UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

The Nostalgia of Change:
A History of Mexican Return Migration to
Acámbaro, Guanajuato, 1930-2006

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satisfaction of the requirements for
the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

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by

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2010

The dissertation of Jesús Pérez Varela is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Dedication

To the memory of Peter McNee, Mary Walsh, Mariano Varela,

Aureliana Cervantes, and Romana Sánchez.

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Map of Mexico
Source: Pickatrail.com

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The song “Truckin,’” by the Grateful Dead, perhaps best represents my experience at UCSD: “Lately it occurs to me, what a long, strange trip it's been.” This process has been a long, strange and hard trip. I quite honestly never imagined I would get this far in academia. I come from a place where academic opportunities are limited and these outcomes just don’t happen. I have been lucky enough along the way to receive support over the years from many, many people who I wish to thank here. If it were not for their guidance and motivation, none of this could have been possible. Thanks first and foremost to my chair, Dr. Michael Monteón, whose guidance, advice, editing suggestions, and patience was essential. My Co-Chair Dr. David Gutierrez helped me in very tough moments of my academic journey and was a big influence in undertaking the challenge of a Ph.D., inspiring me with *Walls and Mirrors* to be more critical on historical issues. Dr. Luis Alvarez’s advice helped me through several tough moments and is a role model in helping students through this process. Dr. Daniel Widener’s advice on how to survive graduate school was also essential. Dr. Everard Mead taught me what a young professor can achieve and his pedagogical style is a model to follow as he makes classes both challenging and enjoyable. And huge thanks to Dr. Nancy Postero, who came to my rescue in the week of my defense and to whom I will always be grateful.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This study examines the social, economic, and cultural changes that return migrants have brought to a town with a long history of emigration to the United States. It encompasses a history of return migration to Acámbaro from the onset of the Great Depression in 1929 through the era of Mexican President Vicente Fox (2006). I trace and juxtapose how return migration has changed the town's social, economic, and cultural landscape. Some of these new attributes include an increase in drug consumption, the development of Chicano-style gang

culture among local youth, and the creation of a temporary middle class. I argue that the development of this new temporary middle class has existed since the Bracero period and that its presence has polarized the populace of towns like Acámbaro because of the introduction of new cultural values. While some view cultural change as invasive and disrespectful to local traditions, others view it as an opportunity to break away from traditional values, prompting further migration to the United States with tangible temptations of a better life. Whereas traditional immigration studies focus on the challenges and opportunities that immigration poses in the host country, I conclude that return migration is just as important. The immigrant experience cannot be fully understood if their return home is not given the attention it deserves.

Introduction

Mexican immigration to the United States is a controversial topic. As I write this, Arizona has passed a law giving the state authorities power to assist in the detention of Mexican migrants without documentation and the federal government has sued to overturn the statute.[1] The fight has broken out over terrain long contested between Mexican migrants and U.S authorities at the local, state, and national levels. The southwestern United States has traditionally boasted the greatest concentration of Mexican migrants. Mexican customs indeed dominate many communities and the arrival of large numbers of immigrant over the years has provoked strong and negative reactions. Mexican migration is no longer a regional issue, however, and is no longer concentrated in the southwest. Over the last fifteen years Mexican immigration has spread to places where it was once unknown.[2] The concentration of media attention on the arrival of Mexicans to the United States has misrepresented the migrant experience, traditionally focusing primarily on the threat that immigrants can present to culture and economy neglecting other aspects of the phenomenon. A key component that is lost amid these debates is the experience of the migrant's return to his/her hometown and the impact that Mexican return migration has had upon Mexico. Return migration to Mexico has been understudied, raising questions such as: What does pursuit of the American Dream bring back to the

[1] "Justice Dept. Sues Arizona Over Its Immigration Law," *New York Times*, 6 July 2010.

[2] "The New Nativism," *The Nation,* 28 August 2006. This article looks at the effects of Mexican immigration to Tennessee and how locals deal with such changes.

sending country? How has the loss of population that immigration entails affected Mexican communities? How have families coped with the pressures of migration? How do local youth respond to the introduction of new trends by return-migrants? And, how do locals who have never been to the United States perceive return migration? Just as the question is posed in the United States, are return migrants viewed as threatening or beneficial in Mexico?

The project is both a personal and academic journey. My father first came to the United States in 1956 as a guest worker under the Bracero Program, which lasted from 1942 to 1964. He was one of a handful of *braceros* from Acámbaro, Guanajuato, and his decision began my family's history of migration. As a migrant child who went back and forth, I noticed major changes in migrants and their respective communities in both Mexico and the United States. Where traditional immigration studies strived to understand the outcome of the migrants' destination, I believe that the process of return migration, or the impact on the place of origin, is equally important because just as it introduces great benefits to communities, it alters them in unexpected and sometimes unwanted ways. In other words, the immigrant experience cannot be fully understood if the return home is not given the attention it deserves.[3]

Like other braceros, my father's yearly return to Acámbaro made him the talk of the town. His short stay represented a moment to trumpet his successes, show off modern or fashionable trends he had acquired, and mesmerize locals with stories of the other side. To his audience, those who had never been to the

[3] Michael J. Piore, *Birds of Passage* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 136-37.

United States, it opened their imaginations to life in *el norte*. Family members and neighbors considered him a legend—brave, successful—a folk hero of sorts. Once my generation was taken to the United States our own experience was similar. I became representative of *el norte* and my own yearly visit furthered what my father's generation had begun. My own observations of the impact of return migration upon my hometown of Acámbaro are thus the inspiration for this study.

Acámbaro, A Brief History

Figure 1. Map of the state of Guanajuato. Acámbaro is located in the southern tip of the state, close to the state of Michoacán.[4]

Upon entering Acámbaro, a road sign welcomes its visitors, boasting "Welcome to Acámbaro, with Acámbaro Guanajuato Was Born, 1526."[5] This

[4] "Acámbaro actualmente," http://forums.tibiabr.com/showthread.php?t=286831 (May 2009).

connection to the history of the state attempts to invoke the sense that the town's history is just as important as the history of other cities in Guanajuato, however its place in history remains relatively unknown at the national level, based more on hearsay and rumor than on fact. Acámbaro was founded just after the conquest of Mexico (1521). As one of the oldest settlements in Latin America, one might imagine that Acámbaro's historical relevance would match or exceed that of comparable cities in its proximity. Dolores Hidalgo, Celaya, the City of Guanajuato, Leon, and Salvatierra have all been referenced within the general framework of Mexico's history. Guanajuato is known for its colonial silver mines, Celaya for Pancho Villa's lost battle during the Mexican Revolution, Dolores Hidalgo for the famous "*grito*" from Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla during the period of Mexican independence, Salvatierra for José Alfredo's Jiménez's famous song "Caminos de Guanajuato," and León for its leather industry. However, there are few, if any, historical references to Acámbaro in the historical literature of the region. Additionally, Acámbaro is regularly mistaken as part of the state of Michoacán, marginalizing it not only within Mexican history more generally, but even within the state history of Guanajuato. Acámbaro's own historical sense is attributed to Father Hidalgo y Costilla's visit to the town during the movement for Mexican independence, in which, according to local history, he was named General of the Insurgent Army on October 22, 1810, and gathered the army that moved on to Dolores Hidalgo to fight the Spaniards.[6] His visit was

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[5] "Con Acámbaro nació Guanajuato, 1526"

[6] "Acámbaro: Turismo," http://www.acambaro.gob.mx/turismo/atractivos.htm (May 2009).

proudly commemorated by a bronze statue in one of the town's main plazas. A plaque on an old home in downtown Acámbaro also boasts his stay. Local tourism promotes Acámbaro's role in the independence movement and as one of the oldest Spanish settlements in Mexico in the attempt to capture its historical bearing. These local anecdotes, alas, are not corroborated by the existing literature on Mexican independence.

Figure 2. A statue commemorating in a main plaza of Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla visit to Acámbaro on October 22, 1810.[7]

In contrast, Acámbaro's regional history has revolved around other roles. For example, the municipality of Acámbaro is widely known for the emergence of the Chupícuaro culture, one of the oldest pre-Colombian cultures. Additionally, the first Mexican steam railroad engine was constructed in Acámbaro, but patent infringement terminated the industry.[8] Currently, Acámbaro is best known for its baking traditions.

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[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

Despite this limited historical background, Acámbaro is representative of a history that is not only relevant to the region but to the nation. The city illustrates the history of return migration that has yet to be documented and this project is an attempt to develop a narrative about Mexico's "modernization." At a time when migration has become of critical importance to both Mexico and the United States, the experience of a Mexican migrant to the United States cannot be fully understood without understanding the changes they bring back home. Studies of Mexican return migration are limited. This is a growing academic field, one with a growing number of studies in anthropology and sociology but almost nothing with a historical perspective.

The Challenges of Immigration within Acámbaro

The challenges of migrants to the United States have changed dramatically from one decade to another. The issue of social isolation that Mexicans experience while living in the United States has been of great significance in comparing distinct eras of immigration. From an era when Mexicans fled their country because of the Mexican Revolution, to the crash of Wall Street which forced Mexicans and Mexican Americans alike to return to a country that had not recuperated from previous problems and was also plunged into depression, to the creation of the Bracero Program in the 1940s, Mexicans have had to deal with one shock after another. To take one example, braceros faced isolation and the requirement to return to their native land, facts that limited

their ability to become as “Americanized” as other immigrants to the United States.

Today’s immigrants face very different challenges, both culturally and economically. For contemporary immigrants, arrival to the United States is a shock, as they learn to deal with customs and laws that are not their own. They are in increasingly hostile territory and are confronted with political campaigns launched against them, criminalizing their entry into the country. They are blamed by whites, other Latinos, and blacks for taking jobs from U.S. citizens. Such hostility, however, helps Mexican migrants to recreate and reproduce their culture. In the process they are also forced to look at Mexico in a new light. Mexican migrants are faced with issues of diversity, not only within the host country, but within the Mexican community as well. While U.S. citizens refer to “Mexicans” as though they represent one defined culture, there are, as Leslie Simpson pointed out decades ago, many Mexicos.[9] Simpson referred to the distinct regions and cultures of the nation, but it is also true of changes over time. And the history of return migration from the Mexican Revolution, to the Great Depression, to the Bracero program, and the current era is a reflection of those temporal Mexicos that have transformed Acámbaro’s history, a narrative tied to the stages of return migration.

Nonetheless within each era there are components that tie together the experiences of these returnees nostalgia and pride. Migrants return to their

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[9] Leslie Simpson, *Many Mexicos* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1964).

places of origin to demonstrate that they have "made it" on the other side. Their return, however, is short lived, for if they wish to maintain their newfound economic status they must return to the United States to endure the pressures of migration once again. This cyclical process continues to repeat itself. As Jeffrey Cohen so eloquently states, temporary return migrants have become "addicted" to migration.[10] Adding to Cohen's observation, migrants are not the only ones addicted. The sending towns themselves have become dependent on the capital that is sent religiously to family members through remittances and seasonal spending by return migrants. Local businesses eagerly await the arrival of return migrants during the winter season. As with any addiction, however, there is a price to be paid. Defining this price is a part of this study.

Along with the positive changes and investments made in Mexican sending communities come various negative side-effects. Mexicans who have gone to the United States return to Mexico to demonstrate success have come to represent a temporary new middle stratum in many parts of Mexico, which is part of a broader dynamic that includes the creation of a new and distinct consumer culture. An example of the changing consumer culture in Acámbaro is the introduction of the first Wal-Mart style supermarket, which opened its doors on November 26, 2006, during the peak season of return migration. Such new businesses have changed the economy of Acámbaro, where the central *mercado* once contained its commercial life. Acámbaro's identity as a migrant hub has

[10] Jeffrey H. Cohen, *The Culture of Migration in Southern Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 21.

changed the town both when they are home and when they are away. It retains a strong hold on its absent sons and daughters. The result is that return migrant lives on a threshold where local traditions are either diluted or being enriched by their presence.

Chapter Overview

This project is broken into five chapters. The first chapter looks at the evolution of return migration. I review some of the literature on return migration and conclude that traditionally, studies of return migration to Mexico have been quite technical and limited, using sociological methods to draw conclusions. In the mid-1980s experts began to question this methodology, admitting that studies of return migration should incorporate a body of more personal information to become more meaningful. This chapter explains the methodology of this study as informed by such a determination.

The second chapter looks at the history of U.S.-Mexican relations and the development of return migration in the early twentieth century during the Great Depression. Mexico's vulnerability to this first massive repatriation lay in the levels of poverty it possessed and the national government's indifference to the hardships that Mexicans endured while in the United States. During and following the Mexican Revolution, the Mexican government had overlooked the massive movement of its people and its consequences. I conclude that the repatriation spurred by the Great Depression established Mexican attitudes on

many issues related to emigration, serving as a foundation for their development in the years to come.

The third chapter focuses on the Mexican and U.S. governments' development of the Bracero Program thirteen years later as a way to supply Mexican labor to U.S. agriculture. It examines how both governments perceived its participants. Even though attempts were made to improve the Mexican laborers' lot in the United States, abuse and racism prevailed on both sides of the border. The chapter features an interview with a *bracero* from Acámbaro with pictures from the Bracero History Archive to highlight abuses permitted by the U.S. government and the Mexican's government's inability to prevent them. The Bracero Program marginalized the historical experience of the not-so-distant repatriation and established patterns for contemporary immigration.

Chapter four looks at the impact of return migration to Acámbaro specifically from the *bracero* era to the recent past as a case in point to analuze the impact of return migration on a Mexican town. I look at the effect on the town during the bracero period, and argue that even though the *bracero*'s stay in the United States was short, their impact on the town was massive. Accomplishment in the United States meant escalation on the local social ladder, thus making them agents of change. Although the *bracero's* experience differs from that of the contemporary return migrant, I argue that their impact is just as significant, introducing a culture of return migration to Mexico and forming a pattern.

Chapter five looks at return migration to Acámbaro today. I argue that return migration is wrought with conflict. While it represents a major economic

advantage to the town and its residents, it comes with a heavy price. Return migrants bring not only earnings from their labor, but cultural and social changes in the structure of economic life. The more notable changes include the emergence of Chicano-style gangs, American gang graffiti, and massive drug consumption. Some locals view these changes with dismay, while others view them as alternatives to the traditional. The contemporary period represents a continuation of what the Bracero Program began and demonstrates how deep changes brought by return migration can be—indicating that migration is no longer a necessary part of the experience.

This dissertation is being written in the midst of a depression affecting both countries, indicating another period of return. Acámbaro has changed according to the new rules of the U.S. economy only to be set up for another series of shocks, whatever they may induce. The work concludes with reflections on the complexity of this issue for both countries and the ways in which Mexican culture has been integrated into the United States, but even more so, the ways in which U.S. culture has become part of Mexico.

Chapter One

The Study of Return Migration
A Brief Synopsis

According to Russell King, "[r]eturn migration is the great unwritten chapter in the history of migration."[11] King's claim is shared by many other scholars who have begun to develop the subject in hopes of better understanding the other half of the immigrant experience. Whereas traditional immigration studies focus on the economic, social, and cultural impacts that immigration entails for an immigrant's destination, the study of return migration entails promoting a similar understanding of those issues on the communities that send them. As King points out, "The historiography of migration studies has nearly always tended to imply that migration was a one-way process, with no return. Studies have focused on departure, the migration journey, arrival, settlement and 'integration'; rarely on return. Often one finds, perhaps hidden in a footnote, the lament that 'little is known of those who returned.'"[12] The changes that immigration produces are just as significant in sending communities, and encompass more than just the obvious economic impacts. Cultural and societal changes are equally significant because they contribute to a much-needed interdisciplinary take on the subject. Agreeing with King is Belinda Reyes, who states "Return migration is an important, but often neglected, component of the

[11] Bimal Ghosh, "Generalizations from the History of Return Migration." In *Return Migration: Journey of Hope or Despair?* ed. Russell King (London: Dover, 2000), 7.

[12] Ibid.

immigration process."[13] The study of return migration represents an alternative to expand upon the debate on migration studies in the United States and in sending countries where displacement takes place. The literature exploring return migration, or the other side of the immigration story, remains in its early stages.

This chapter will look at three stages of the study of return migration to provide context for the Mexican case. The first part develops the historiography and methodology of what some of the early arguments on the subject have claimed. It is followed by an analysis of the significant shift in arguments of return migration during the 1980s and 1990s and how contemporary studies have evolved from that period to include transnational migration as a "third space." Finally, I determine how external cases are different from or or assimilate the Mexican case, with regard to citizenship in particular, and discuss the contributions that this study makes to the field.

As an alternative sub-field within the study of immigration, describing return migration has many challenges. It has quickly evolved from a field of relatively unknown interest to one of the fastest-growing topics of the day. As Scholars by and large have been more interested in understanding the impact immigrants had on the host country than in understanding their return to their place of origin and what that impact entails as part of the full experience.[14]

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[13] Belinda I. Reyes, *Dynamics of Return Migration to Western Mexico* (San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California, 1997), 1.

[14] Daniel Kubat, ed., *The Politics of Return: International Return Migration in Europe: Proceedings of the First European Conference on International Return Migration (Rome, Italy, November 11-14, 1981)* (Roma: Centro Studi Emigrazione, 1984), 5.

Historicizing return migration and its contributions to sending communities adds a much-needed perspective to the contemporary study of migration. Dino Cinel suggests "regardless of the reasons advanced to go home, returnees and their savings have an impact on home communities."[15] This economic impact may be the most apparent or directly observable, but Cinel notes that the impact returnees have on their place of origin is multidimensional, calling for further exploration to better understand the return migrant's experience and thereby the migration experience more broadly. In many cases return migrants have evolved to play a significant role in sending countries, even contributing to their political agendas.[16] Bismal Gosh argues that the debate is marked by a "sharp difference between sending and receiving states, with transit states and the migrants themselves frequently playing a part in the controversy."[17] This controversy includes the many changes that return migrants confront or initiate upon returning to their homeland. Such changes include many aspects of their newfound lives, including the process of re-adaptation to their country of origin, their impact on their local environment, political rights, and economic entitlements.[18] Beyond these changes, Jean Pierre Cassarino finds that return migrants also develop an intellectual right. Their vision of the world "generates a form of intellectual ambiance; a form of distinctiveness that the returnees like

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[15] Dino Cinel, *The National Integration of Italian Return Migration, 1870-1929* (New York: Cambridge, 1991), 3.

[16] Ibid., 2.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

cultivating."[19] As such, the gannet of topics surrounding return migration is quite broad.

1.1 The Early Stages of the Field

Much of the effort to define the study of return migration is based on understanding how earlier scholars viewed it. The earliest developments of the study in the 1960s and 1970s focused primarily on quantitative evaluations to determine patterns in migration. Frank Bovenkerk looked at the studies of return migration conducted from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s in 1974 and found that this period of experimentation dealt with a consistent lack of theoretical and empirical knowledge of the subject.[20] Early scholars who developed the subject of return migration include J.A Jackson, who looked at return Irish migration; T.H Hollingsworth, who looked at Scottish return migration; and J. Alvarez-Hernandez, who looked at the case of Puerto Rico. All encountered major limitations. [21] According to Bovenkerk, many authors from this period attempted to develop an idea of return migration, however they were limited by a lack of intellectual cohesiveness that naturally forced them to create individual analyses of their subjects.[22]

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[19] Jean Pierre Cassarino, "Theorizing Return Migration: The Conceptual Approach to Return Migrants Revisited," *International Journal of Multicultural Societie (IJMS)* (2004): 267.

[20] Frank Bovenkerk, *The Sociology of Return Migration*: *A Bibliographic Essay* The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), 1.

[21] These are just a few names from Frank Bovenkerk's extensive list of authors on the early studies of return migration.

[22] Bovenkerk, *The Sociology of Return Migration,* 1.

A major part of the challenge in the study of return migration was "sloppiness found in the relevant literature"[23] due to inconsistencies in establishing terms that specify what return migration really meant to early scholars. According to Bovenkerk, too many terms and a lack of precise definitions for them led to confusion, using "back migration, countercurrent, counterflow, re-migration, reflux migration, remigration, return flow, return migration, return movements, second time migration, and repatriation"[24] as examples. Early scholars were few and although they may have been trying to say the same thing, varying terminologies impeded the development of return migration as a field of study. Bovenkerk provides an example in the usage of terms such as "remigration" and "re-emigration," both of which mean:

> …migration for a second time and they do not imply return to a place of origin. But apart from this very broad meaning these words are also used more specifically when people emigrate again to the same destination after having returned home, and sometimes they mean that people emigrate again to yet another place of destination.[25]

He conceptualizes and simplifies previous arguments, combining many of the previous concepts into simpler terms, but his ideas still lack cohesiveness. Bovenkerk falls into precisely the same trap of creating his own language to describe return migration. His suggestions, although well intended, are proof that the problem remained.

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[23] Ibid., 4.

[24] Ibid., 5.

[25] Ibid., 4.

One of Bovenkerk's most important contributions to the discussion, however, is his suggestion of an alternative to the "terminological labyrinth." He suggests deviating from the theoretical body dominating migration studies that look at migrants as quantitative subjects based mostly on sociological analysis. One example of the "terminological labyrinth" and quantitative focus that Bovenkerk criticizes is found in John Vanderkamp's analysis of return migration. Vanderkamp looks at three types of migration—new migration, return migration, and autonomous migration.[26] According to Vanderkamp, breaking the terms into three categories facilitates the study of return migration.[27] The terms also contribute to the reinterpretation of the usage of economics within the region under study. [28] However such models become restrictive, leading to the development of equations to define them. Vanderkamp offers a formula that uses income differentials to explain return migration between two regions.[29] There is no doubt that an economic approach is necessary, but as Vanderkamp explains in his three types of migration flows, his model offers more of the same confusion:

> It is useful to distinguish among three types of migrations flows: (i) new migration (iZ7Mij), (ii) return migration (RMij), and (iii) autonomous migration (AMij), where ***i*** denotes the sending region and *j* the receiving region. Return migration consists of those people who are returning to their home territory, which is some proportion of other migration flows in

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[26] John Vanderkamp, "Migration Flows, Their Determinants and the Effects of Return Migration," *The Journal of Political Economy* 79-5 (September-October 1971).

[27] Ibid., 10.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

> the opposite direction (]VIMji +AMji). Return migrants include people who are disappointed about their original move but also persons who planned to return from the start. The important characteristic is that return migrants are not influenced by incomes and distance in the way new migrants are. The flow of autonomous migration constitutes all those moves which are unrelated to average incomes in the regions, such as employment transfers within business firms, government agencies, and the armed forces.[30]

Such are the abstract sociological models that Vanderkamp employs, which some authors would criticize, noting that they "eliminate the influence by the characteristics of the individual."[31] This renders such attempts to describe return migration hazy and scientific, following Bovenkerk's critique that "some authors go so far to relegate this propensity to return to the field of unrealistic ideology."[32]

Another example of the weaknesses found in the quantitative approach is found in a critique by Julia DeVanzo of James Kau and C.F. Shirman's study on internal return migration within the United States. The authors looked at three types of migration—return, repeat, and new migrants—in their study.[33] These three categories represented a trend within the early study of return migration, however DeVanzo notes that ultimately Kau and Sirmans "shed little light on why and how these groups might behave differently, and their empirical work suffers from a number of serious flaws that make it virtually incapable of telling whether

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[30] Ibid.

[31] Sidney Goldstein and Alice Goldstein, *Differentials in Repeat and Return Migration in Thailand, 1965-1970* (Bangkok: Institute of Population Studies, Chulongkorn University, 1980), 15.

[32] Bovenkerk, *The Sociology of Return Migration,* 19.

[33] Julie S. De Vanzo, "New, Repeat, and Return Migration: Comment," *Southern Economic Journal* (January 1978), 1.

these groups do indeed exhibit different behaviors."[34] Devanzo also states, "the expectation of differing response characteristics to the explanatory variables information and uncertainty among migrant types."[35] This leads to a prediction that persons without previous migration experience (potential new migrants) should have a lower propensity to migrate, but there are no specific hypotheses about how the three groups might respond differently to the explanatory variables Kau and Shirman include in their empirical analysis. Their usage of abstract terminologies and multiple models demonstrates again that quantitative approaches limit the study of return migration. Nevertheless, is important to note that it becomes a useful tool to extrapolate basic ideas on return migration that begin to evolve during this era.

Bovenkerk understood these limitations and suggested that migration studies should strive to unlock traditional technical studies on the subject, recognizing the importance of looking at the "perspective of individual migrant histories," which are ignored by models, statistics, and theories.[36] Earlier works on return migration dominated by quantitative research lack such a perspective. According to Bovenkerk, individual histories should be considered more seriously in contemporary scholarship to make the experiences of the return migrants more complete. This idea greatly influenced the development of return migration scholarship in the years to come.

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[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid., 7.

1.2 Evolution in the 1980s

As empirical research was common during the early stage of the study, it evolved in the 1980s to encompass a wider spectrum on the scholarship of the subject. The 1980s represented a pivotal period and the formation of a more established school of thought on return migration.[37] As Jean Pierre Cassarino explains, this era also brought an "increasing variety of scholarly analyses, together with the resilient politicization of international migration movements,[that] have been ac[c]idental to the ways in which return migration *and* returnees have been understood and analyzed."[38] This decade was a time when the studies of return migration began to ask more logical questions about the experience at the individual level. The most basic and fundamental question of the time was what motivated their return.

Although studies of return migration vary considerably, socioeconomic commonalities among them bridge the returnees' experiences and allow for the generalizations of certain tropes to help create a narrative about the return migrant experience. The 1980s became a time for ratifying commonalities in the early stages of the subject. Similar arguments surfaced and parallels were made across case studies. It is important to point out here that the Mexican case is surprisingly limited and the dependence on international cases is unavoidable because they provide models to help develop the context for how return

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[37] Cassarino, "Theorizing Return Migration," 254.

[38] Ibid.

migration functions and develops. An example of this dependency is what Russell King notes as the traditional examination of return migration at the micro level. The tendency of benefiting from what is out there and formulating what King refers to as "cross-national comparison and theoretical synthesis" helps to construct a general frame of the subject and build a skeleton of theory that leads to the unique characteristics of certain cases of return migration.[39] Commonalities can be borrowed from other cases that have pioneered an area of the subject, but there is always a fissure where every case retains its own unique characteristics.

Studies on international cases of return migration helped to establish agreement within the literature in the 1980s.[40] The internationalization of return migration is evident in Rosemarie Rogers's study of South Africa, the Middle East, and Western Europe. Rogers uses international examples and experiences to develop a narrative on the commonalities within return migration.[41] She argues that these cases deal with patterns of behavior that lead most migrants to stay longer in their host country than expected because "it took them longer that they had expected to reach certain savings targets, because little changed in the economies of their own countries, and because their tastes and aspirations changed once they were abroad."[42] Rogers sees a pattern of

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[39] Russell King, ed. *Return Migration: Journey of Hope or Despair?* (London: Dover, 1986), 40.

[40] Rosemarie Rogers, "Return Migration in Comparative Perspective," *The Politics of Return*, ed. Daniel Kubat (Rome: Centro Studi Emigrazione, 1984), 277.

[41] Ibid.

actions that have a common cause within several distinct groups. This idea of looking at several cases to examine similarities and differences to develop ideas about return migration becomes a key tool to its study.

A more contemporary take on the evolution and the maturity of the discipline in this period is Cassarino's study on the approaches of return migration. He states that "While scholarly approaches related to return migration can be traced back to the 1960s, there is no question that, with hindsight, it was in the 1980s that stimulating scientific debate among scholars took place on the return phenomenon and its impact on origin countries."[43] He looks at the number of conferences that dealt with the subject during the 1980s, which propelled interest by scholars. Conferences, he writes,

> contributed intensively to the development of the literature on return migration, together with the growing concern over "co-development", the "voluntary repatriation of third-country nationals," the emergence and implementation of bilateral readmission agreements between sending and receiving countries, and the link between international migration and economic development in migrants' origin countries."[44]

As such, the study of return migration developed to be more cross national in nature and became an important dimension within the subject of migration studies.

Cassarino notes that one problem in the development of many theories and approaches in the 1980s was that it remained hindered by conceptual

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[42] Ibid., 278.

[43] Cassarino, "Theorizing Return Migration," 254.

[44] Ibid.

problems in defining return migration.[45] He emphasizes their significance and value, as "such definitions hav[e] a bearing on the formulation of national immigration policies…there also exist several definitional approaches to return migration, and to returnees that are playing a crucial role in orienting, if not shaping, the perceptions, taxonomies and policies adopted by governmental and intergovernmental agencies."[46] This aspect of the study propelled more scholars to consider these factors. Russell King also notes problems with theorizing return migration in this period, noting studies, "have been taken into two rather different directions: first, attempts to formulate law-like statements *á la Ravenstein* on the basis of empirical and statistical evidence; and second, attempts to understand return migration within more general epistemologies of studying migration and human behavior."[47] King refers to three approaches. The first has to do with the historical approach to return migration. This involves the inclusion of ideas about immigrants returning to their place of origin for either a short or long period, responses to economic pressures that surround immigrants in their host country, political and social issues, a decision to return as an individual or group, and close ties to the country of origin. The second has to do with a theoretical approach that involves classical economic models, psychological models, and a Marxist perspective. It "…also involves conflict analysis, but on large scales, as well as historical-structuralist models" and "the

[45] Ibid. He uses Mary Kritz's analysis from 1987 to make this point.

[46] Ibid.

[47] King, *Return Migration: Journey of Hope or Despair?* 40.

transnational community perspective."[48] The third is the psychological approach, most commonly used by anthropologists and psychologists. King finds this approach, like the first, flawed because "it ignores the relevance of factors outside the control of individual migrants and it tends to obscure the underlying causes and consequences of geographic mobility."[49] The histories and experiences of returnees and their effect on their place of origin embody moral issues over statistically based facts. King argued in this period for a more interdisciplinary approach to the study of return migration.

1.3 The Contemporary Approach

A new approach responds to many of the factors that have made return migration vague and at times difficult to understand. The discipline matured to address previous difficulties with explaining how return migration functions. The approach that developed combines the insights of anthropologists, sociologists, social geographers, and, in this case, historians.[50] Cassarino states that a structural approach "argues that return is not solely analyzed with reference to the individual experience of the migrant, but also with reference to social and institutional factors in countries of origin. In fact return is also a question of context."[51] Such context allows several perspectives to be considered to better

[48] Ibid., 42.

[49] Ibid., 43.

[50] Cassarino, "Theorizing Return Migration," 248.

[51] Ibid, 257.

understand the experience of return migration. The return migrant's experience contributes to the narrative, but is necessarily limited in understanding the full experience. Non-migrant or local narratives compliment and juxtapose returnee narratives. Locals represent a fundamental agency for understanding the distinctions and uniqueness of the cases on return migration. These developments are direct responses to Cassarino, Bovenkerk, and King's early concerns.

The next major contribution to the scholarship of return migration was the development of transnationalism and diaspora studies. This development became important to broadening scholarship on the subject, representing a new approach to return migration studies. Scholars such as David Fitzgerald note that previous studies on the issue "are constructing transnational identities that challenge standard bipolar notions of immigration in which emigrants definitely leave one country and become settled immigrants in another."[52] Fitzgerald points to some of the debates about the usage of the term "transnationalism," referring to Alejandro Portes and his colleagues who warn about the usage of transnationalism on empirical and theoretical grounds, and argue that transnationalism should not be fully regarded as part of the total migrant experience.[53] However, the experience of transnational migrants is a key component of the experience that is essential to better understanding return

[52] David Fitzgerald, *Negotiating Extra-Territorial Citizenship: Mexican Migration and the Transnational Politics of Community* (La Jolla: Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, University of California, San Diego, 2000), 5.

[53] Ibid.

migration. Therefore, questioning the involvement of locals and their experiences with change contributes to a broader perspective on return migration. Fitzgerald refers to this population as part of an "imagined community" and not being "necessarily transnational."[54] I agree that such "imagined communities" are indeed agents of change and as so they are no longer imaginary, or have never been imaginary. In a context where return migration was not considered part of the narrative before transnationalism, it can be said that rather then being imaginary, such a community has been marginalized from the discussion on the migrant experience. Transnationalism and return migration as subjects need each other to make better sense of where these fields of academia are headed. As such, part of this study is to prove that change is a shared experience and that people can experience change in their place of origin without ever having left. [55] Therefore, the migratory experience cannot be understood completely without understanding the dynamics of the place of origin.

Belinda I. Reyes's study of return migration to Mexico in 1997 demonstrates how far the study of return migration has come in this period. Her use of theory from various disciplines demonstrates its evolution into interdisciplinary territory, allowing for a better understanding of the functionality of return migration, and making it more relevant. Her study reveals how the conversation on transnationalism unlocked new spaces or realms to focus on.

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[54] Ibid., 7.

[55] Ibid.

Reyes states that “Migration is a complex process and its causes may involve elements from each of the migration theories.” Her contribution as an economist confirms this interdisciplinary nature and reveals the dynamicity of the study.

Another important contribution in contemporary return migration studies is what Marcelo Suarez Orozco refers to as the “new immigrant.”[56] His term fits to the complexities that contemporary immigrants face in American society. The term “new migrant” is intriguing because it establishes a premise that the migrant’s experience is dynamic and constantly changes its environment. The influences that immigrants acquire while in the United States, according to Suarez Orozco, creating diverse and complex interactions, leading immigrants to bring change to not only the host country, but also to their place of origin. Suarez Orozco states, “in recent years, anthropologists and sociologists have claimed that what is novel about the new immigrants is that they are actors on a new transnational stage.”[57] Although previously established by Fitzgerald, Suarez Orozco’s take differs with regard to how he looks at the large scale of global immigration studies, writing “immigrants now are actors in a thoroughly globalized and rapidly changing economy that is increasingly taking an hourglass shape,”[58] affecting change in both directions. He adds that immigrants not only affect the host country but they also reshape and are responsible “for significant

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[56] Marcelo Suarez Orozco, ed. *Crossings*: *Mexican Immigration in Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 9.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Ibid., 11.

social transformation back home."[59] This observation furthers the understanding of return migration as a two-way process, as a shared experience.

