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‘The Mexican’ and ‘The Cancer in the South’: Discourses of Race, Nation and Anti-blackness in Early 20th Century Debates on Mexican Immigration

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Abstract:

This article explores the flexible manner in which discourses of anti-black racism were employed within congressional debates on the proposed restriction of Mexican immigration at the end of the 1920s. I examine how both sides of this debate placed Mexicans within a particular historical narrative of race and nation, positioned in relation to a range of other populations, including Chinese and Japanese immigrants, Native Americans, Filipinos and Puerto Ricans. Within these narratives, slavery and the imagined Negro problem were particularly salient, being frequently used to orient racial interpretations of Mexican immigrants as well as the manner in which they were positioned in relation to other 'racial elements'. Imprinted with US histories of slavery, conquest and empire, these discourses offer insight into the ambivalent interrelationships of American's multiple trajectories of racism.

In his now classic examination of American democracy, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote:

The most formidable of all the ills which threaten the future of the Union arises from the presence of a black population upon its territory; and in contemplating the cause of the present embarrassments or of the future dangers of the United States, the observer is invariably led to consider this as a primary fact.¹

The problem, Tocqueville argued, was rooted not in the ‘abstract and transient fact of slavery’ itself, but in its ‘fatal’ combination with ‘the physical and permanent fact of color.’ Epitomizing what Barbara Fields has termed the ‘great evasion’ of American history and historiography - the ‘substitution of race for racism’², Tocqueville regretfully noted that just as ‘the tradition of slavery dishonors the race,’ ‘the peculiarity of the race perpetuates the tradition of slavery.’ ‘You may set the negro free,’ he concluded, ‘but you cannot make him otherwise than an alien to the European.’³ This foreboding early outline of what later Americans would refer to as the Negro problem, which configured ‘the presence of blacks’ as corrosive to American equality, anticipated early 20th century eugenic discourses of immigration, in which the perilous impact of ‘physical and permanent difference in race’ on American nation-building was theorized with the presumed authority of both scientific knowledge and hard-lived experience. After the perceived lessons of Reconstruction and its failure, as well as those being made evident by the ‘heterogeneous stocks of humanity’ entering the nation through the paths of both migration and American empire building, the number of racial toxins identified in such discourse was extensive. However, as I will explore in this article, Tocqueville’s early observations of ‘the presence of blacks’ as ‘the most formidable of all ills’ was prescient of the ways in which anti-black discourse would provide a powerful

historical vocabulary through which to measure and interpret the problems and opportunities presented by new populations.

Between 1926 and 1930, nearly a century after the publication of *American Democracy*, Congressional hearings were held to debate bills proposing to restrict Mexican immigration, a movement of people which had seen the number of first- and second-generation Mexicans in the United States increase more than 100 percent in each of the first three decades of the 20th century.⁴ The transcripts of these hearings offer a rich composite resource, documenting the statements of and exchanges between legislators, public officials, employers, lobbyists, and scientific experts, providing invaluable glimpses of racial discourse in ‘live’ use. In her analysis of the hearings, Claire Sheridan writes that ‘while blacks were often used as a touchstone for evaluating Mexican behavior and temperament as superior, their presence in the debate was muted.’⁵ It is certainly true, as she points out, that no one championed African Americans as a viable alternative to Mexican labour. Yet, a remarkable feature of the hearings, I will argue, is the manner in which both sides invoked the memory of slavery and the presence of African Americans, usually spoken of in the singular figure of ‘the negro’ - the always male, generic representative of the black population - as an instrument with which to orient the figure of ‘the Mexican’ and the meaning of ‘his’ coming.⁶

