenagers in vicious migrant beating attack." The fictional lawyer for the suspects, Mr. Bob Boso (the name a phonetic play on the Spanish word *baboso* meaning "fool" or "simpleton") is quoted as saying: "Let's not get carried away. It would be an injustice to try these mere children as adults. I mean, these kids are white, right? From good homes? Right? Hello?"⁵ At once the article reveals the false "race-neutrality" of

⁵ www.pocho.com/news/2000/teens.vs.migrants/teenbeat071900.html [accessed Oct 3, 2000].

laws and reveals how laws are practiced and applied in the everyday. It addresses the reality of disenfranchised communities whose experiences have taught them that the application of laws is different depending on which ethnic group you belong to. The description of the incident which includes references to the weapons that the teenagers armed themselves with for the attack ends with an asterick that footnotes the line: “This is true.” Should there be any doubt to the legitimacy of the facts, given the satire the story is encased in, the footnote serves as a sobering reality check.

Among Alcaraz’s most provocative works is the media hoax “Hispanics for Wilson.”⁶ Produced during the volatile mid 1990s California gubernatorial campaign, the short mockumentary documents Daniel D. Portado (played by Alcaraz, and again the last name being the phonetic Spanish word *deportado*, meaning “deported”), the head of the fictional Hispanics for Wilson campaign as goes to Sacramento in support of Wilson’s campaign. Amazingly, Alcaraz managed to get invited to Telemundo’s *Sevcec* show (a talk show hosted by Spanish language TV personality Pedro Sevcec) for a live debate on the issue of Proposition 187. The mockumentary cuts over to clips from the *Sevcec* show as Daniel D. Portado asserts his support for gubernatorial candidate Pete Wilson, advocating self deportation. He goes on to blame immigrants for the most innocuous of things, such as the excessive amount of Mexican music on the airwaves and unhealthy Mexican food. “Si son ilegales,” Daniel D. Portado declares when the microphone is handed to him, “son *crimi-grantes!*” (“If they

⁶ In fact, it was the mockumentary *Hispanics for Wilson* and the various Latina/o Film Festival venues that it was shown at that brought Alcaraz and Rivera into contact with each other, later leading to their collaboration on *El día de la independencia*.

are illegal, they are crimi-grants!”) In this manner, Alcaraz takes the exact same rhetoric espoused by the Wilson campaign, and virtually with little additional fabrication, aside from the impersonation, unveil the absurdity of that logic.

Needless to say, Alcaraz’s dedication to im/migrant rights is unwavering, as is evident from the epigraph to this chapter. In fact, so much of his work, particularly his editorial cartoons, is centered on this subject, that in 2004 he published a collection of these works in a compilation titled *Migra Mouse*. The title of the book is a reference to one of his editorial cartoons that implicates the Walt Disney Company with funding conservative republican candidates such as Pete Wilson.

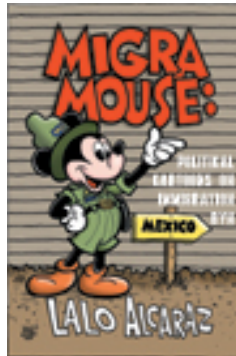


Fig. 9, *Migra Mouse* cover art.

In Alcaraz’ words, the image is meant to disclose Disney’s political associations:

Migra Mouse represents the corporate interests of the Walt Disney Company, which donated money to then—California Governor Pete Wilson’s re-election campaign. Wilson was exploiting the illegal immigration issue on the most divisive way, so I felt it was necessary to point out that wholesome Disney was affiliating itself with Wilson and Proposition 187, a xenophobic state ballot.⁷

Like Viramontes and artist Esther Hernandez, Alcaraz exposes the orchestrations that typically occur “behind the scenes.” In this case, the

⁷ Lalo Alcaraz, *Migra Mouse: Political Cartoons on Immigration*, (New York: RDV/Akashic Books, 2004), 34.

saccharine sweet innocence that is iconic with the Walt Disney Company is exposed for its political, if racist, leanings. Alcaraz' humor cannot be dismissed as mere replication of stereotypes or as a superficial recycling of existing images.