David Gutierrez introduces the concept of the "third space" to facilitate the understanding of the function of return migration.[60] Suarez Orozco's "new immigrant" fits into this concept of "third space." Gutierrez claims that the growing Mexican influence in the United States has flourished, making it easier for them to adapt, and that this third space has been,

> …carved out between the political and social worlds of the United States and Latin America, the threat of legal repression from outside the community and conflicts stemming from class and national-origin or cultural differences inside the Mexican and pan-Latino population will likely contribute to the ongoing fragmentation of these groups into many different shards—and into social behaviors that may strongly militate against their political "assimilation."[61]

This third space is part of the process of return and assimilation. Assimilation in the United States cannot be understood without making reference to what the immigrant generates when they go back to their place of origin because the effects of assimilation become more visible due to the process of readmission. Readmission is filled with challenges such as tension, rejection, admiration, and glamorization by the sending community, making their place of origin a victim of rapid global transformation and the third space where the returnee gets accredited by the changes that are taking place. As Gutierrez states "The

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[59] Ibid., 10.

[60] David Gutierrez, "The Politics of the Interstices: Reflection of Citizenship and Non-Citizenship at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," *Race and Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 1 (Autumn 2007): 327.

[61] Ibid.

movement of such large volumes of people across international frontiers through an interlocked and expanding sphere of capitalist exchange inevitably created simmering social tensions between members of these moving diasporas and the sedentary self-defined 'natives' of receiving societies."[62] Gutierrez's contribution cements the importance of the study of return migration, that it is an inherent and inseparable topic within migration studies.

1.4 The Case for Acámbaro

The Mexican case on return migration is quite limited from a historical perspective. The general historiography barely mentions Mexico as a protagonist on the subject. There are very few exceptions, including Paul Taylor's pioneering work on return migration in Arandaras, Jalisco, in the 1920s. One of the few works that has a broader historical component is Dino Cinel's book on Italian return migration from 1870 to 1929. Most of the cases used in this historiographical analysis, for example, represent sociological or anthropological points of view. This study endeavors to broaden the historiography of Mexican return migration from the historical perspective in order to better understand the experience. The historical take allows for an interdisciplinary approach, providing much-needed context that strays from these more traditional perspectives. This study draws from varying disciplines to piece together the experiences of return migration, representing shifts in contemporary

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[62] Gutierrez, "Politics of the Interstices," 95.

scholarship on migration, as scholars break from traditional ways methodologies to include new perspectives.

As Russell King and others have suggested, the study of return migration still lacks cohesiveness. Efforts to define the study have caused it to evolve, causing new ideas to arise all the time, but issues such as the "terminological labyrinth" remain and it progresses in an early form. This study will not be an exception to such limitations. My take on return migration is more inclined toward the impact that returnees have on their place of origin, specifically Acámbaro. This study looks at the overall effect that returnees have on a place. It does not classify returnees according to status, time limitations, or citizenship.[63] A necessary part of understanding this experience is the incorporation of the experience of those locals who have never been to the United States. I argue that return migration is a shared experience, that both perspectives work together to achieve a better understanding of this phenomenon. The construction of a narrative on return migration from the first major repatriation during the Great Depression to 2006 establishes the early history of return migration to Mexico. The attempt to this study is to provide a broader analysis of the migrant experience, focusing on the role of the migrant as an agent of change in a transnational society. Acámbaro serves as a model for

[63] This decision is a response to some of the generalizations that have hindered return migration studies in the past. For example, Cinel attempts to simplify variations in return migration through generalization: "Individuals return to [their] native communities for many reasons, such as changes in political and economic conditions at home, undesirable changes in the countries of immigration, problems of adjustment of the host country, and resentment of the original needs that promoted emigration." Doing so detracts from the unique nature of the migrant experience and prevents progress in the field.

the study of return migration because it has been transformed from a small, unknown town to a global one. It has been put on the map, living in a threshold between rural and urban. Its history of migration to the United States dates from the Bracero Program in 1942 and its growth provides grounds for the study of return migration. The town's economy, for example, is directly guided by remittances. Over time, American economic influences have contributed to the "Tijuanization," or the development of a dependent binational economic culture. Local culture, particularly youth culture, is similarly dependent on the transnational sphere, which provides it with cultural alternatives. In essence, the town's experience with return migration has led to the creation of a binational community.

Chapter Two

Mexican Repatriation: The Fear of Return

The issues that emerged from immigration policies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries help explain the roots of contemporary Mexican immigration and return migration to Mexico, and the attitudes that surround them. There is, of course, the component of American dependence on Mexican labor, mainly how it has affected the push and pull of Mexican workers to and from the United States. Several of the most important factors that shaped both the shift of population from Mexico to the United States and the subsequent dynamics of return migration to Mexico emerged during this period. These include the disastrous national economic policies of dictator Porfirio Díaz. Although Díaz's policies helped build the economic infrastructure of Mexico, by the end of his regime millions of Mexican peasant workers were landless and jobless. These chronic circumstances led to his exile and eventually to the Mexican Revolution. Both these trends converged to provide the impetus for one of the largest regional migrations in world history. Thus, I argue that Mexico's internal conflicts and American business interests became key components of a vicious cycle of dependency that in some ways continues to the present day. Then, a highly speculative economy in the U.S. led the Crash of 1929 and the Great Depression, altering the fate of millions of Mexicans and hundreds of thousands of Mexican Americans. The economic crisis prompted the United States to use Mexico's vulnerability and its neglect of its citizenry. Mexican workers in the

United States were targeted as part of the problem, leaving them no choice but to return to their families and a country that had long forgotten them. This presented not only a challenge to the returnees, but a major problem for the Mexican government as well. Mexico was unprepared for what happened—a tale of woe on both sides of the border.

This was the first wave of Mexican return migration in the twentieth century. While it can be labeled various ways, this forced return or repatriation set the stage for how Mexicans would be treated in later periods. The study of repatriation opens the door for a broader analysis of Mexican-American and Mexican history, as Abraham Hoffman noted in 1972, "[f]or many years repatriation, as well as other episodes in Mexican American history, was completely ignored. Not until recently have serious studies begun to come from disciplines other than sociology, anthropology, or education."[64] This study recognizes that repatriation is synonymous with the Mexican and Mexican-American experiences. It will be argued here that repatriation holds the same historical weight in the development of U.S.-Mexican relations as more traditionally recognized events like the Mexican-American War and the Mexican Revolution.

Establishing the importance of repatriation requires looking at events during the Great Depression, especially between the years 1929 and 1935. It also requires looking at how Mexico dealt with and responded to the

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[64] Abraham Hoffman, "Mexican Repatriation Statistics: Some Suggested Alternatives to Carey McWilliams," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 3 (October 1972): 392.

consequences of repatriation. At the same time that repatriation took place, Mexico simultaneously dealt with pressures created by its own immigrant populations. Chinese, Russians, Syrians, Jews, and Poles entered Mexico in large numbers, complicating Mexico's economic stability and drawing public fire as undesirable elements within the plan for Mexico's national reconstruction. Mexico found itself concurrently burdened by economic hard times, revolutionary changes, immigration, and repatriates. Although Mexican authorities and the Mexican media did not express concerns about repatriates as blatantly as they did about foreign immigrants, the returnees were hardly welcomed.

There are three early periods of repatriation, or forced return migration, that reveal what happened and what it meant. The first involved immigration from the Mexican-American War through the presidency of Porfirio Díaz, with the Mexican Revolution serving as a pivotal moment in changing U.S.-Mexican relations. This era opened a major debate on immigration in the United States and demonstrates how economics and politics determined U.S. immigration policy. The second period involved the treatment of Mexicans in the United States in the 1910s and 1920s, during the period of the Mexican Revolution. Mexican state authority was fragmented, allowing for abuses by American authorities and citizens against Mexican immigrants. The stresses of immigration were felt primarily by Mexicans in the United States who experienced the duality that has characterized their existence ever since. On the one hand, they have been welcomed by employers as workers in key industries, but on the other, they have been extremely vulnerable to economic downturns and native hostility

during hard economic times. Although the great repatriation campaigns of the 1930s are the most dramatic examples of this process at work, similar periods of forced or coerced return were seen in the recession following the First World War, the infamous "Operation Wetback" in the 1950s, and similar periods of turmoil in the 1970s, to say nothing of the current situation. In the 1930s, Mexico was affected by these pressures as well, as the country was going through a period of havoc and reconstruction and it failed to address the treatment of its people abroad and even at home upon their return. The third period came after the Revolution and during the Great Depression and involved an intense nationalism as Mexico struggled to find a post-revolutionary identity. Repatriation and immigration challenged that identity, resulting in xenophobia toward foreigners and repatriates.

2.1 Setting the Stage for Immigration: The *Porfiriato*

The Mexican-American War (1846-1848) isolated Mexico from the United States for many years. As Timothy J. Dunn points out, "[t]his coercive annexation left a bitter and complex legacy of mexicanos residing in the annexed territories, as well as for those who migrated north from Mexico in subsequent decades, and the descendents of both groups."[65] This moment in U.S.-Mexican relations gave rise to a series of broken promises that still resound today. For example, "the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, which ended the war, granted

[65] Timothy J. Dunn, *The Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border 1978-1992* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 1.

American citizenship to Mexican nationals who remained in what had become the United States."[66] These new U.S. citizens were guaranteed rights to both citizenship and their private property; however, their treatment challenged these promises, as Mexicans lost their rights to their land leaving them with no guarantee in their new homeland.[67] According to Dunn, "Mexican-Americans lost their land to Anglos through a variety of measures, including theft, intimidation, swindles, dubious legal challenges and the burden of related court costs, taxes and other debts as well as purchases."[68] Their rights to territory, questions about the validity of their citizenship, and limitations to the practice of their culture defied these promises. Benjamin Heber Johnson states, "they were not willing to immigrate, but rather a conquered people subjected to the rule of their conquerors (as a Chicano slogan from more than a century later put it, '[w]e didn't cross the border; the border crossed us')."[69] This aphorism is a historical reminder of the prickly relationship between the two nations. Anglo settlers in what had been northern Mexico viewed the Mexicans much as they did the Native Americans, as obstacles to their own enrichment. The portrayal of Mexicans as a burden and a nuisance to American progress laid the foundation for a legacy of Mexican struggles in the United States.

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[66] Benjamin Heber Johnson, *Revolution in Texas: How a Forgotten Rebellion and its Bloody Suppression Turned Mexicans into Americans* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 8.

[67] Carey McWilliams, *North from Mexico: The Spanish-Speaking People of the United States* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 51.

[68] Dunn, *The Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border 1978-1992,* 7.

[69] Heber Johnson, *Revolution in Texas,* 9.

Diplomatic relations changed under Mexican President Porfirio Díaz (in office from 1876 to 1911), who sought economic investment from the United States, thus beginning a new era of U.S.-Mexican relations and economic stability in Mexico and marking Mexico's integration into a global economy.[70] The investment was vast and heavy as Frederick Katz argues that "[b]etween 1884 and 1900, about $1,200,000 worth of foreign investment flooded into the country, and the gross national product rose at an annual rate of 8 percent. Mexico now enjoyed an unprecedented era of political stability."[71] Cardoso points out that by 1903 most of the railroads were owned by American investors and by 1910 "…Anglo investors owned 75 percent of all active mines in Mexico. In the state of Chihuahua alone, Anglos had invested almost $100,000,000."[72]

Mexico achieved one of its most successful economic periods under the leadership of Porfirio Díaz. During his presidency, Mexico undertook a massive construction effort to extend railroads from Mexico City to the northern border towns. Simultaneous expansions in the United States in the 1880s and 1890s meant that the American Southwest "provid[ed], for the first time, fast and relatively inexpensive transportation to the more populous Midwestern and eastern markets of the country, and…integrat[ed] the southwest in the national

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[70] Jaime Aguila, "Protecting 'Mexico de Afuera': Mexican Emigration Policy, 1876-1928" (Ph.D. dissertation, Arizona State University, 2000), 6.

[71] Friedrich Katz, *The Life and Times of Pancho Villa* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1998), 15.

[72] Lawrence Anthony Cardoso, "Mexican Emigration to the United States, 1900 to 1930, An Analysis of Socio-Economic Causes" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Connecticut, 1974), 57.

industrial economy."[73] The importance of rail expansion to the north not only had an economic impact, benefiting those who had invested in Mexican infrastructure during the Díaz regime, but it also opened new possibilities for external immigration and internal migration to flourish as jobs became available throughout Mexico and the United States. Population statistics from this period confirm a rise in Mexican immigration to the United States. Jaime Aguila shows that in 1877 "Mexico's population was 9,389,461. This was an increase of only 2,889,461 since 1824, but by 1910 the population reached 15,160,377 an increase of over 60 per cent within a thirty year period. In 1880 Mexico's expatriate population in the United States was 68,399 while by 1910 it was 221,915 an increase of over 300 per cent"[74] These changes are a reflection of economic fluctuations in the United States.

The need for unskilled Mexican labor in railroad construction and other employment outlets was high in the United States from the 1880s through the 1890s. Although Mexican labor in railroad construction was minimal, its contribution was nonetheless vital to the American goal of uniting the nation and developing the American Southwest.[75] According to Mark Reisler, in 1909 "…Mexican laborers constituted over 17% of the total maintenance work force of these railroads. A sample of the Mexican railroad workers revealed that 71.5%

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[73] Ibid., 38.

[74] Aguila, "Protecting 'Mexico de Afuera,'" 9.

[75] Mark Reisler, "Passing through our Egypt: Mexican Labor in the United States, 1900-1940" (Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 1973), 5.

had been in the United States less than five years and that 98% were aliens."[76] Although relatively small, the presence of Mexican labor in the railroad industry showed its potential and signaled a rising U.S. dependency on its southern neighbor. Reisler states, "Railroad officials claimed that Mexicans were superior to Japanese as track workers because they were stronger and better suited to the hot climate. Their superiority in the eyes of management, however, appears to have been based far more on their willingness to accept a lower wage than other groups."[77] Accepting this lower wage presented a better alternative to being in Mexico during a time when the profits from Díaz's policies did not trickle down to the masses, leaving desperate Mexicans few choices but to seek opportunities north in rail construction, mining, or agriculture. As such, Mexican presence spread throughout the Southwest, establishing its reputation and necessity.[78] For example, as Texas became the cotton hub in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Mexican labor "…quickly became essential for the success of Texas cotton and…the state's growing irrigated vegetable harvest."[79] More traditional farming communities, such as those in California, also recognized the Mexican contribution. Those who contracted Mexican laborers were drawn by their reputation for hard work and submissiveness. One Texan farmer stated, "The Mexican laborer is the only man that we have found that is adapted or will

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[76] Ibid., 6.

[77] Ibid., 7.

[78] Ibid., 11.

[79] Ibid., 10.

do this work."[80] Mexicans were considered "…plentiful, and generally peaceable, [and] satisfied with low social conditions."[81]

The development of agriculture in the Southwest was matched by economic instability in Mexico. According to Lawrence Cardoso, job opportunities in Mexico were limited during this period; although Mexican infrastructure was booming, Mexicans in rural sectors continued to live under very harsh conditions—many had lost their lands to policies under Porfirio Díaz.[82] At the same time, the U.S. agricultural sector required an abundance of labor to meet demands, particularly after Chinese labor migration was constricted in the 1880s and Japanese labor migration soon after the turn of the century. Cletus Daniel confirms this demand for labor by pointing to California's need for an abundance of contracted labor in the 1890s to support the survival of agriculture in the state.[83] This period began the trend in which Mexican labor became a key factor in fulfilling American goals for development.

As the United States mechanized its industrial sector, agriculture remained comparatively rustic, requiring a great deal of human labor. Cardoso explains, "the key element in agricultural production during this period was 'stoop

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[80] Ibid., 11.

[81] Ibid., 13; Reisler quotes California Fruit Growers on August 27, 1907 in "Passing through our Egypt: Mexican Labor in the United States, 1900-1940," 4.

[82] Ibid., 13.

[83] Cletus E. Daniel, *Bitter Harvest: A History of California Farmworkers 1870-1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 44.

labor.'[84] Farming was rarely mechanized, and human muscle had to carry out virtually all steps from clearing the land to harvesting the final crop."[85] The nature and scale of the agricultural sector's growth set the stage for the abuse, exploitation, and stereotyping that workers confronted as their numbers grew. One critic of employment practices at this time stated, "every employment first attracts the character of the people willing to engage in that employment. Make the employment of men brutal, and you must depend upon a brutalized class to fill the positions it offers, a class that will become more embruted by the character of its treatment."[86] Along with other ethnic groups (such as the Chinese and Japanese), Mexican labor became the remedy to solve U.S. regional demand. Economic demand, physical facility via the railroads, and the role of recruiters in the form of the *enganche*, all worked to impel thousands of Mexicans to migrate to the United States.[87]

Mexican labor presented a threat to other ethnic groups in the United States. As other ethnic groups were deemed unsuitable for the labor that the United States demanded, the American government enacted ethnic laws to limit their presence, including the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 that restricted Chinese immigration to the United States and the Gentleman's Agreement of

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[84] The "stoop labor" system refers to a system where "only hand labor was used. This work was extremely fatiguing and poorly paid when compared to wages available in nonagricultural pursuits. For these reasons, Anglo and other workers, by and large, refused to engage in stoop labor." Cardoso, "Mexican Emigration to the United States," 46.

[85] Ibid., 44.

[86] As quoted by Daniel, *Bitter Harvest,* 45.

[87] Cardoso, "Mexican Emigration to the United States" 47.

1904, which restricted Japanese immigration to the United States. Mexican labor also presented a threat to the Mexican-American community in the United States. David Gutierrez points out that prior to the Mexican-American War Mexican labor filled the lowest unskilled jobs in the United States. He states,

> Finding their access to skilled occupations, professions, and service jobs severely restricted, Mexican American workers were compelled either to accept semiskilled or unskilled occupations or to enter the growing stream of migrant agricultural workers. To make matters worse, the concentration of Mexican American workers in these low-status occupations in many ways helped reinforce and perpetuate negative stereotypes about "Mexicans'" native abilities, for over time Americans in the Southwest came associate Mexican Americans with unskilled labor.[88]

Gutierrez derives his analysis from the views of farmers who described them as submissive, cheap, and able to endure practically any condition, arguing that this institutionalized label stuck not only to Mexican workers who were coming to the United States, but to Mexican-Americans as well. Gutierrez states, "Indeed, this status became institutionalized in some ways by the emergence of an ethnic division of labor characterized by a dual wage structure, in which Mexican workers were constantly paid less than 'white' workers performing the same work. By the turn of the century the dual wage system was a characteristic feature of virtually all industries employing Mexican and other ethnic workers throughout the Southwest."[89] This branding as reliable, easily exploited, and cheap distinguishes the Mexican worker throughout the period of study. Even as workers from Mexico crossed into the United States, capital from the United

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[88] David Gutierrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 24.

[89] Ibid., 25.

States went into Mexico and as it did so, it reproduced the racist system of job and wage discrimination that already existed in the Southwest.

2.2 Mexico's Economic Miracle under Díaz

Díaz asserted his rule through repression and corruption. Alan Knight explains, "The Porfirian regime gave Mexico a generation of unprecedented peace and stability. The Pax Porfiriana was, of course, a flawed peace, based on recurrent repression as well as popular consensus; nevertheless, the continuity of government, local and national, and the absence of serious civil war, contrasted with the endemic political conflict of the fifty years after Independence."[90] Díaz had the support of despotic, regional leaders who ruled Mexico with a "blend of self interest and oppression tempered by inefficiency, sloth, and complacency, displaying an overriding loyalty to the dictator."[91] The Díaz regime became increasingly repressive, ignoring or silencing those who disagreed with its policies. "The slogan of the Porfiriato summed it up; 'mucha administración y poca política'—'plenty of administration and not too much politics.'"[92]

Mexico became fragmented and divided under Díaz, leading to immigration and an uprising. Díaz had succeeded in polarizing the upper and

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[90] Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution: Porfirian, Liberal, and Peasants*, *Vol 1.* (Cambridge: University Press, 1986), 15.

[91] Ibid., 35.

[92] Ibid., 15.

lower classes; his policies left many Mexicans unable to survive in their country and awakened the possibility of escape to the United States to relieve social and economic pressures. Immigration was largely ignored during the Díaz presidency. Carey McWilliams states, "From the inception of the Díaz regime, a degree of quiet prevailed along the border until the break of the Mexican Revolution."[93] Cardoso also confirms this, stating, "There was no immediate response by the Porfirian government to reports of large outflows of peasant workers. Díaz's government, preoccupied with colonization of Mexico by Europeans, seemed to place little value on peon and campesino labor. As early as 1902, however, state officials and provincial newspapers spoke of emigration but carefully refrained from direct criticism of the federal government's do-nothing attitude."[94] It was not surprising, then, that this abandonment took place. Díaz was more focused on modernizing Mexico than on who left the country. Jaime Aguila states,

> Although the Porfirian objectives followed a blueprint constituted during the Juárez presidency, the world economic factors and Díaz's own political ambitions resulted in a more conservative scheme for transforming into a modern society. Large-scale immigration was an unexpected consequence of this process, and in response policy-makers reformed the consular structure to assist Mexicans abroad.

Immigration pressured the Díaz regime to pay some attention to immigration, as with the development of consular services abroad, however, Díaz's modernization plan did not address the lower sector of society. One Jalisco

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[93] Carey McWilliams, *North from Mexico: The Spanish-Speaking People of the United States* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 111.

[94] Cardoso, "Mexican Emigration to the United States" 58.

newspaper noticed that people were leaving in "alarming figures" in 1902.[95] A Catholic newspaper added that "...the whole northern frontier was being depopulated to satisfy the needs of the United States."[96] The failure of this plan to include the lower sectors of society effectively alienated it and pushed peasants and workers away, fitting into a larger plan for the nation that did not include them.

The new relationship between the United States and Mexico during the Porfiriato failed to extend beyond its economic nature, meaning little for Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in the United States. It even "prompted a ferocious backlash,"[97] particularly among new arrivals. Mexicans were treated as second-class citizens and as a cultural threat to American society, failing to reflect the newfound partnership between Mexican and American elites. New arrivals to the United States from the 1880s through World War I were defined as "racial degenerates unfit for social equality or citizenship."[98] Mexico was "[a] fractured society, a disgruntled, but silent elite, a desperate lower class, and a president who had ruled beyond his time marked the end of an era that took a decade to die."[99] Stability covered up vast inequities that eventually gave rise to the first American revolution of the twentieth century (1910-1920). The reaction to Díaz

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[95] Ibid., 58.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Heber Johnson, *Revolution in Texas,* 49.

[98] Ibid.

[99] William H. Beezly and Colin M. Maclachlan*, Mexicans in Revolution 1910-1946: An Introduction* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 9.

and his administration and the political havoc that ensued not only divided the country, but created an atmosphere of anarchy. William Beezly and Colin Maclachlan argue that "[t]he Mexican Revolution resulted from a decidedly different context and program. The successes, not the failure, of the previous regime generated these revolutionaries."[100] Díaz and his loyalists eventually alienated members of his own party, the Liberals, and a substantial part of the general populace.[101] The upheaval that began in 1910-1911 forced him into exile in Paris. He left with the famous words, "¡Pobre México! ¡Tan lejos de Dios y tan cerca de los Estados Unidos!" (Poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the United States!).[102] The Revolution ended Díaz's reign and, more to the point of this study, profoundly influenced migration between Mexico and the United States and the attitudes that surrounded it, contributing to the tense relationship between the two nations. The view of Mexican immigrants worsened as Díaz's Mexico fell apart and the Mexican Revolution ensued (1910-20), leaving many Mexicans no other choice but to emigrate to the United States. It impacted life north of the border, as American investments in Mexico were lost, the Mexican elite fled, and a massive exodus began among the lower classes to escape the violence that ensued. The Revolution made the United States a natural escape

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[100] Ibid., 11.

[101] Adolfo Gilly, *The Mexican Revolution: A People's History* (New York: New Press, 2006), 45.

[102] Alan Riding, *Distant Neighbors: A Portrait of the Mexicans* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 318.

valve from Mexico's social and economic turmoil, but created new tensions in U.S.-Mexican relations.

2.3 Treatment of Mexicans in the United States in the 1910s and 20s

As Mexican violence reached its peak between 1913 and 1918, the United States experienced massive growth, particularly in the Southwest, creating a pull for cheap Mexican labor.[103] This pull was based on U.S. involvement in World War I. At first, this involved U.S. sales to the belligerents, especially Great Britain, but this was followed in 1917 when the United States joined Britain and France against Germany. As laborers were recruited to serve in the war effort, the industrial sector demanded imported labor to fulfill its needs. Camille Guerin Gonzales explains, "…industrial development in the United States created a demand for a large number of unskilled and semiskilled, low-wage workers. Unemployment and other dislocations in Mexico and the presence of jobs in the United States set the stage for Mexican immigration." A shortage of labor ensued as African Americans and Caucasians were drafted to serve in the military.[104] World War I reinforced Mexicans as prized workers.[105] After the war, agricultural output continued to rise, increasing the demand for Mexican labor. Cletus Daniel explains,

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[103] Mario T. Garcia, *Desert Immigrants. The Mexicans of El Paso, 1880-1920* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), 2.

[104] Camile Guerin Gonzales, "Cycles of Immigration and Repatriation: Mexican Farm Workers in California Industrial Agriculture, 1900-1940" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Riverside, 1985), 77.

[105] Richard Mimes, *Developing a Community Tradition of Migration to the United States: A Field Study in Rural Zacatecas, Mexico, and California Settlement Areas* (La Jolla: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, 1981), 15.

> By the mid-1920s Mexicans not only had become main stays of the agricultural labor force, but had displaced the Chinese in the employers' conception of ideal farmworkers. This change in attitude derived from two simple facts: Mexicans were available in abundant supply, and employers soon realized that social, political, and economic forces combined to render Mexican farmworkers as powerless as they had the Chinese a generation before.[106]

As the numbers of emigrants grew with the escalation of the Revolution, the Mexican government, itself in disarray and the object of a good deal of the fighting, paid even less attention to the problem and did little to prevent such movements. During the years of unrest, approximately 700,000 of its citizens fled Mexico to seek refuge in the United States.[107] The outflow continued with the dislocations caused by a feeble recovery in the 1920s. According to George Sanchez, "This process eventually made Mexico one of the largest single sources of immigration to the United States. For Mexico the migration resulted in the loss of about 10 percent of its total population by 1930."[108] The pattern of emigration reveals a strong continuity between what had begun under Díaz and continued after the Revolution.

Within the United States, the massive wave of Mexican immigration suppressed wages in U.S. agriculture as Mexicans became the best alternative to work in practically any condition and for lower wages than the Chinese coolies,

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[106] Daniel, *Bitter Harvest.*

[107] Thomas Dublin, *Immigrant Voices: New Lives in America. 1973-1986* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 203.

[108] George Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 20.

Japanese, and Filipinos. Lawrence Cardoso points out that "[t]he campesinos rarely complained about work camp conditions and were generally judged better and more docile workers than Europeans or Asiatics." Perhaps more importantly, Mexicans worked for a lower wage than any other group; a dollar or more per day for common labor work offered a powerful inducement to the poor peon or campesino from Mexico."[109]

The controversial debates about Mexican immigration in the twentieth century to the United States have their roots in this period, as immigrant labor was welcomed, but its culture was not, despite a strong Hispanic presence in the Southwest. "Not surprisingly, the Mexican question soon bulked large in the American foreign policy, and U.S.-Mexican relations—which had been usually cordial in the thirty years preceding the Revolution—deteriorated rapidly."[110] Native labor in the United States resented Mexicans and soon the immigrants faced "prejudice, segregation, economics, and other societal factors"[111] that are reflected in the way that Americans and the American media referred to them in this period. For example, one El Paso physician warned his community: "They are aliens, civilians, indigent, unhygienic and liable to become public charges. In fact, they are obnoxious to every law governing the admission of aliens into the United States."[112] Such disapproval of Mexicans by Americans was

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[109] Cardoso, "Mexican Emigration to the United States," 51.

[110] Knight, *U.S.-Mexican Relations, 1910-1940,* 1.

[111] Guerin Gonzales, "Cycles of Immigration and Repatriation," 16.

[112] Garcia, *Desert Immigrants*, 41.

commonplace, providing the chance for Americans to criticize the influx of Mexicans. Mass Mexican immigration presented a real threat to the Anglo population's cultural ethos for the first time since the Mexican-American War.

The atmosphere of cultural and racial stigmatization that surrounded the Mexican presence in the United States allowed for the segregation and manipulation of immigrants. For example, contractors fostered racism and pitted Mexicans and other ethnic workers against each other to drive down wages.[113] Within the United States, Mexicans had no help from their government or from associations they created. The U.S.-Mexican border serves as an example, as it became redefined as an area of constant flow of products and illegal immigration. Knight explains, "[d]uring the Revolution, U.S. border towns boomed as centers of supply and as ports of entry for over a quarter of a million migrants, who were pulled north by the U.S. wartime boom just they were pushed north by the conditions of upheaval, unemployment, and hunger in Mexico."[114] The desperation that plagued the border area left Mexican exiles (specifically the poorest Mexican immigrants) vulnerable to social and racial abuses. Despite these antagonisms, Mexican workers in the United States found ways to adapt. They settled in *barrios* and camps that "were segregated from the residence of other groups. They did so partly because of racial discrimination and prejudice

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[113] Guerin Gonzales, "Cycles of Immigration and Repatriation," 80-81.

[114] Knight, *U.S.-Mexican Relations,* 95.

and partly out of a sense of self-protection."[115] They slowly etched out a detached space in American society.

The pressures that immigration put on border communities shaped the American treatment of Mexicans for years. Criticism was directed at the Mexican government and manifested in negative attitudes toward newcomers. Poorer Mexicans, who represented the bulk of these refugees, received the brunt of such treatment, although those seeking asylum in the north did not represent a single class or experience.[116] Nativist attitudes appeared throughout the Southwest. One letter sent to the *El Paso Times* in 1914 reflected concerns about the burgeoning Mexican population. Its author warns readers "against the dangers to public health" that Mexicans could bring to the El Paso area. [117] Another resident voiced the complaint that Mexicans were ungrateful of U.S. generosity. "I cannot understand what the United States is coming to, when it allows a foreign disturbing element to come to this country and break all laws and go unpunished, as they do in El Paso."[118] Such attitudes and generalizations were the result of pressures that border communities felt in the midst of such an increase in immigration and permeated the American mindset at the time,

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[115] Guerin Gonzales, "Cycles of Immigration and Repatriation," 55.

[116] Garcia, *Desert Immigrants*, 41; Garcia argues that there were two types of Mexican immigrants, political and economic. The Mexican revolution did not discriminate who it expelled to the United States. Garcia states, "[h]undreds of political refugees, both rich and poor, fled Mexico to escape the persecution by the different warring factions." This included doctors, lawyers, farmers, and soldiers who did not want to fight for Díaz.

[117] Ibid., 41.

[118] Ibid., 42.

establishing the foundation for the treatment of Mexicans in the United States for years to come.

Mexico by and large failed to address the treatment of its people in the United States. The issue of emigration was eclipsed by the Revolution. Mexican consuls in the United States were officially charged with aiding immigrants to that country, but as Jaime Aguila explains,

> In September 1917, the SRE [Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores or Foreign Relations Secretariat] received several complaints from Mexicans who had been victims of assaults or had their rights violated within the American judicial system. Most had appealed to their consul because they felt that they did not have any other recourse since the offenders were all American officials. Local authorities generally refused to act in cases that involved Mexicans and consuls were usually ineffective without the support of higher diplomatic pressure. The most significant obstacle was that a standardized procedure for addressing such incidents besides submitting reports was nonexistent.[119]

The failure to address abuses at this level allowed them to perpetuate and be ignored. The government was also busy improving its image in the eyes of the American and international press. Therefore, discussions of exploitative working conditions and racism suffered by Mexicans in the United States were dismissed.[120] The Mexican government's policy was "reactive" and "incapable of controlling the phenomenon, helpless either to discourage or contain the flow, and in no position to refuse to take back deported compatriots."[121] This trend

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[119] Aguila, "Protecting 'Mexico de Afuera," 32.

[120] Jorge Durand, "Immigration Policy and the Asymmetry of Power: The Mexican Case, 1900-2000," in *Citizenship and Those that Leave: The Politics of Emigration and Expatriation,* eds. Nancy L. Green and François Weil (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 226.

[121] Ibid.

continued as successive Mexican governments paid little attention to their countrymen moving north.[122]

The wave of immigration incited dialogue around where Mexicans and Mexican Americans stood within American society. The debate that surfaced recalls conversations that followed the Mexican-American War. Americans questioned whether Mexicans were capable of adapting to American life and if it was worth it to allow them to reside permanently or remain temporarily. Popular opinion about Mexican immigrants ranged from acceptance to open abhorrence, however, this debate focused primarily around race and culture as inhibiting the Mexican's ability to assimilate. The following dialogue between immigration opponent Adolph J. Sabath and Adolph J.T. Whitehead, a farmer from Nebraska, was recorded before Congress in 1926 as it debated restricting Mexican immigration.[123]

> Mr. Sabath: Do you think the Mexican would make a much better neighbor than the European?
> Mr. Whitehand: No sir; I would hardly say that, but the Mexican does not become a neighbor. The Mexican is a child, naturally.
> Mr. Sabath: Some of them are pretty tough Children, are they not?
> Mr. Whitehand: Some Children need a good deal of discipline.[124]

A more sympathetic view was presented by the Reverend Vernon Monroe McCombs, a "superintendent of Latin American Missions of the Methodist

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[122] For more on Mexican consulates in the United States, see Gilbert Gonzalez's *Mexican Consuls and Labor Organizing: Imperial Politics in the American Southwest* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999).

[123] Robert J. Lipshultz, "American Attitudes toward Mexican Immigration, 1924-1952" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1962), 5.

[124] Ibid. Citing Charles A. Thomson, "Mexican Interpretation," National Conference of Social Work, Proceeding, LV (1928), 503.