Part of what makes this discourse worth investigating is the variegation of the racial lines it mapped; it was not just black (and white) Americans against whom speakers evaluated Mexicans but Chinese, Japanese, Puerto Ricans, Filipinos, and Native Americans. Importantly, as I will argue, rather than being made separately from discursive trajectories that compared or contrasted Mexican immigrants and African Americans, evaluations positioning Mexicans against or alongside these other

racialized groups were frequently formulated through, or in relation to, anti-black discourse. Arguing that by the mid-1920s the ‘Mexican problem’ began to rival the ‘Negro problem’ in Texan imaginations as the state’s primary race problem, Neil Foley comments that in contrast to the South, ‘[i]n the West the threat to whiteness came principally from Asia and Latin America, particularly Mexico, not from Africa or African Americans’.⁷ However, it was precisely the figure of ‘the negro’ poised to defile the state’s social landscape that California’s agriculturalists sought to evoke in the debates on Mexican immigration. To argue their case, defenders of Mexican labour repeatedly stated their fear that ‘the negro’ would ‘spread’ if Mexican immigrants were shut out, as well as using well-established anti-black discourse to position Mexicans in relation to Native Americans as well as Filipinos and Puerto Ricans. On the other hand, restrictionists regularly likened the economically driven ‘importation’ of Mexican ‘peons’ to slavery in order to emphasise its potential to inflict racial devastation on the nation.

As Clare Jean Kim has noted, the trajectories of racialization constructing ‘other non-Whites’ in America have been both distinct and ‘profoundly interrelated.’⁸ Examining the manner in which both sides of the debate positioned Mexicans in relation to African Americans, and tracing the network of associations through which each group was aligned with or differentiated from other allegedly racially alien populations, offers revealing insight into the enduring salience of anti-black racism and the multivalent manner in which it contoured the racialisation of other ‘non-whites’. It illustrates furthermore how the continual act of aligning or contrasting African Americans with immigrants and aliens, and the use of ‘the negro’ to situate other groups as racially benign or racially menacing, simultaneously reproduced and re-entrenched racist constructions of the ‘presence of blacks’ as a national affliction.

‘We have only one social division that can be termed “caste”’: The social landscape of the debates

‘It was the misfortune of the Mexican,’ sociologist Ruth Tuck would later write, ‘to enter the United States at a time when we were indulging in a national orgy of racist philosophy.’⁹ While it certainly had unfortunate consequences, the accelerated arrival of Mexicans in the United States during the very period in which a ferociously racist brand of nativism was flourishing was no accident of fortune. As the 1924 Johnson Reed Act restricted European immigration ‘to the point of extinction’ and excluded Asian immigration altogether, agricultural and industrial employers turned to Mexican labour. The contradiction, one that Aristide Zolberg argues has recurred throughout American history in various forms, between the ‘main gate tightly regulated in keeping with the “national interest”’ and the ‘informally managed “back door” where agricultural employers ruled supreme’, provoked the bitter fury of the country’s self-appointed racial guardians and profoundly shaped arguments against Mexican immigration.¹⁰

Those demanding the restriction of Mexican immigration included many of the same individuals and organizations that had vociferously opposed European immigration earlier in the decade. However, by the time of the hearings in the late 1920s, the discursive geography of national racial problems had been significantly recharted. As Mae Ngai argues, a fundamental outcome of the 1924 restrictions was the legal solidification of the boundaries around the ‘white race’. While the Johnson-Reed Act classified European nationalities into ‘a hierarchy of desirability’, none of them were subject to the Act’s provisions, aimed at Asian immigration, to exclude those who were not white, and thus ‘racially ineligible’ for citizenship.¹¹ It thus

imbued the division between 'white' and 'not-white' with momentous significance. After the effective blockage of the 'hordes' of inferior European races, Mathew Frye Jacobson writes, the concept of a 'reforged, consanguine Caucasian race' became prominent even amongst the eugenicists who had previously drawn a stringent line between 'Nordics and non-Nordics'.¹² Epitomizing this shift, in his 1927 work *Re-Forging America*, Lothrop Stoddard asserted: 'We have only one social division that can be termed "caste." That is the color-line, drawn between the white and non-white elements of our population.'¹³ European immigrants could be racially assimilated with time and effort, Stoddard argued, but this 'most emphatically does not apply to non-white immigrants, like the Chinese, Japanese, or Mexicans; neither does it apply to the large resident negro element which has been a tragic anomaly from our earliest times.'¹⁴

Though the restriction of European immigration was referenced, the figure of the European immigrant as a 'racial element' of population was virtually absent. On the other hand, assessment of the Mexican immigrant in relation to non-white races formed an important theme within the debates. In making their arguments, each side presented Mexicans within an analogic constellation of 'Indians', 'Negroes', and 'Asiatics'. However, as is also made apparent in the debates, while attention to the alleged racial differences between Europeans may have subsided, this development was not matched by a symmetrical consolidation of non-Europeans into a monolithic 'non-white' race on the other side of the 'color-line' in either legal or discursive terms.