His introduction to *Migra Mouse* is very clear on this:

To me the humane treatment of immigrants, regardless of their immigration status, is nonnegotiable. Immigrants are human beings, and deserve proper treatment in any society. Immigrants contribute to the economic prosperity of the U.S. and fuel its cultural diversity and creativity.⁸

In yet another example of his edgy satire, albeit somewhat non-traditional even for Alcaraz, is the design of his book jacket for *Migra Mouse*. A quick glance at the back of the book reveals nothing out of the ordinary: picture of author, short biography and what one would assume to be favorable reviews and accolades about the book. However, upon closer inspection of what one assumes is celebratory praise, Alcaraz has instead printed hate mail that has been sent to him. The top reads: "What are Lalo's fans saying about his editorial cartoons? Here's a sampling:" Six excerpts follow. As a reader, it is difficult not to be taken aback and disturbed by the racist rantings but taking a moment of reflection, it becomes equally difficult to *not* recognize their utter absurdity. The first letter shocks the reader into attention:

To you and people like you, I say, GET THE F*** OUT OF THIS COUNTRY IF YOU DON'T LIKE IT HERE. GO BACK TO MEXICO, OR AFRICA OR WHEREVER THE F*** ...DON'T LET ME, THE F***** HONKEY HOLD YOU BACK FROM LEAVING.

-J.B, Phoenix, AZ *Soon to be re-taken by Mexico through illegal immigration.*

By showing the reactions he has received for his work, he makes transparent the racism that is an everyday reality for him in a realist fashion through parody. He

⁸ Ibid, 9.

isolates the real tragedy at the heart of comedy. The last sample of “fan mail” is just as sobering:

Dear Worthless Spic,

By publishing the type of cartoons you do, you are doing Whites like myself a great service. You see Consuelo, every time you get liquored up for hours on end on grocery store tequila, then draw some communist ranting and call it a cartoon, you advance my cause. I want the entire country to see how you filthy mestizo animals feel about your superior White Masters. Your cartoons are pathetic, but what can you expect from a filthy illiterate Mexican? Well Jose, I'd thought I'd drop you a line and let you know that the only thing mexicraps are good for are cutting my grass and hanging my drywall. Ha ha ha, I guess you're probably halfway through your 3rd bottle of tequila and a few grams of heroin by now, hell it's already 6:05 pm!!! Have a good night Miguel!
-T.V.

These samplings are a testament to the everyday lived reality for Alcaraz as a Latino editorial cartoonist. For better or for worse, he puts this hate mail for the world to see on the back of his book. In a way, he has the last laugh as he exposes the ignorant reactions to his work. The satire that Alcaraz works with then does not seem as “silly” or uncritical as one might presume. By having these hateful letters published on the back of his book, it brings a gritty reality that only validates the use of satire as a strategic and calculated rhetorical weapon to get at the heart of racist discourse.

* * * *

Alex Rivera is a New York based digital media artist and filmmaker, the son of a Peruvian immigrant father and an Anglo American mother. He received his B.A. from Hampshire College, where his thesis project became a video venture and thus began his interest in film as a medium for creative expression. He credits his bicultural upbringing in influencing much of his work. In fact, his

undergraduate film thesis, *Papapapá*, was inspired by his father his immigrant experience after emigrating from Peru.⁹

For Rivera, the medium of the internet has been a prominent theme in his work from the very beginning. The image on the opening page for his website, while initially a little disconcerting, demonstrates this. The central figure is a caricature of a *campesino* sitting at a computer typing. Underneath the image of the *campesino*, in bold block letters, is the word “NETBACK” and typescripted over this are the words “El Compusino.” According to Rivera, he drew this picture approximately ten years ago in 1996 upon graduating from college. The image came to him at a time when the utopian dreams and the celebratory discourses over the “endless possibilities” of the internet were at their peak. In his words, the image was an attempt to “short circuit that utopian dreaming” by juxtaposing the “iconic image of the *campesino*, a character connected to the earth and the land” in an effort to disrupt the myth of the super highway changing everyone’s lives.¹⁰ Two things became clear to him: not all sectors of society would benefit from such technological advances, and what would it mean if they could? He wanted to juxtapose a figure that, in his mind, was so clearly connected to the earth and the land and “butt it against” the technology that was supposed to change everyone’s lives.¹¹

⁹ This film is a play on the word *papá* (father) and *papa* (potato). His musings hinge on three main ideas, that of his papa becoming a couch potato (papa) and the migration of the potato/papa from Peru to the New World which has turned into an all American staple in the form of potato chips and French fries.

¹⁰ Alex Rivera, phone interview with the artist, June 11, 2007.

¹¹ Ibid.



Fig. 10, Home page web art for Alex Rivera.