Episcopal Church, and a pioneer in the education of Anglo-Americans about their Mexican brethren," who was very critical of the ignorance and racist attitudes held by Americans toward Mexicans, and who saw a future for Mexicans in the United States.[125] In 1925 Reverend McCombs stated:

> We have largely ignored Mexico as far as constructive help is concerned, but we cannot permanently ignore the hundreds of thousands of Mexicans who have dug their way with pick and shovel into the life of our country. Over vast areas in the Southwest we are entirely dependent upon the Mexican. His children and his children's will live there [sic] as American citizens. They will help to elect our presidents; they will help establish our moral, political and religious ideals and practices. Our future is bound with theirs. We must think about them; we must come to know them; we must work with them in the constructive and worthwhile things of life.[126]

His words demonstrate a far less represented side of the debate that focused on the possible contributions that the Mexican immigrant could make to American society. Other records reveal mixed feelings about Mexican immigration at this time, recognizing its economic importance and the need for Mexican labor, but frustrated by the social and cultural elements that came with it. S. Parker Friselle, a representative of the California Federated Farm Bureau, declared to the California House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization in 1926:[127]

> We gentlemen, are just as anxious as you are to build the civilization of California or any other western district upon a Mexican foundation. We take him [the Mexican] because there is nothing else available to us… We would prefer white agricultural labor and we recognize the social problem incident to the importation of Mexicans. We are loath to burden our State

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[125] Ibid., 38.

[126] Ibid., 39. Lipschultz cites Vernon Monroe McCombs, *From Over the Border* (New York: Council for Home Missions and Missionary Education Movement, 1925).

[127] Ibid., 1.

> with this type of immigrant, but….it seems that we have no choice in the matter. The Mexican seems to be our only available supply.[128]

In the end, economics trumped social and cultural concerns. The debate over immigration, however, at least recognized the importance of Mexican labor to the nations' material life.

The dialogue that began in this period ended with the collapse of the U.S. stock market in 1929 and the economic depression that marked the 1930s. The economic need for Mexican labor was over and cultural fears prevailed. White Americans soon demanded the deportation of Mexicans and Mexican Americans, drawing little distinction between the two. This propelled an unexpected challenge for Mexico, as it received both Mexicans and Mexican Americans into the country. This influx of return migrants and their children via the repatriation campaigns of the 1930s demonstrated just how unprepared Mexican authorities were to deal with the needs and challenges that they presented. Mexican authorities displayed astounding ignorance of Mexican treatment in the United States and failed to grasp the consequences that it would have for the unity of the nation, further destabilizing it. By failing to deal with the problem as it came and treating them poorly, the Mexican government established a pattern that would reverberate for decades to come.

2.4 Depression and Return

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[128] Ibid. Lipshultz cites Louise F. Shields, "Mexicans Ambassadors of Good Will," *The World Tomorrow* 11 (February 1928), 81.

The economic calamity of 1929 caused millions of Americans to lose their savings and their jobs, and consumer and investor confidence plummeted.[129] It affected the United States as well as the rest of the world and brought international trade to the "brink of failure."[130] The economic crisis left the United States with high unemployment. With such hard times came a desperate working class that was "shamed and beaten down by prolonged inability to provide for their families."[131] Massive internal migrations caused by farmers escaping the Dust Bowl in the prairies added to hard times, bringing more competition for jobs, most notably in places like California. Despite the many complex reasons for Wall Street's collapse, desperate Americans began to point the blame at more immediate societal factors such as immigrants, and Mexican immigrants in particular. Camille Guerin Gonzales explains, "[t]he low social and economic position of Mexican immigrant workers made them especially vulnerable to efforts on the part of governmental authorities to find a panacea for the Depression."[132] As the American media and public sentiment more generally turned against them, Mexicans and Mexican Americans feared forced removal from the United States. Guerin Gonzales explains, "Fear spread through Mexican communities around the United States, and Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans fled the United States in the belief they would be soon

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[129] Robert F. Himmelberg, *Great Depression and the New Deal* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2000), 7.

[130] Ibid., 8.

[131] Ibid.

[132] Guerin Gonzales, "Cycles of Immigration and Repatriation," 103.

deported."[133] Ernesto Galarza adds about the era that "[t]he fear of deportation often takes the proportion of community psychosis, affecting even those who have legal status as resident aliens."[134]

Just a year earlier, Mexico had been on the road to recovery and views about emigration were changing. In July 1929, *El Excelsior* published an article in which the emigrant who was so easily let go a decade earlier was again considered as an important part of the nation.

> These men immigrated in search of better luck, and many times found the opposite. But if Mexico can give them paying work and even opportunities to build a fortune, it is likely that they will return to their homeland, where they will find a more suitable environment for their character and customs. What are they doing abroad when there are abundant sources of unexploited riches in our country that await labor and capital?[135]

This attitude changed when the depression hit Mexico. Thus, the task of returning to Mexico proved a challenge for this population in several ways. Returnees met with hostility on various levels, representing new competition at the local level and a burden to the government.

Repatriation was difficult and costly to the Mexican government, making it a small priority on the national agenda. As Gilbert G. Gonzalez explains,

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[133] Ibid., 104-105.

[134] Quoted by Guerin Gonzales in "Cycles of Immigration and Repatriation," 83.

[135] "Emigración México-EE.UU-la repatriación de los trabajadores mexicanos," *Excélsior*, 24 July 1929, Archivo de Lerdo de Tejada, H04307, Folder 508, Year XIII, Volume IV, Number 4. "Esos hombres que emigraron en busca de mejor suerte, que muchas veces les fue contraria; pero si México les puede proporcionar trabajo rumenador y aún oportunidades de labrar una fortuna, lo natural, lo probable es que regresen a su patria, donde encontrarán un ambiente más propicio a su carácter y costumbres. ¿Qué hacen en el extranjero cuando en nuestro país hay abundatísimas fuentes de riqueza inexplotada, que solo esperan la mano del hombre y el capital?"

"[r]epatriation, like emigration restriction, never assumed a priority status on the agenda of Mexican domestic politics until pressured by U.S. demands for the return of unemployed and welfare cases in the late 1920s and 1930s." [136] These new pressures forced Mexico to realize that the problems its own emigration caused belonged to more than just the United States; they were theirs as well.[137] Some measure of bilateral cooperation existed in this effort, as Mexican consulates in the United States helped with the paperwork for repatriation and the cost of train tickets, and food was provided by charitable American organizations. However, once the deportee set foot on Mexican soil the Mexican government was reluctant to aid him any further. As Gonzalez explains, "[r]epatriation, as policy extended to emigrantes, never garnered the interest of Mexican authorities."[138] To the extent that Mexico did pay attention to repatriation, its focus was primarily on controlling the negative impacts that returnees would bring to Mexico rather than facilitating their assimilation and integrating them. The Mexican government complained about the effect their presence would have in Mexico. The American Spanish-language newspaper, *La Opinión*, referred to their return in a column entitled "Regreso no muy airoso" ("Not a Very Graceful Return") in 1931, challenging the view of repatriates as failures or a burden to the national agenda. It argues that they should be viewed

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[136] Gilbert G. Gonzales, *Mexican Consuls and Labor Organizing: Imperial Politics in the American Southwest* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 31.

[137] Ibid.

[138] Ibid., 32.

as great "heroic workers who with their hard work, sweat, tears, and life have contributed to the development of the American Southwest." It emphasizes their potential to the nation in the process of rebuilding and progress in the form of valuable experience and skills in railroad construction and agriculture.[139] *La Opinión* argued that these workers should be given support and credit for their hard work and that the Mexican government should take advantage of their skills. Authorities did not agree. Returnees soon discovered that they were an unknown and unwanted class in Mexican society. The Mexican government was bound to help them in minimal ways, promising fair and respectful treatment, but delivering neither.[140]

This discrepancy is shown in the correspondence between government officials and José I. Delgado, President of the General Union of Mexican Workers in the United States of America (Unión General de Trabajadores Mexicanos en los EE.UU de América), based in Dallas, Texas, which represented 1,000 Mexican workers. Delgado sent two letters to Mexican government representatives, one to Género Estrada, Secretary of External Relations, and another to Pascual Ortiz Rubio, President of Mexico, to outline the problems that Mexicans faced in this period and seek help to repatriate 1,000 Mexicans with dignity. The letter to Estrada expressed concerns about internal competition, racism, and the government's inaction.

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[139] "Regreso no muy airoso," *La Opinión,* 15 August 1931, Archivo de Lerdo de Tejada, M83060, Folder 3 (Migración), 112.

[140] Gonzales, *Mexican Consuls and Labor Organizing*, 32.

> For more than six months Mexican workers have been substituted by blacks and Americans at our cost. They have given us unemployment and death because we lack the means to keep on living. To date, nothing has been done to help remedy our unemployment or lack of food for our families. We believe it proper to address the President of the Republic and this branch of our government so that they can help these countrymen with their return to their homeland. By proceeding in this way we believe it is our highly patriotic duty to address our representatives in this letter, exposing our current living conditions so that you might respond in the most appropriate fashion. [141]

The other letter, sent to President Pascual Ortiz Rubio (1930-1932) on January 27, 1931, reaffirmed this plea for help and outlined the horrible conditions these Mexican nationals confronted in Texas.

> We wish to inform you, Mr. President, that we have been excluded from all contractor and city jobs for more than six months. We are prejudiced by these measures, which are taken to protect the nationalist spirit of the natives of this country who also need jobs under the current conditions. Lately this country's Immigration Department has worked against our countrymen, carrying out mass deportations of Mexicans, returning them to Mexico in disastrous conditions, putting our members at similar risk. Given these measures, we believe it our highly patriotic duty to address you with the stated goals to solicit national representation and help for our repatriation, with consideration of the fatal consequences that remaining in this country without jobs and without resources would bring. [142]

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[141] Letter from the Unión General de Trabajadores Mexicanos en los EE.UU de América to C. Genero Estrada, Mexican consulate of Dallas, Texas (27 January 1931), Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores Archive, IV-349-1, 9.
"Hace más de seis meses que los obreros Mexicanos han estado siendo substituidos en sus puestos por negros y americanos en prejuicio nuestro, ya que a nosotros nos han enviado a la desocupación y a la muerte por falta de medios para seguir viviendo."
"Como hasta la fecha no se ha hecho nada efectivo a favor nuestro para remediar en algo la desocupación y la falta de alimentos para nuestras familias, hemos creído conveniente dirigirnos al C. Presidente de la República y a esa Dependencia de nuestro Gobierno para que si a bien lo tienen ayuden al grupo de compatriotas mencionado para su regreso al patrio suelo."
"Al obrar así creemos un deber de alto patriotismo dirigirnos a nuestros representantes en esa exponiéndoles nuestras actuales condiciones, para que si a bien lo tienen nos comunique los más conveniente al caso."

[142] Letter to President Pascual Ortiz Rubio from the Unión General de Trabajadores Mexicanos en los EE.UU de América (27 January 1931), Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores Archive, IV-349-1, 2.

The Mexican government responded on February 12, 1931, stating quite bluntly that the Mexican government did not have the money to meet the union's request.[143] However, another letter sent to the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores by the consul of San Antonio, Texas, on February 25, 1931, offers different reasons why the union's request might not have been fulfilled. The consul disputed the legitimacy of the union, claiming that it took advantage of the "ignorance of our humble workers," it could not be trusted due to internal disputes, and that as such, its requests should be ignored. Delgado tries to bring attention to the situation by writing to the president, but the government refuses to aid them, demonstrating the selectivity of the government in aiding repatriates. The union's nonaffiliation with the consulate or the government suggests a reason for its refusal.

Delgado's reference to patriotism in his plea is significant in that the Mexican government presented the issue of repatriation as its patriotic duty. It even hoped that it would benefit the nation in some way. "They were transported free of cost to various places in the country. Despite the unflattering economic

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"Hacemos saber a Ud. Señor Presidente, que desde ya hace más de seis meses se nos está excluyendo de todos los trabajos de los contratistas y de la ciudad, y que estas son medidas tomadas en nuestro prejuicio, para proteger el espíritu nacionalista de los nativos de este país que también necesita del trabajo en las actuales condiciones. Como el Departamento de Migración de este País últimamente ha estado obrando ligeramente en contra de nuestros compatriotas efectuando deportaciones en masa de Mexicanos regresándolos a México en condiciones desastrosas y esperando los suscritos correr el mismo riesgo. dadas las medidas anteriormente tomadas, hemos creído un deber de alto patriotismo dirigirnos a Ud. con los fines ya citados para solicitar de esa alta representación Nacional, una ayuda para nuestra repatriación, teniendo en cuenta las fatales consecuencias que traería nuestra permanencia en este País sin trabajo y sin recursos."

[143] Ibid.

situation that we are experiencing, the national treasury invested large sums of money in this pious, humanitarian, and highly patriotic project, that is in the end beneficial to the Republic."[144] As repatriates began to return to Mexico, national newspapers emphasized the economic burden that they placed on the country. For example, an editorial in *El Universal* on July 28, 1932, stated "…it seems that the sacrifices that this country has made in the last few years for the repatriation, undoubtedly costly, tend to have no return because of the repatriates themselves."[145] A level of frustration surrounded the repatriation, as the sacrifices that the Mexican government made appeared to flounder. The nation expected to receive some benefit from this sacrifice, which did not surface.

The Mexican government recognized and feared the enormous economic impact of the deportations on the nation. At this point Mexico suffered from high unemployment, since recuperation from the Revolution was slow and its economy was very fragile. In December 1930, the Advisory Board on Migration (Consejo Consultivo de Migración) declared that one of the nation's biggest problems was the repatriate flow of the deported adding to the ranks of the

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[144] "La repatriación de los deportados es un serio problema para el gobierno," *La Presa Unidad de México*, 12 December 1930, Archivo de Lerdo de Tejada, H04307.
"Gratuitamente fueron transportados a diversos lugares del país. El tesoro nacional, no obstante la situación económica nada halagüeña porque atravesamos, invirtió gruesas sumas de dinero en esa obra no ya humanitaria y piadosa, sino altamente patriótica, y, en el fondo, benéfica para la República."

[145] Ibid.
"Sin embargo, parece que los sacrificios que para el país significa la repatriación, indudablemente costosísima, en los últimos anos emprendida, tienden a parte a ser estériles por culpa de los propios repatriados."

unemployed.[146] It did hope, however, to harness any advantages it could from the returnees. "State governments established agricultural colonies for repatriates in order to take advantage of the skills they had learned in the United States."[147] They were quickly "…abandoned when disillusioned colonists walked out with disgust"[148] because of miserable conditions, primitive housing, and shortages of food.[149] One repatriate stated, "[t]he soil is rich, all right…[b]ut people who aren't born there can't live very long."[150] The colonies were intended to represent the good intentions of the Mexican government, but instead became symbols of rejection.

Official fears about the returnees increased. Their concerns represent the level of economic instability and how little they knew about the history of immigration to the United States in the prior 15 years. The way that returnees were received was handled as a solitary phenomenon, demonstrating no connection between immigration and the Revolution; its cause had been forgotten. For example, José Angel Ceniceros, Mexico's Foreign Relations Subsecretary under President Cárdenas, expressed concern that repatriates represented a great risk to Mexico: "[repatriates] have grown accustomed to live on public charities [in the United States] and do not attempt to find work beyond

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[146] Ibid.

[147] Guerin Gonzales, "Cycles of Immigration and Repatriation," 156.

[148] Ibid., 34.

[149] R. Reynolds McKay, "Texas Mexican Repatriation during the Great Depression" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1982), 430.

[150] Guerin Gonzales, "Cycles of Immigration and Repatriation," 157-58.

that which they are obligated to by state or municipal public works once or twice a week."[151] He feared that these countrymen had acquired poor work habits while in the United States. Ceniceros regretted the large number of repatriates because they "lack skill training and who have acquired dangerous idle habits over the last years of the economic crisis."[152] His fear was based in the idea that poorly educated and unskilled *campesinos* would return to Mexico. Quite plainly, they would not fit the national plan for progress and nationalism and would possibly become public charges. He concluded that among those thousands of repatriates there were not enough "artisans—carpenters, plumbers electricians, shoemakers"—the kind of skilled return migrants that the nation needed.[153] As Gilbert Gonzalez states, "[n]egative portrayals like those of Cisneros filtered down into the lower echelons of the government bureaucracy and opened the door to a host of troubles faced by returning citizens and noncitizen dependents."[154] This negativity became common among top Mexican officials and set the stage for the development of even harsher view of repatriates.

Various levels of government echoed the official line about the repatriated. T.R. Vázquez, Consul of Mexico in Denver, Colorado, and a self-proclaimed expert on the issue, worried in a letter to the Secretary of External Relations that

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[151] Ibid.

[152] Ibid.

[153] Ibid.

[154] Ibid.

returnees would harm their nation.[155] He compliments the Secretary on the government's repatriation efforts, especially its provision of "excellent train carts" for transporting the returnees;[156] he then rants about how ungrateful the repatriates are to himself and to the Mexican authorities in the United States, "…the saddest thing, the most painful, is that they have come here talking and denigrating the government of our country."[157] His experience reflects this disconnect between the push that the Revolution incited and the repatriation. In addition to currying favor with his own administration, he, of course, was not from the same class as the immigrants—the letter reflects the complete lack of sympathy for their situation. He phrases his concerns in terms of *mexicanidad* ("Mexican-ness"). His choice of words indicates the distance between his government and the returnees. He categorizes repatriates as opportunistic and their children as foreigners,[158] stating:

> Unfortunately, these workers…are uncivilized and unconscious, failing to inculcate love and respect for our country, its flag, and our national heroes into the tender hearts of their children. As a result, they breed a new generation that has no love for our country and, in this manner, we will avoid these generations born to our nation abroad constituting a threat to our nationality in the future, as with Texan Mexico and the pochos of Arizona, California, and New Mexico[159]

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[155] Letter to the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores from Y.M. Vasquez (19 August 1932), Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores Archive, 16-10-122, 203-4.

[156] Ibid.

[157] Ibid., 2.
"Pero lo más triste, lo más doloroso, es que han venido hablando y denigrando al Gobierno de nuestro país."

[158] Ibid.

[159] Ibid., 3.

He adds,

> It is shameful that every time they have the opportunity they publicly deny their nationality and their ancestors due to their total ignorance. Their parents are solely responsible for neglecting the education of their children in this sense. It is a sad contrast that while an infinite number of foreigners try to immigrate to our country daily, ours, by contrast, form an exodus toward the north, where every day they are scoffed, insulted, and humiliated.[160]

His words demonstrate the gap that existed between Mexican diplomats and the Mexican working class in this period. He was frustrated by what he considered the population's naivety and lack of patriotism, and feared that they had no desire to really return to Mexico, using their deportation as a holiday visit with the true intention of returning to the United States.[161] His comments reflect the frustration and impotence that the Mexican government exhibited when dealing with issues of immigration and the fear that the return on this investment would not pay off.

The financial burden of repatriation took its toll, particularly among communities along Mexico's northern border that were saturated with returnees.

"Pues desgraciadamente este elemento trabajador, por lo general, es gente inculta e inconsciente que descuidan lastimosamente el inculcar en los tiernos corazones de sus hijos el amor y respeto a su patria, a su bandera y a nuestros héroes, dando por resultado que se cría una nueva generación que no tiene ningún amor hacia nuestro país y de esa manera evitaremos que estas generaciones nacidas a nuestro pueblos mexicano en el extranjero, vengan a constituirse, en el futuro, en una amenaza para nuestra nacionalidad, como ha resultado con el México tejano y los pochos de Arizona, California y Nuevo México."

[160] Ibid.
"No tienen empacho y cada vez que tienen oportunidad, públicamente niegan ser descendientes de nuestra nacionalidad y de nuestros ancestros, debido todo esto, a su ignorancia completa y que son únicamente responsables sus padres por haber descuidado la educación de sus hijos en este sentido. Es un triste contraste que mientras infinidad de extranjeros diariamente tratan de emigrar a nuestro país, los nuestros, por el contrario, forman el éxodo hacia el Norte, donde diariamente son vejados, insultados, y humillados."

[161] Ibid.

Local governments, such as that in Baja California, were especially concerned about returnees intensifying the competition for already scarce jobs.[162] Although returnees were by and large Mexican, they were considered outsiders in every region and thus faced the same economic resentments south as they had north of the border. In 1931 in Monterrey, Nuevo León, an editorial referred to the influx of Mexican repatriates as "a heavy burden" on the city and complained of the insufficient support that the federal government gave them. "Because the wave of repatriates that came before them were treated like never before and given resources, now everyone thinks that Monterrey is obliged to receive every repatriate who crosses the border."[163] Border cities felt the burden of helping repatriates continue on their way home,[164] presenting competition for jobs and resources with locals. The national government complied with its minimal responsibility to bring Mexicans south, but once there they were on their own.

On the individual level, the cultural transition was harsh for returnees. For some, Mexico was a vague memory; others had never seen it before. The transition implied confronting a new country, new laws, a new society, and a new culture, and the welcome returnees received was both disappointing and confusing. While Mexicans expected to return to their homeland and leave

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[162] Letter from the Mexican Ambassador to the United States (25 June 1931), Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores Archive, IV-352-31, 2.

[163] "Llegan repatriados a la C.D. de Monterrey," *Excélsior,* 18 April 1931, Archivo de Lerdo de Tejada, M83069 (Migración), 10.
"Y es que como a los repatriados anteriores se les trato aquí como no se les había tratado en ninguna parte, y se les proporcionaron recursos, ahora todos creen que Monterrey es algo a si como el hijo del obligado para recibir cuanta caravana de repatriados atraviese la línea divisoria"

[164] Herry W. Frantz, "Los mexicanos sienten la nostalgia de la patria," *La Prensa,* 10 July 1931, Archivo de Lerdo de Tejada, M83069 (Migración).

mistreatment behind, they instead had to defend their *mexicanidad*. Their children were now "too American."[165] The readjustment was difficult and as news spread of their difficulties, other possible repatriates feared any return. Gilbert Gonzalez states that this fear resounded along the border: "[Mexican] Migration personnel at the border were reported to have treated repatriates with subtle insults and overt contempt, and some repatriates complained of having to bribe migration authorities to smooth out 'improperly' filled out papers."[166] He adds, "A border journalist described the returnees massed at entries as 'stationed in waiting rooms and corridors of the customs houses, in front of the migration office and other public places, awaiting transportation…a very sad picture.'"[167] In Mexico repatriates suffered hunger and despair.

Soon, feelings of nostalgia set in. A repatriate and painter working at the National Theatre in Mexico City said, "I have made a terrible mistake. I should have stayed in the United States. Opportunities here are fewer than in the United States."[168] In the judgment of one historian, remorse and disillusionment upon returning to Mexico were common among returnees, "[t]he majority of repatriates had believed that life would be better back in the home country; they

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[165] Francisco E. Balderrma and Raymond Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in 1930s* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 243.

[166] Ibid.

[167] Ibid.

[168] Ibid., 35.

were sorely disappointed."[169] These feelings were common among repatriates who realized they were as unwanted in their home country as they were in the United States. As the aphorism goes: "Ni de aqui, ni de alla" ("from neither here nor there").

2.5 Xenophobia in Mexico

The Revolution, the economic difficulties of the 1920s, and the crash of 1929-1931 generated more intense nationalism and xenophobia than Mexico had seen prior to 1910. Immigration to Mexico had been encouraged under Díaz with the hope that the country would be modernized, colonized, civilized, and whitened with increased European immigration. However, the Revolution drove possible immigrants away. Immigration rebounded again in the mid-1920s as the Mexican economy recovered and new immigration laws in the United States prompted Mexicans and Europeans to look to Meso- and South America. Some came under colonization schemes, as with large groups of Russian immigrants who came to farm and populate rural areas.[170] Jewish immigrants also arrived in Mexico as anti-Semitism grew in Europe leading up to World War II. The most abundant group of new immigrants during this period, however, were the Chinese, who flooded Mexico in response to political violence and an economic crisis in China and deportation from the United States.[171]

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[169] Ibid.

[170] "La inmigración de campesinos rusos a México," *El Nacional Revolucionario,* 19 March 1931, Archivo de Lerdo de Tejada, H83069, 8.

Table 1. Immigration to Mexico from 1911-1923[172]

The Great Depression promoted nativism almost everywhere; Mexico was no exception. *La Prensa* published a column in 1931 representing the concerns of the Unión de Industriales Mexicanos (Mexican Industrials Union). It was distressed by immigrants who had been recruited to work in agriculture and were instead seeking other pursuits. "…[T]hey laugh—that's the word: laugh—at the hospitality that we extend to them, dedicating themselves to commercial activities that prejudice locals. This wrongdoing must be stopped and eradicated."[173] The letter concludes by stating:

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[171] "México pide ayuda a EU para evitar la entrada de chinos," *El Heraldo de Cuba,* 1931, Archivo de Lerdo de Tejada, H83069, 4.

[172] Departamento de Estadística Nacional, *Estadística Nacional*, 15 January 1925, Archivo de Lerdo de Tejada, N03099, 5.

[173] "Todavía los extranjeros indeseables," *La Prensa,* 19 March 1931, Archivo Lerdo de Tejada, H03069, 11.
"Y los cuales se burlan—esa es la palabra: burlan –la hospitalidad que les brindamos, dedicándose a actividades especialmente comerciales, de las que deriva gran prejuicio para los nativos, conviene que se tomen medidas eficaces para atajar primero y extirpar, el mal."

> …if this competition is illicit, if it is based in deceit toward our country and authorities, we should with even more reason devote greater political energies toward those negative elements that come to us from all over the world and fail to produce anything … [they] suck our riches dry, riches that are produced for Mexicans and should stay with us end up abroad.[174]

Economic competition led to immigrants being labeled thieves. Another editorial in 1931 states, "…these adventurous foreigners…come to see what they can take, in good faith and in bad, taking up to the last cent—that's why they came and that's why they leave."[175] Nativism led to xenophobic movements. National anti-Chinese and anti-semitic organizations formed and sent letters to the Mexican press, expressing their concerns about foreigners on Mexican soil. *El Universal* published one such missive, from the Asociación Anti-China (Anti-China Association) in 1931, with the usual fear of competition for jobs. [176] Immigrants were blamed for destabilizing and hurting local business by smuggling contraband and for causing "misery…for thousands of small Mexican merchants." These complaints were followed by calls for the Mexican government to close its doors to immigration.[177]

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[174] Ibid.
"Y si esa competencia es ilícita, si se funda en un engaño a nuestro país y autoridades, con mayores motivos hay que aplicar una política energética a los malos elementos que nos llegan de todas partes del mundo y que, sobre no producir—en el sentido neto de la palabra—chupan nuestras riqueza, la riqueza producida para los mexicanos que ven fugarse al extranjero las utilidades que deberían quedarse entre nosotros."

[175] "Gritos de angustia," *El Nacional Revolucionario,* 1931. Archivo Lerdo de Tejada, M83069, 3.
"Nunca en México queda de esas razas aventureras; vienen para ver que se llevan de buena y de mala fe, sacando siempre hasta el último centavo pies que para eso llegaron y por eso se van."

[176] "Intensa labor de la Asociación Antichina," *El Universal de México*, 9 March 1931, Archivo de Lerdo de Tejada, H03069, 9.

[177] Ibid.

Resentment eventually led to changes in local and national government policy. Governments were urged to keep track of and report foreigners within their boundaries.[178] In 1931 the Secretariat of Governance (Secretaría de Gobernación) proposed a program of "Pure Nationalism" to combat foreign influence and avoid the devaluation of Mexican culture and values.[179] It included the isolation of foreigners and the avoidance of their interaction with Mexican nationals. Thus, fears that related most directly to economic competition were expressed through concerns over cultural denigration.

The Chinese received the brunt of this xenophobic fervor. Their presence was interpreted as a threat to local economies as they quickly became involved in local commerce and were considered to take advantage of Mexican labor.[180] The heading from one editorial in *El Universal* warned "Chinese Steal Mexican Jobs."[181] They were "stereotyped as filthy, disease-ridden, money-grubbing, parasitic, and sexually threatening."[182] Similar characterizations were extended to Jewish populations within Mexico. Alan Knight points to the post-revolutionary Mexico of the 1930s as a period crucial to forming a national identity in which

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[178] See Appendix 1, a letter from the president of the Anti-Chinese and Nationalist League to the mayor of Acámbaro, asking him to document the presence of Chinese and other "harmful" immigrants within his municipality.

[179] "Nuevas orientaciones en nuestra migración," *El Nacional*, 10 June 1931, Archivo Lerdo de Tejada, M83069, 8.

[180] "El problema chino en México," *El Nacional Revolucionario*, 28 April 1931, Archivo Lerdo de Tejada, M83069, 27.

[181] "Los chinos arrebatan los trabajos a los mexicanos," *El Universal*, 1931, Archivo Lerdo de Tejada, M83069, 9.

[182] Knight, *U.S.-Mexican Relations,* 96.

anything that did not fit the ideal of *mexicanidad* was viewed with "irrational prejudice."[183] The government was overwhelmed by immigration and wanted to choose the foreign elements that the nation would incorporate. Race, religion, and economy all impacted interpretations of who should or should not be included in the national plan for progress.

The discourse that surrounds the returnee in this period is strikingly similar to that which surrounded immigrants under attack by Mexican nativism. Although prejudice toward the returnee was not racialized, they did not fit the current national agenda in many other ways. Regardless of the color of their skin or place of birth, their absence and adaption of American customs raised questions about their *mexicanidad*. Their differences and categorization as an inferior class, and thereby their ability to devalue Mexican culture represented a direct threat to the Pure Nationalism plan. The threat that repatriates brought to Mexico was not expressed as openly as that toward foreigners because regardless of their level of *mexicanidad*, they were still Mexican.

Then all of this began to change. The cause was, once again, the coming of a world war. By 1937, the most radical years of the nationalist government of Lázaro Cárdenas were over (the nationalization of the oil fields tends to obscure this fact). By 1940, the nation moved to the right, picking as the country's official party candidate, Manuel Ávila Camacho, a man who openly courted closer relations with the United States. In the years to come, the image of the Mexican

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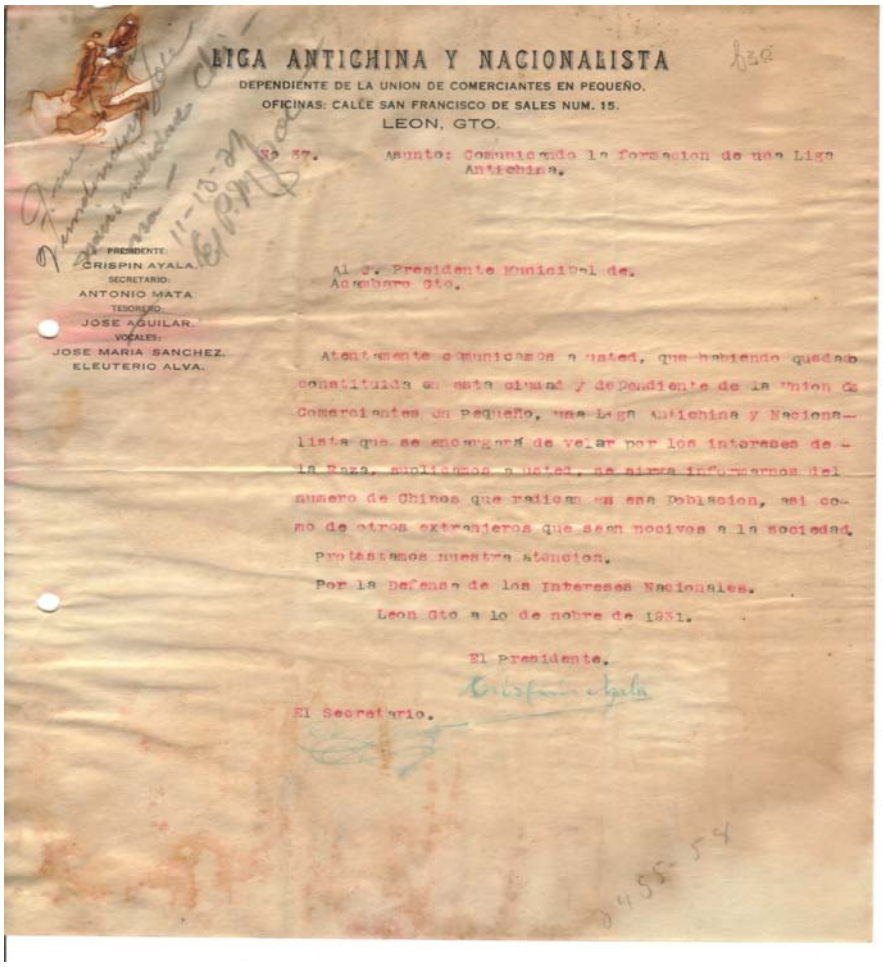
[183] Ibid., 71-96.

worker would change. U.S. involvement in World War II caused the United States to look once again to its southern neighbor to provide the cheap labor it needed to supply its growing economy and to sustain manpower levels as young men were conscripted into service. The creation of a guest worker program (1942-1964) would open a new debate on immigration and shape the way return migrants would to be viewed by the Mexican public as well as the Mexican government.



LIGA ANTICHINA Y NACIONALISTA

DEPENDIENTE DE LA UNION DE COMERCIANTES EN PEQUEÑO.

OFICINAS: CALLE SAN FRANCISCO DE SALES NUM. 15.

LEON. GTO.

No 87. Asunto: Comunicando la formacion de una Liga Antichina.

PRESIDENTE.
CRISPIN AYALA.
SECRETARIO.
ANTONIO MATA.
TESORERO.
JOSE AGUILAR.
VOCALES:
JOSE MARIA SANCHEZ.
ELEUTERIO ALVA.

Al C. Presidente Municipal de.
Acambaro Gto.

Atentamente comunicamos a usted, que habiendo quedado constituida en esta ciudad y dependiente de la Union de Comerciantes en Pequeño, una Liga Antichina y Nacionalista que se encargará de velar por los intereses de la Raza, suplicamos a usted, se sirva informarnos del numero de Chinos que radican en esa Poblacion, asi como de otros extranjeros que sean nocivos a la sociedad.

Protestamos nuestra atencion.

Por la Defensa de los Intereses Nacionales.

Leon Gto a 10 de nobre de 1931.

El Presidente.

El Secretario.

Figure 3. Letter from the Mexican Nationalistic Anti Chinese League.

Chapter Three

A New Welcome
The Bracero Era

The influx of Mexican returnees during the Great Depression sparked debate within Mexico over whether their presence (and that of their children) represented a burden to Mexican progress. This attitude was common, as it spread from local townships to national-level politicians. The attitudes against Mexican repatriates reveal Mexico's vulnerability when it came to dealing with issues of immigration, and specifically forced return migration. Mexico had mishandled a tragedy involving its own people. Thirteen years after the deportation Mexico was still dependant on the U.S. market. As the U.S. economy improved and the United States engaged in World War II, it was again in need of cheap labor, rendering Mexico a valuable partner once more. For Mexico, the demand for its oversupply of labor began a new era in which the United States would serve as a permanent escape valve for the nation's social and economic deficiencies.