Though the vast majority of Mexicans in America at the time of the hearings were more recent arrivals, Mexican people had, of course, been in the US for a much longer period. The US conquest of the Southwest laid an uneven legal and discursive

ground for the 20th century immigrants, which also shaped the restriction debates in important ways. In the build up to and duration of the Mexican American war, in which Mexico lost half of its territory, the Mexican people were often cast as a ‘slothful, indolent, ignorant race of beings’ as an Ohio congressman put it, incapable of making use of their own lands.¹⁵ Nevertheless, at the end of the war, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo formally incorporated all Mexican residents of the annexed territory, admitting them ‘to the enjoyment of all the rights of citizens of the United States.’ Because in 1848, American citizenship was constitutionally limited to ‘free white persons,’ Mexican Americans became white, as George A. Martinez has put it, ‘through the give and take of treaty-making.’¹⁶ As scholars have made clear, being deemed white by treaty could often fall significantly short of being deemed white by ‘nature.’¹⁷ This ambivalent legacy surfaced in different ways in the discourse of the hearings. While Mexican immigrants were virtually universally understood to be non-white in the debates, their legal status was not without consequence. Despite restrictionists’ efforts to pressure the State Department into reclassifying them and Harry Laughlin’s suggestion that a new statute should be enacted specifying that only ‘one *all of whose ancestors* are of Caucasian stocks’ should be eligible for naturalization, Mexican immigrants remained exempt from the exclusion which applied to those ‘ineligible for citizenship’.¹⁸

Occasionally, those defending Mexican immigration pointed to the established population of Mexican Americans to support their position. A.C. Hardison, a representative of the California Grange and Farmers Union, described ‘the older type of Mexicans’ as ‘a very desirable class of people’ as positive evidence that Mexican immigrants might be ‘rather slowly assimilable.’¹⁹ John Box, a congressman from East Texas and tireless anti-Mexican crusader, dismissed such ‘loud praise of our own

Mexican and Spanish-blooded citizenship,' arguing that the people referred to were mostly 'of Spanish blood' and themselves victims of the 'alien peon flood'.²⁰ As his distinction between 'alien peons' and 'our own Mexican and Spanish-blooded citizenship' reflects, rather than the regional history of the Southwest, restrictionist discourse sought primarily to place Mexican immigrants in a broader history of racial wrong-turns in the building of American civilization.

'Has the past no parallel...?': Historical narratives of race and nation

In distinguishing his and his fellow restrictionists' motivations from those of their opponents, Albert Johnson, one of the architects of the 1924 Immigration Act and chairman of the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization during the debates on Mexican immigration, asserted: '[W]e are trying to look far into the future.'²¹ Looking far into the future for Johnson and his colleagues meant looking far into the past; the arguments of those demanding the restriction of Mexican immigration, and indeed the counter-arguments formulated in turn by their opponents, were often articulated in a panoptical temporal framework. While the more recent struggles over European and especially Asian immigrant labour were features of the historical trajectory in which restrictionists framed Mexican immigration, slavery and the 'negro problem' often provided its most richly evocative ingredients, used by restrictionists and anti-restrictionists respectively to presage ominous futures should Mexican immigration continue unabated or be cut-off.

In his statement to the House Committee, Henry Ward, representing the Immigration Restriction League of Boston, which had enthusiastically applied eugenic race principles to its battle against European immigrants, appealed to the lessons of history in a manner repeated throughout the hearings:

Our great Southwest is rapidly creating for itself a new racial problem, as our old South did when it imported slave labor...The Mexican peon, with a standard of living so low that American labor can not compete...is being substituted for 'cheap labor' from southern and eastern Europe.²²

Though identifying Mexican peonage, 'cheap labor' from Europe, and African slavery as chapters of the 'same old story of the "need for labor" – a configuration which flagrantly denied the enormity, and the specificity, of the violence inherent to slavery²³, Ward's statement also begins to illustrate that if these problems could be made analogous, they could not be made entirely interchangeable. Reflecting the diminishing emphasis on intra-white racial divisions in the years after the 1924 restrictions, Ward distinguished European immigration from the other forms of 'cheap labor' with which he aligned it, noting that '[o]ur European immigrants have done better by us than we deserved' and that Mexicans were 'more alien and less easily assimilated than the poorest of our European immigration.'²⁴