The juxtaposition of such contradictory images help visualize some of the elements that are important to Rivera as a digital media artist. In the spirit of his proclaimed “internet anti-empire,” Rivera’s site provides free access to virtually all of his short films on line. In another interview with Kathy High, “Reel New York” series curator, Rivera has stated the reasons behind his commitment and interest in the internet as his medium:

I also have an interest in all of the rhetoric of cyberspace, the information age. It’s so huge right now. I’m trying to think about the language, which is really rich. In those discourses around the Internet, people are reevaluating distance, reevaluating culture, property, geography, and I think, even ‘nations.’ All these things are up in the air. But then simultaneously, the whole access thing is also really exclusionary and aimed at the upper class, giving more access to culture and information to those people.¹²

Rivera considers his work as “radical collages” and admits to being as influenced by main stream American blockbuster hits such as *Star Wars* as by small,

¹² Alex Rivera, interview by Kathy High, May 1997
<http://www.alexrivera.com/PAGES/PRESS/REELNY.html> [accessed May 2006].

independently produced Latina/o productions such as Gregory Nava's *El Norte*. In fact, science fiction is, by personal admission, his favorite genre.¹³

Rivera's *Why Cybraceros?* (1997) a mockumentary, is among his earlier works. To achieve the aesthetic look of a documentary, Rivera uses actual footage from a propaganda film from c. 1959 by the California Grower's Council titled *Why Braceros?* which was used to promote and defend the use of Mexican Braceros. Rivera's "mockumentary" lays out the history of past guest worker programs, such as the Bracero Program and its importance to the American economy. All of this information is narrated by a serene voiceover that begins then to posit an unusual alternative: the idea of a "Cybracero." The satire slips in almost unnoticeable given the calm voice-over narration, but the "problems" (such as the unwanted bodies of unwanted subjects) of the old Bracero Program are pointed out. As the narrator explains, a "Cybracero" is a Mexican worker that can provide the same labor—but from Mexico, without ever crossing the border. Connected to machines via the internet, the actual crossing of the Mexican body into the U.S. is no longer necessary.¹⁴ It speaks to the sterile excision of the unwanted parts of this labor: the human body that provides it. Taking the same serious tone that a documentary would, Rivera's satirical mockumentary suggests that a new cyber-produced bracero program can replace the old. At once he repeats the sterile and "logical" tone found in legal discourse and public policy that was so prevalent during the "common sense" debates of Proposition 187. Rivera notes the need for the delicate handwork

¹³ Alex Rivera, <http://www.alexrivera.com> [accessed May 2006].

¹⁴ This premise has become the framework for his first major motion picture release, a science fiction film expected to be released in January 2008 titled *The Sleep Dealer*.

needed for picking fruit. This is the primary reason that given all of our technological advancements, and this is stated in the mockumentary, hand picked produce is still the only way to harvest. The dexterity of physical, manual labor has not been replaced, hence the reliance on immigrant labor. His solution harks on the unspoken but very much present idea and implied in legal rhetoric and contractual labor proponents: how to get the manual labor without the body? Thus the cybracero can remain in their country yet be connected via the internet and provide that labor. Tactfully, the female narrator describes the ‘problem’ of the old Bracero Program in which immigrants remained here illegally. The new cybracero, however, resolves this problem by eliminating the possibility of temporary workers becoming permanent residents. In other words, it removes the “problem” of the unwanted body. What is “tactfully” avoided in legal language and plain-speak, is visually articulated by Rivera. It is the same “practical” logic but hyperbolized in order to expose the dehumanizing logic inherent at its core. Made transparent is the way in which these discourses resist the concept of personhood for im/migrants. Thus, Rivera visualizes the unspoken; the ways in which the bodies of im/migrants are expected to be mechanized, unfeeling; in short, robotic. “Under the Cybracero Program,” the woman’s cool voice continues, “American farm labor will be accomplished on American soil, but no Mexican workers will need to leave Mexico. Only the labor of Mexicans will cross the border, Mexican workers will no longer have to.”¹⁵

Rivera uses the visual medium to reveal the ways in which juridical and public discourse fragment and dehumanize the Mexican immigrant body. By

¹⁵ <http://www.alexrivera.com/PAGES/TRANSCRIPTS/cyb-eng.html> June 20, 2007.