The Mexican government's attempt to reincorporate forced returnees was fraught with challenges. The government hoped that these repatriates would be able to adapt better than other immigrants because they came from "*México de afuera*" (the other Mexico). They assumed that the returnee's familiarity with Mexican culture would not only facilitate their integration and assimilation, but also help to enrich Mexican culture and "increase production…to create new richness" with their newly acquired talents. All of these goals rested on the basis

"of the love they have for their country."[184] This assumption, however, faced many obstacles. The Mexican government was confronted with high rates of unemployment and poverty among Mexicans and foreign immigrants alike. Any attempts to integrate repatriates in the 1930s were overshadowed by the nation's economic and social problems, consistently deferring the issue of repatriation.[185] Additionally, rejection and competition challenged repatriates' ability to "love their country," displacing them from Mexico's plan for modernity.[186]

President Lázaro Cárdenas (in office 1934-1940) did make several important attempts to reintegrate repatriates into Mexican life. He saw them as an important asset for repopulating rural areas in need of agricultural labor. Alanis Enciso Fernando Saul notes that Cárdenas supported repatriates for two specific reasons. First, he believed that repatriates came from a more advanced environment and had acquired better skills that could aid in the development of Mexico's rural sector. Second, Cárdenas believed that these repatriates would repopulate rural areas and share their knowledge.[187] His administration therefore allotted farmland to rural farm workers and repatriates through its *ejido* program in the 1930s. However, the Cárdenas administration failed to provide farm workers and repatriates with the necessary equipment, seeds, and insecticides for the job, and farmers had limited access to credit and capital because Mexican

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[184] Ibid., 15.

[185] Ibid., 25.

[186] Alanis Enciso Fernando Saul, "Haciendo patria: El regreso de los trabajadores mexicanos de Estados Unidos" (Ph.D. dissertation, El Colegio de México, 1996), 8.

[187] Ibid., 15.

banks were not ready to meet their needs due to a lack in infrastructure.[188] (These same problems, it must said, afflicted Mexicans who had gained land during Cárdenas's great reform.) Thus, economic limitations prevented rural families from fulfilling their economic ventures, making the Bracero Program especially opportune. After the Cárdenas administration, Mexican presidents moved to the right, emphasizing modernization and economic growth over the mobilization of peasants and laborers for social justice. This attitude drew them closer to the United States than the more nationalistic Cárdenas and it led directly to official enthusiasm for the Bracero Program. Douglas Massey states "for rural families suddenly in possession of land and searching vainly for a way of financing production, the arrival of the Bracero Program truly seemed a godsend."[189] It represented such a "godsend" both to the government and to Mexican farm laborers. The opportunity to again engage the United States gave Mexico leverage in determining a new relationship with its neighbor. The implementation of the Bracero Program became pivotal in creating Mexico's addiction to remittances and the exportation of a still impoverished labor force to the United States.

This chapter looks at how the Bracero Program, which lasted from 1942 to 1964, became an important contributor to alleviating pressures on Mexico's rural sector and fulfilling America's need for labor, and renewed Mexico's relationship with the United States. The Bracero Program paved the way for both Mexicans

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[188] Ibid., 36.

[189] Ibid.

and the Mexican government to view labor migration as necessary and vital to Mexico's future. As the program was implemented, the Mexican media began to address the vulnerability of Mexican workers to American abuses and to question the level of risk that the Mexican government allowed its workers to endure as participants. Mexico's inability to provide for its people and its need to export laborers prompted it to look at the program as an opportunity, regardless of the situation its people would face in the United States.

The treatment of *braceros* during this period was overshadowed by the propaganda that sold the program. It was part of the U.S. promotion of the Good Neighbor policy—the promise to avoid the use of force against Latin America. But the idealistic literature about the *braceros* was one thing; the reality for Mexicans in the United States was another. Although *braceros* entered the United States legally, their legal status did not guarantee just treatment, leaving the door open to forms of abuse and exposing both legal and illegal workers to conditions that promoted isolation and suffering. The *braceros* endured social isolation and this had an impact on return migration and on the sending communities during this period. The marginalized status which the program imposed on *braceros* kept them from assimilating American values. Isolation was an advantage for *braceros* as they came home, as major cultural and linguistic changes were largely avoided, but changes to local communities were unavoidable nevertheless. Their relative improvement in income changed local life upon their return. Suddenly they had more power and class at least the opportunity to achieve some upward mobility—often for the first time in their lives.

As a result, they became something they could not have imagined within their own community. Locals, however, had mixed feelings about *braceros*, often viewing them simultaneously both as sellouts and heroes, reflecting the inconsistent ways of understanding the experience of labor migration, its value, and its long-term social and cultural implications for life in Mexico in the second half of the twentieth century. Understanding the *bracero*'s experience in this binational context is fundamental to the discussion of return migration because it paved the way for a tradition of Mexican immigration, both legal and illegal, to the United States; founded an irreplaceable dependency between the two nations; and brought the first major transnational changes to their home communities in the form of a new materialism, which in turn aroused a consciousness of disparity among those left behind.

3.1 Early Guestworker Programs

As already told, at the turn of the twentieth century and prior to the Great Depression, Mexican labor was in high demand in the Southwest. Railroad companies, farming, and cement companies made Mexican labor a principal component of the labor market in the United States. U.S. involvement in the First World War spiked demand for cheap labor and early guestworker programs emerged to meet it and led to the first efforts to regulate its flow. According to Otey M. Scruggs,

> The war-accelerated trend toward greater reliance on Mexicans for seasonal farm work was further reflected in the importation of Mexicans under contract from 1917 to 1922. To be sure, the numbers of workers imported under contract was but a fraction of wartime seasonal farm labor force. However, the significance of the program far transcends the numbers involved. Not only did the importation undertaking contribute to the greater reliance placed on Mexican labor, but more important…it helped shape attitudes on both sides of the border twenty years later, when the demand was again raised for the importation of workers under contract. [This was the] first Federal effort to regulate the migration of alien farm workers to the United States.[190]

These early guest worker programs left much to be desired. Violations by both employers and the government were frequent, including failure to provide guest workers with adequate housing, wages, and other benefits, leaving workers with few guarantees.[191] Because of the deficiencies with these early guest worker programs "…many workers left their jobs before the contract expired" and frugal employers "…because of the cost of returning the workers to the port of entry…encouraged the contractors to desert when the services were no longer needed." [192] On the other side, some American employers depended so heavily on Mexican labor that they kept guest workers beyond their contract limits.[193] The U.S. government turned a blind eye to such legal inconsistencies. Such intense demand introduced concerns about how to regulate the influx of legal and illegal immigration from Mexico and the rising numbers of *coyotes* and *enganchistas* (labor smugglers and recruiters) who took advantage of the labor

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[190] Ibid., 73.

[191] Ibid., 80.

[192] Ibid.

[193] Ibid., 82.

market in the United States, introducing the first real concerns about illegal immigration to the United States.[194] Furthermore, the role of the Mexican government in these developments was marginal at best as it emerged from the Revolution. According to Scruggs, no comprehensive guest worker program existed in which the Mexican government could partake in the decision-making process. He explains,

> So far as can be determined, the Mexican Government was never consulted about the undertaking. Consequently, nothing resembling a Mexican inspection force, with powers to regulate relations between employers and workers, existed. To be sure, Mexican consuls were kept busy listening to the complaints of disenchanted workers. But during the war, Mexican authorities could do little else. In all likelihood, the Mexican Government was too preoccupied with internal problems to intervene in the contract labor program even had it desired to do so.[195]

The Mexican government did intervene in cases regarding abuse, but only when necessary, demonstrating its weak role in the process.

3.2 The Bracero Program

The early guest worker programs between the United States and Mexico served as examples of what not to do. Negotiations of the Bracero Program recognized the challenges that emerged from them and incorporated the desire to extend guest workers some degree of dignity for their contributions as part of that recognition. In 1942 the U.S. and Mexican governments came to an

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[194] Otey M. Scruggs, *Braceros, "Wetbacks," and the Farm Labor Problem: Mexican Agricultural Labor in the United States 1942-1954* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988), 72.

[195] Ibid., 83.

agreement that would allow Mexican workers to enter the United States legally to alleviate the need for agrarian labor.[196] The Bracero Program was specifically designed to fulfill the labor shortage created by the United States's participation in World War II.[197] It was intended to "maximize agricultural production"[198] and to "provide [U.S.] growers with an endless army of cheap labor…."[199] The program had good intentions in theory, promising to lessen how indiscriminately Mexican-Americans and Mexicans were deported, as they had been in the past.[200] It was intended to supplement American labor through the war, "[h]owever, conditions and forces dictated otherwise, and the Mexican contract laborers became in fact, if not in theory, a permanent part of the American work force."[201] The program became part of a long legacy of Mexican contributions to U.S. growth and economic support. Michael C. Meyer and William L. Sherman note that, "ultimately the most controversial contribution to the war effort was the mutual decision made by Ávila Camacho and Franklin D. Roosevelt to allow Mexican laborers (braceros) to serve as agricultural guest workers in the United States Southwest."[202]

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[196] Ibid., 1-5.

[197] Ibid., 154.

[198] Gamboa, *Mexican Labor and World War II,* 48.

[199] Kitty Calavita, *Inside the State: The Bracero Progam, Immigration, and the INS* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3.

[200] Michael C Meyer and William L. Sherman. *The Course of Mexican History*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 633.

[201] Scruggs, *Braceros, "Wetbacks," and the Farm Labor Problem,* 1.

[202] Meyer and L. Sherman, *The Course of Mexican History, 633.*

The Bracero Program marked the beginning of political and economic reconciliation between Mexico and the United States. Indeed, Richard B. Craig points out that the Bracero Program "…marked a significant milestone in the United States relations."[203] Such reconciliation was based on the development of vested interest groups during this period, as Craig notes:

> Braceros had entered the United States on a contractual basis during World War I and had been employed intermittently by southwestern farmers during the interwar years. Prior to 1942, however, they had crossed their northern frontier under the auspices of an international accord. The wartime pact and the events leading up to it not only constitute an important event in our relations with Mexico; they also provide fertile soil for the student of interest groups politics. Despite its international overtones, the bracero program was from its very inception the offspring of an interest-groups' parentage.[204]

The agricultural sector in particular promoted its development as it could not find a steady supply of cheap labor to meet its demands. Americans migrants who were pushed to the Southwest because of the dust bowl represented hope for a more permanent working constituency. They "were overnight welcomed with open arms, but their majority soon bypassed the fields for more lucrative careers in a burgeoning defense industry." This left the agro business and domestic labor to turn "…to a long neglected but never forgotten potential—the Mexican."[205] Although Mexican labor had long been used to supplement other labor supplies, the belief was that Mexican workers could be counted on to serve as a

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[203] Richard B. Craig, *The Bracero Program: Interest Groups and Foreign Policy* (San Antonio, International Standard Group, 1971), 37.

[204] Ibid.

[205] Ibid.

permanent supplement to American labor in the Southwest, thereby lending support to the calls for the establishment of a formal international labor program.

Opposition to the program within the United States came from various groups. Craig explains, "[t]he flow of Mexican labor in the United States engendered native opposition on religious, economic, and political ground." The American public's fear of and hostility toward Mexican migrants was at a peak due to the constant influx of Mexicans moving to traditionally Anglo areas where they were confronted with language barriers, segregation, and discrimination.[206] Dennis Nodin Valdez argues that "[h]ostile public opinion toward Mexicanos in the 1940s was fanned by press distortions in reports on Sleepy Lagoon incident, the zoot-suit riots and the *pachuco* phenomenon in the Southwest."[207] Racial hostilities in the Southwest climaxed in this period, providing grounds for concern about an influx of Mexicans.

Economic concerns about the Bracero Program also surfaced within the Mexican-American community with the belief that the new labor alternative would suppress already-low wages and increase competition.[208] David Gutierrez notes a duality for many within the Mexican-American community, as it rendered

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[206] Denis Nodin Valdes, *Al Norte: Agricultural Workers in the Great Lakes Region 1917-1970* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 112.

[207] Ibid., 117.
The Sleepy Lagoon murder refers to the murder of a latino youth in East Los Angeles and the trial that ensued, which indiscriminately convicted 22 latino teens of the crime. The injustice and bias surrounding the case demonstrated exaggerated hostilities against the latino community and caused tensions to arise. It helped lead to the Zoot Suit Riots in 1943, a series of riots in which white servicemen targeted Mexican-American youth, particularly *pachucos* or Zoot Suiters.

[208] Scruggs, *Braceros, "Wetbacks," and the Farm Labor Problem*.

sympathy for the causes of Mexicans who came to the United States to improve their lives, but nonetheless "insisted that the rights of American citizens had to come first."[209] A historical legacy of discrimination since the Mexican-American War furthered the community's opposition, as did the not-so-distant scapegoating it endured during the Great Depression. Regional Leader of the Bureau of Agriculture, Davis McIntire, points out that the Mexican-American community was skeptical of bringing Mexicans laborers to the United States because "they seemed to feel that such importation would be the beginning of another period of exploitation of the 'greenhorns.'"[210] The past had taught them that their citizenship status could be neglected at whim and they could indiscriminately be deported to Mexico during periods of economic pressure. McIntire also notes that the Mexican-American community was "resentful of the discrimination against the Mexican, and rather bitter over the long record of exploitation and injustice to which Mexicans had been subjected in this country."[211] This made the community distrustful that such a program would do anything to ease racial tensions with the U.S. government. In order to garner Mexican-American support the American government consulted with the community on the implications of the program as a way to convince them that their communities would not be affected by the influx of Mexican labor.

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[209] David G. Gutierrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 152.

[210] Ibid.
A "greenhorn" is a newcomer, especially one who is unfamiliar with the ways of a place or group.

[211] Ibid., 159.

Opposition in Mexico stemmed from various sources. The Catholic Church opposed the Bracero Program because it would "…contribute directly to the disruption of family life." The Church also expressed concern over the immoral temptations that *braceros* would be exposed to while in the United States, such as "…prostitution, alcohol, and gambling…" as well as the influence of Protestantism.[212] The Mexican media also kept on the forefront of the gamble that the Mexican government was taking and the room for abuse that it entailed, including a campaign to prevent it. Mexican newspapers such *El Universal* highlighted the Zoot Suit riots in Los Angeles and the Sleepy Lagoon incident, and underscored racial discrimination against Mexicans in Texas and Chicago, calling attention to racial pressures across the United States. By doing so, it demonstrated distrust in American promises that *braceros* would be treated well and not subjugated to the prejudices of the time. One editorial's concern lies within the fact that promises were not enough to relieve the humiliation that stemmed from prejudice toward Mexicans and their children in the United States.[213] It criticized the Mexican government's capacity to defend its workers and its ability to keep them from places like Texas where racial prejudice would be elevated:

> The Mexican Government's revulsion upon authorizing the departure of workers to a state that gets to choose how Mexicans will be treated, not only expresses justified disgust with the situation they find themselves in, but also their wish to not add fuel to the fire in the Mexican-Texan

[212] Craig, *The Bracero Program,* 21.

[213] "El Prejucio Racial," *El Universal*, 30 July 1943, Archivo de Lerdo de Tejada, I04016 ("Prejuicios Raciales-Estados Unidos 1943-1960," 8.

> dispute, which, if it increases, may affect the feeling of good neighborliness between the two countries.[214]

El Nacional echoed these concerns in "A Mejor Entendimiento, Mayor Solidaridad" (Better Understanding, More Solidarity), published in July 1942. It expressed concern with allowing Mexican workers to enter the United States and avoiding another catastrophic repatriation.[215] The editorial's critique of the treatment that Mexican *braceros* would face in the American Southwest reminded readers of events during the Great Depression, specifically referencing the State of Texas. It pointed to past inconsistencies in the treatment of Mexicans in the state and the newfound urgency for Mexican labor, and expressed distrust in the state's guarantee of lessened racial tensions as given by Texas Governor Coke Stevenson.[216] Popular concerns about the treatment of *braceros* prompted the Mexican government to take some precautions upon entering such an agreement.

Negotiations outside the United States were handled directly by the Mexican government.[217] Its concerns with the program were primarily based on

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[214] Ibid.
"La repugnancia del Gobierno Mexicano a autorizar la salida de trabajadores hacia un Estado en donde el trato que se da a los Mexicanos avecinados ahí permite colegir cual será el que reciban los que lleguen, no solo expresa el justificado disgusto que le causa la situación a que se ven sometidos aquellos, sino también su deseo de no consentir en que se echa más pábulo a la hoguera de las diferencias méxico-texanas, que de crecer tal vez afectaría los sentimientos de buena vecindad entre los dos países interesados."

[215] "A Mejor Entendimiento, Mayor Solidaridad," *El Nacional Revolucionario*, 30 July 1943, Archivo de Lerdo de Tejada, I04016 ("Prejuicios Raciales-Estados Unidos 1943-1960), 1.

[216] Ibid.

[217] Ibid.

its negative experience with returnees during the Great Depression. Their inability to handle the forced repatriation made it skeptical of such a program, prompting it to request a series of guarantees to safeguard against it. As Scruggs explains, the Mexican government "remembered the expense of having to transport back to Mexico hundreds of families who came to the United States under contract during the First World War and of having to repatriate and relocate thousands of their penniless compatriots during the 1930s."[218] Another concern held by the Mexican government was the dependency it might create on the United States. However, Richard B. Craig explains that"...despite her apparent disgust and humiliation at being the source for such a human stream, Mexico did not terminate the legalized exodus."[219] In the end, these warnings and concerns were overlooked in favor of the economic benefits and relief that the Bracero Program could provide.

The Bracero Program represented a possible historical reconciliation between the two nations, however inconsistencies, pressures, and failures by both governments kept it within the realm of rhetoric. Mexican officials began to view the opportunity as the chance to send the nation's least educated, most isolated, and most unqualified citizens—those who posed the greatest barrier to progress in the eyes of the Mexican government—to fulfill the program requirements. Erasmo Gamboa states, "without doubt, the lack of education among the *bracero* age group was even higher than the national rate since most

[218] Ibid.

[219] Craig, *The Bracero Program,* 23.

of the workers came from the rural areas where education was most lacking."[220] This lack of education represented a major risk factor in setting the stage for a high level of abuse both while in the United States as well as within Mexico. The abuses truly began in Mexico, as recruitment centers lacked adequate transportation systems and dire facilities to administer the program.[221] One *bracero*, named Isidoro Ramírez, relates the abuses he suffered in Empalme, Sonora, a major center for *bracero* recruitment in Mexico: "the concentration camp was in Empalme…There were about 5,000 other *braceros* in front of me, the cold was tough because it was January and before my departure they told us not to bring much, and we had to find a place to stay, and we stayed in the streets or wherever we could find a place." He waited three weeks in Empalme before being given a permit to work as a *bracero*. The experience was harsh and frustrating, as he concludes: "For me, it was a bad experience, the worst experience I had in my life. It was filled with humiliation, from the time you leave until you return"[222] Just as prior to the Great Depression, the Mexican government was quick to complain about abuses by the U.S. government regarding the program and extremely inefficient in addressing the care of the workers they were exporting. Another *bracero* from Acámbaro, Guanajuato, also

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[220] Erasmo Gamboa, *Mexican Labor & World War II: Braceros in the Pacific Northwest, 1942-1947 II, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000),* 60.

[221] Jorge Durand, "The Bracero Program (1942-1964): A Critical Appraisal," *Migración y desarrollo* (2007): 36.

[222] Steve Velásquez, "Isidoro Ramírez," Bracero History Archive, Item #142, http://braceroarchive.org/ items/show/142 (June 2009).

complained about the abuses and humiliations in Empalme before coming to the United States:

> When we were sent to Empalme, we were sent with a letter, then we were contracted there, not here in Acámbaro. We were sent to Empalme on a conditional basis to become *braceros*. There was a lot of injustice in Empalme. I saw things that I shouldn't even talk about, but what made me angry was that we were being treated badly by Americans who were there to contract us as *braceros* on our own soil. When we were in Empalme we were not allowed to enter the market or even the church and we were marginalized by the local people.

As *braceros* were transported to the United States, they were required to pass a series of requirements on both sides of the border that set them up for exploitation. Medical exams took place that included x-rays to screen for tuberculosis upon crossing the border in either direction. *Braceros* were fumigated with poisonous DDT and scanned by Mexican authorities, and then processed to cross into the United States. Carlos Corella who worked for the Department of Labor, at Rio Vista, Texas, at the time recalls the experience:

> After they were processed and got to the Bracero Reception Center they had to be disinfected, so they would go through U.S. Public Health, they would form in four or five lines, they would place through a quasi hut…and they were asked to strip and they were sprayed with a white powder all over their body, including their hair and their facial hair, the hair on their head, and even around the lower area. Some of the braceros that experienced that for the first time were embarrassed and some thought it was kind of cute and [others thought] it was a laughing matter and when they would came out of the quasi hut they would look at each other and they were all white and they would laugh [say to each other] "well we are gringos now," so humor was always thought of the way they tolerated it. After they were processed through Public Health, then we would feed them. After we would feed them we would send them through a "selection line" and there the contractors or farmers, whichever would happen to be the case, would speak to them, and based on a very very short interview through three or four questions "do you know how to pick cotton," "do you know how to pick cantaloupe," "do you know how to pick corn," "do you

> know how to pick strawberries," "do you know how to pick watermelon," and depending on their response, they would choose the braceros, they would select them and they were considered then the property of that contractor or that farmer….[223]

Contrary to Corella's interpretation, *braceros* did not view the process as "cute" or as a laughing matter. It was humiliating, as Ramírez recalls from his own experience. His version of the inspections is shrouded in shame: "they used to do everything and in front of everybody, there was no privacy, [it was] very embarrassing."[224] After his second time to the United States, in 1956:

> Many of us got sick, we had a fever…we had the flu and they said that in order for us to come to the United States we had to lower our fever, and they told us that we needed to go see the doctor so he could give us an injection. While in the United States they took us to a room and there were female nurses, and other Americans and [all the braceros were stripped of their clothes] and we walked totally naked in front of everybody to get our flue shot, for me it was very humiliating. When you are young you don't feel it as much, but I saw older people crying and saying 'why are they doing this to us?'[225]

When asked about his experiences coming to the United States, Ramírez states "when we used to come here to the California [reception] Center, they would place us next to a wall and the contractors would show up as if they were buying cattle, and if they did not like you they would send you back and bring in another one. Then they would tell where you needed to go." He concludes by saying that

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[223] Rebecca Craver, "Carlos Corella," Bracero History Archive, Item #37, http://braceroarchive.org/ items/show/37 (June 2009).

[224] Velásquez, "Isidoro Ramírez."

[225] Ibid.

braceros had no choice in where they were sent, stating in English "you take it or leave it."[226] Another *bracero* related his experience:

> After you were treated like shit in Empalme you had to go to Calexico where the *braceros* had to have a special medical exam. The gringos who examined you were so selective and racist that if you had a spot in your body you were sent back to Mexico just like that. The Mexicans were never welcome in the United States. We were beaten up, treated like animals. The gringos back then were very harsh. Also, they took X-rays and loaded us on to train cars to spray us with those hoses the firemen use. Then we were sprayed with DDT to disinfect us. If you didn't want to go through it all, they would grab you by your hair, beat you up, and send you back to Mexico. You couldn't say anything because you were punished. We were treated like slaves. One of the other requirements the gringos had was that they wanted hard-working people. The gringos used to look at your hands if you were a farm worker and if your hands were clean you were not allowed to set foot in the United States. If your hands were dirty and looked like working hands, you fulfilled that requirement. Those who had neat clean hands would rub their hands with sand and rocks until they were about to bleed a couple of hours before they were checked.

Figure 4. The description reads "Oftentimes, braceros were forced to show their hands to prove that they were experienced farmers. Inspectors would check to see how callused their hands were; according to them, the more callused the hands, the more experienced the farmer. A dryback shows callouses to prove he is really an experienced farm laborer."[227]

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[226] Ibid.

[227] Leonard Nadel, "An official examines a bracero's hands for calluses during processing at the Monterrey Processing Center, Mexico," Bracero History Archive, Leonard Nadel Collection, Negative Item #1592 (1956), http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/1592.
Original caption reads: "A prime requirement for the bracero to be considered for employment in the United States is that he must have farming background. An immigration inspector examines

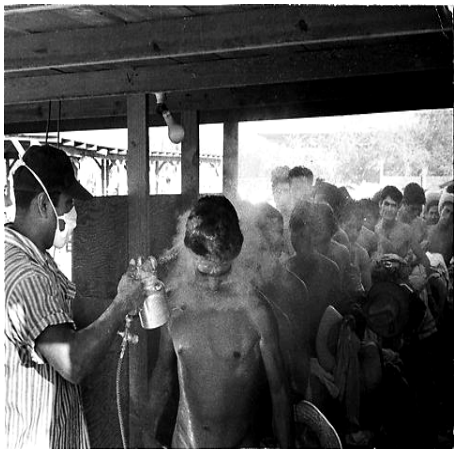

Figure 5. The description reads “This photograph shows how upon arrival to the United States, braceros were taken to processing centers where they were searched for vegetables, weapons, marijuana or similar contraband and sprayed with DDT by Department of Agriculture personnel. The photographer, Leonard Nadel described the photograph with the following caption: "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."[228]

Despite the amicable goals of the Bracero Program and the promises made by both sides to improve the participant’s lot, reality at the local level reflected very different concerns. As the interviews and photos suggest, the United States was primarily concerned with selectivity, establishing grounds for what it considered an ideal worker and thereby an ideal immigrant. For its part, Mexico concerned itself primarily with disposing those individuals who might impede their vision of progress. The implementation of the program failed to reflect the humanitarian ideals behind it, favoring instead economic and political motivations.

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this applicant's hands for calluses as proof of his experience as a farmer. One of the primary requirements for employment of braceros in the United States is that the men must have farming experience. During processing at the Monterrey Control Station in Monterrey, Mexico, a USES inspector examines the calluses of a prospective laborer and decides that he is not eligible. Only after the men are accepted for employment in the U.S. are their expenses for food and transportation paid by the U.S. A charge of $ 5.00 per head is levied on the U.S. farmers participating in the labor procurement program.

[228] Leonard Nadel, National Museum of American History, Leonard Nadel Collection, Negative #2003-8514 (1956), http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthemove/collection/image_75.html.

The promises to renew "good neighbor" policies between the two nations remained primarily at the diplomatic level and had little bearing on its implementation. The assurances made by both by the Mexican and American governments to provide fair treatment and avoid discrimination failed to generate change, as evidenced in the concerns voiced by the Mexican media in the 1940s and later by the complaints of the *braceros* themselves. "[P]erhaps worse than being held under the thumb of their employers, the *braceros* were victims of terrible injustices stemming from inadequate camp facilities, inept officials, and racism."[229] To the *bracero*, the stakes were too high to leave, regardless of their treatment by American employers. The economic pressures back home would prove too large, allowing mistreatment and abuse to prevail throughout the *bracero*'s experience, from recruitment to return. Mexican economic interests trumped the concerns expressed during negotiations. As the program developed, concerns about the treatment of workers—one of the primary concerns of many stakeholders—were largely relegated. The "safeguards" that the Mexican government implemented to avoid such problems failed, as even Mexican labor inspectors who witnessed the program's weaknesses ignored them. Jaime Velez Storey argues that visits from Mexicans representatives to observe the program at work were not rare, but largely ineffective, as they failed to pressure the United States to better conditions for Mexican workers. One representative from the Secretariat for Foreign Relations (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores) on such a mission recognized the abuses, but avoided

[229] Gamboa, *Mexican Labor and World War II,* 91.

speaking of them, admitting that some ranchers had taken advantage of the conditions surrounding the program. He concludes, "…This trip left me with a magnificent impression of what the majority of our workers do and that they enjoy an improved quality of life."[230] Erasmo Gamboa also points to the inefficiency of Mexican inspectors, saying "…[they] were so few. At this point, the employers had full say and could do literally as they pleased with the workers and their contracts."[231] The way the Bracero Program was implemented created an atmosphere of abuse and neglect, with workers paying the price as they became disposable laborers.

3.3 Constructing the Ideal Bracero

From 1951 to 1954 a total of 4,295,622 *braceros* came to work in the United States. Guanajuato, Jalisco, and Michoacán were the major contributors to the cause. Guanajuato sent 567,514 *braceros* (13% of the total), Jalisco sent 33,712 (11%), and Michoacán sent 463,811 (11%). A total of 34 percent of the *braceros* during this period came from these three states alone.[232] They came along with others to the United States under promises made on behalf of the

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[230] Jaime Veléz Storey, "Los braceros y el fondo de ahorro campesino," in *Migración Internacional e identidades cambiantes*, eds. María Eugenia Anguiano Téllez and Miguel J. Hernández Madrid (Zamora: Colegio de Michoacán, 2002), 27.
"Puedo decir que mi viaje me dejo una magnífica impresión por lo que hace a la gran mayoría de nuestros trabajadores, quienes se hallan disfrutando de un elevado nivel de vida."

[231] Gamboa, *Mexican Labor and World War II*, 53.

[232] Juan Ramon Garcia, *Operation Wetback, 1954* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980), 42. "Sources: 1951-1960 Oficina Central de Trabajadores Emigrantes cited in 'El problema del bracero Mexicano' (Ph.D. Diss. Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1964) Table 7. 1961-1964. *Anuarios Estadísticos,* 1962 /63-1964/1965." Ibid.

United States to protect the rights of the *braceros*. These promises were embodied by the image of the Mexican farmworker that was sold by the American agricultural community. This image largely romanticized the treatment that legal *braceros* received in the United States and served to promote the Bracero Program according to its international goals as well as to ward off criticism regarding discrimination or racism. Lloyd Yount, a citrus grower and editor of the magazine *Agriculture Life,* devoted its first edition in 1954 to the *bracero* worker, highlighting how he lived, socialized, and was treated by American farmers. In his editorial, Yount states, "[this] issue is devoted largely to the story of the 'bracero,' the friend in our fields from south of the border. It tells of the services he performs for and the care he receives from the organized citrus growers of the State. It is a fascinating story of international fellowship."[233] This side of the story maintains that the Bracero Program, as it was handled by the Mexican and U.S. governments up to this point, was improving the *bracero's* lot, that he was being treated fairly, and that his isolation in the United States allowed him to feel at home, sheltered from the prejudices of the time. Such propaganda exalted and praised the Bracero Program by highlighting the treatment that *braceros* received. According to *Agricultural Life*, the *bracero* was paid the average Mexican daily wage for each hour of work in the citrus industry. Their residences were described as "modern, clean, and well equipped units," they were offered life insurance, and were fed native foods. [234] Responses to the

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[233] "How Mexicans Lend its Hands to Save California's Crops," *Agricultural Life* 1 (1954), 2.

program's criticism were dismissed as the public's inability to distinguish "the illegal 'wetback' and the legal contract worker who has entirely replaced him on most farms" or passing it off as "the good old American tradition for the headlining the bad and taking the good for granted. The wonder is that there are so few soft spots in a program involving so many workers throughout the nation."[235] Those with vested interests in the program worked hard to portray it as successful from every angle.

Government officials representing both sides of the border also expressed contentment with the program's development and implementation. Glen Brockway of the U.S. Bureau of Employment Security stated, "With notable exception, the farmers of California deserve some great deal of credit for their desire to comply with and in some cases actually exceed the terms of the migrants labor agreement with Mexico." From the Mexican government's standpoint, the Bracero Division of the Consulate General at Los Angeles expressed its satisfaction with the Bracero Program:

> We are pleased with the steady progress that has been made in the migrant labor program during the past five years or so. Many people deserve the credit—the officials of both governments who draw up and supervise the terms of the market, and the farmers, who have organized many large associations which have, in turn, improved the over all function of the program. This improvement includes such things as well-regulated allocation of workers; accounting systems; supervision of working conditions; prompt medical attention and settlement of claims, and that all important item, centralized housing and feeding.

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[234] Ibid., 5.

[235] Ibid., 6.

Government officials looked to model farmers to demonstrate that the program worked and was fulfilling its goals while ignoring their inconsistencies.

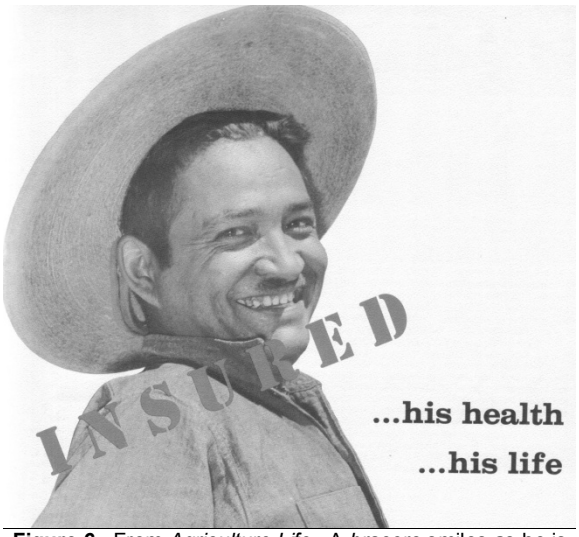

Figure 6. From *Agriculture Life.* A *bracero* smiles as he is insured under the Bracero Program.[236]

Aside from the basic provisions, growers added other realms of support for their *braceros*, subscribing to George Graham's (of the Citrus Grower Inc.) philosophy that "Proper recreation means happier workers. Happy workers are better workers. And good workers benefit everyone."[237] According to *Agricultural Life*,

> Ask any traveling salesman what he dislikes most about his job and chances are he'll tell you it's those depressing times when he is caught for a weekend in a tiny strange town. Now, take the elements of this situation and add barriers of language and strange customs, and you'll see how the bracero in this land could be a lonely, a restless worker, without a helping hand from his employer. In the citrus industry of the Southwest, helping the Mexican National workers build barriers against

[236] Ibid., 13.

[237] Ibid.