Apparently finding greater parallels between Mexicans and Asians, he warned that Mexicans threatened to become a 'new class of permanent "coolie" labour'.²⁵ Other restrictionists similarly pointed to the perceived illogic of encouraging Mexican labour after the nation had excluded Chinese and then Japanese immigration. To illustrate his claims about the degrading impact of Mexicans on American standards of labour, John Box described Japanese agricultural labourers he watched in California 'on their hands and knees...looking like droves of pigs.'²⁶ For their part, anti-restrictionists rejected their opponents' comparisons between the two groups, asserting that 'docile' and 'un-ambitious' Mexicans were completely unlike the property hungry, independence seeking Japanese.²⁷

However while restrictionists drew parallels between Asian and Mexican labour, it was often linkages constructed between Mexicans and African Americans that they drove home. ‘Importing thousands of Mexicans is one way to fill up a country, but is it the right way?’ Ward challenged the committee during his testimony. ‘Has the past no parallel in the way of the slave cargoes from Africa?’²⁸ That Ward and others often placed greater emphasis on likening Mexicans to enslaved Africans, despite both the historical singularity of slavery and the recent importance of Asian immigration on the West Coast is revealing. Though deeply intertwined with and reinforcing of racial whiteness and blackness, the ‘oriental problem’ could not easily replace ‘the negro problem’ in national narratives of race.²⁹ Asian immigrants, unlike Europeans, were definitely ‘non-white’ and without question widely viewed as racially inassimilable. Yet even if perceptions of Asian Americans as racially distinct did not subside, the perception of Asian immigration as a pending racial menace necessarily shifted after exclusion. Tellingly, when, during his testimony to the committee, Harry Laughlin, the Superintendent of the Eugenics Records Office, delineated ‘six major problems’ in American history in which the ‘racial factor has been uppermost’, the ‘gigantic’ racial problem arising from slavery was the only one he described as being unsolved, ‘even up to the present time.’³⁰ On the other hand, in discussing ‘oriental migration,’ he asserted that the American people had had the wherewithal to pass the Chinese Exclusion Act, thus taking the necessary action to ‘[catch] the oriental problem before it had reached proportions which would have rendered it insoluble.’ Similarly, in *Re-forging America*, Stoddard confidently declared that ‘thanks to our Asiatic exclusion laws’, the Chinese and Japanese would ‘never be more than local Pacific Coast problems.’³¹

If ‘coolies’ and ‘peons’ were understood to degrade American labour and the fabric of American equality *like slavery*, the damage slavery was understood to have inflicted – and here it is clear that restrictionists were concerned with the consequences of slavery for white Americans rather than the formerly enslaved or their descendants - was perceived to have been singular in its magnitude. In differentiating ‘the negro’ from America’s other ‘non-white’ populations, Stoddard highlighted the historical depth and breadth of the imagined Negro problem:

The negro has been with us from the first; he was the basic cause of our worst national disaster – the Civil War; and he now numbers over 10,500,000- nearly one-tenth of our total population. The negro is at once the most chronic and the most acute of our national problems.³²

The centrality of slavery to American history, the manner in which it had historically shaped ideas of citizenship, freedom, labour and equality in every region of the country, ensured understandings of blackness as economically and socially noxious were intelligible across the country. This was true of observers in both of the primary destinations of Mexican immigrants, Texas, a former slave state and home to a large African American population, as well as California, which was neither. Texas historian Ruth Allen positioned the ‘presence of blacks’ as a dilemma that was singular not just in American history but human history more generally, writing that ‘[o]ne can only marvel at the temerity of a people who, faced with the gravest race question of all time’ were now bringing ‘horde after horde of Mexican peons’ across the Rio Grande.³³ In California, Samuel J. Holmes, a professor of zoology at Berkeley, outlined the problems of Mexican immigration before the California Commonwealth club in 1926 in the following terms:

We have had one experiment in cheap labor that has been a great disaster and one of the greatest drawbacks in our history, and that is the importation of African slaves. We have not seen the end of that and we won't see the end of it for a great many years, possibly centuries.