revealing the dehumanizing rhetoric that lies beneath the surface of supposedly “value-free” legal discourse, Rivera highlights the ethical and moral contradictions at the heart of anti-immigrant discourse. Even today, some of the new guest worker programs that are currently in negotiations dictate that Mexican immigrant laborers can labor for a maximum of five years and then must return home. Implicitly, these immigrant laborers are being asked to not make a life in the U.S.; to provide their work here for 5 years, not establish any connections that can be associated with having a personal life, including but not limited to falling in love, getting married, having children etc. These legal guidelines absolutely dictate the quality of their lives in the United States as working hands. After all, they are, as discussed in earlier chapters, defined through negation: non-citizens and non-residents. Rivera’s hyperbolic vision of the “perfect immigrant laborer” is revealed in all of its absurd, racist ugliness. What legal languages try to erase and make palatable through politically correct, sterile jargon, Rivera exposes and in doing so, denounces. Rivera’s *Why Cybraceros* directly tackles the issue of the U.S. government as an active participant in the recruitment of contracted labor and also, I would argue, as the beneficiary of undocumented immigration as well.

Interestingly, much like Alcaraz, Rivera has also had one of his parodic projects taken seriously. Expanding on the idea of tele-robotic labor, he created a fictional website that hailed the innovations of RLS: Remote Labor Systems. “In these times of terror,” the website reads, “as America needs to increase its deportation and detention of illegal immigrants, we must confront difficult

questions like: 'How will America stay competitive without immigrant labor?' And 'If America succeeds in sealing its borders, who will do the work millions of illegal aliens are doing today?'"¹⁶ Much to his surprise, Rivera was contacted by a reporter for *La Opinión*, one of the country's largest Spanish language newspapers and after an interview, "RLS" made the front page of the business section on April 27, 2003. (Links to the actual published article are posted online at cybracero.com) Again, here we see the seriousness in the humor that Rivera is deploying. The fact that such absurdity can be taken seriously produces a sobering realization: that this is no laughing matter.

“(Illegal) Alien Invasion”: Satire Strikes Back

In 1997 Lalo Alcaraz and Alex Rivera, collaborated to create the short film *Día de la independencia*. In a process that reflects the ways in which they are redefining the notion of “borderless” space, these two artists collaborated from opposite coasts to produce a “cross-continental digital animation project.”¹⁷ Living on opposite coasts (Rivera from New York City and Alcaraz from Los Angeles) their collaboration consisted of using the internet to create a short film. Alcaraz would sketch images that Rivera would later animate and send back to Alcaraz for further editing. In the end, their bi-coastal project maximized some of the possibilities available to them through the “borderless” space of the internet. Addressing the dehumanizing language operating at this time, their work reflects a visual riffing of the word “alien.” In such a way, their work very much aligns

¹⁶ www.cybracero.com [accessed June 20, 2007].

¹⁷ Acker, “Survival Through Satire.”

itself with Latina/o activists who refuse the term “illegal alien” a term bandied about indiscriminately during the public debate over Proposition 187. In fact, the legislation was commonly referred to as the “anti-illegal-alien initiative” in the media. This short film functions as a cultural utterance—a denouncement, if you will—that at once provides a relevant and necessary critique of the systematic disenfranchisement of the Latina/o community.

Día de la independencia needs to be situated within the context of the 1990s and within the context of a decade riddled with a series of profitable, mainstream, mega-blockbuster science fiction films, namely *Independence Day* (*ID4*), *Men in Black* and *X-Men*.



Fig. 11, ‘Alienated,’ Alcaraz, 1997.

Science fiction films, as a genre, have typically provided fertile ground for their interpretations and the symbolic representations of its alien Other. Science Fiction films from the 1950s and 1960s have been cogently analyzed by various scholars as allegories of nuclear holocaust, or as visualizations of the “Red Scare.”¹⁸ Following these scholars, I contend that these films like *ID4* (1996) and

¹⁸ See generally Vivian Sobchack *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press) 1997.

Men in Black (1997) gesture toward the current political climate that I refer to as the “Brown Scare,” indicative of the escalating anxieties around Latina/o immigration. Film scholar Joyce Evans defines the science fiction genre as ideal for providing the space “to create, reflect, and reinforce the central system of practices, meaning and values operating within a society during a particular period which helps to form [this] dominant ideology.”¹⁹ As Evans clarifies with regard to the science fiction films produced during the “Red Scare” era: “The Cold War ideology constituted a set of values, judgments and ideas that became deeply embedded in American culture and that resulted in direct political influence over the context of studio production and the content of Hollywood film.”²⁰