> loneliness, homesickness, and restlessness has become a standard practice.[238]

Growers provided preventive medical care, professional entertainment, recreational opportunities, and even religious shrines because "braceros are devout people. Providing a place for daily worship feeds the inner man." The response to fulfilling the *bracero's* restlessness and loneliness appears generous and even idyllic. The image of the "happy *bracero*" fulfilled the goal of demonstrating the success of the Bracero Program, however, such provisions actually encouraged their isolation. By keeping *braceros* on the farms the growers interceded in their workers' exposure to local communities, thus avoiding social tensions, and additionally limited the *bracero's* exposure to American society, thwarting assimilation. The image of the "happy bracero" fulfilled an important role for farmers and government officials alike, keeping the Bracero Program in line with its established goals and ensuring a continued flow of workers. The *bracero* became an isolated being in American society, a submissive individual both relegated by American propaganda and interests, and the Mexican government's inability to understand and admit to the circumstances in which they found themselves.

Stories from *braceros* themselves, however, stand in stark comparison to the romanticized image created by the citrus growers. Figures 2 and 3 demonstrate the disparity between how many *braceros* lived and the image that the citrus industry presented in this period. Figure 2 demonstrates the sparse

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[238] Ibid., 15.

conditions and lack of resources that many *braceros* endured with regard to nutrition, while Figure 3 demonstrates the romanticized image presented by model programs such as that presented by the citrus growers.

Figure 7. "On a Texas farm, 200 braceros, stacked like dry goods, share a long, shed-like building with double-deck canvas beds. Besides from their close living conditions they prepared food by themselves. As they were used to it and it was affordable with even low wages, they mostly made tortillas.[239] Circa 1956.

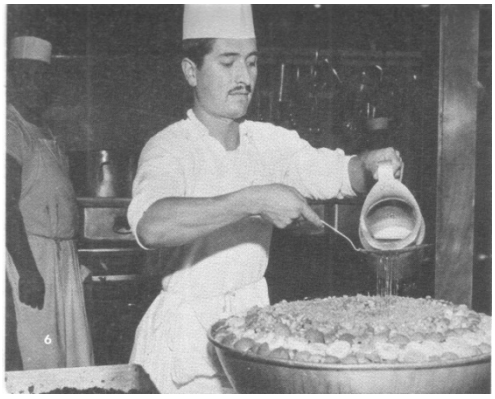

Figure 8. This picture was taken from *Agricultural Life*. The caption reads: "Hearty, nutritionally-balanced meals of natives dishes plus fresh eggs, milk and fruit are prepared in spotless kitchens and served at cost in modern dining rooms." Circa Spring 1957.

Isolation, however, did not mean that *braceros* did not improvise to manage their isolation while temporarily in the United States. Figure 4 shows that *braceros*

[239] Leonard Nadel, "Braceros prepare their food in a living quarter on a camp near McAllen, Texas," Bracero History Archive, Item #1394, http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/1394 (June 2009).

found ways to make their environment feel "like home." They were forced to find outlets to express the frustrations that their experience provoked.

Figure 9. The description of the picture reads: "Often isolated on farms far from town, many braceros had to improvise basic services and some turned these needs into weekend or evening businesses." Circa 1956. [240]

Isolation forced *braceros* to improvise similarly to the development of Mexican-American *barrios* prior to the Bracero Program.[241] *Braceros* were only allowed in designated areas, primarily rural since they worked in agriculture, and they had little contact with Anglo society. Erasmo Gamboa states that, "as a rule, the *braceros* lived in camps set aside exclusively for them. At other times they were placed in the same facility with out-of-state workers, but segregated in one section of the complex.[242]" One *bracero* I interviewed described these labor camps as concentration camps because they were so isolated.[243] As Jorge Durand explains, some of these camps were inadequate to live in: "it has been

[240] Leonard Nadel, "A bracero sits on a chair and gets a haircut by another bracero in a living quarter of a Californian camp," Bracero History Archive, Item #2757 (1956), http://braceroarchive.org/items/ show/2757 (June 2009).

[241] Gutierrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, 33.

[242] Gamboa, *Mexican Labor and World War II,* 92.

[243] Personal interview, 3 July 2000.

said that this gave the Program a touch of semi-slavery."[244] The very "comforts" allowed by growers served to create isolation. Outside the labor camps braceros were met with hostility, as many businesses posted signs that read "No Mexicans, Negroes, or Dogs Allowed." Negro, a former *bracero* collaborates this: "Also, at the camps where I used to stay, sometimes other *braceros* that I worked with would come back from town all beaten up. They had gone into places because they couldn't read the signs and the gringos beat them up."[245] Erasmo Gamboa also notes that "[l]abor officials agreed that intolerance was destructive since the efficiency of the Mexican workers was hampered considerably through social discrimination."[246]

Abuse surrounded the Bracero Program in various ways. Promises of a minimum wage were toyed with, as explained by Jorge Durand. "The protestant spirit of United States capitalism is expressed in the imposition of an intense working rhythm, control of times and movements, transference of all possible costs to the worker (transportation, housing, insurance) and establishing the lowest wage level possible, as low as the bracero will tolerate it."[247] Physical abuse also prevailed, as noted by Negro, "The ones who treated us badly were the *mayordomos* [foremen]…I saw them beat up workers because they thought they weren't doing their jobs. I saw many of those injustices. They were very

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[244] Durand, "The Bracero Program," 36.

[245] Personal interview, 4 July 2000.

[246] Gamboa, *Mexican Labor and World War II,* 115.

[247] Durand, "The Bracero Program," 37.

common. One time one of the *mayordomos* tried to kick me and told me, 'you stinky, dirty *bracero*, if you don't do what I tell you to do I'll hit you.'" Additionally, the Mexican government implemented a wage deduction plan in which they would safeguard a portion of those wages for *braceros* to claim in the future. This promise was never fulfilled and remains contested to the present.

The intense isolation experienced by this generation of migrants and their exceptional marginalization from society led to very minimal contact with American culture. The wife of a farmer best expresses common sentiment about the submissiveness of Mexican *bracero* workers and their lack of contact with American culture, stating "'We sure like these new Mexicans,' she said…She considered the *braceros* to be more virtuous than the earlier Mexican American migrants. In her view, 'The new Mexicans go or are sent to town for only one purpose… for their groceries and needed clothing.'"[248] As such, their journey to the United States did not entail many cultural losses. In fact, many *braceros* were able to maintain strong cultural roots as a result of this marginalization. Additionally, most of the *braceros* went to the United States with the sole purpose of making money and returning with it to their place of origin, hindering any motivation to incorporate themselves into their surroundings. Gamboa's interview with the farmer's wife expresses this purpose: "[the *braceros*] are eager get their money to send it back to Mexico where an American dollar exchanges for $1.50 in Mexican money."[249] At this time, the

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[248] Gamboa, *Mexican Labor and World War II,* 62.

Mexican population residing in the United States was quite small compared to today and Anglo culture was visibly dominant. This demographic situation, along with racial isolation, prohibited many Mexicans from forming a bond with their host country or culture that was anything but economic and deterred them from staying or incorporating American culture into their lives. If anything, the hostility they faced forced them to cling even more strongly to the familiarity and comfort of their own culture. As such, migration to the United States in this period was viewed as a temporary response to short-term economic needs. Few imagined the lifestyle it could become.

3.4 Suffering and Redemption: Returning Home

The *bracero*'s experience was marked by risk, abuse, suffering, and success. Their need to try their luck in a foreign country that made great promises forced them into an unfortunate period within U.S.-Mexican relations. *Braceros* were viewed as subjects, as tools of labor by both governments. The economic benefits it brought, however, overrode complaints about the program's negative impacts to a degree, even at the individual level. The experiences of isolation and economic and racial discrimination in the north allowed the *bracero* to be in high spirits when returning home. Richard Craig points to a new attitude among *braceros* in his analysis of an interview with Juan Garcia, a *bracero* from Guanajuato, in the late 1950s: "Once he returned home, Juan Garcia had time to reflect on his adventure. Compared to his friends and relatives who had not

[249] Ibid., 63.

been *braceros*, he felt much more worldly."[250] Returning home became a pivotal moment of the *bracero* experience, as they encountered newfound social and economic privileges. Their return became a moment to demonstrate that they had achieved something in the United States, that they had "made it," and that their suffering was worth something.

Some *corridos* from this time portray not only the physical suffering felt by *braceros* as laborers, but the nostalgia and emotional suffering that accompanied it. The *corrido* entitled "La Despedida del Bracero" (The *Bracero's* Farewell) by L.y M. de Josefina O. de Vásquez, demonstrates this nostalgia, promising a better life as a result of the suffering he endures.

Adiós mi vida ahora mismo tengo que partir, con el Alma entristecida porque me alejo de ti	Goodbye my love I must go now with a sad soul because I'm leaving you
Adiós mi amor ya muy pronto volveré soon me voy para el otro lado a la pizca de algodón.	Goodbye my love I'll be home I'm going to the United States to pick cotton
Ya verás cuando regrese luego luego nos casamos yo te prometo mi vida que nuestra luna de miel durara una eternidad.	You'll see when I return we'll get married right away I promise you on my life that our honeymoon will last an eternity

This promise of a better life as a consequence of suffering is valued by the *bracero* as his redemption upon returning to Mexico. In "El Joven Bracero," (The Young Bracero) Antioco relates this connection: "little bird, go console my love, tell her that I'm suffering without her love…go tell her that I went as a bracero,

[250] Craig, *The Bracero Program,*136.

and now I come home very happy because I bring good money."[251] Redemption comes in the form of returning to his former life with economic success.

This relationship between economic success and redemption for the suffering that it entailed is common among *braceros*. "El Joven Bracero" (The Young Bracero) by Antioco Magueyal tells of a young man who promises to return to Mexico to marry the love he left behind, with the hope of returning with money to make her happy.[252] It most directly relates the economic goals of the *bracero*, however, even more importantly, it relates the sense of home that the *bracero* embraced. The *bracero* went to the United States with the understanding that he would return to his life in Mexico. The United States embodied a necessary economic component; however "life" remained in Mexico. Richard Craig also notes this pattern with Garcia: "Like most *braceros*, Juan definitely planned to contract again in the future. He would, in fact, like to return with a visa. However, based on his short experience, Juan did not think he would like to become a United States citizen."[253] Another *bracero* interviewed for this project further corroborates this "I never imagined living in the United States back then. My life and my family were in Acámbaro."[254]

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[251] "con tu canto ve y Consuela mi morena, le diras que ando sufriendo por su amor," "anda dile a mi morena que me fui yo de bracero, ahora vengo muy contento porque traigo buen dinero."

[252] Antioco Magueyal, "El Joven Bracero" (9 April 1958), Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) 051738, Volume 1208, Folder 26883, 3.

[253] Craig, *The Bracero Program,* 137.

[254] Personal interview, December 2008.

The *bracero's* experience was driven by this distinction between Mexico as "home" and the United States as an economic necessity. Returning home successful was also a necessary part of the goal. Paul S. Taylor's study of Arandas, Jalisco, in 1933 supports this idea,

> …with a large proportion of the returned emigrants, the happier life in Mexico was more than counterbalanced by the higher material standard of living in the United States. Many asserted that they were happier in Arandas, and almost in the next breath, that they would go back to the United States if work was plentiful, and would gladly live there the remainder of their lives, apparently seeing no contradiction in their statements. In explanation they repeatedly said that it was hard to make a living in Arandas, and wages were good in the United States, and one could have good clothes and autos, and there were pretty parks, too.[255]

Although this study takes place prior to the Bracero Program, it demonstrates how important the economic element was to the migrant experience, even before the program began. The psyche of the migrant did not change drastically from this period to that of the *bracero*—economic success trumped nostalgia.

The Mexican migrant's understanding of "home" in this period is also exhibited in Nelson Copp's survey of 160 undocumented workers who had been detained in Texas in 1950, asking them if they had 100 dollars what they would do with it. Returnees overwhelmingly responded that they would spend the money in Mexico (68%). Only 10 percent replied that they would spend it in the United States, and 23 percent replied in more neutral ways (on beer, clothing, etc.) or did not reply.

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[255] Paul S. Taylor, *A Spanish- Mexican Peasant Community in Arandas, Jalisco, Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1933), 52-53.

Table 2. How Mexican Migrants Would Spend $100 if Given the Chance (1950)[256]

Buy food, clothes, etc., for family in Mexico	33
Buy land in Mexico	17
Send it, or part of it, to relatives in Mexico	16
Set up a business in Mexico	14
Buy farm animals in Mexico	11
Attempt to legalize status in the United States	9
Buy or make the initial payments on a house in Mexico	8
Buy food, clothes, etc., for self	8
Establish an occupation in the United States	7
Save most of it for future use and needs	5
Put it in the bank to "make interest"	5
Pay debts in Mexico	3
Buy beer, whisky, etc.	3
Don't know	2
Make improvements on house and land in Mexico	2
Provide a better education for the children in Mexico	2
Buy an automobile and take it back to Mexico	2
Others, and those who did not reply	13
Total	160

This points to an understanding of immigration at this time as a temporary thing, something that had a specific economic purpose, to support their "real life" in Mexico.

Popular perceptions of *braceros* ranged from heroic and comical to indignant. They were influenced in many ways, through songs, film, literature, personal contact, and hearsay. As such, these perceptions became distorted and hyperbolized, to the extent that the use of the word *bracero* became a synonym for illegal immigrants. One characterization of *braceros* is as "sellouts."

[256] Nelson Gage Copp, "'Wetbacks' and Braceros: Mexican Migrant Laborers and American Immigration Policy, 1930-1960" (Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1963), 99.

One Mexican newspaper, *El Heraldo,* in an attack on the Mexican government in 1953 announced, “La Salida de Braceros: Vergüenza de Mexico” (The Departure of *Braceros*: Embarrassment for Mexico).[257] This sentiment is supported in songs from the period, such as “El Corrido de los Braceros” (“The *Bracero’s* Song”) by José J. Padilla. It portrays *braceros* as selfish, lazy sellouts.

Voy a cantarles	I’m going to sing
A mis amigos	to my friends
El corrido de los braceros	the bracero’s song
Dejan mujeres abandonadas	They leave women abandoned
A la ventura del cielo.	to the adventure of the heavens
Van abandonar lo que realmente produce	They’ll abandon what really produces
Teniendo tierra que cultivan ….,	having land they can cultivate
Si ellos no fueran malagradecidos,	If they weren’t so ungrateful
Nunca su patria dejarían ya.	they would never leave their homeland again
Es la ambición de los dólares	The money’s the goal
La que los hizo salir,	it’s what made them leave
Sin fijarse en su familia	without thinking of what
Lo que puedan sufrir	their family might suffer
Nunca trajeron dinero,	They never brought money
Buenos para presumir,	good for bragging
Con que fueran más decentes,	if only they lived
En el modo de vivir,	more decently
El vecino de allá enfrente,	the neighbor over there [theUnited States]
Los acostumbro muy mal,	has spoiled them
Con la subida del dólar	With the rise of the dollar
Ya no quieren trabajar.[258]	they don’t want to work anymore

[257] *El Heraldo de México*, 26 June 1953, Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), Volume 1045, Folder 16796, 1.

[258] José J. Padilla, “El Corrido de los Braceros” (1949), Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) 051738, 5238.

This critique of the *bracero* expresses the anger and embarrassment that the bracero's experience implies for the individual and the nation more broadly. It points to the repercussions that local communities felt upon their dismissal, such as the separation of families, a loss of nationalism, and the sense that *braceros* were "better" than those who stayed.

Another perception of the *bracero* was as a hero, adventurer, or outlaw. As such, the bracero became an important part of Mexican culture and folklore during the years of the program. Guillermo Robles's "Las Hazañas de un Bracero" (The Bracero's Achievements) tells the story of a bracero who outwits American authorities to cross the border, womanizes in Laredo, drinks, and spends money as he pleases.[259] The song mythologizes the *bracero* experience, focusing on its rewards and demonstrating just how distorted the perception of the bracero was by failing to acknowledge the suffering that the experience entailed. Furthering this image, the Mexican film industry caricatured the bracero as adventurous and comical in movies such as *Pito Pérez se va de bracero* (Pito Perez Goes as a *Bracero*) (1948) or *El bracero del año* (*Bracero* of the Year) (1964). The image of the *bracero* in these realms facilitated a fictional familiarization with the experience. The popularization of the *bracero* experience demonstrates that migration had become part of the Mexican experience by this time. It reflects the importance of the transnational phenomenon in the period.

[259] Guillermo Robles S., "La Hazaña de un Bracero" (Corrido) (May 1951), Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) Volume 964, Folder 11520, 1.

The *bracero's* return, presence, and stories of the neighboring country would open Mexico to new possibilities and challenges from abroad. *Braceros* were the first cultural emissaries of a transnational life. They became emblematic of progressive possibilities, bringing with them a new materialism that represented their labor. Figure 6 demonstrates this concept, as returning to Mexico with new shoes impressed the *bracero*'s successes while in the United States, as implied by this advertisement, and opened people's eyes to a world of disparity and opportunity. A bracero by the name Antonio pointed to this as he stated "Our dream to bring back to Acámbaro was some Levi jeans, nice cowboy boats, a tejana (cowboy hat) and a radio, that gave you instant status at home. And instantly, the locals knew you were a *bracero*."[260]

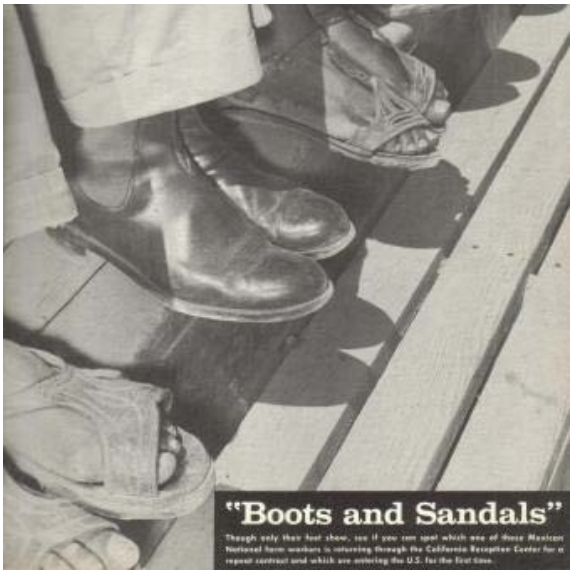

Figure 10. "Boots and Sandals." The caption reads, "Though only their feet show, see if you can spot which one of these Mexican National farm workers is returning through California Reception Center for a repeat contract and which are entering the U.S. for the first time."

[260] Personal interview, 22 December 2008.

Tales of success and adventure, accompanied by material acquisitions, changed the dynamics of Mexican immigration to the United States. They served as proprietors of what others could achieve if they too went north. This perception not only touted the Bracero Program as an avenue for social and economic progress, but illegal immigration as another avenue for progress, prompting its acceleration. This popular conception blurred the definition of what bracero meant, thwarting the program's effort to distinguish legal from illegal immigration. Popular literature also helped distort this distinction. Ettore Pierri's *Braceros: la verdadera historia de los "pollos," indocumentados y "espaldas mojadas"* (Braceros: The True Story of Human Contraband, Undocumented Workers, and Wetbacks) and La Prensa's *Bracero: Tres reporteros y dos fotógrafos, tras la verdad en el caso de los trabajadores indocumentados en Estados Unidos* (Bracero: Three Reporters and Two Photographers after the Truth in the Case of Undocumented Workers in the United States) consistently confuse the word *bracero* with undocumented labor, making no distinction. Such literature also adds a more sympathetic characterization to the *bracero*. La Prensa's documents various journalists' attempts to understand the undocumented experience, concluding that the "*bracero*" is a victim of national circumstance, an exploited adventurer, and a fighter. Pierri's novel uncovers concerns with the dangers of crossing, human rights violations, racism, and exploitation. The characterization of the undocumented worker as a product of a failing system, as a comment on Mexico's failure to provide for its people, and as a folk hero provoked great changes in local communities with the formation of the

trend to go the United States. One *bracero* from Acámbaro confirms this in his interview:

> As a *bracero* all we did was work and come back to our towns. We came back by ourselves, but when we were given the opportunity to become legal residents, many braceros started taking their families with them. Some of their children were born in the United States and others acquired American customs and brought them back to Mexico. I'd say that Acámbaro has become Americanized and I know that we were fomenting more migration.[261]

Few opportunities in Mexico, matched by abundance to the north and a familiarity and fascination with the experience all led to an increase in immigration during the *bracero* period. Figure 7 demonstrates rapidly increasing illegal immigration from 1951 to 1954, nearly doubling in this period. The implementation of Operation Wetback reduced illegal immigration considerably in the years following, although it achieved a steady increase regardless.

Table 3. Number of Undocumented Persons Apprehended, 1951-1964[262]

Year	Number
1951	500,628
1952	543,538
1953	875,318
1954 (Operation Wetback)	1,075,168
1955	242,608
1956	72,442
1957	44,451
1958	37,242
1959	30,196
1960	29,651
1961	29,877
1962	30,272
1963	39,124
1964(Program ends)	43,844

[261] Personal interview, December 2000.

[262] Ramos Garcia, *Operation Wetback*, 236.

3.5 The End of the Bracero Program

Mexico fought successfully to extend the Bracero Program as it was to expire on June 30, 1951. Juan Ramon Garcia points out that "Mexico entered into negotiation determined to wring as many concessions and guarantees as possible from the United States. Mexico wanted to continue the program because remittances from braceros were quickly becoming a prime source of income for Mexico's battered economy, but it also had to contend with growing criticism from its own people."[263] Garcia continues, "What especially incensed Mexicans were reports that their country men were denied equal treatment in Texas because of their color of their skin and nationality. They also resented the apparent American belief that all Mexicans were illiterate peons."[264] At this point, the Bracero Program had become a legal way to abuse labor. Garcia argues that "…even though the program supposedly had been negotiated to provide protection and to regulate the flow of emigrates, it had not proven very successful in accomplishing either goal."[265] The program's mishandling lay in vested interests from American companies who needed illegal workers to cross into the United States and the Border Patrol's willingness to go along with whatever it took. Garcia explains, "[t]he United States did not follow a clear, consistent, or coherent policy on Mexican immigration throughout most of the period preceding

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[263] Ibid., 70.

[264] Ibid.

[265] Ibid., 71.

'Operation Wetback.' Instead, on several occasions, it chose to selectively relax its immigration policies along its southwestern border to acquire the Mexican labor it deemed necessary to its economic security."[266] Needless to say, when these workers were "…no longer needed in large quantities, the United States would apply its immigration policies." The INS's authorization of this demand-based flux failed to curb illegal immigration, instead making it worse and creating a market for it.

In order to render the Bracero Program functional, the Mexican government supported the United States in preventing illegal Mexican immigration to the United States from the very beginning, as documents sent from Washington, D.C., to the Secretariat of Governance (Secretaría de Gobernación—SEGOB) confirm. In 1944, representatives from the two governments agreed that "… the U.S. government would renew its efforts to impede illegal immigration among Mexican workers and that it would return those who had entered the country illegally to Mexico …."[267] By 1946, the United States still had concerns about the influx of illegal immigration. According to a letter sent by the Department of State to the Mexican Embassy on February 14, 1946,

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[266] Ibid., 107.

[267] "Vigilancia para Impedir Inmigración Ilegal de Trabajadores." Letter to the Secretaria de Gobernación from Washington, D.C. Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores Archive 1425-3, 1. "… [el] gobierno [de] Estados Unidos redoblaría las medidas de vigilancia para impedir inmigración ilegal trabajadores Mexicanos y que devolverían a nuestro territorio a aquellos que ya hubiesen entrado ilegalmente …"

> The [INS] official informally stated that [it] was much concerned over the same question because of the great number of Mexican workers entering [the United States] in spite of the careful supervision maintained by that Service and in spite of the fact that approximately six thousand Mexican workers have entered illegally…are returned to Mexico each month at great expense to this Government. The official stated that the memorandum would be given every consideration but that it was his belief that successful control of this movement could only be brought about by the establishment of a parallel supervisory system by the Mexican Government…to prevent the departure of these workers from Mexico.[268]

The United States's desire to control immigration was a fundamental part of the Bracero Program. It allowed the United States to be selective about whom it let in and illegal immigration undermined that goal. Nonetheless, illegal immigration increased in this period as employment was plentiful, establishing its benefits to the U.S. economy. Likewise, Mexico could not control the influx of illegal workers heading north. Garcia points out that a drought in northern Mexico from 1948 to 1953 left even more jobless people in the region. "[B]ecause there were always more workers than jobs and because wages tended to be higher across the border, many Mexicans crossed the border by whatever means they could."[269] From 1951 to 1954 alone, the number of illegal immigrants apprehended doubled from 500,628 to 1,075,168.[270] While the Bracero Program allowed the United States to retain immigration standards within its borders, the accessibility of illegal immigrants demonstrated to American employers the benefits of not having to follow standards.

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[268] Letter from the Department of State to the Mexican embassy in Washington, D.C. (14 January 1946), Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores Archive 1425-3, 4-5.

[269] Ramos Garcia, *Operation Wetback*, 11.

[270] Ibid., 236.

"Operation Wetback" was created in 1954 in response to the flow of illegal Mexican immigration to the United States. The law itself was deemed racist and discriminatory by both the Mexican government and the Mexican-American community, as it permitted the Border Patrol to mistreat and abuse Mexican workers.[271] It was shrouded in language to "protect the integrity of legal braceros workers," but the media complained it would further mistreat Mexican nationals as "American authorities could not tell the difference between legal and illegal braceros, making the operation quite ineffective.[272] The Bracero Program worked as an experiment, as both governments pretended that it was functioning well. But mishandlings and mistreatment were well known and the program began to fall apart. Mexico ignored the situation during this period, as Larry Garcia y Griego points out, "[a]t this point it is clear that the Mexican government had no significant interest in promoting the interest of Mexican contract laborers. As the offer to continue the pre-designated workers program on 'an experimental basis' suggested, Mexican officials were more concerned with the appearance of making concessions than whether they actually made them."[273] The Bracero Program survived under these circumstances until 1964, when an accumulation of bad press, poor administration, mistreatment on the part of both governments,

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[271] Ibid., 171.

[272] Ibid.

[273] Larry M. Garcia y Griego, "The Bracero Policy Experiment: U.S.-Mexican Reponses to Mexican Labor Migration , 1942-1955" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1988), 825-26.

and decreased demand by the U.S. corporate agricultural sector for low-cost Mexican labor led to its abolition.

This effort to curb illegal immigration, however, did not bring the end of Mexican migration in search of employment opportunities in the United States, nor did it mean an end to its demand. The Bracero Program introduced the Mexican labor force to outside opportunities and changed the destiny of both nations. By the end of the Bracero Program, both countries wholly relied on this movement of labor. It opened the floodgates for illegal immigration, establishing its niche in the American economy and serving as vital contributor to Mexico's gross domestic product.

3.6 Conclusions

The Bracero Period is extremely significant within the history of Mexican return migration. *Braceros* were the first return migrants to be given a space in Mexican society as valued members of the national economy. The *bracero*'s experience paved the way for contemporary migration patterns, establishing a tradition of both legal and illegal Mexican immigration to the United States. An important part of this tradition is the atmosphere of abuse that revolved around it. The U.S. and Mexican governments' consistent preference of economic and political goals over social or humanitarian ideals during the years of the Bracero Program established the treatment of Mexican labor as a disposable, yet permanent workforce for the years to come. It was an open acknowledgement of

the role that Mexican labor played in the American economy. The program additionally influenced the policies that would determine the reception of Mexican laborers, as with Operation Wetback.

The rise of Mexican immigration to the United States meant changes to both American and Mexican society. Although *braceros* remained isolated in the United States and viewed the experience as temporary, it served as a major transnational phenomenon. On the individual level, coming home represented the *bracero*'s redemption for the suffering he endured on the other side, returning to his life and enjoying his newfound social and economic status. Their experience necessarily engendered upward mobility, something that was unattainable to most Mexican citizens, serving to instigate change on a societal level as well. Their introduction to this phenomenon via return migration established a link between social and economic privilege and going to the United States. It also established the circular nature of the migrant experience—in order to continue to reap the benefits of success, the migrant had to return. The popularization of the *bracero* experience during this period worked alongside this observation to establish immigration as part of the Mexican experience and define the *bracero* as an agent of transnational change. Furthermore, it demonstrates the dependency created between the United States and Mexico during the period. Whereas one of the Bracero Program's initial stated goals was promote good neighborliness, it ended up promoting an irreplaceable dependence for both countries.

As immigration to the United States continued in the decades to come, these patterns within return migration continued. The *bracero* period created a prototype for today's return migrant, who embodies these observations even more acutely. The new materialism that *braceros* brought to Mexico was relatively light due to their isolation. The vast increase in immigration, accompanied by greater access to American society, culture, and economy by new generations of immigrants, has fomented the much greater impact of return migration on sending communities. The following chapter looks at the acceleration of change and how these patterns have developed into the contemporary period in the case of Acámbaro.

Chapter Four

Ni de Aquí, Ni de Allá
From Neither Here Nor There

Immigration to the United States, both legal and illegal, continued following the termination of the Bracero Program as a response to global economic demands. Figure 1 reveals the extent of the rise in the Mexican population living in the United States from 1960 to 2006.

Table 4. Mexican Emigrants Living in the United States, 1960-2006[274]

Year	Number of Emigrants
1960	576,000
1970	788,000
1980	2,199,000
1990	4,447,000
2000	8,072,000
2006	11,132,000

This continuous flow has changed the nature of many Mexican towns, including Acámbaro, in a variety of ways. The last figure represents more than ten per cent of population of Mexico. Some towns have lost much of their population, and even more significantly, much of their young workforce, leaving women, children, and elders behind and dependent upon remittances. Little information pertaining directly to Acámbaro exists, however, statistics for the state and recognition from the state that Acámbaro is among the top emigrating municipalities give us an idea of how prevalent return migration is and how dependent the municipality is on its emigrants.

[274] Consejo Nacional de Población (CONAPO), "Población de origen mexicano residente en Estados Unidos, 1900-2007," in *Informe Anual 2006* (Mexico City: Banco de México, 2007).

Guanajuato consistently provides a steady flow of immigrants to the United States. According to Durand, Massey, and Zenteno, the state consistently ranked among the top three states in Mexico to send emigrants to the United States since the early 1900s.[275] Figure 2 shows emigration from Guanajuato as a percentage of national Mexican emigration to the United States, demonstrating a relatively consistent pattern across the years. Additionally, it ranked third in the nation in 1995 and second in 2003 and 2006 in terms of the amount of remittances it received from the United States.[276] According to the Guanajuato state government, the municipality of Acámbaro boasts one of the state's largest numbers of households receiving remittances in the state, an outcome of high levels of emigration.[277] Reasons for such high indices of emigration include a lack of employment opportunities and low wages. Additionally, the municipality of Acámbaro possesses the highest level of marginalization in the state; poor economic, political, and social infrastructure; and a higher mortality rate than the national average (6.9%). The State of Guanajuato ranks fifth in the nation in terms of suicide among youth ages 15 to

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[275] Jorge Durand, Douglas S. Massey, and Rene M. Zenteno, "Mexican Immigration to the United States: Continuities and Changes," *Latin American Research Review* 36 (2001): 109.

[276] Consejo Nacional de Población (CONAPO), "Remesas familiares y su distribución por entidad federativa, 1995, 2003 y 2009," in *Informe Anual 2006* (Mexico City: Banco de México, 2007), conapo.gob.mx (March 2010).

[277] Horacio Guerrero García, *Situación de la población en Guanajuato* (Guanajauto: COEPO-IPLANEG, 2007), http://iplaneg.guanajuato.gob.mx/c/document_library/get_file?p_l_id=11933&folderId=23310&name=DLFE-1605.pdf (March 2010).

19.[278] The poor quality of life in the state more generally and the municipality more specifically contributes to an augmented level of emigration. As a result, the municipality of Acámbaro boasts the highest level of migratory activity and depopulation in the state. [279] As a state with such a high level of emigration, it provides solid ground for a case study of return migration.

Table 5. Emigration from Guanajuato as a Percentage of National Emigration[280]

Year	Percent of National Emigration
1926-32	10.3
1944	13.8
1964	11.1
1978-79	17.1
1984	10.3
1992	11
2000	9.8

Another significant aspect of the state's emigration is the demographic that it represents. From 1993 to 1999 the flow of emigrants to the United States from Guanajuato state was between the ages of 25 and 34 years old. The average age of the states' emigrant from 1999 to 2000 was 35.[281] This rise is significant because it reflects the state's economic crisis, which drives away its working age population, provoking more age groups to take the risk to immigrate

[278] Ibid.; "Guanajuato: suicidios, pobreza y remesas," *Excelsior*, 20 February 2007.

[279] Guerrero García, *Situación de la población en Guanajuato.*

[280] Durand, Massey, and Zenteno, "Mexican Immigration to the United States: Continuities and Changes," 110; Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), "U.S. in Focus," Migrationinformation.org/ future/display (May 2010).

[281] Juan Pescador Medrano, "Migración en Guanajuato," in *Informe sobre necesidades sociales en Guanajuato: elementos de reflexión para el rediseño curricular de las carreras económico-administrativas,* ed. Ricardo Contreras Soto (Malaga: Universidad de Malaga, Fundación Universitaria Andaluza Inca Garcilaso, 2006-2007), 75.

in search of work. This is also reflected in the acceleration of the municipality of Acámbaro's aging population and a striking disequilibrium in the distribution of the male-female population in various regions of the state, with more females than males represented in categories from 15 to 19 and older.[282] According to Juan Pescador Medrano, between 1997-2003 about 260,000 *guanajuatenses* immigrated to the United States, of whom 88.7% were men and 11.3% were women.[283] Immigration from Guanajuato is dominated by young men, meaning that many families are left behind, dependent on remittances. It is also significant to the town because it loses an important component of its labor force, hindering local development and transferring traditional roles to women. According to the *Encuestas sobre Migración en la Frontera del Norte de Mexico* in 2003, 36% of the total population of the state of Guanajuato had a connection with the immigration.[284]

As such, Acámbaro is highly dependent on its emigrant population in various ways. They affect nearly every aspect of local life: economics, family relationships, culture, traditions, fashion, and even architectural preferences. Return migrants have placed Acámbaro on the map more effectively than any government-run program ever could have. Migration has propelled Acámbaro to join the global economy and established its place on a transnational scale. Their return, however, prompts locals who have never been to the United States to

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[282] Guerrero García. *Situación de la población en Guanajuato.*

[283] Pescador Medrano, "Migración en Guanajuato," 75.

