

U.S. Xenophobia and Racism—The Presence of the Past

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Current anti-immigrant sentiment, largely focused on the influx of Mexican and Latino newcomers—and the fact that Latinos, along with African Americans and Asian peoples, are projected to represent a majority of the U.S. population by 2042—denies the fact that, in the words of former presidential candidate Pat Buchanan “they are taking *our* country away from us.”¹ The fear, bluntly stated, is that “they”—Mexicans and Latinos—will erode “our”—white European—power over U.S. identity. Buchanan articulates only the most recent U.S. American anti-immigrant animosity that finds deep roots in the nation’s history.

U.S. American xenophobia, based on the assumption that “our country” is defined by, and should maintain, its dominant white European heritage is rooted in the myth of the U.S. as a nation of European immigrants.

This myth represses America’s original sin of racism and obscures the fact that the country was in part built, advanced, and sustained on the backs of African peoples who were stripped from their cultures of birth and arrived involuntarily via the Atlantic slave trade. This myth also buries, literally and figuratively, the many and diverse Native peoples who populated this country before the arrival of any Europeans.

This internalized, cultural construction of national identity as white European was first codified in the Three-Fifths Clause of the Constitution, which “counted” slaves in a state’s population at a “discounted” rate of 60 percent for purposes of apportioning Congressional representation. It was also manifested in the Naturalization Act of 1790 that restricted citizenship to whites, remained in force until 1952, and was not completely repealed until passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1965.

The current animosity against Mexican and Latino immigrants is not without precedent. Many U.S. Americans may be surprised to learn that citizens of Mexican descent have been denied their rights repeatedly throughout U.S. history. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican-American War in 1848, promised to protect the rights of new U.S. citizens of Mexican descent who inhabited the territory surrendered to the United States. However, despite the Treaty’s mandate, these new U.S. citizens, and their descendants, would not begin to realize the formal rights of citizenship until 1965.

For most of the twentieth century, many U.S. citizens of Mexican descent were still considered “alien.” The Mexican Repatriation Act of 1930 led to the forced removal of more than one million people during the Great Depression. The law’s title was a misnomer: rather than *repatriation*, the law engendered local, state, and federal collaboration in the *forced removal* of U.S. citizens of Mexican descent.

“Operation Wetback,” a similar deportation program initiated in 1954, again assembled and deported U.S. citizens of Mexican

descent as well as newly arrived Mexican immigrants. Then, as now, heightened border security and migration controls coincided with a virulent anti-Mexican and anti-immigrant sentiment. The political slogan for Operation Wetback is repeated today: “save jobs for true Americans.”

Ignorance of these historical “repatriation” and deportation campaigns “is consistent with the general invisibility of Latina/o civil rights deprivations throughout much of U.S. history.”² Although the demographic shift to a majority of Latinos, Asians, and African Americans would seem to make the historic color line anachronistic, current anti-immigrant, and specifically anti-Mexican and -Latino sentiment, re-enacts the historic U.S. white/nonwhite color line. The past endures in the present.

- 1 Pat Buchanan, interviewed on National Public Radio’s “Talk of the Nation,” (May 30, 2000). Go to www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1074805. See also Pat Buchanan, *Day of Reckoning: How Hubris, Ideology, and Greed are Tearing Americans Apart* (Thomas Dunne Books, 2007), p. 244.
- 2 Kevin R. Johnson, “The Forgotten ‘Repatriation’ of Persons of Mexican Ancestry and Lessons for the ‘War on Terror’” in *Pace Law Review* Vol 26, No. 1, (2005): 1-26.