'And the Mexicans,' Holmes noted, 'are a race almost as distinct as the negro, especially the Indians.'³⁴ Rather than merely juxtaposing perceived traits and qualities of the two groups as 'cheap labor' or as citizens, observers both within and outside of the hearings used the so-called Negro Problem to draw out the broader meanings about what Mexican immigration meant for the nation. In such discourse, the problem of black race was often presented, either implicitly or explicitly, in 'the most formidable of all ills' vein earlier advanced by Tocqueville. By likening Mexicans to African Americans, attention was drawn not just of the not-whiteness of Mexicans but to the severity of the problem they were perceived to pose to the social fabric of the nation.

Illustrating the pivotal weight of slavery in the restrictionist narrative is the frequency with which they invoked slavery to challenge their opponents' arguments. The response of Senator David Reed, another architect of the 1924 Immigration Act, to Ralph Taylor, Executive Secretary of the Agricultural Legislative Committee of California and one of the more adroit defenders of Mexican immigration, is typical: 'Everything you have argued in favor of the admission of the Mexicans runs along the same line with the arguments of the Southern States in favor of the admission of the negroes.'³⁵ In his own exchange with Taylor in 1930, Box first dismissed Taylor's arguments about the unique necessity of Mexican labour by asserting that Californian employers had previously claimed that the exclusion of Chinese and Japanese labour would ruin the state, and indeed that others had claimed that the 1924 act would ruin

the country, eventualities which had not materialised. He then shifted to the broader sweep of national history - and thus the seminal problem of slavery - to emphasize the gravity of the issues before them, telling Taylor: 'We are treading in the steps that men have been walking in for over a hundred years.' Just like the men at the Constitutional Convention in Annapolis, 'determining whether or not they would import Africans in the South', Box warned Taylor that 'you gentlemen in California' were dealing with 'the great race question', the consequences of which, like the 'incurable injury' of slavery, would be left to all of their children.³⁶

Critically the anti-restrictionists response to these challenges was to position Mexicans as a fundamentally different, benign, racial element precisely by reaffirming slavery, and 'the presence of blacks', as an incurable blight. When Box suggested that Californians were attempting to bring in another 'ruinous element of population', Taylor countered with a favoured argument of restrictionists, to be explored further below, that, on the contrary, the absence of Mexican labour would create a 'vacuum' which would be filled by 'the negro of the South' (and like racial menaces): 'You know the cancer that is in the South,' Taylor demanded, 'Would you have that spread over the rest of the United States?'³⁷ Just as the 'ruinous' nature of the black population was a 'fact' central to restrictionist arguments, it also became a key element in anti-restrictionists defensive efforts, anchoring the network of racial associations, past, present and future, through which they sought to establish the benefits of Mexican labour.

'They are of Indian blood': Mexicans as Indians and the Negro Problem

Those positioning themselves as experts on Mexicans' racial qualities from the restrictionist side frequently emphasized Mexican immigrants' indigenous

ancestry by referring to them continually as ‘peons’, distinguished both from white Americans and the ‘white [and stationary] ruling classes of Mexico’. In a letter to Johnson, which was printed in the *Holtville Tribune* and entered into the record of the hearings, Southern Californian Russell Bennett was eager to dispel any notion that ‘the vast Indian horde’ that comprised large growers’ field labour had any meaningful amount of ‘Spanish blood’:

I want to tell you what the idea is about the type of citizenry Mexicans make. Here in this city are three physicians and in our business we make it a point to mention the births. In putting the question to the physicians as to the births for the week they say, "Oh, yes; I had so and so's white baby and a couple of Mexicans, but you don't care anything about the Mex."

Remember the Mexicans that are given unlimited immigration are not known as whites. Let some good- sized growers' organization lobbyist answer that. Why aren't these Mexicans whites? Because they are Amerinds.³⁸

What makes Bennett’s challenge to California’s agricultural lobbyists to ‘answer to’ Mexicans’ social status as nonwhites is interesting precisely in that the lobbyists of ‘good-sized growers’ organizations’ showed no interest in convincing any one that Mexicans were white. To the contrary, they used Mexicans’ ‘Amerind blood’ to argue their case. While the conflation between Mexicans’ Indianness and unfitness to be assimilated into American citizenship had been well established in the era of the Mexican American War and while eugenicists made often obscenely racist assessments of indigenous peoples, prominent Californian anti-restrictionists drew on alternative historical imaginaries of Native Americans to emphasize Mexicans’ consonance within the American social landscape.