[284] Ibid.

sense changes in their traditions with the constant flow of new values introduced by return migrants. The value that they place on their new lifestyle can be perceived as superseding local tradition. The return migrant's gains provoke mixed feelings among locals, who are introduced to a sudden invasion of material diversity. This, in addition to a cognizance of the dependence on return migration fuels friction between locals and return migrants. Whereas the economic impact of return migration is often the focus of its study, this chapter uses it as a starting point to argue that the cultural impact that return migration entails is every bit as important in determining its real impact on a place. It looks at the impact that migrants and return migrants have on Acámbaro, how local *acambarences* view these silent yet pervasive changes, and how they respond to changes in cultural meaning in order to historicize the presence of return migration in Acámbaro. Acámbaro's history is dependent upon such an analysis.

4.1 "Paisano, Bienvenido a tu Patria" (Countryman, Welcome to your Homeland)

During the season of high return migration (November-January) Acámbaro makes a notable effort to welcome back its countrymen. Bilingual banners that read "Paisano, Bienvenido a Casa" (Countryman, Welcome Home) are placed in the main entrances of the town and downtown in the main plaza to welcome return migrants. Pharmacies, markets, and restaurants display signs in both Spanish and English to announce "*se aceptan dolares*" (we accept dollars). The local government sets up information booths to attend to the needs of returnees

and promotes dances and festivities in their honor. Their presence is welcomed because they have become central to the city's commercial life. For returnees, the social and economic advancements they make in Acámbaro redeem the efforts they take to make ends meet while in the United States, both consciously and unconsciously. Acámbaro becomes a transnational space.

However this was not always the case. Acámbaro's official welcome is a relatively recent phenomenon. Returning to Mexico has placed migrants at risk in the past. The Mexican government instilled programs to protect return migrants, but their intentions and real outcomes prove otherwise. For example on April 6, 1989, Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari and his administration created the Programa Paisano.[285] The program's intent was to protect return migrants from abuses by Mexican authorities and to improve "federal public services in the border regions, seaports, and international airports." Most importantly, the program's primary goal was to welcome Mexicans who live in the United States with open arms.[286] Its creation was a response to abuses that had been reported during the high periods of return migration, including the confiscation of merchandise and *mordidas* (bribes) demanded by Mexican authorities. Contrary to the goals set up by the program, the years since its enactment have led to even more abuses. Newspaper headlines during the period of high return migration often report official abuses targeting migrants.

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[285] This can be translated generically to English as the "Countryman Program."

[286] Secretaría de Gobernación, "Paisano: Bienvenido a casa," http://www.paisano.gob.mx/index.php?page/ Vision_mision_objetivo (Novermber 2009).

The Laredo Morning Times on November 28, 1998, for example, printed the headline, "Visitors are Victims: *Paisanos* Pay a Heavy Price," referring to the risk it takes for returnees to visit their place of origin. The article describes how return migrants prepare themselves economically for expected abuses by Mexican authorities before crossing into Mexico. One interviewee heading to Zamora, Michoacán, stated that he "allots $200-$300 in payments to Mexican authorities in his travel budget" because bribing authorities is part of the ritual of returning.[287] Reporter Miguel T. Ramírez notes that often the "official is evasive on what law has been violated and explains the alternative is to have the offending cargo confiscated by the Public Ministry."[288] In 2003, migrant leaders in California complained that Programa Paisano was full of deficiencies and a testament to abuse by Mexican authorities toward return migrants.[289] Regardless of how much a return migrant brings, local authorities continue to abuse their power. There is always an official answer to such behavior. In response to the criticism of Programa Paisano, Director Florencia Martines, pointed out that return migrants tend to abuse Mexican laws, failing to pay the appropriate taxes for the merchandise they bring into Mexico, either bringing in too much or illegal goods, thus justifying an inspector's confiscations. Whereas Programa Paisano was intended to protect return migrants, it quickly became the means to regulate what they brought and subjected them to more abuses and inconveniences.

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[287] Miguel T. Ramirez, "Visitors are Victims: *Paisanos* Pay a Heavy Price," *The Laredo Morning Times*, 28 November 1998.

[288] Ibid.

[289] "Programa Paisano, no 'solo propaganda,'" *El Universal,* 8 December 2003.

Although the program did not succeed in its goals, Programa Paisano ratified the importance of returnees to the nation and changed the rhetoric surrounding how immigrants are viewed in Mexico. It represented a turning point in the Mexican government's relationship with migrants and within Mexico's migrant history. For the first time returnees were recognized as having protagonists in the development of Mexico's economic structure. Whereas they were once considered a burden to national progress, they became important components of Mexican life.

4.2 Redefining Class

The benefits that migrants' return entails, however, outweigh the risks of return. Returning to Mexico provides return migrants an irreplaceable opportunity to enhance their status. For example, the difficulty and expense of obtaining many American goods—electronic goods, new music, brand-name clothing, cars, and so on—is repaid with an emotional distinction that they lack in the north. Material accomplishments convey a message of success and superiority. Such spectacle, however, also creates tension and envy within the community. As Susan Matt claims, envy is developed in a limited society when it is bombarded by accomplishments and success, "While people have experienced envy throughout history, the expansion of the consumer economy

multipl[ies] the occasions for the emotion and offer[s] new ways to assuage it."[290] The pace of bombardment with American goods in Acámbaro led to an imported consumer economy in a relatively short period of time.

The return migrant's stay in Mexico leads to the formation of a new, temporary social class because of the upward mobility that their experience in the United States entails. They become a temporary middle or even upper class because of the economic and consumer power they possess. Eugenia Georges notes similar appraisals of class mobility in the Caribbean. In her case study of Los Pinos, Dominican Republic, she notes that "maintaining ties with villagers was…important to many migrants' long term strategy of return and entrance into the nation's middle class. In short, these multiple considerations worked to reinforce ties with extended family and other network members even though migrants might be absent from the community for years."[291] The importance of local connections in creating this status holds true for the case of Acámbaro as well. Family ties constitute an important element of a returnee's status because they allow them reentrance into the community and do not allow them to feel displaced, providing them with a level of comfort and security, regardless of how the changes they bring affect the greater community. Georges argues that the level of acceptance back into the community is determined by a return migrant's display of spending. As an example, she notes that that return migrants "…treat

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[290] Susan J. Matt, *Keeping up with the Joneses: Envy in American Consumer Society, 1890-1930* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 3.

[291] Eugenia Georges, *The Making of a Transnational Community: Migration, Development, and Cultural Change in the Dominican Republic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 152.

friends in the bars. Such spending displays were also a way of asserting one's success in the United States and affirming that the process of achieving one's migration project was well under way."[292] It is important to note that this power is temporary. The satisfaction of attaining this status requires the returnee to emigrate again to sustain this image.

Circular migration theory supports this analysis. Wilbur Zelinsky refers to circulation as "a great variety of movement, usually short term, repetitive or cyclical in nature, but all having in common the lack of any declared intention of a permanent or long lasting change of residence."[293] This theory is closely connected to the transnational component of the returnee. As the returnee enjoys a life of comfort in Mexico, going back to the United States becomes a predictable ritual. Belinda Reyes explains, "Under these conditions, circular migration provides the means to maximize the family's income and keeps the mover's options open for both the origin and destination, reducing the risk of not being able to support the family."[294] Supporting the family and demonstrating success is dependent upon this circulation. Whereas in the bracero period migrants viewed emigration as a temporary experience and need, contemporary migrants view it as a permanent cycle. They have lost sight of the assumption

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[292] Ibid., 161.

[293] Wilbur Zelinsky, "The Hypothesis of the Mobility Transition," *Geographical Review* 61 (1971), 226.

[294] Belinda Reyes, *Dynamics of Immigration: Return Migration to Western Mexico* (San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California, 1997), 13.

that they will someday return permanently. Their temporal return, regardless of its length, elicits changes in local life.

Locals understand what is happening. Material displays of success by contemporary return migrants are by no means new to Acámbaro's history. They have accompanied return migration in some form since its early days. During the period of the guest worker program, *braceros* who returned to Mexico had a similar opportunity to display and show off their economic gains. One 72-year-old woman whose husband was a *bracero* in the 1950s, recalls that her husband and other *braceros,* "came [to Acámbaro] many times to show off. They felt superior because they came from the United States and [my husband], and others like him, felt they had more economic resources to survive on in Acámbaro."[295] An 18-year-old local female interviewee whose father left for the United States and never returned echoed that sentiment in the present day, saying about return migrants: "My sister is obsessed with what she sees on TV and with our cousins who are in the United States who bring new things to Acámbaro to show off."[296] When asked how it made her feel to see these things she stated, "I'm not jealous, but they want us to be like them and I personally don't like the way they dress, talk, or walk. I can't understand why they bring and show off new clothes that don't even look good. Their Mexican bodies weren't

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[295] Personal interview, 18 December 2008.

[296] Personal interview, December 2000.

made for the American clothes they wear."[297] For many, however, the new consumption patterns brought by return migrants and the desire to emanate success creates discomfort among locals. The creation of new spending and consumption habits and the lack of economic resources among locals to acquire similar goods mean that the only way to achieve them is to go to the United States. The introduction to American-style consumer culture and the desire to attain it has its roots in migration, from its early stages in the *bracero* period to the magnified expression that resounds today.

Patterns of consumption have changed dramatically in a brief period . Since the 1940s Acámbaro has depended on its traditional market, the Mercado Hidalgo, where the majority of the population purchased foodstuffs and other merchandise. For more than sixty years it represented the economic heart of the town. In November 2006 its presence in the town was challenged by the introduction of a Walmart-style Mexican supermarket called Soriana. Its introduction provided locals an urban alternative for consumption. With the opening of Soriana, other American-style businesses arrived. Domino's Pizza, for example, opened a franchise in November 2007. From the U.S. perspective it is difficult to understand the significance of these changes. Something that represents such an everyday, working-class experience in the United States is, in fact, quite extraordinary in Acámbaro. For return migrants, the acquisition of these consumer habits while in the United States represents prestige and progress in Acámbaro, simply because they are American in origin. These

[297] Ibid.

businesses, while representing very basic consumption patterns in the United States, are luxuries for locals. The price of a Domino's Pizza, for instance, is more than the average laborer makes in a day. Other cities with populations half the size of that of Acámbaro, such as San Miguel de Allende or Moroleón, are even more developed in these consumption patterns. However, they are also closer to industrial centers or tourist hubs, which provide for different patterns of consumption. Acámbaro, by contrast, is an agrarian town dominated by a traditional market. It depends on agriculture, remittances sent from relatives in the United States, and seasonal spending by return migrants. Immigration, return migration, and all that it entails has triggered the development of a new consumer culture.

Prior to these developments, the only way for locals to experiment with American consumption patterns was to go to Morelia, Michoacán, or Celaya, Guanajuato, both of which are an hour's distance from Acámbaro. The opening of the Soriana supermarket marked Acambaro's introduction to this market. Its inauguration was timed according to the influx of return migration, counting on returnees to introduce locals to American-style consumption patterns. One return migrant related that she would "rather go to Soriana because it's cleaner and there are more options [than at the market]."[298] The idea of a clean store is an influence of American consumption. The local *mercado* includes a variety of miscellaneous business, dominated primarily by fruit and vegetable stands, and

[298] Personal interview, 2 January 2009.

meat stands where the carcasses of the animals are fully exposed. The lack of refrigeration, pungent smells, and pest problems that go with it are part of a shopping experience that revolves around buying small quantities day to day. The introduction of American consumer tendencies includes the packaging and refrigeration of meat, visible sanitary improvements (masks, gloves, sanitation procedures), buying more products in fewer shopping trips, and the need to make fewer transactions. This clashes with local consumer patterns and requires the return migrant's preferences to sustain this new lifestyle.

Business owners at the Mercado Hidalgo have suffered in the wake of Soriana's inauguration, as consumers shifted toward the new option. One vendor remarked that it took a while for locals to get used to having a supermarket, but once Soriana integrated itself into the community, he lost about 20 to 30 percent of his business.[299] These consumption patterns would have arrived eventually, but they came faster as a result of the acquired tastes of returned migrants. Thorstein Veblen pointed to the status that surrounds consumption patterns, stating that consuming in certain places provides "evidence of wealth," thus establishing a distinctive image that once did not exist before.[300] Locals respond to such businesses as a desire to participate in the consumer trend and thereby obtain status within the community.

4.3 Taming "el Norte"

[299] Personal interview, 22 December 2008.

[300] Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Whitefish: Kissinger Publishing, 2004), 39.

Return migrants become Americanized and see their home country as "backward." A realization of how American they have become is exhibited in their newfound desire to turn Acámbaro into "a little United States."[301] An example of this is returning migrants who, as a first sign of success, build or improve their homes. Gustavo López Castro, who studies migration in the neighboring state of Michoacán, explains that the most common improvement is converting a dwelling from adobe to concrete. This development also serves to fulfill a returnee's need to demonstrate that they have succeeded in the United States.[302] Structural changes often reflect where the return migrant has worked in the United States and is reflected in architectural trends and influences, such as sloped rooftops, automatic garage doors, modern details, and grass yards. It is quite commonplace to see a street with a wide variety of housing styles, from the most humble and bare walls to near replicas of American homes. Figure 3 shows a home on the outskirts of Acámbaro with unequivocally non-traditional motifs. Its architectural features reflect those typical in Southern California or the west coast of the United States more generally and are located in the outskirts of Acámbaro due to the need for space. Such developments relate a very direct influence on local architecture specifically and places value on a new lifestyle more generally.

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[301] Sam Quinones, "His U.S. Residency Crossed the Line: Mexican Court Rules Mayor-Elect Ineligible," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 8 September 2001, http://www.sfgate.com/cgibin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/ archive/2001/09/08/MN200784.DTLbv.

[302] Sam Quinones, *True Tales from Another Mexico: The Lynch Mob, the Popsicle Kings, and the Bronx* (Albuquerque: University of Mexico Press, 2001), 285.

Figure 11. An American-style home under construction in the outskirts of Acámbaro. Photo taken in February 2007 by the author.

The return migrant also challenges the status hierarchy of their home town. The new hierarchy is based on the ability to consume and to demonstrate their ability to tame "*el norte*." The returnee's success is measured by his mastery of new American trends and a confident view of having improved himself. He has become an agent for what Karl Marx called the, "fetishism of commodity." Marx states,

> A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour. This is the reason why the products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses.[303]

Return migrants have such a physical connection with their commodities because of their labor, however Acámbaro becomes a witness to a process that was previously unavailable (for example, residents would not be impressed by a new truck or a Domino's pizza in the United States). This fetishism is

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[303] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 83.

ostentatious and the return migrant's accomplishment (real or perceived) creates an environment of desire among locals. An unavoidable collision takes place between those who have it and those who want it. As such, return migrants are perceived or welcomed home with a level of hesitancy because they demonstrate limitations to the local's ability to succeed.

In her study on return migrants in the Dominican Republic, Peggy Levitt notes that returnees use "their sending community as a reference group against which they gauge their status."[304] Such measure stimulates a polarization that to locals appears to be a challenge rather than a natural phenomenon. Years of migration or transnational migration provoke issues with social identity. While there exists a level of tolerance by locals toward returnees, a level of acceptance is still not achieved. Her study reveals how class becomes a powerful identifying factor among both locals and returnees. Levitt notes that both "migrants and non-migrants claimed that what really rules is 'the law of the peso,' which privileges and protects those who have money and arbitrarily demands things from those who do not."[305] A similar polarization occurs in Acámbaro, in which locals become subject to the demands of return migrants precisely because of what could be termed the "law of the dollar." Seasonal migration ensures that shopkeepers, bricklayers, and domestic labor will be in demand. In Acámbaro, return migrants take this a step further, approaching the town as a place without

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[304] Peggy Levitt, *The Transnational Villager* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 11.

[305] Ibid., 114.

law. Part of the experience of returning to Acámbaro is to do those things that cannot be done in the United States, such as drinking and driving, experimenting with cocaine or other illegal drugs, clandestine cockfights, disturbing the peace, and so on, to be followed up with a bribe to local officials to tide things over. The popular Mexican aphorism sums up this philosophy: "*con dinero baila el perro*" (literally: with money, the dog dances. Meaning, money makes the world go 'round).[306] Returnees to Acámbaro embrace that saying, finding loopholes in the local system to excuse their behavior. One local who was interviewed said, "Here in Acámbaro, how much you have is how much you're worth."[307] Levitt noted similar responses to the law among her interviewees, who related that local police would refrain from harassing them in exchange for a payoff. As a result, Levitt concludes, "those with less money and power are more vulnerable. They have to keep the law at bay by paying differences to its gatekeepers."[308] Levitt adds, return migrants view the law of their country with disdain and "even when a person had acted wrong, his or her behavior could always be explained and excused."[309] In Acámbaro, this dichotomy between those who have and those who do not is a major reason behind the tension between locals and returnees, leading to the inability to accept them fully into the community. The

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[306] Mexico Guru, http://www.mexicoguru.com/mexican-slang-meaning.php?date=090204 (February 2008).

[307] Personal interview, 25 December 2008.

[308] Levitt, *The Transnational Villager,* 115.

[309] Ibid.

attitude of cultural superiority and blatant disregard of local norms brought by returnees furthers that sentiment and further emphasizes that rift.

Acámbaro lives in two realities: one without return migrants, and the other with them. From spring into fall, Acámbaro is socially static, like many towns and cities in central Mexico, it is still run by local customs. But by mid-November and through the New Year festivities, Acámbaro is transformed into a disarray of people, parties, traffic, violence, and is marked by a high consumption of alcohol and drugs. One lawyer I interviewed related that the county of Acámbaro is the leading consumer of alcohol in the state of Guanajuato from November through mid-January.[310] A former police officer corroborated this observation: "My worst experiences have been during the [Christmas] festivities…There is a lot of violence and most of it is committed by people who come from el *norte*." He noted that arrests were not only alcohol-related, but drug-related as well.[311] One local woman echoed these concerns, saying "It's unsafe to go out at night because those *norteños* [return migrants] are trouble makers and maniac drivers. All they do is show off, drink, and drive, and it's unsafe."[312] Disregard for the law and the mayhem that ensues during the high season of return migration is another factor in the division between locals and returnees.

The fact that migrants do not have to respect Mexican laws and are unconstrained by American ones gives them (especially the young) a distinct

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[310] Personal interview, 30 June 2000.

[311] Personal interview, 29 June 2000.

[312] Personal interview, 30 June 2000.

"freedom." An example of this is the issue of wearing a seatbelt in a car. Whereas migrants are careful to wear them to avoid fines in the United States, they quickly shed once they arrive in Mexico and even find it permissible to drink beer while driving. In Mexico, they are part of a higher, if not the highest, social class. Levitt argues that "migration…calls into question ideas about right and wrong and the appropriate uses and abuse of the law. The result is again somewhat paradoxical. Calls for reform and greater accountability grow stronger at the same time that the new ways to circumvent and take advantage of the legal system are introduced." Thus, this is not solely a Mexican trend. However, in nations like Mexico, where money can buy status and privilege, these circumstances are common.

The peak season for return migration transforms Acámbaro into a competitive stage for boasting. Migrants are distinguished by new trucks blaring loud music. In their terms, the bigger the better! It is the grounds for expressing the American Dream in Mexico, however it is achieved. Figure 5, taken in December 2008, exhibits the contemporary migrant's interpretation of success, as all heads turn to witness a Hummer with California license plates barrel down a city street. This image of success is fraught with inconsistencies, as one return migrant caught exhibiting his new truck in downtown pointed out: "Listen, *el león no es como lo pintan* (things aren't always as they appear). Most of the people who bring their new trucks and cars here don't own them. It's impossible, unless

you're selling drugs. They're all deep in debt."[313] In essence, part of the story is being left out. The migrants' success must be accompanied by sacrifice. However, such sacrifice is hidden from view, giving the impression that that is easy to succeed in the United States.

Figure 12. A return migrant drives a Hummer with California license plates in downtown Acámbaro, causing heads to turn. Photo taken by the author in January 2009.

Ostentation runs the risk of failure. Internal competition among return migrants is visible to the public eye, in terms of who sports the bigger house, the best car, or the most up-to-date technology. Those who have been to the United States stand out and comparisons are inevitably made. Robert Birney, Harvey Burdic, and Richard Teevan affirm "[t]he measure of success is essentially determined by who and how many others have accomplished the same thing. The successful person needs those who have failed, and those who have failed need hope that some day the tables will be reversed."[314] This drastic shift from the slow pace of life in Acámbaro throughout much of the year to a place that

[313] Jesús Pérez, "Suffering and Redemption: Return Migration and the Reconstruction of Popular Culture," (Master's Thesis, San Diego State University, 2002).

[314] Robert C. Birney, Harvey Burdic, and Richard C. Teevan, *The Fear of Failure* (New York: Reinhold Company, 1969), 1.

simulates American abundance and status seeking takes place quickly and profoundly in the period of high migration, leading locals to experience the United States without ever leaving Acámbaro. The presence of returnees simultaneously reveals disparities, causes envy, and inspires hope, leading locals to experience culture shock within the borders of their own town.

Changes in the town's class structure are included in the transformation of Acámbaro's economy. The influx of dollars to Acámbaro has created a monetary gap. In other words, those individuals who wield dollars have more power than those who use pesos. Part of this gap is sustained by remittances sent by family members in the United States that support a better quality of life among some locals. As such, class disparity persists beyond the period of return migration, forming a new permanent class. This disparity, however, is also dependent on the migrant's return to the United States. Just as the return migrant needs to return to the United States to keep up with the image they left in Acámbaro, locals who rely upon remittances need family members to go north again. Thus, although tensions exist between locals and return migrants, they are interdependent in many ways; they are necessarily part of one another's experience.

4.4 The Evolution of Culture

The migrant's return leads to romanticizing Acámbaro and Mexico more generally, however, their presence invariably changes precisely what they long for. Return migrants become the talk of the town as cultural changes inevitably

clash with local traditions and values. Music, technology, and clothing are simple examples of such changes, as return migrants once brought the first televisions, boomboxes, and CD players to their home town. Return migrants crave Mexican tradition and culture, but unavoidably introduce those around them to new ideas and alternatives, contributing to cultural change. Bellbottoms in the 1970s, legwarmers in the 1980s, and heavy metal t-shirts in the 1990s entered the town with returnees. Even female migrants' decision to wear makeup, something once relegated to *mujeres de la mala vida* ("loose" women) in Acámbaro, challenged local mores. The return migrant's arrival, especially in earlier years, represented a change so swift and profound that locals who hadn't been to the United States found them hard to digest, provoking criticism, discomfort, and curiosity.

Returnees transport new cultural elements to Acámbaro both consciously and unconsciously—a trend that accelerated as more people began to migrate. Local traditions have changed as a result, which is evident in the transformation of winter festivities in Acámbaro. Where they were once dedicated to the *posadas* and the three kings, they now involve Santa Claus, reindeer, and Christmas trees. Many return migrants heading south for the holidays anticipate a Mexican-style holiday, but American Christmas festivities and images have become so influential that the holiday itself has changed significantly. Some return migrants use the holiday season to demonstrate their cultural and material acquisitions in the United States, decorating their homes in Acámbaro with lights according to the American style and even bringing Christmas trees from the

United States.[315] Traditional nativity scenes now incorporate Santa Claus and his reindeer as guests of the newborn king. Additionally, local children can choose to have their photo taken with either Santa or the Three Kings in Acámbaro's main plaza.

Another change in local tradition is found in late October, revolving around the celebration of the Day of the Dead. Halloween paraphernalia and trick-or-treating have been incorporated into the celebration. Figure 1 depicts how the market has responded to new cultural demands, selling merchandise once relegated to an American Halloween, such as witch hats and pumpkin candy pails, alongside more traditional sugar skulls, caskets, and offerings for the Day of the Dead. Additionally, on November 1st children dress in costume and ask for their "*calaverita*" (literally, "little skull," invoking "trick-or-treat"[316]) from local merchants in the center of town in return for candy, as depicted in Figure 2. The incorporation of American traditions into local life is tangible and unfettered. What would have been unimaginable fifteen to twenty years ago is overwhelmingly pervasive today. Return migrants serve as agents of cultural change, regardless of the amount of time they spend in Mexico or whether they succeed or fail in the United States. The town's culture has evolved to fit the needs of the migrant population and reflects its history of emigration.

[315] Pérez, "Suffering and Redemption."

[316] A reference to the sugar skulls that are traditionally made to celebrate the Day of the Dead.

Figure 13. Stands in downtown Acámbaro sell Halloween paraphernalia alongside More traditional Day of the Dead merchandise. Photo taken in October 2007 by the author.

Figure 14. Children trick-or-treating local merchants in downtown Acámbaro on November 1, the Day of the Dead. Photo taken on November 1, 2007 by the author.

Of course, return migrants are not the only conductors of Americanization in Acámbaro; locals are also bombarded by American television programs displaying life in Beverly Hills, New York City, and other locales. About eleven years ago, Acámbaro had four television channels and programming was available only during certain hours of the day. Very few had satellite dishes and those who could afford them were either wealthy or from *el norte*. This, too, was a symbol of status in the town. As the town grew, however, cable companies saw an opportunity to expand their market. In 2000, cable television arrived, broadcasting both American and Mexican channels 24 hours a day. Approximately 60 percent of the programming is now American and includes the

Cartoon Network, Nickelodeon, VH1, MTV, American Network, Disney Channel, E Entertainment, and so on.[317] An increasing amount of the local population now encounters the American lifestyle through *Barney, Beverly Hills 90210,* and *E! News*. With the introduction of cable television, locals no longer need to rely on hearsay to imagine life in the United States; the visual depiction of the stereotyped American Dream is at their disposal. This development redefines the town's historically isolated status, contributing to its newfound global status. Doreen Massey argues that "each geographical 'place' in the world is being realigned in relation to the new global realities, their roles within the wider whole are being re-assigned, their boundaries dissolve as they are increasingly crossed by everything from investment flows, to satellite TV networks. Moreover, as distance seems to become meaningless, so relations in time, too, are altered."[318] Gregory Nava explores the impact that American media can have on a potential migrant in the film *El Norte*, in which Rosa, a potential Guatemalan migrant looks at American magazines, dreaming about fashion and life in *el norte*. He touches on the fantasy that surrounds *el norte* that is projected by media and juxtaposes it with the unpleasant realities that migrants often face. This other side, the suffering that migration entails, is avoided upon return—a heightened materialism does the talking.

Another important contribution to bolstering Acámbaro's role in the global arena is the popularity of the Internet. Just as satellite dishes in the late 1980s

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[317] Cablecom, http://www.cablecomqro.com.mx/canales.html (February 2008).

[318] Doreen Massey, "A Place Called Home?" *New Frontiers: A Journal of Culture, Theory, and Politics* 17 (Summer 1992): 3-15.

and early 1990s served to boast social status, the Internet plays the same role today. Internet access is expensive and considered a luxury. Most who cannot afford to have it in their homes pay ten pesos an hour in cafés or other small businesses to access the rest of Mexico, the United States, and the world. The spectrum is infinite and Acámbaro is no longer confined to its rural borders. The first Internet café was opened twelve years ago in Acámbaro and today cyber cafés are big business in the city, especially during the high season of return migration. In 2008 there were about fifty in operation and each one was saturated with 10- to 15-year olds who incorporated it into part of their daily recreation—chatting being particularly popular. Those who can use the Internet can view the latest technologies, current fashions, and chat with people from around the world. The internet is not a visual representation, but it has become an outlet of communication in breaking borders and asserting Acámbaro in a different light. "*Lo de afuera*" (the outside) is viewed as innovative and necessary because it connects them to a wider spectrum—a world that they want to be a part of. It develops a need to participate through the consumption of fashionable products. Acámbaro's youth are particularly drawn to this phenomenon.

Return migrants view Acámbaro as a "playground" of sorts—a place to demonstrate that they "tamed" the United States and to redeem the sacrifices and hardships they endure to do so. Local perceptions of this "redemption," however, do not look kindly on the result. Locals admit that they enjoy the economic benefits that return migrants bring to the town, in terms of their consumption patterns and an increase in employment opportunities, but fear the

negative repercussions that their presence can also entail. In one interview, an owner of a small grocery store said that he could not understand the massive transformations he saw in many of his friends after they had gone north and returned again to Acámbaro: "They are different, and some return worse off than before they left to the United States."[319] Another store owner feared "*norteños* are here to change our traditions."[320] Yet another said, "Their dollars are welcome, but their attitudes of superiority toward local people are not."[321] In response, when asked about such sentiments among locals, a returnee responded, "We don't care if people from Acámbaro like us or not. We belong here and come and go as we please."[322] Return migrants distance themselves from Acámbaro precisely because of what they bring. Their experience has made them different. Eugenia Georges finds similar attitudes toward Dominican returnees,

> Pineros had a saying that "New York changes people" ("Nueva York hace cambiar a la gente"), referring not only to the obvious changes in clothing and language, but also to the more subtle social distance that migration put between migrants and some villagers. Thus, while on the one hand migrants conveyed a message of success that was potentially distancing, they were often also concerned to show that living in New York had not made them so comparón ("stuck-up") that they had forgotten friends and relatives in the village.[323]

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[319] Personal interview, 4 July 2000.

[320] Personal interview, 27 December 2008. The word "*norteño*" is commonly used in Acámbaro and other parts of Mexico to refer to Mexicans coming from the United States.

[321] Personal interview, 2 July 2000.

[322] Personal interview, December 2000.

[323] Georges, *The Making of a Transnational Community,* 152.

Such reactions bring up important questions regarding the dual roles that return migrants play in the community. Whereas return migrants can be perceived as agents of change and modernity, they subsequently present open challenges to the local lifestyle.

Some locals, in contrast, appreciate the cultural alternatives that return migrants introduce to the town. Some youth embrace such changes more openly, as one local merchant describes. He tried his luck in the United States and lived in Berkeley, California, for 11 years, returning to Acámbaro in the late 1980s to find a town that had changed very little since he left in the mid-1970s. When asked about his perception of return migrants, he said "this town depends on them, like it or not. But the changes they bring are huge, and the youth in particular adopt what they bring more quickly than the older generations."[324]

Regardless of whether return migrants are viewed negatively or positively within the community, locals are introduced to a lifestyle that is enviable in terms of economic stability, social distinction, and cultural modernity. The presence of return migrants induces more migration as it opens locals to the possibility and the benefits it might bring. Massey corroborates this: "Once a critical takeoff stage is reached, migration alters social structures in a way that increases the likelihood of subsequent migration…it relies on a variety of social-structural mechanisms, the most important of which is network formation." The return migrants' presence is an extension of the transnational experience.

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[324] Personal interview, 29 December 2008.

4.5 Conclusions

Return migration has evolved to become more common, more dynamic, and more mobile than ever before. The changes that it brings to a destination are therefore heightened. Whereas returnees were once shunned by the nation, Mexico has come to recognize their value, as demonstrated by the Programa Paisano and the welcome Acámbaro extends to its own migrants. By promoting security, facilitating return, and standardizing and celebrating the experience, governments foment more return migration as an essential economic function within the Mexican economy.

That economic purpose is matched by the importance of the experience to return migrants themselves. Class is directly connected to return migration in Acámbaro and is measured in terms of new forms of achievement, based primarily on economic and cultural values, as demonstrated by the value placed on the development of a new consumer culture. *Braceros* became the first successful returnees in Mexican history, demonstrating rapid class ascension and material gains. Contemporary migrants continue to respond to economic and class incentives, as well as cultural alternatives.

The local perception of migration is very one-sided. Return migrants hide the suffering that they endure, focusing instead on their successes while in Acámbaro. Locals see their redemption, the short-lived comforts that are enviable in a town that cannot produce them for the average citizen. The introduction of the migrant lifestyle leads to cultural, social, and economic

transformations. Return migration has come to embody part of Acámbaro's identity. The next chapter looks at how return migration has transformed local identity through the introduction of American gang culture as a major component and example of another layer of the return migrant's influence.

Chapter Five

"*Cholismo*" and the Emergence of Chicano-Style Gangs in Acámbaro

The successes of return migrants in Acámbaro provoke both resentment and admiration based upon gains and a dual impact on the receiving community. They are admired but their success is often misinterpreted. The return migrants engage in a competition of conspicuous consumption. However, these visible representations of success and accomplishment entail deeper impacts on the receiving community. The influences of return migration in Acámbaro have sparked a new phenomenon that infiltrates youth in particular, as new cultural forms are introduced to a population that is exposed to few opportunities or arenas for expression. One form of new expression is graffiti, which becomes a visually prominent representation through which local youth can speak or mark a territory. The graffiti that has developed in Acámbaro is strikingly similar to that of Latino *barrios* in California and other U.S. states where Mexicans live. Graffiti is now a major element of the return migrant's cultural expression and has influenced local youth, who are attracted to it and to what is being expressed, an attachment to a gang and a *cholo* subculture. As a Mexican migrant, I noticed new scribbles each time I returned to Acámbaro or when I traveled to other parts of Mexico, and watched them progress from simple signs to sophisticated codes over the years. The graffiti in Acámbaro, as in other parts of Mexico, eventually reminded me of *barrios* where I grew up in Salinas, California. It stimulated my questions about tagging in Mexico: Who was doing it? What did these symbols

mean in this context? Graffiti is now everywhere; towns so small they hardly appear on a map having competing graffiti and fully tagged homes and businesses. It has even spread to native communities. The beginnings of these scribbles and their increased sophistication can be tied to repatriated *cholos* and is adopted by youth who have never been to the United States as part of a cultural alternative. As emigration has brought many positive influences to the town in the form of economic opportunity and remittances, migration has also developed a more problematic inheritance, bringing gangs and their symbols to Acámbaro.

Figure 1 was taken in the summer of 2002 in the outskirts of Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca, a Zapotec community. What was peculiar about this graffiti was the message it had. One read 18—the number that represents the Salvadoran gang base in Los Angeles known as the Mara Salvatrucha. The 18 had an X over it, accompanied by a responding message. In the form of the number 13, representing a Mexican gang known as the *sureños*, “La 13 no somos una moda, somos una forma de vida” (13, we aren’t a fad, we’re a way of life). Next to it the 18 responded, “la 18 en pie de Guerra” (the 18th marching for battle). This written dialogue represents a major change from the public messages of old that promoted politicians and commercial goods. The art was unimpressive but its location and what it said mattered—gang culture had arrived to this small town. This type of graffiti is now a normal part of the scenery in much of rural Mexico. It is an indicator of return migration and represents the grim side of the migrant

experience in the United States. This chapter looks at how certain groups, graffiti, and Chicano-style gangs have evolved in Acámbaro. I look at the impact of this evolution on the local community and particularly on youth. Other questions I ask are how local authorities approach the problem, how it is tied to return migration, and how it evolved to be what it is today.