Likewise, I see something similar in the blockbuster films of the 1990s, which Alcaraz and Rivera isolate and respond to in their short film *Día de la independencia*. *ID4* and *Men in Black*, like most “alien invasion” films, operate on the premise of fear and the threat of complete annihilation. However, these films in particular (and they were wildly popular and successful films) reflect some distinct associations that echo the xenophobic fears that fueled what was at the time a largely anti (Latina/o) immigrant moment. In *Men in Black*, the main characters Agent K (played by Tommy Lee Jones) and Agent J (played by Will Smith) must give up their identities—even their names, if they are to defend the country from dangerous aliens. The scope of the narrative includes the existence of a large system of checks and balances in order to carefully

¹⁹ Joyce Evans. *Celluloid Mushroom Clouds, Hollywood and the Atomic Bomb*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998) 2.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 3.

document and monitor the various alien Others that are allowed in.²¹ *ID4*, operates primarily within a rhetoric of “alien invasion” which is not surprising for a science fiction film, but the impact this makes in 1996 (when the film distributed) is understood differently when contextualized within the public debates of Proposition 187 at the time that was likewise sustained by a rhetoric of an “illegal alien invasion.” The trailer to *ID4* in particular, is visually impressive in reflecting this fear of the alien Other in that it shows a series of American monuments, such as the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Monument and the White House—one must note, pristinely white monuments—being ominously darkened by flying space ships. It visualizes the fears of the “browning” of America that were also prevalent in the rhetoric of Proposition 187. The film’s taglines flash on the screen with each passing image: “On July 2nd, they arrive. On July 3rd, they strike. On July 4th, we fight back.” Again, the us/them binary echoes the anti-immigrant rhetoric circulating at the time.

My analysis on this builds from film scholar Charles Ramírez-Berg who has read anti-immigrant anxieties in other science fiction films such as *Alien*, *Close Encounters of the third kind* and *Star Wars*. Like him, I contend that “these new extraterrestrial films are a culturally unconscious means of working out the whole question of immigration as it emerged in the last several decades.”²² These films, which are the backdrop that Alcaraz and Rivera are responding to, have provided what he refers to a “mythic-cultural” function for the “unconscious

²¹ At the end of this film, the final fight scene with the unwanted alien results in a giant cockroach.

²² Charles Ramirez-Berg, “Immigrants, Aliens, Extra Terrestrials,” *CineAction*, Fall '89. 4.

reflection on the immigrant question.”²³ Ramírez-Berg’s article predates the work of Alcaraz and Rivera, but is certainly still applicable over a decade later.

Día de independencia views much like a mainstream, block-buster movie trailer. In fact, it almost mirrors perfectly the actual theatrical trailer for a blockbuster film of the previous year, the phenomenally lucrative *Independence Day*.²⁴ The visual images produced by Alcaraz and Rivera however, replace the ominous flying spaceships with digitized flying *sombreros*. Their satirical version of *Independence Day* plays with the discursive constructions of Latina/o immigrants in the 1990s and the accompanying rhetoric of invasion. They take what is unspoken, but understood, and visualize it in all of its absurdity. Images cut back and forth between images of chaos and mayhem on American streets and the images of gargantuan, flying *sombreros* crossing the U.S. Mexico border. “On September 16, *they* come.”



Fig. 12, Still of flying *sombrero* blowing up the White House from *Día de la independencia*.

Alcaraz and Rivera’s choice of September 16 is likewise significant in that it is Mexico’s Independence Day. While many may not be aware of this Mexican historical fact, the significance of it resides in the function the parody for a

²³ Ibid, 4.

²⁴ As part of what was surely a calculated marketing strategy, *ID4* premiered on July 4th, typically a profitable strategy to open on a holiday. Not to be overlooked is the evocation of nationalism and patriotic pride on the premiere of a film about fighting alien Others.

primarily Latina/o audience. The short is approximately 2 minutes long, but manages to squeeze in as much satire in that time frame. While cutting back to an image of what seems like a government control room an anxious soldier reports: "...6...7...8 flying sombreros on radar, sir! At this rate, they will have taken all of our jobs in less than 36 hours!" Parody is taken to theatrical levels and in so doing, Rivera and Alcaraz critically engage the pejorative discursive constructions that circulated at this time, particularly in the state of California: from the idea of immigrants taking away jobs from Americans to the idea of immigrants as parasites that will destroy the country (culturally, socially, and economically).