The diametric positioning of Mexican's Indian blood by the opposing sides of the debate reflects both the striking multivalence of racial constructions of Native Americans, as well as the contrasting relationship between them and racial constructions of blackness. Both of these factors are illustrated in a report on Mexican immigrants published in the 1908 Bureau of Labor Bulletin. Its author, Victor S. Clark, sanguinely concluded that 'though the preponderant Indian blood of most recent Mexican immigrants' could not be dismissed from consideration, 'it has not as yet created a race question along our southern frontier.' Indeed, he continued, '(t)here is no sign of that stern race consciousness that marks the attitude of the white man in the South toward the Negro. There is more of the tolerance with which Americans have traditionally regarded the Indians.'³⁹ When a very definite 'race question' came to be loudly raised in the following decade, anti-restrictionists appealed to this 'traditional tolerance' – as well as its differentiation from 'attitude[s] towards the Negro.' The owner of the *Los Angeles Times*, Harry Chandler, heavily employed this rhetoric in his testimony.

[Y]ou have to consider fundamentally that these Mexican men are practically Indians, they are of Indian blood, these peons who come in and there is no more problem with them than with our original Indians. And we Americans who look back to the time we were among the Indians know there were fewer problems then. But they were not Americans, and they were not our race. They did not make the problem that the negro has made or that the Filipino would make if we brought him in.'⁴⁰

Johnson seems to have found Chandler's ruminations fundamentally unconvincing—he interrupted the latter's testimony to ask, 'Do you not imagine there was a time when a great many people thought that the negro would be no problem in the United

States?’ However, Chandler’s use of a rather nebulous account of American history to position Mexicans as Indians and thus by extension not like ‘negroes’ (or Filipinos, as I will discuss below) reflected the fact that the discursive regimes of race applied to Native and African Americans were often antithetical.⁴¹

Using James Madison’s formulation of the ‘black’ and ‘red’ troubles confronting the early United States, Nicolas DeGenova has argued that the groups were frequently conceptualised respectively as the race problem ‘within our bosom,’ and that ‘on our borders,’ with the former group perceived as the ‘despicable bottom of white “American” society’ and the other as the ‘inimical and incorrigible outsiders’ on its periphery.⁴² A dark irony of the nation’s genocidal expropriation of native lands is the manner in which the figure of the Indian also became a romanticized symbol of Americanness. Citing the Indian-head nickel (whose coinage between 1913 and 1938 coincided with the debates on Mexican immigration), Winthrop Jordan writes that for white Americans the Indian became a ‘symbol of their American experience’, personifying ‘the conquest of the American difficulties [and] the surmounting of the wilderness.’⁴³ Facilitating the admiring perceptions of Native Americans, Jordan suggests, is the distance from which most white Americans viewed them and their exteriority to American society. In his 1907 work, *Races and Immigrants in America*, John Commons noted: ‘Only recently has there sprung up a policy of admitting them to citizenship, and therefore the Indian, superior in some respects to the negro, has not interfered with our experiment in democracy.’⁴⁴

Revealingly, while the 1924 Citizenship Act had declared ‘all non-citizen Indians born within the territorial limits of the United States’ to be American citizens⁴⁵, Chandler speaks of ‘our original Indian’ entirely in the past tense, and contrasts ‘him’ with the African American in the present tense: the Indians ‘were not

Americans' and 'did not make the problem that the negro has made'; the actual population of Native American citizens is vanished as the archetype of the vanishing Indian 'on our periphery' is repeatedly counter-positioned against the 'negro', lodged uncomfortably and irrevocably 'within our bosom.' The difference in the groups' 'external' and 'internal' positioning illuminates the following exchange between Johnson and Chandler after the latter again asserted that '[o]ur Indians did not make a problem':

The Chairman. They kept the United States Army rushing everywhere west of the Missouri River from 1850 to 1875.