Figure 15. Picture taken in the summer of 2002 in Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca. Photo by the author.

5.1 Popular Cultural Alternatives in Mexico

The introduction of *cholo* subculture as a cultural alternative in Mexico and local responses to it have their roots in much earlier movements over the period of study. As cultural alternatives were developing in the United States and the United Kingdom in the 1950s and 1960s, Mexican middle-class youth saw these influences as opportunities to seize new trends and adapt them to their own environment. These trends developed primarily in urban centers. Mexico City was expanding rapidly and drawing migrants from throughout the country. It

became a cultural Mecca where foreign trends could develop more naturally than in other places. As they became important symbols of identity to urban youth, such trends were perceived outside of the capital city as lawless and against tradition outside of the capital city. Any cultural trend brought to *la provincia* (a usually derogatory label for any place outside of Mexico City) was looked upon as if it came from another planet. Foreign trends would, nevertheless, eventually filter down to rural Mexico.

One of the first major modern cultural influences that went beyond Mexico City was the image of the *pachuco*. Originally from the United States, the *pachuco* was personified in Mexico by the image of the Mexican actor Tin Tan in the 1940s. Mexican-American *pachucos* (or Zoot Suiters, as they were known) were a "symbol of cultural resistance, and end[ed] up cornered and persecuted in the segregation campaigns that culminate[d] in the Los Angeles Zoot Suit Riots."[325] Tin Tan, the famous Mexican comedian and actor, transformed the *pachuco* into a folk symbol in Mexico, with many ambiguities attached to it. Carlos Monsiváis notes that Tin Tan's "dress and style announce[d], for the first time, a popular modernity."[326] Modernity in the image of the Mexican *pachuco*, however, engendered many negative connotations. According to Monsiváis, the image that Tin Tan created became the archetype of the "*pocho,*" "a person who has lost caste [*descastado*], who has forgotten his roots, and exchanged the

[325] Carlos Monsiváis, *Mexican Postcards* (New York: Verso, 1997), 110.

[326] Ibid., 111.

vigor of idiosyncrasy for the plate of beans of superficial Americanization."[327] Nonetheless, the ambiguity of the *pachuco* was reflected upon by Mexican intellectuals such as Agustin Yañes[328] and Octavio Paz. In his book, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Paz claims that the *pachucos*:

> . . . are youths, for the most part of Mexican origin, who form gangs in Southern cities; they can be identified by their language and behavior as well by the clothing they affect. They are instinctive rebels, and North American racism has vented its wrath on them more than once. But the pachucos do not attempt to vindicate their race or the nationality of their forebears. Their attitude reveals an obstinate, almost fanatical will-to-be, but this will affirms nothing specific except their determination—it is an ambiguous one, as we will see—not to be like those around them. The pachuco does not want to become a Mexican again; at the same time he does not want to blend into the life of North America. His whole being is sheer negative impulse, a tangle of contradictions, an enigma. Even his very name is enigmatic: pachuco, a word of uncertain derivation, saying nothing and saying everything. It is a strange word with no definite meaning; or, to be more exact, it is charged like all popular creations with a diversity of meanings. Whether we like it or not, these persons are Mexicans, are one of the extremes at which the Mexican can arrive.[329]

Paz considers the *pachuco* to be a victim of his own identity because he carries "an obvious ambiguity: his clothing spotlights and isolates him, but at the same time it pays homage to the society he is attempting to deny. He is a passive sinister clown whose purpose is to cause terror instead of laughter."[330] Where Paz is insulting toward the *pachuco* and his influence, Carlos Monsiváis diverges:

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[327] Ibid.

[328] Ibid.

[329] Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 13-14.

[330] Ibid., 16.

> [Tin Tan] He is the Pachuco: a word that in Mexico City oscillates between friendly irony and insult. There is a considerable leap from riots in Los Angeles to the dance halls of Mexico City, and the Pachucos of the capital—who do not offend the 'other', the North American, but, rather the 'other', the man of respect—bet everything they have on this character who makes an adventure of dressing and urban fantasy of the migrants' challenge.[331]

Although Monsiváis classifies Tin Tan and *pachuquismo* as a fashion statement or folk symbol in Mexico, he is also more aware of the social and cultural implications the *pachuco* invoked in the form of change, modernization, and the overall impression it left on Mexican youth in the 1950s and 60s. Gustavo López Castro goes beyond this analysis to note that Mexican *pachucos* confronted similar social circumstances as their American counterparts. He argues that *pachucos* in Mexico City were rebels in Mexican society who created their own identity and values in response to their marginalization.[332] This Mexican subculture emerged from feelings of rejection and social discrimination to develop gangs that created prestige and status based on their rebellious reputation.[333]

Pachucos in Mexico were caught in a dilemma between the traditional and the modern. The way they dressed, walked, talked, and acted was undoubtedly an urban phenomenon, but when they returned to their towns of origin, they clashed with their more traditional semi-rural roots. Ignacio, one *acambarence*

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[331] Monsiváis, *Mexican Postcards,* 111.

[332] Gustavo López Castro, *La casa dividida: Un estudio sobre la migración a Estados Unidos en un pueblo michoacano* (Zamora: Colegio de Michoacán, 1986), 120.

[333] Ibid., 121.

interviewed for this project who was a teenager in the early 1950s, corroborates such a clash. According to Ignacio, many *acambarences* had two choices in those days due to a limited economy and a lack of job opportunities: they could emigrate to the United States as *braceros* or go to Mexico City to look for work. When *acámbarences* succeeded economically in Mexico City they would return to partake in the town's festivities and visit family and friends. According to Ignacio, they would return to Acámbaro completely transformed as "*pachucos*, because it was what you did in Mexico City, to come back as a *chilango* dressed up as a Tin Tan *pachuco*." When asked how locals viewed their transformation, he replied, "They viewed them with jealousy and horror because to locals it was something different. Very similar to what *cholos* are today, but *pachucos* were classy dressers."[334] The local response to outsiders promoting a new, unfamiliar identity and the clash with small town society formed the roots for the tensions that would arise with each cultural alternative that would be introduced in the years to come. The *pachuco*'s stay in rural Mexico was a way to display his acquisition of modernity and to escape and redeem himself from the urban chaos. However, in order to remain a true *pachuco*, he had to return to Mexico City.

A comparison of the *pachuco* in Mexico and the Zoot Suiter in the United States reveals similar responses to oppression, but to very different circumstances. Although both of these groups emerged from the lower segments of society, the Zoot Suiter's development in the United States was

[334] Personal interview, January 2008.

primarily influenced by an ethnic component, while the *pachucho's* development in Mexico was based upon social and economic circumstances. Chicanos in the United States dealt with racial exclusion that prevented them from making social or economic gains, and racism and constant abuses by the police in Mexican and Chicano neighborhoods led to violence. Luis Alvarez explains that Zoot Suiters extended beyond racial lines to encompass other groups who faced similar repression: "[t]he multiracial character of the zoot—evident in its popularity among Mexican Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, white youth—reveal that zoot suiters drew from a wide range of cultural influences that often extend beyond their most immediate familial, neighborhood, and even 'traditional' cultural worlds."[335] An example of this notion is in the defense of pride and *barrio* as it became part of the Chicano (zoot-suiter) identity.[336] Carey McWilliams furthers this notion:

> . . . the pachuco gang differs from some other city gangs only to the degree to which it constitutes a more tightly knotted group. There is more to the pachuco gang than just having a good time together. The pachucos suffer discrimination together and nothing makes for cohesiveness more effectively than a commonly shared hostility. Knowing that both as individuals and as a group they are not welcome in many parts of the city, they create their own world and try to make it as self-sufficient as possible.[337]

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[335] Luis Alvarez, *The Power of the Zoot: Youth and Culture and Resistance during World War II"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 5.

[336] Ibid., 122.

[337] Carey McWilliams, *North from Mexico: The Spanish Speaking People of the United States* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 217.

The *pachuco* in Mexico did not confront the same racial challenges that their northern counterparts did. Rather, their circumstance was tied to the economic situation within Mexico in the moment. He was a working-class Mexican who came from rural Mexico to achieve the "Mexican Dream." Nonetheless, Mexico City marginalization of *barrios* created a similar *barrio* environment as the United States. As Jorge Durand explains "The influence of the U.S.-dominated culture industries on a rapidly emerging middle class after World War II cannot be underestimated. Mexican society contracted new habits but, paradoxically, while Mexico was becoming Americanized the country wanted simultaneously to be 'de Americanized,'"[338] The economic marginalization caused the working class to develop cultural tendencies similar to those of the Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the United States because, as Durand explains, modernization "produced elements for new types of racism and class chauvinism, as fomented by the massive migration from the countryside to its capital and represented in the discourses of the marginal characters of mainstream media."[339]

By the 1960s, *pachuquísmo* lost its popularity, as other influences were introduced to Mexico. The *pachuco* was "…eventually 'deported' and deleted from the Mexican cultural scene."[340] The *hipi* (hippie) movement emerged and became a significant influence within the Mexican middle class. Although the *hipi*

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[338] Jorge Durand, "Nation and Translation: The 'Pachuco' in Mexican Popular Culture: Germán Valdés's Tin Tan," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 35 (Autumn 2002), 44.

[339] Ibid.

[340] Durand, "Nation and Translation," 46.

movement ignored the *pachuco* as "a counter-modern element,"[341] it, too, was primarily produced by an American counterculture. It served to acknowledge Mexican youth who dealt with the criticism of their parents and of the political system of the time and were viewed as a threat and a nuisance. As part of the movement, rock and roll became an alleyway for separation from the status quo. Eric Zolov claims that that cost of rebellion within Mexican middle-class was quite high: "The economic and social ramifications of revolt, hence, were more severe, and many youth faced the prospect of either conforming to family standards or being ejected from their home."[342] Adding to this, Zolov states that this threat affected the patriarchal order within the Mexican family structure, leading this "rebellious" youth to experience the rejection and disrespect of Mexican society.[343] The hippie protested tradition even more than the *pachuco*, as it was a completely foreign movement. It remained, however, within the realm of the middle class. According to Zolov, rock and roll "served the modernizing aspirations of the middle class"[344] and limited the trend to other social classes because of the costs that participation entailed.[345]

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[341] Ibid., 47.

[342] Eric Zolov, *Refried Elvis: The Rise of the Mexican Counterculture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 164.

[343] Ibid., 165.

[344] Ibid., 115.

[345] Ibid., 111-115.

The 1970s saw the emergence of *rockeros* (rockers), *greñudos* (long-haired men), and *rock pesado* (heavy metal) in Mexico City and the United States. They stood for more cultural alternatives and led to the creation of the *chavos banda* (street gangs) to adopt punk, rock, and metal as a way to rebel against society. According to Emiliano Pérez Cruz, the *chavos banda* traditionally received the brunt of a frustrated Mexican middle class that viewed them as outcasts. American films that demonized social outcasts were exported to Mexico in the 1970s and supported these attitudes. Films like *Straw Dogs* with Dustin Hoffman (1971), or the classic 1979 film concerning black gangs, *The Warriors,* painted urban outcasts as troublemakers and disruptive to society and as violent heroes.[346] Pérez Cruz argues that such films traumatize society and particularly the Mexican middle class as they portray urban youth as merciless and obscure, able to attack at the moment you least expect, and threatening the very core of Mexican society—the family, private property, and the state.[347]

Each of these trends represents cultural alternatives and possibilities in their respective time periods. The rebelliousness of escaping traditional values is evident in each of these movements. A pattern develops for each one, leading to the *cholo* phenomenon that exists throughout Mexico today. The emergence of the *cholo* thus becomes yet another layer to the defiant cultural evolution among Mexican youth. Some important similarities and distinctions in their

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[346] Emiliano Pérez Cruz, *Noticias de los Chavos Banda* (Mexico City: Grupo Editorial Planeta, 1994), 11.

[347] Ibid.

developments, however, must be made. All of these cultural movements, from the *pachuco* to the *cholo,* have the commonality of being rooted in rebellion toward traditional culture—a desire to embrace modernity and foreign influence while challenging traditional Mexican values.

The *cholo* phenomenon distinguishes itself from preceding cultural movements, however, in its sheer scale. Whereas other movements were relegated primarily to specific areas, such as Mexico City and other urban centers, *cholismo* defies traditional boundaries. Whereas the *pachuco*, *hipi*, and *rockanrolero* required a certain social standing or economic access to participate, access to *cholo* culture is much more open, appealing primarily to desolated youth. It is precisely this economic component that encourages youth to take part in the movement. Ignacio pointed out that in the *pachuco* era youth had two options in the face of few opportunities: to go to Mexico City or to the United States as a *bracero*. Today, youth have even fewer opportunities. Mexico City does not offer the promises it did during the Mexican miracle and *el norte* has become more dangerous, increasingly inaccessible due to restrictions and cost, and poses extraordinary risk. In such an atmosphere, *cholismo* becomes an opportunity to express frustration with both social and economic repression. *Cholismo* goes beyond the other movements as a cultural movement to represent a response to economic and social challenges.

Gustavo López Castro, a pioneer in the early study of the phenomenon of *pachucos* and *cholos* in Mexico, makes a connection between the two movements:

> Cholismo is a continuation of the phenomenon of the pachuquismo. Cholismo is more than a curved social conduct, but rather an exterior manifestation due to a social conflict initiated by the United States within their marginalized sector of the Chicanos and Mexicans in American society. In the occidental part of Mexico cholismo is also a symbol of social conflict because it has emerged in the popular sectors, marginalized barrios, and in several rural areas. And this is based on social inequality.[348]

López Castro's observation of the growth of the *cholo* phenomenon is an important beginning, especially for the time in which it was published. What differentiates the *cholo* phenomenon from other cultural movements is that its purpose in the United States now fits the needs of rural Mexico, making rural Mexican youth particularly susceptible to its influences both as a cultural phenomenon and as a response to social and economic pressures. Its transnational nature is also important because it is beginning to represent similar injustices on both sides of the border.

The public's perception of *cholos* is supported by American film as it was exported and promoted in Mexico in the 1990s, as with the *chavos banda* in the 1970s and 80s. The popularity of films like *American Me, Colors,* and *Blood In, Blood Out* resuscitated a part of *pachuco* counterculture and the modern image of the contemporary *cholo* can be attributed to them. Such films emphasize brotherhood among gang members and the conflicts among *cholos* in the United

[348] López Castro, *La casa dividida,* 126.

States and glamorize life in the *barrio*, relating it to tattoos, drug consumption, and jail sentences. *Cholos* and potential *cholos* in Acámbaro are subjected to these stereotypes and expectations, as are other members of society, who have cause to demonize *cholos* and view them as outcasts and dangerous to society. Public attitudes toward *cholos* are also rooted in the historical perceptions of other counterculture movements. Ignacio's recollection of "jealousy and horror" toward *pachucos* in their time resonates in his appraisal of contemporary *cholos*. Public disapproval of *hipis*, *roackanroleros*, and *greñudos* also corroborates this attitude. These reactions are primarily based in perceptions of threats to traditional culture.

5.2 From Scribbles to Graffiti

Early graffiti in the 1970s in Acámbaro was inclined towards political propaganda or the announcement of a musical group that was to perform in town. There were many "doodles" or scribbles, but they never spurred conflict in the community.[349] As insignificant as these scribbles could be, they still carried meaning. Koon Hwee Kan states, "Adolescents' doodling may seem totally formless and meaningless, but it fits perfectly into certain aspects of adolescents' psychology."[350] Some of the most common expressions were of love for

[349] Koon-Hwee Kan refers to doodling as "a form of private graffiti. These scrawls and scribbles are created when attention is supposed to be focused elsewhere, so their completeness and aesthetic quality are seldom recognized."
Koon-Hwee Kan, "Adolescents and Graffiti," *Art Education* 54 (January 2001): 18.

someone, a favorite soccer team, or a simple caricature. Public walls where doodling took place remained in the outskirts of Acámbaro or in alleys where it could be hidden. In other words, it was not as public as current gang graffiti is. In the early 1990s graffiti shifted to represent different templates and meanings in Acámbaro. It began to appear more in public spaces, such as downtown, along busy streets, or on homes. The letters and symbols that appeared differed from previous expressions. Old-English letters and numbers, names in Spanglish, American jail names, low riders, images of saints and virgins, and so on appeared. While some graffiti was quite disturbing and intimidating at times, other examples were quite artistic. American Chicano-style graffiti had emerged in Acámbaro.

Figure 16. Traditional graffiti located in an ally in Acámbaro reads “Lety y Juan” (Lety and Juan). Photo taken by the author in June 2000.

[350] Ibid.

Figure 17. Artistic graffiti at a miscellany store in Acámbaro. The owner of the store claims that he let an American *cholo* paint religious images on his store to prevent other *cholos* from painting it with gang signs. Photo taken by the author in June 2004.

Figures 18 and 19. Two homes in the periphery of Acambaro's downtown fully tagged with American-style cholo graffiti. Both read "Sur 13" and boast gang nicknames. Photos taken by the author in August 2006.

As in the United States, graffiti in Acámbaro has become popular not only among those with artistic inclination, but among those who use it to claim space, linking its purpose to gang activity—a development that the town had not before experienced and still fails to acknowledge. The local newspaper, *Correo,* finally took notice of graffiti in the town in 2008 in an article entitled "Taggers Keep

Gaining Space in Acámbaro."[351] It emphasizes the artistic nature of the graffiti, posing the question, "Graffiti: Art or Disaster?" and identifies its presence as the manifestation of rebellious attitudes against local authorities.[352] Such an observation is supported by Koon-Hwee Kan, who argues that youth exhibit such attitudes "…in their defiance against parental authority and revolt against codes and order. Adolescents may seek autonomy primarily this way, establishing their own identity by breaking away from earlier dependent and compliant roles."[353] Kan's understanding of the need for youth to seek expression supports the development of graffiti in Acámbaro, as a lack of opportunities for local youth abounds. However, the focus of the local interpretation of graffiti as advanced by the newspaper on adolescent attempts to stake a place in society fails to note gang involvement in its appearance. A true interpretation of the presence of graffiti in Acámbaro must include a discussion of gang involvement, as the graphic used to support the article incorporates blatant American gang symbols.

The practice of graffiti has saturated Acámbaro; the defacement of stores, homes, schools, churches, cultural symbols, and businesses represents a serious problem for local authorities. [354] The gravity of such developments is noted by Koon-Hwee Kan, who in his research on graffiti in the United States since the 1950s states that "graffiti has become an expensive problem in many

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[351] Onofre Lujano, "Siguen ganando espacios grafiteros de Acámbaro," *Correo,* 18 March 2008, http://www.correo-gto.com.mx/notas.asp?id=61900 (May 2008).

[352] Ibid.

[353] Kan, "Adolescents and Graffiti," 18.

[354] Lujano, "Siguen ganando espacios grafiteros."

cities in the world. U.S. cities spent an estimated four billion dollars cleaning graffiti in 1994."[355] Accordingly, the cost to a town such as Acámbaro becomes especially problematic as public spaces are targeted, drawing the attention of local authorities in recent years. César Larrondo, former mayor of Acámbaro, emphasized in March 2008 that new laws need to be established to prevent this behavior from continuing:

> After multiple complaints by residents, César Larrondo, mayor of Acámbaro, announced that the municipality seeks to approve several administrative ordinances with the support of municipal officials, that would penalize [taggers] with fines from 2,500-5,000 pesos [about US$80-450] in addition to the cost of repairing the damage, as well as 50 hours of community or social service.[356]

Larrondo's reaction is supported by the fact that the local government spends about 90,000 pesos each year (about US$8,000) to combat the problem. In a more positive attempt to curb the spread of graffiti in public places, local authorities attempted to provide designated spaces for graffiti to local youth, but they have since proven to be insufficient.[357]

What appears to be lacking in the local debate and government appraisal of graffiti in Acámbaro is a connection to the incorporation of gang culture into the

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[355] Kan, "Adolescents and Graffiti," 22.

[356] Lujano, "Siguen ganando espacios grafiteros."
"El alcalde César Larrondo informó ante múltiples quejas de la ciudadanía, el Ayuntamiento busca aprobar algunas disposiciones administrativas, espera que ediles las apoyen y sería penalizarlos con multas de 2 mil 500 a 5 mil pesos aparte de lo que resulte por reparar el daño y cumplir 50 horas de trabajo comunitario o social."

[357] Ibid.

community. Its purpose goes beyond artistic expression to define *barrios* like never before. The message that is being sent is much more powerful and denotes an unambiguous attachment to American-style gangs. Its usage is beginning to play a similar role to that which it plays in the United States.

5.3 The Meaning of Graffiti in Acámbaro

The presence of graffiti reflects youth's hunger for foreign culture and an arena for expressing isolation and frustration. Susan Philips notes that youth need self expression and that gang culture has become a popular means to do so on the street.[358] Philips's description of boundary setting centers around Chicano/Latino gangs in the United States, but her analysis can be applied to Acámbaro as well. She argues that gang signs mark off gang terrain and assert a cultural system and the gangs' importance outside the Chicano world.[359] In Acámbaro, the expression of gang insignias is found from electricity poles to churches as markers of territory that, until recently, did not exist. Their development is rooted in local youth looking to repatriated *cholos,* who play the role of *veteranos* (veterans). The *veteranos* indoctrinate local youth into a new subculture that begins as a fad, but evolves into a serious component of local society, incorporating many similarities to gangs in the United States. The lack of an established youth culture within Acámbaro helps popularize gang subculture.

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[358] Susan Philips, *Wallbangin': Graffiti and Gangs in L.A*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 148.

[359] Ibid.

Acámbarences interviewed for this project often complained that the presence of graffiti degraded their town, looking back to the Acámbaro of 15 to 20 years ago with nostalgia. According to Manuel, who has lived all of his 38 years in Acámbaro and has never been to the United States, graffiti became more noticeable during the months of high return migration (November through January): "Ten years ago, you hardly saw any walls painted with all those *cholo* scribbles.[360]" Roberto, who is 27 and has never been to the United States, mentioned that "in every *barrio* you will see graffiti and people know who is doing it. But local authorities don't make it a priority to stop all of the kids who do it."[361] As such, a largely rural town began to sprout urban insignia. As Philip's notes:

> [This] genre of graffiti [grows] increasingly relevant as the percentage of cities that host these unwanted but tenacious groups rises. Initials, numbers, aesthetic and symbolic codes, more or less rigid, layered meaning lurking with disjointed segments. There should be—perhaps, by the very nature of its content and style, there is—a warning label applied to gang graffiti: Not for popular consumption! Gang members only! It is directed toward a group of people who already understand what it means.[362]

Philip's understanding of the content of graffiti is important to understanding the local view of graffiti in Acámbaro. Locals who are not privy to its deeper meaning or these "warning labels" view it as an annoyance; however, they begin to represent more than youthful dissatisfaction. They are serious indicators of boundary formations that render little importance to the meaning of former

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[360] Pérez, "Suffering and Redemption."

[361] Ibid.

[362] Philips, *Wallbangin,'* 51.

boundaries. There is, for example, no distinction made for private property or religious shrines. Figure 6 shows a local business tagged with the number 13 and the word "*sureño*." Figure 7 reveals the state of Acámbaro's most sacred shrine to the Sacred Cross (la Santa Cruz), which is located at the peak of the *Cerro del Toro* (Hill of the Bull). Each year on May 3rd Acámbaro celebrates one of its most important religious events known as the el día de la Santa Cruz (the day of the Sacred Cross), which dates from colonial times. The cross in the center of the shrine is carried down by pilgrims and taken to the churches and homes around the town. Streets are painted with colored sawdust, *mojigangas* (giant puppets) take the streets, and a marathon takes place. After the cross's tour and related festivities, it is taken back to the shrine to look down upon the town once again. Furthermore, the shrine is the symbol of not only Acámbaro, but of the entire municipality. Having succumbed to the graffiti trend, the shrine now looks like a *barrio* icon in Acámbaro. Even the town's most sacred symbol is now tagged with 13s, 14s, and 18s; *sureños* and *norteños;* and their member's nicknames. The importance of boundary marking and displaying a gang's importance in the town is now extended just about anywhere.

Figure 20: A man walks past a business in Acámbaro tagged with *cholo* graffiti, boasting "13" and "*sureño*," January 2006. Photo by the author.

Figure 21: The shrine to the Sacred Cross, fully tagged with graffiti. January 2009. Photo by the author.

The first signs of gang graffiti came from youth imitating the children of the returnees. As Figure 8 shows, such graffiti is not as sophisticated; it looks like an imitation. The same wall, years later, however, was tagged over to reflect what can be found in the *barrios* of the United States (Figure 9). It became more skilled and intimidating, carrying the warning sign to which Philips pointed. It appears to be more meaningful in its purpose, boasting that this territory belongs to the *sureños*, and tying itself to a transnational phenomenon by making reference to San Quentin prison in California. The development of this phenomenon in a town like Acámbaro can be attributed to two causes: the deportation of Mexicans involved with gangs in the United States, and the Mexican parents in the United States who send their troubled youth to Mexico to

be “straightened out” in their towns of origin, as suggested by Robert Courtney Smith.[363] Local youth, never exposed to gangs before, quickly caught on. Courtney Smith argues that one major opportunity is that “…*pandillas* [gangs] provide a way of both rejecting and fulfilling parental and societal expectations.”[364] Their arrival fills a demand that already exists in the new environment. Gang members made Acámbaro their haven because it represented new territory in which to spread their views and behaviors to a new audience. Young locals saw them as “innovators,” as a new alternative to what youth should be in Acámbaro. [365] With this and the influences brought by repatriated *cholos*, gang borders soon became more defined within Acámbaro’s neighborhoods. They brought with them American-style urban *barrio* life, with graffiti as a serious component of local youth culture.

Figure 22. Gang graffiti in Acámbaro, Guanajuato, June 2000. Reads: “14 TR MARA,” accompanied by nicknames. Photo by the author.

[363] Robert Courtney Smith, *Mexican New York: Transnational Lives of New Immigrants* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 213.

[364] Ibid., 246.

[365] Ibid.

Figure 23. Gang graffiti in Acámbaro, Guanajuato, June 2006. The same wall six years later reads: "Sureños: 13 San Quentin." Photo by the author.

As emigration to the United States increased, so did emigrants' visits to Acámbaro. Its presence changed youth culture in the town, leading to changes in graffiti, the presentation of new gang symbols, and a proliferation of letters and numbers referring to American gangs. A pattern of announcements told locals "We exist." As more graffiti appeared, return migrants themselves began to take notice, comparing Acámbaro to border towns such as Tijuana or Ciudad Juárez. But what do these symbols represent and how did they emerge?

The most common symbols of Chicano-style gangs were traditionally the numbers 13 and 14, representing "south" and "north," but over the years they have evolved to include more sophisticated gangs such as the Mara Salvatrucha, with their distinctive number 18. An understanding of their meaning demonstrates how gangs relate to Acámbaro. Susan Philips notes symbols can have multiple meanings, "several books about gangs that discuss graffiti point to the 13 representing M, the thirteenth letter of the alphabet," meaning "Mexico, SUR (south) Sureños Unidos Raza, or United People of the South—meaning of

course southern California, but also parts of Mexico and the southwest…M which also represents EME which stands for 'El Mexicano Encarcelado' (the incarcerated Mexican)."[366] The 13 and "M" are used by gangsters with stronger Mexican influences, while the 14 represents the letter "N," "which stands for 'North' or Norte or Norteños,"[367] and is affiliated with Mexican-American gangs.

18s and references to the Mara Salvatrucha have also surfaced in Acámbaro, as evidenced by Figure 4, but remain less visible than the norteño and sureño gangs. The Mara Salvatrucha boasts two different factions in Los Angeles: "Mara-La 18" (M-18) and Mara Salvatrucha Sur 13 (MS-13). Mara 18 began as a diverse group, composed of Mexicans, Central Americans, and blacks.[368] Although Mara 18 did not begin as a wholly Salvadoran gang, the Salvadorans made it theirs by taking it to back to El Salvador while continuing to allow for a more diverse membership than traditional gangs. The word "mara" derives from "*marabunte*," the name for a wild ant that roams in great numbers in the Central-American jungle.[369] The word is widely used in El Salvador to refer to restless youth and was adopted by the 18th Street gang's Salvadorian members in Los Angeles. The Mara-Salvatrucha, or MS-13, borrowed the "13" from the Mexican sureño gang to identify its link to the south or their homeland. Its name can be broken down into distinctly Salvadorean references. "Salva" stands for El

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[366] Philips*, Wallbangin,'* 148.

[367] Ibid., 149.

[368] *La Prensa de Honduras* (7 February 2002).

[369] Ibid.

Salvador and “trucha” means trout, which in gang slang connotes assertiveness.[370] The M-18 and MS-13 were created as distinct gangs and even became rivals. They would take characteristics from one another, however, to become stronger individually.

In the United States, immigrant youth are faced with a cultural antagonism in their new environment that naturally forces them to change. Kyung-Seok Choo argues that from a historical perspective, immigrant youth who are engaged in gangs in the United States come from a “disorganized marginal immigrant community” and that such formations are part of the process of immigration.[371] The formation of gangs in Acámbaro lacks the presupposed immigrant community that Choo’s analysis requires, however Acámbaro itself is a reflection of marginality, fulfilling another important factor in their formation. Acámbaro has long been neglected by state authorities and is often confused as being part of the state of Michoacán. Youth are neglected and the town has little to offer them, leading them to pursue gangs as an avenue for opportunity.[372] The local government has a reputation for failing to prioritize youth; this, combined with high unemployment leads to frustration. Federick Trasher points to environment as a major reason for the development of gang behavior. He states, “if conditions are favorable to its continued existence, the gang tends to undergo

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[370] Ibid.

[371] Kyung-Seok Choo, *Gangs and Immigrant Youth* (New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing, 2007), 11.

[372] Pérez, “Suffering and Redemption.”

a sort of natural evolution from a diffuse and loosely organized group into the solidified unit which it represents the matured gang…which may take several forms."[373] The marginalization that youth feel in Acámbaro impels them to seek a comfort zone and rise of gang subculture in the town fills that void.

James Diego Vigil and Steve Chong Yun refer to the creation of Chicano gangs in Los Angeles as a consequence of "multiple marginality."[374] They stress that marginality is due to ecological, socioeconomic, cultural, and psychosocial factors that prompt the creation of gangs, working to build conflict and thereby generating a need for distinction.[375] Internal conflicts among Mexicans, Chicanos, and Central Americans can be explained by the process of assimilation and in terms of ethnic orientation. Vigil and Chong state "… youth are often on the 'margins' of two different ethnic spheres, betwixt and between cultural identities, not quite belonging to either."[376] Immigrant youth who are faced with the challenges of assimilation cannot relate to Mexicans who have been to the United States before them or the Chicano experience and are thereby forced to create their own ethnic sphere. At the same time, Mexican and Chicano groups are driven to exclude them with the economic pressure they represent, as newfound competition, bolstered by general lack of knowledge

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[373] Quoted by Choo, *Gangs and Immigrant Youth,* 18.

[374] James Diego Vigil and Steve Chong Yun, "Vietnamese Youth Gangs in the Context of Multiple Marginality and the Los Angeles Youth Gang Phenomenon" in *Gangs and Youth Subcultures,* eds. Kayleen Hazlehurst and Cameron Hazlehurst (New Jersey: Transaction Publisher, 1988), 117.

[375] Ibid., 118.

[376] Ibid.

about the experience of being surrounded by a diverse environment, and thereby feeling the stigma of inferiority attributed to the newcomers."[377]

Their insights can be applied to Acámbaro, a town ignored by the state of Guanajuato that is harmed internally by the territoriality of street gangs. Social and generational stigma occur in Mexico when a *cholo* who comes from the United States is perceived as foreign, prompting locals to develop a sense of nativism based on how the newcomers may change their environment. This parallels the situation found in Mexican *barrios* in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century, which had poor schools and not enough job opportunities.[378] Just as Mexican youth use the *barrio* as a cultural safety zone in the United States, the children of return migrants transform *barrios* in Mexico into similar regions. Their experience as immigrants in the United States, coupled with the challenges they face in Mexico, "shape[s] their personal identities."[379] Street-savvy youth who are forced to return to such an environment find that a place like Acámbaro can be easily transformed into a haven for gang activity.

Upon their return, returnees must reinvent themselves. Regardless of how "Mexican" they may be or how marginalized they were while in the United States, many of the new attributes they have incorporated into their lives are American. As Courtney Smith states, "The experiences of returning *cholos* and

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[377] Ibid.

[378] Vigil and Yun, "Vietnamese Youth Gangs," 5.

[379] Ibid.

regulars are different but related. While regulars feel they sometimes do not fit in because they are not Mexican enough, *cholos* feel unwelcome despite having been born in Mexico."[380] The unwelcoming reception of these Americanized groups is a natural and harsh reaction to return migration. Although its manifestation towards them, at least in the case of Acámbaro, is not ethnic (yet), the nativist attitudes that have flourished among locals can emulate similar positions to those that some Americans have about Mexicans and other minorities in the United States, both of which stem from an alteration of local traditions and values and discontent with return migrants and gangs.

5.4 A New Trend

The rise of *cholo* subculture is notable in the transformation of the local market to accommodate the new trend, revealing a striking demand for gang paraphernalia, tattoos, films, and music. One store, named "Novedades Aztlán," opened in response to its popularity, selling everything needed to dress as a *cholo*: Dickie's and Ben Davie baggy pants, button-up shirts, baseball caps with gang insignias, bandanas, sunglasses, belts, wallets, gangster hip hop and films, Homie figurines, low-rider bikes, socks inscribed with 13s, 14s, and 18s, and so on. Demand has also encouraged vendors in flea markets, the local market, and the informal sector to sell gang paraphernalia. While the specialty store sells brand name clothing, the informal sector responds with handmade, imitation, or pirated clothing displaying the same images and language as the originals.

[380] Ibid., 262.

Wearing authentic clothing raises a local's *cholo* status, as an original shirt, imported from the United States, is worth between 200 to 300 pesos (US$20-$25) at Novedades Aztlán. If local youth cannot afford the original product, however, they can buy the Chinese or Mexican-made copies, which cost between 70 to 100 pesos (US$6-$9) at the local market or swamp meet. As such, youth at various economic levels can participate in the trend.