The satire evident in their bodies of work begins in the early 1990s, before political satire became the trend as hit shows like the Daily Show with Jon Stewart or The Colbert Report with Stephen Colbert are today. When asked about why the choice of satire, Rivera responded "it felt like the right way to intervene at the time."²⁵ The works from these artists represent a fraction of the burgeoning "renaissance" of Latina/o workers whose work hinges on satire in the 1990s. They stand among other, more recognizable Latina/o artists that include, but are not limited to the likes of Coco Fusco, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Ella Troyano, and Marga Gómez. Their use of satire and humor becomes the weapon within which they rewrite history. This body of work demonstrates that it takes a critical engagement or "engaged humor" as Gutiérrez-Jones would put it, to find agentic resistance within the same racist diatribes. *Día de la independencia* does so by making it possible to locate a strategic, satirical humor

²⁵ Alex Rivera, phone interview with the artist, June 11, 2007.

in the logic of hate that fuels anti-immigrant rhetoric. It becomes both an aesthetic method and a strategy, indeed, a survival mechanism in absurd times. Their humor resists, disrupts and I would argue, in the end, heals.

CONCLUSION

As my dissertation has attempted to highlight, the Mexican im/migrant body became the metaphoric landscape upon which the broader questions of citizenship and national identity were, and continue to be, battled. The discursive construction of ethnic Mexicans as “foreign,” “diseased,” and “criminal” have had profoundly dehumanizing effects upon the Latina/o population in the United States. Latina/o culture workers have noted and critiqued with urgency, the associations made between citizenship and humaneness and have consistently fought to rehumanize the ethnic Mexican body so often denigrated in public discourses.

The deportation drives targeting ethnic Mexicans in the United States in 1930 and 1954, later echoed rhetorically in the anti-Mexican immigrant legislation of Proposition 187 of 1994, all indicate moments of heightened xenophobia that dehumanize the bodies of ethnic Mexicans on a variety of levels. The early 1900s scripted the Mexican body as diseased and dirty primarily through a series of mechanized orchestrations along the border that were put in place in order to “sanitize” all Mexican immigrants crossing over into the United States. In the post war period, with the onset of the Bracero Program, the bodies of ethnic Mexicans were fragmented and reduced to a mere pair of “hands” that were

expected to provide labor and then depart, leaving no trace of their presence behind. In the late 1900s, Mexican im/migrant bodies were both mobilized (by NAFTA) and criminalized (by Proposition 187 and Proposition 21) and rendered immutably “alien” in popular cultural discourse.

The recent immigrant rights protest marches of 2006 indicate the saliency of the Latina/o public’s response to dehumanizing rhetoric that stubbornly persists. The 2006 protests were in response to the passing of HR 4437, a bill that was fueled by the “war on terrorism” and unabashedly brought together and to and blurred the issues of immigration and terrorism. The bill was aimed at enforcing border protection, anti-terrorism and illegal immigration control, which further criminalized undocumented immigrants. The overwhelming response in California and from the Latina/o population in the United States left no doubt which ethnic population was feeling targeted. HR 4437 criminalized not only those crossing illegally, but further criminalized any persons providing humanitarian aid to undocumented immigrants. The bill would radically restrict the actions of many non-governmental organizations and even church organizations that provide shelter to undocumented immigrants (such as providing for other basic needs such as leaving clean water along common migratory paths), making these acts of goodwill equally punishable. This clearly emphasizes a renewed effort in “securing” the nation’s borders—particularly the southernmost border. The overwhelming response to this bill from Latinos in California and across the United States left no doubt which ethnic population was feeling targeted.

While my analysis of Latina/o cultural productions ends in the 1990s, it is nevertheless evident that Latina/o responses continue on to the present day. Recently, films such as Mexican Sergio Arau's *A Day Without a Mexican* (2004), and Tommy Lee Jones's (the screenplay which was written by Mexican Guillermo Arriaga) *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005) demonstrate an existing concern with the representation of ethnic Mexicans living in the United States. Albeit each film does so differently, both of these films tackle the weighty issues of labor, citizenship and immigration. On an even more "popular" front, the recent media attention given to Gustavo Arrellano's "¡Ask a Mexican!" column in the *OC Weekly*, (a sort of "ethnic angled" Dear Abbey column) further reveals the nation's tense relationship with its ethnic Mexican population. Like Alcaraz and Rivera, Arrellano uses his own personalized version of satire to respond to the public's (often ignorant) questions about Mexicans.

The adjacency between the United States and Mexico and its ever increasing militarized border ensures that immigration from Mexico, and thus, the ways in which ethnic Mexican bodies are "read" will continue to be a volatile issue. Likewise, I foresee the persistent engagement of Latina/o culture workers in isolating, revising, rewriting and rearticulating the often pejorative and dehumanizing narratives imposed upon them. For, as I hope this dissertation has shown, the history of these denunciations by the Latina/o community in spite of often being occluded, is both long and strong.

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