Figure 24. December 2000, Acámbaro. The teen on the right has returned from the United States to spend Christmas with family dressed in original, brand-name attire. The teen on the left has never been to the United States and is dressed in local imitation attire. Photo taken by the author.

Fide, one of the owners of Novedades Aztlán, was interviewed to help understand how the trend is interpreted locally. When asked about the items he sold, he indicated that he considered them a fashion trend more than anything, and that the violence associated with *cholos* did not represent the majority of those seeking *cholo* fashion.

> I think that youth in Acámbaro are bored of everything the town has to offer. All of this is a fashion statement and these kids are heard by the way they dress. But, just as in any group in a society, there can be a few rotten apples that affect the image of many of these kids. All they want to do is have fun. I have to admit that violence is more common than before, but most of it is provoked by *rancholos* [those who come to Acámbaro from small towns or ranchos are referred by natives from Acámbaro as "rancholos"] who come from *el norte*. They're a bunch of show-offs and the local youth gets irritated because they are not from Acámbaro and that

provokes fights. In other words, local kids feel that their territory is being invaded. But fights aren't like they used to be. Now they involve knives and guns.[381]

Figure 25. "Novedades Aztlán" (Aztlán Novelties) is a specialty store that sells *cholo* paraphernalia. Picture taken by the author. June 2003.

Figure 26. Hand-painted shirts, sweaters, and hats sold at the local *mercado*. The images are of common Chicano gang symbols such as *cholo*-style Mexican patriotic symbols, Virgins, and lowriders; *cholo* slang such as "*mi vida loca,*" "*vato locos*," "*sur* 13," "*loco* 18;" and references to cocaine, and marijuana." Picture taken by the author. January 2009.

When asked if those who bought and wore his products were associated with gangs, he responded, "They might be. I'm sure they are, but I'm just doing business." Fide was careful not to clarify representations of *cholo* influences as a mere fashion statement or a dangerous trend. However, the spread of a market for such products is growing, graffiti is in every street in town, and gangs have evolved from being a fad to a serious component of local youth identity.

[381] Pérez, "Suffering and Redemption," 40.

Evidence of much more serious developments surrounding their existence is also apparent in the town. Since their establishment, gangs have organized to recruit, communicate with other gang members, and boast their image through e-mail and blogs and even over YouTube, which depicts gang activity and graffiti in Acámbaro.[382] Some of the videos posted to YouTube show young people dressing as gang members, cruising in their cars, fighting, smoking marijuana, and even doing lines of cocaine. They also pose, demonstrating their affiliation through gang signs or hanging with the clique.[383] One sureño blog demonstrates that rivalries have surged between the gangs in Acámbaro. The blog's provocative language reveals that tension between local gangs exists, as demonstrated by a blogger who goes by the name "La Paty 13 de Acámbaro" and states, "K Ondas vatos [y] hinas, en Guanajuato somos sureños de corazón, tenemos sangre Azteca y un orgullo guerillero, los 14, 19, son una mierda, no saben lo que habla." [This is *La Paty* from Acámbaro. What's up dudes and *hinas*? We are *sureños* in Guanuajato, we have Aztec blood and warrior pride. The 14s and 19s are shit, they don't know what they're talking about."] Another blogger that goes by the name of "Michael Gonzales" who blogs from "Northside California" affiliates with the *sureños* and states "Órale cabrones, puro North Side 14 rifando y controlando, Saludos a los norteños q viven en Mexico!! Arriba

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[382] YouTube, "Pandilla de Acámbaro la Carranza," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ABM1IbL54Y&feature=related (June 2009); YouTube, "Pandilla de la Carranza 14," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPszaWaVR8I&feature=related (June 2009).

[383] YouTube, "Gatos Secos de Acámbaro, Guanajuato," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNY6LqzZIXc &feature=related (June 2009).

NORTE XIV que no!!"[384] [Right on, assholes, pure North Side 14 ruling and controlling, Hello to the norteños who live in Mexico!! Go NORTE XIV of course!!] As such, the presence of gang subculture in Acámbaro goes beyond representing a mere fashion trend; it is a movement with serious meaning behind it.

Gangs in the United States naturally harbor an urban mentality that is used to open new horizons for potential recruits. The repatriation of *cholos* from the United States to Acámbaro brings this urban mentality to a rural way of thinking. Michel Maffesoli's concept of the "urban tribe" suits the returnee's situation because it deals precisely with this idea of needing to "fit in" with a community. "[W]ith its inevitable tragic dimension, these tribes favour the mechanism of belonging."[385] He continues, "At the same time as the aspiration, the future and the ideal no longer serve as a glue to hold society together, the ritual, by reinforcing the feeling of belonging, can play this role and thus allow groups to exist."[386] According to Maffesoli, such groups will do anything to adapt, presenting a two-fold challenge to adaptation in the case of Acámbaro. In order for the group to exist and survive in rural Acámbaro, the town must be transformed into an urban center.

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[384] La Paty, "Comentarios sobre cholos," *Se Piensa Blog* (20 February 2006), http://sepiensa.org.mx/ contenidos/s_cholos/c_comentarios18.htm (June 2009).
[385] Michel Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism and Mass Society* (London: Sage Publication, 1996), 140.

[386] Ibid., 141.

A useful comparison to the development of gangs in Acámbaro is the experience of European immigrants from small communities who came to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, as demonstrated by James Diego Vigil. He argues that these immigrant groups had to develop an urban mentality because "the process of finding work, locating places to live, and adjusting to urban life was repeated many times over for different ethnic groups…the Mexican immigrant population is no different in this regard."[387] The challenges that accompanied finding employment or attaining a better quality of life led certain groups of European immigrants to form or join gangs to protect their communities and interests. The idea of adapting and belonging to an urban setting fulfills a basic human need; however, rebelling against it was just as natural because "the feeling of belonging proceeds if not by exclusion then at least by exclusiveness."[388] In the case of Acámbaro, return migrants who have adopted an urban, American way of thinking view the town with certain levels of antagonism because the town is small and does not provide them with the same comforts they experienced in the United States. This prompts repatriated *cholos* to create a similar atmosphere by introducing an urban mentality similar to that which they enjoyed in the United States to Acámbaro.

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[387] Vigil and Yun, "Vietnamese Youth Gangs," 3.

[388] Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribes,* 142.

Robert Courtney Smith notes that such an urban mentality clashes and "creates tensions with transnational life" when introduced to a rural setting.[389] Another case for comparison is found in African Americans who migrated north from the segregated south during the Jim Crow era in search of the so-called "urban dream." Moving from a rural setting to an urban setting was problematic and became even more challenging when they returned to their place of origin because while moving to an urban center they had acquired new ways of life which clashed with those from their place of origin.[390] Harsh encounters in "promised" lands serve as complex impediments to adaptation and as the derivations of newfound adaptation patterns in order to cope. Hayden notes, "The children of those migrant dreams whether black or brown, discovered 'they had little hope for deliverance' since they were already in the 'promised land,'"[391] leading youth to disillusionment because they represented nonconformity and an inability to adapt or integrate to American society. "[T]hey accepted their exclusion and transformed it into a separate identity, even a country, they could belong to: the neighborhood ('hood"), with its own names, tattoos, slang, sign language, colors, dress, art form (graffiti) and economy (underground)."[392] This process is currently at work in Acámbaro. As repatriated youth find that they

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[389] Courtney Smith, *Mexican New York,* 50.

[390] Tom Hayden, *Street Wars: Gangs and the Future of Violence* (New York: New Press, 2004), 28.

[391] Ibid.

[392] Ibid.

cannot conform to small town society because they lack opportunities, and are in a cultural re-adaptation, they develop their own identity to survive.

Once youth who have maintained closer ties with the United States return to their parents' place of origin, they often realize that they do not belong in Acámbaro. As *cholos* are acculturated in the United States they do not realize how much of their *mexicanidad* ("Mexicanness") is lost—especially when this sense of authentic Mexican identity is defined by the locals. Whereas they feel undeniably "Mexican" in the United States, their perception of such ties is questioned upon arrival in Mexico. They have lost their rural identity in the United States and have little connection to their parents' place of origin. The experience of return is uncomfortable and necessitates the development of an identity. Regardless of their pride of origin in the United States, re-adaptation to their hometown presents enormous difficulties. Diego Vigil and Steve Chong Yun point out that the emergence of identities that are considered "extreme" by others almost inevitably create cultural conflict. However, they find ways to adapt by forging new identities. *Cholos* are social chameleons.

As the trend has taken root in Acámbaro, it is now quite common to see young people walking through the town proudly displaying fashion trends that can be attributed to return migration. Other attributes acquired from repatriated *cholos* by local youth include slang words, such as "*loco*," "*homie*," "*ese*," "*vato*," "*chale*," "*clica*" (to name a few), which have become ordinary and incorporated themselves into the local lexicon among young people. Sam Quinones's study

on how Mexican culture has changed due to migration notes changes not only in vocabulary, but also in the development of "English nicknames: Enrique becomes el Henry; Jaime, El Jimmy, el Jorge, El George."[393] One YouTube video attributed to the Carranza gang in Acámbaro demonstrates this adoption of gang slang and American nicknames, referring to hanging out with "*la clica,*" "Carranza 13," and naming "el Robert," among them.[394]

The end result is that *cholos* and Chicano-style gangs adapt remarkably well to their new rural environments in Mexico. Discontented youth who have not adapted well or, conversely, adapted too well to life in the United States directly influence Acámbaro's youth in this manner. The difficulties they encounter upon their arrival in Acámbaro initiates the process of adaptation anew and creates a need for the introduction of familiar mechanisms of coping, manifested in gang subculture.[395] The creation or the adaptation of symbols, customs, slang, and clothing transforms attitudes and changes the local environment. Acámbaro's hunger for cultural change and an outlet for expression of discontent make the adoption of gang subculture even easier.

5.5 Beyond the Traditional

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[393] Sam Quinones, *True Tales from Another Mexico*, 163.

[394] YouTube, "Pandillas de Acámbaro," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wop9dhGe1hA&feature= related (June 2009).

[395] Ibid.

Courtney Smith states that "the emergence of *pandillerismo*, in transnational life is not an aberration, but a logical outgrowth of the migration and assimilation process in which migrants and their children are embedded."[396] Gangs transform small towns in Mexico because emigration is so prevalent within them. They not only transform local politics and introduce new concerns to society, but they also set the stage to influence national politics in Mexico. The evolution of the current image of the *cholo* in Acámbaro has transcended beyond repudiation by the public. *Cholo* presence is now a significant component of youth culture in Acámbaro and is as visible as the graffiti they have scattered throughout the town.

The local reaction to the development of gang subculture in Acámbaro is instilled with discomfort. One interviewee expressed concern that Acámbaro was beginning to look like a border town. Each year that passes brings more American youth. Local authorities, always short of funds, have not collected information on how many gangs or taggers there are or other related indicators. The question, however, is not relegated to Acámbaro, as this is a growing concern throughout Mexico, as confirmed by the U.S. Agency of International Development (USAID), which in a study on gangs in Mexico from April 2006 stated:

> There are no official statistics in Mexico on the number of crimes committed by gangs. Unfortunately, most of the information provided on gang involvement in crime is difficult to confirm, as decentralized record keeping means that data is not necessarily consistent from one state to

[396] Courtney Smith, *Mexican New York,* 207.

> the next. Government authorities have no consistent figures on the number of active gang members in the country.[397]

Nonetheless, reports in newspapers from the state of Guanajuato and Acámbaro itself indicate an acceleration of the violence affiliated with gang activity in the surrounding region. Reports of gang violence in several parts of Guanajuato such as in the town of Silao reported that the gangs known as "Los Batos Locos" and the "Bola Ocho" (Eight Ball) attacked one family in June 2009.[398] The names of these gangs also show their *cholo* influence. As of January 2010, the City of León, Guanajuato, has also noticed an increase in gang activity and responded with its own gang task squad.[399] Even if gang activity in Acámbaro is in its initial stages, these developments reveal that the foundation for more serious developments has already been established. Furthermore, the incorporation of gangs into the narcotrafficking agenda is of no surprise. As youth lack opportunities, the temptation of fast money and drugs make Mexican *cholos* disposable assassins to a social turmoil that has Mexican authorities at a standstill due to their sluggish admission of the nation's gang problem.

5.6 Conclusions

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[397] Harold Sibaja, et al. "Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment Annex 4: Southern and Northern Borders of Mexico Profile," The United States Agency of International Development (USAID) (April 2006), http://www.usaid.gov/locations/latin_america_caribbean/democracy/mexico_profile.pdf, 3.

[398] Cayetano Ramírez, "'Pandilleros' agreden a Familia," *Correo,* 30 June 2009.

[399] Gisela Chavolla y Paola Romo, "Antimotines para aplacar a pandilla," *Correo,* 22 January 2010.

Mexican youth have a history of imitating cultural trends throughout the twentieth century. All social classes have had the opportunity to imitate and adopt new trends to their environment. Such trends are often provocative or insulting to the traditional sector of society, but they represent more than simple imitation or fashion; they represent a desire to modernize and change one's lifestyle. Whereas previous cultural movements such as the *hipis* and *rockanroleros* represented defiance of authority in terms of social and cultural norms, the *cholo* movement roots itself in similar needs but additionally goes beyond that to express social and economic injustice. The injustice that fomented the *pachuco* movement in the 1940s is echoed in the *cholo* phenomenon today. However, the seriousness of the *cholo* phenomenon is distinguished in its breadth and transnational nature. What began as a trend or fad, has become a serious alternative to youth who lack opportunities, of which Mexico abounds. Its connection to a larger network via transnational gangs adds to its development and purpose. The development of gang subculture in Mexico has transcended its status as a cultural movement and changed the nature of rural life. Neglect of the issue by Mexican authorities and the failure to develop opportunities for youth to thrive and develop only propel the *cholo* movement to continue to attract discontented Mexican youth in towns like Acámbaro.

The repeated and intensifying presence of gangs in Acámbaro reinforces the idea that returnees drive a major part of the economy, something that cannot happen without shaping its culture. Just as the town has adapted to changes in tradition and economic preferences in response to increases in return migration

(as with Halloween and superstores in the previous chapter), culture has changed as well to include graffiti and gangs. The old Acámbaro is not gone yet, but it is being inundated by a culture it cannot and, economically, dare not stop. However, touting return migration with grand welcomes as with the Bienvenido Paisano program in Acambaro, thinking only of the short-term economic benefits that it derives, and failing to address the issues that drive emigration in the first place lead to the failure to address their long-term cultural and social outcomes. The price of kids dressing in gang insignia and flirting with gang identity and all that entails represents the collapse of local values that once dominated family life. It goes beyond a fad to present serious social indicators, such as drug use, criminal activity, and the rise of a new male honor code. The economic benefits wrought by return migration are counteracted by changing social codes representing local instability.

Conclusion

The Nostalgia of Change

Figure 1, taken in December 2008, depicts two elderly women standing outside a miscellany store in Acámbaro early in the morning. They chat in front of a *cholo*-style Virgin of Guadalupe that locals have made into a shrine. It is accompanied by a lowrider car with a pair of hommies and a revolutionary-style *cholita.* This image could be from any *barrio* in the United States or any border town but is now common throughout Mexico. This picture encapsulates what this project is about, documenting the changes that return migration has brought to Mexico, their assimilation into communities, and the ways they challenge local tradition.

Figure 27. "The Nostalgia of Change." Photo by the author, December 2008.

This project traces a history of return migration to Mexico from the Great Depression to 2006 in order to understand how migration patterns have changed in both Mexico and the United States over the period in response to observable economic factors. Mexico's fragility during the Mexican Revolution and its focus

on the armed conflict led to the expulsion of its population. It was met by a burgeoning American industry that needed cheap hard-working laborers. The exodus of Mexicans to the United States came as a relief to the Mexican government and helped establish its attitude toward this flow. Emigration failed to register as a priority and was pushed to the back burner as more immediate issues arose. The economic debacle of the 1930s, however, forced the Mexican government to confront the issue of its lost compatriots as repatriates and their (often American) children returned to Mexico in the thousands. Mexico's national culture revolved around efforts to recover from the Revolution and the creation of a national identity in this period. Part of that atmosphere looked at repatriates hopefully, as bearers of "civilization" who would help propel Mexico into modernity. Their presence, however, challenged this hope and the government quickly gave up on them. The Pure Nationalism Plan reinforced the idea that they weren't Mexican enough. Instead, these forced return migrants were viewed as a burden to national progress and were met with an antagonism informed by xenophobic pressures that surrounded internal Mexican immigration issues. Repatriates, in addition to unwanted foreigners, represented a new form of economic competition to locals in a tight economic climate. This period established return migrants as a negative entity in Mexico. It also demonstrates the fragility of the economic ties that U.S.-Mexican relations depended on at this time. Employment opportunities in the United States served as a welcome release for short-term pressures in Mexico but could be easily broken, leaving Mexico vulnerable to this dependency.

This fragility was quickly forgotten as the Bracero Program was introduced in 1942. Just as the Mexican Revolution and World War I fueled the early migratory wave to the United States, World War II brought a change of attitude toward Mexican laborers in the American Southwest. Economic interests again influenced migrant flows, bringing Mexicans back to the United States and opening a new chapter in their bilateral history. U.S. growth meant a need for cheap labor, serving both countries' needs to meet demands for employment and food. Although Mexico went into the process wary from the repatriation, it quickly forgot the risks and promoted the program. The Bracero Program laid the foundation for immigration in the decades to come as well as patterns of return migration. *Braceros* faced discrimination and racism in the United States, leading to their isolation from American society, which provided them an advantage upon returning home, as cultural ties remained strong. *Braceros* returned to their places of origin with money and new consumer goods. They climbed a short social ladder—something that could not have happened before. They introduced an idealized immigration experience to Mexico that propelled others to imagine their own successes in *el norte,* prompting more emigrants to try their luck, legally or illegally. In this period, the perception of the return migrant changed from unfavorable to quite positive and, for some, even heroic.

Braceros established a pattern in the immigration experience. The journey to and existence in the United States amounted to their suffering. Consequently, their return to Mexico amounted to their redemption. Redemption came in several ways: cultural, social, and economic. Culturally, *braceros*

directly connected to the place and traditions they longed for while abroad. Their social status evolved as their newfound economic status allowed them to establish a distinct life based on new consumer goods and a sense of shared sophistication based on living in a more complex society. Redemption became an integral part of return migration during this period—a pattern that carries on into the contemporary period. The *bracero* became a prototype of what contemporary migrants would become: cultural emissaries of a transnational life.

The Bracero Program ended in 1964 and left Mexico closer to and more dependent upon the United States than ever before. Mexican immigration and the economic dependency that fueled it became a natural part of the relationship between the two nations. The consistent demand for labor stimulated both legal and illegal immigration, despite the lack of an official program to guide it. The rise of illegal immigration made the United States more accessible to emigrants than under the Bracero Program and thereby made Mexico more susceptible to American influences than ever before, forging a culture of emigration and return migration in Mexico. As Mexican immigrants gained greater access to American society, changes came more quickly to Mexico. Acámbaro serves as an example of these shifts, as it boasts a bountiful migrant population that dates back to the *bracero* period. As such, many tangible changes that have taken place in the town represent direct responses to return migration. It has served as a major proprietor of change based in experiences with American society, transforming Acámbaro in terms of consumer patterns, technology, fashion, architecture, culture, and beyond. Contemporary migrants extend the path

established by the *bracero*, becoming new folk heroes, cultural proprietors, wielders of new materialism, and temporary members of the middle class. At the same time, they clash with the traditional Mexican middle class as exuberant ostentatious outsiders. The suffering that the migrant experience necessitates is diminished by the highs of redemption embodied in hyperbolized success, giving locals a very one-sided view of the migrant experience.

Acámbaro necessarily adapts to accommodate return migrants, meeting their demands for consumption, entertainment, and services. The response to return migration, however, does not remain solely economic. The cultural response is just as significant and indicative of the strength of the returnees' presence, as evident in the repeated and intensifying presence of gangs in Acámbaro. Whereas Mexican youth have looked abroad for cultural alternatives in the past, experimenting with *pachuco*, hippie, or rock n' roll subcultures, *cholo* subculture represents a new development in such communities due to its transnational nature and affiliation with drug use and crime. Youth welcome these trends with open arms as traditional culture no longer draws their attention. Copying and adapting what comes from the outside is a sign of rebellion and modernity. *Cholo* influences in particular have shifted from being a temporary influence to a complex and sophisticated cultural alternative for Mexican youth who have never been to the United States. *Cholismo* is no longer solely an American creation; it is as important to Mexican youth in Mexico as in the United States. This cultural trend overshadows other cultural influences brought by returnees due to its accessibility to local youth. Whereas other changes brought

by returning youth (such as material goods) may not be obtainable, it is possible to participate in *cholo* subculture. Even more importantly, this trend demonstrates that the influence of return migration is so strong that locals no longer need to leave Mexico to experiment with American culture. As demonstrated in the case of Acámbaro, return migration has the capacity to drastically transform an environment.

Acambaro's local history focuses on tying itself to what are traditionally perceived as relevant Mexican histories surrounding Independence or Revolution. But perhaps its most important contribution to the national history is that which surrounds its emigration story. The impact that migration has had on the town—from social changes in family structure to economy, politics, and culture—is representative of a powerful force that has swept Mexico over the decades since the Bracero Program. This half of the immigration story has largely failed to be addressed, thereby ignoring a significant portion of the historical record and an inherent misunderstanding of the topic. Mexico's unwavering support of return migration, as demonstrated by the Programa Paisano, was blindly driven by policies that put economic growth above all other priorities. The short-term gains of emigration fail to account for the social price of being an expulsion nation, as revealed by the development of transnational gang activity.

Migration is the major provocateur of the many tensions that historically link Mexico and the United States. Immigration currently receives more attention in the United States than in Mexico, demonstrated by debates surrounding

Arizona State Bill 1070 and nationwide calls for President Barack Obama to bring a heavy hand down on illegal immigration. All this is reminiscent of events in 1929-1933 when an economic crash led Anglos to scapegoat Mexican laborers. Mexico's attitude toward emigration has changed little from its position throughout the twentieth century. During his visit to the U.S. Congress on May 10, 2010, President Felipe Calderon expressed his nation's discomfort with the immigration question and the Arizona law in particular, but failed to address how better policies might be implemented. "We want to provide the Mexican people with the opportunities they are looking for. That is our goal. That is our mission as a government to transform Mexico in a land of opportunities, to provide to our people with jobs and opportunities to live and peace and to be happy...."[400] His actions in office, however, indicate the prioritization of more immediate issues, such as Mexico's current drug war. Emigration again serves as a convenient means to alleviate the national burden. Calderon's reaction to U.S. laws and recognition of the problem represent an attempt at diplomacy through solidarity. However, Mexico's addiction to migration and all it brings force the issue to the back burner. The immigration debate, therefore, never really addresses the issues at hand, clouding the need for serious structural changes with the demonization of immigrants themselves.

Understanding return migration in the Mexican case is fundamental not only to Mexican history, but also to the study of return migration itself. As a field

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[400] National Public Radio (NPR), "Mexican President Challenges Congress on Immigration, Guns," 10 May 2010, http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2010/05/mexican_president_challenges_c.html.

of study that is so new, the Mexican case has much to offer in terms of the factors involved. The effects of return migration in Mexico are perhaps accelerated compared to other nations due to its proximity to the United States, which facilitates return, and its intensity, which amplifies its extent. The Mexican case demonstrates the capacity of the influence of this transnational phenomenon to change a society in many ways. It challenges the way we view immigration, which always seems to be shrouded by politics and economics, ignoring cultural and social impacts that are just as important. These effects have largely been swept under the rug, scorning the individual without understanding the historical context of his or her existence. And this indifference runs through the official channels of both the United States and Mexico. If only people in the United States understood that Mexican return migrants are among the most pro-U.S. individuals in Mexico, that they represent the possibility of a complex set of changes that could facilitate a positive direction for both countries. If only Mexico would face its own reality and discuss its future dependence on emigration and remittances, it would begin the dialogue within the country and between its government and that of the United States that must take place.

The impact of return migration on Mexico goes beyond the rise of gang culture to influence culture at every level, from the construction of California homes to the love of big trucks, indicating great change in Mexico. The image of Mexican modernization is being shaped not only by factors of production and urbanization, but steadily by return migration—a now necessary agent of national income and, as such, an unavoidable agent of national change. Mexico has

always looked to the outside world to modernize; return migration is another layer of this historical process. The emigrant experience is no longer necessary to experiment this change, going beyond the individual to influence society more broadly. The culture of immigration is now part of the Mexican experience and its study is as significant to the Mexican history as more traditionally explored topics within the twentieth century.

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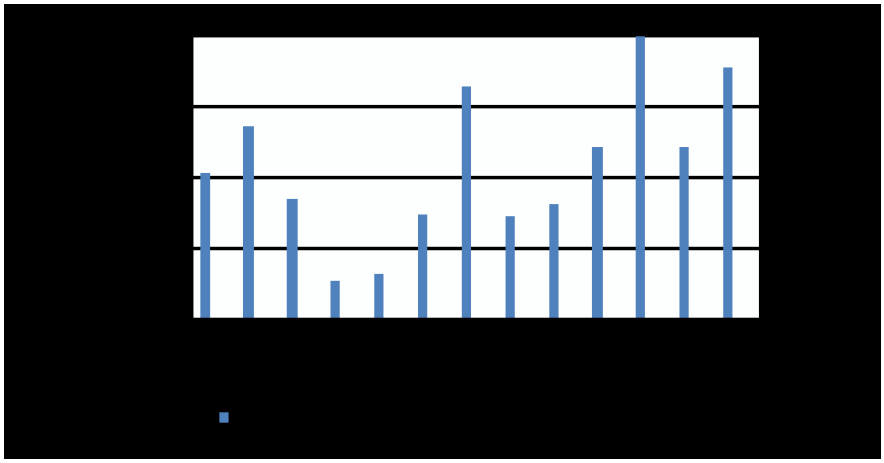
Table 1. Immigration to Mexico from 1911-1923[172]



The Great Depression promoted nativism almost everywhere; Mexico was no exception. *La Prensa* published a column in 1931 representing the concerns of the Unión de Industriales Mexicanos (Mexican Industrials Union). It was distressed by immigrants who had been recruited to work in agriculture and were instead seeking other pursuits. "…[T]hey laugh—that's the word: laugh—at the hospitality that we extend to them, dedicating themselves to commercial activities that prejudice locals. This wrongdoing must be stopped and eradicated."[173] The letter concludes by stating:

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[171] "México pide ayuda a EU para evitar la entrada de chinos," *El Heraldo de Cuba,* 1931, Archivo de Lerdo de Tejada, H83069, 4.

[172] Departamento de Estadística Nacional, *Estadística Nacional*, 15 January 1925, Archivo de Lerdo de Tejada, N03099, 5.

[173] "Todavía los extranjeros indeseables," *La Prensa,* 19 March 1931, Archivo Lerdo de Tejada, H03069, 11.
"Y los cuales se burlan—esa es la palabra: burlan –la hospitalidad que les brindamos, dedicándose a actividades especialmente comerciales, de las que deriva gran prejuicio para los nativos, conviene que se tomen medidas eficaces para atajar primero y extirpar, el mal."

braceros had no choice in where they were sent, stating in English "you take it or leave it."[226] Another *bracero* related his experience:

> After you were treated like shit in Empalme you had to go to Calexico where the *braceros* had to have a special medical exam. The gringos who examined you were so selective and racist that if you had a spot in your body you were sent back to Mexico just like that. The Mexicans were never welcome in the United States. We were beaten up, treated like animals. The gringos back then were very harsh. Also, they took X-rays and loaded us on to train cars to spray us with those hoses the firemen use. Then we were sprayed with DDT to disinfect us. If you didn't want to go through it all, they would grab you by your hair, beat you up, and send you back to Mexico. You couldn't say anything because you were punished. We were treated like slaves. One of the other requirements the gringos had was that they wanted hard-working people. The gringos used to look at your hands if you were a farm worker and if your hands were clean you were not allowed to set foot in the United States. If your hands were dirty and looked like working hands, you fulfilled that requirement. Those who had neat clean hands would rub their hands with sand and rocks until they were about to bleed a couple of hours before they were checked.

Figure 4. The description reads "Oftentimes, braceros were forced to show their hands to prove that they were experienced farmers. Inspectors would check to see how callused their hands were; according to them, the more callused the hands, the more experienced the farmer. A dryback shows callouses to prove he is really an experienced farm laborer."[227]

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[226] Ibid.

[227] Leonard Nadel, "An official examines a bracero's hands for calluses during processing at the Monterrey Processing Center, Mexico," Bracero History Archive, Leonard Nadel Collection, Negative Item #1592 (1956), http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/1592.
Original caption reads: "A prime requirement for the bracero to be considered for employment in the United States is that he must have farming background. An immigration inspector examines

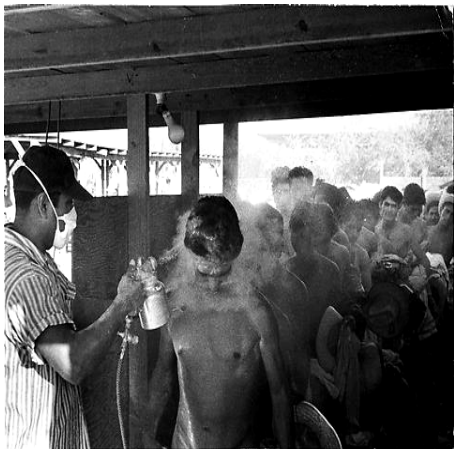

Figure 5. The description reads “This photograph shows how upon arrival to the United States, braceros were taken to processing centers where they were searched for vegetables, weapons, marijuana or similar contraband and sprayed with DDT by Department of Agriculture personnel. The photographer, Leonard Nadel described the photograph with the following caption: "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."[228]

Despite the amicable goals of the Bracero Program and the promises made by both sides to improve the participant’s lot, reality at the local level reflected very different concerns. As the interviews and photos suggest, the United States was primarily concerned with selectivity, establishing grounds for what it considered an ideal worker and thereby an ideal immigrant. For its part, Mexico concerned itself primarily with disposing those individuals who might impede their vision of progress. The implementation of the program failed to reflect the humanitarian ideals behind it, favoring instead economic and political motivations.

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this applicant's hands for calluses as proof of his experience as a farmer. One of the primary requirements for employment of braceros in the United States is that the men must have farming experience. During processing at the Monterrey Control Station in Monterrey, Mexico, a USES inspector examines the calluses of a prospective laborer and decides that he is not eligible. Only after the men are accepted for employment in the U.S. are their expenses for food and transportation paid by the U.S. A charge of $ 5.00 per head is levied on the U.S. farmers participating in the labor procurement program.

[228] Leonard Nadel, National Museum of American History, Leonard Nadel Collection, Negative #2003-8514 (1956), http://americanhistory.si.edu/onthemove/collection/image_75.html.

Government officials looked to model farmers to demonstrate that the program worked and was fulfilling its goals while ignoring their inconsistencies.

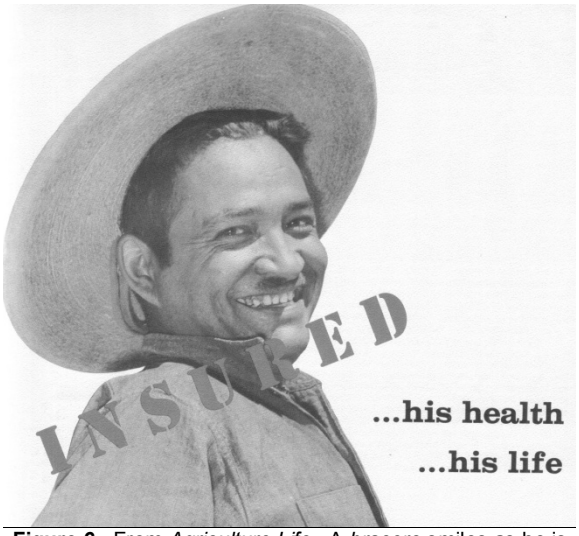

Figure 6. From *Agriculture Life.* A *bracero* smiles as he is insured under the Bracero Program.[236]

Aside from the basic provisions, growers added other realms of support for their *braceros*, subscribing to George Graham's (of the Citrus Grower Inc.) philosophy that "Proper recreation means happier workers. Happy workers are better workers. And good workers benefit everyone."[237] According to *Agricultural Life*,

> Ask any traveling salesman what he dislikes most about his job and chances are he'll tell you it's those depressing times when he is caught for a weekend in a tiny strange town. Now, take the elements of this situation and add barriers of language and strange customs, and you'll see how the bracero in this land could be a lonely, a restless worker, without a helping hand from his employer. In the citrus industry of the Southwest, helping the Mexican National workers build barriers against

[236] Ibid., 13.

[237] Ibid.

conditions and lack of resources that many *braceros* endured with regard to nutrition, while Figure 3 demonstrates the romanticized image presented by model programs such as that presented by the citrus growers.

Figure 7. "On a Texas farm, 200 braceros, stacked like dry goods, share a long, shed-like building with double-deck canvas beds. Besides from their close living conditions they prepared food by themselves. As they were used to it and it was affordable with even low wages, they mostly made tortillas.[239] Circa 1956.

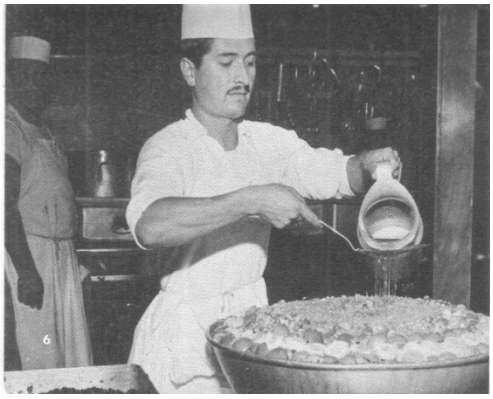

Figure 8. This picture was taken from *Agricultural Life*. The caption reads: "Hearty, nutritionally-balanced meals of natives dishes plus fresh eggs, milk and fruit are prepared in spotless kitchens and served at cost in modern dining rooms." Circa Spring 1957.

Isolation, however, did not mean that *braceros* did not improvise to manage their isolation while temporarily in the United States. Figure 4 shows that *braceros*

[239] Leonard Nadel, "Braceros prepare their food in a living quarter on a camp near McAllen, Texas," Bracero History Archive, Item #1394, http://braceroarchive.org/items/show/1394 (June 2009).