Mr. Chandler. They did. But I am speaking of the vast number of problems to deal with. They did not mix up with our population; they have not deteriorated our population like the colored people have, nothing like it. And you will find that, from our Vice President down, a man with a little Indian blood is proud of it.⁴⁶

These two claims, which were reiterated in the report submitted by the Agricultural Legislative Committee of California to the 1930 hearings, that the Indian 'did not mix up with our population' and that 'a little Indian blood' was something to be proud of, may seem contradictory at first glance. They are, however, in keeping with the broader aims of that marked American approaches to indigenous peoples. As Patrick Wolfe has argued, whereas the regime of exclusion imposed upon African Americans within the nation required that their supposed difference be made 'essential, absolute and refractory', epitomized in the infamous 'one-drop rule', intermixture with the

majority population could be seen to complement the regime of absorption, genocide and elimination imposed upon Native peoples.⁴⁷ As long as the Indian was ‘disappearing’ culturally and physically into American society or remained safely installed on the reservation, ‘a little Indian blood’ could enrich rather than pollute. Thus in positioning Mexican immigrants as Indians, who, unlike ‘negroes’ and other ‘ruinous elements’, posed no threat to the ‘American bloodstream’, these men sought to override the question of Mexicans’ racial assimilability by reaffirming them as a population fundamentally external to the American social body. Their implicit suggestion that should intermixture of American and Mexican ‘blood’ occur it would be harmless was not intended to argue Mexicans’ racial ‘assimilability’ as much as their fundamental exteriority.

‘You know what the problem is’: African Americans, Puerto Ricans and Filipinos as racial menaces

Distinguishing the manner in which white Americans conceptualised Mexicans as a racial problem in the 1920s from that in which they conceptualised African Americans, Neil Foley writes that in contrast to Mexican immigrants cast as ‘alien’ and irreversibly foreign, white Americans presumed that they ‘knew’ African Americans, sharing with them important commonalities in religion, language and culture: ‘Blacks, whatever else they might be to whites, were not “alien”.’⁴⁸ In this vein, during his testimony before the Hearings Committee, Laughlin contrasted African Americans with Old World immigrants, asserting that the ‘negro is for America first’. ‘The American negro,’ he asserted, ‘is not in the hyphenated class. He is a black man in the United States, without ties elsewhere.’⁴⁹ For his part, Laughlin seemed to appraise the African American population through a sort of pragmatic

resignation. The original European colonists in the New World had made a terrible error in importing African slaves, he stated, '[b]ut the negro is here. He paid the price of admission with two and one-half centuries of slavery.'⁵⁰ Laughlin thus attributes to African Americans' a 'right' to be in American society that Mexicans and other 'aliens' certainly did not have.

However, it was precisely the sense that African Americans were a 'known' quantity (even in regions with small or non-existent black populations) – and their permanence in American society – that made the so-called Negro problem such a powerful frame of reference through which white Americans could interpret other supposedly racial relationships. Rather than differentiate them from the foreigner by marking their inclusion or belonging, the very Americanness of black people often accentuated their exclusion. Ngai writes that during this period the ethnic and racial identities of European Americans became 'uncoupled'; in other words, 'their identities turned both on ethnicity – that is, a nationality-based cultural identity that is defined as capable of transformation and assimilation – and on a racial identity defined by whiteness.'⁵¹ African Americans' racial identity was also uncoupled from their ethnic identity but with directly inverse effect. Whereas an Irish American could be ethnically Irish, racially white and fully American, 'the American negro' invoked during the hearings was American in culture and legal nationality but biologically alien. Laughlin commented in his testimony:

However inassimilable the negro is in race, he has, so far as he has been able, adopted our institutions, our language, religions, and essential laws and customs, but the contrast in blood between the northwestern European settlers and

the African negroes is so great that racial assimilation is impossible.⁵²

This conceptualisation of African Americans, as both un-hyphenated Americans, ‘without ties...elsewhere’ and racially extrinsic, is also distinct from the ‘alien citizenship’ of Mexican and Asian Americans, which Ngai outlines as emerging during this period. These groups’ ethnic and racial identities, she argues, remained ‘conjoined’, ‘cast[ing] them as permanently foreign and unassimilable to the nation.’ Unlike the racial identities of Mexicans or Chinese, for example, which were understood to be tied to specific nations, cultures and histories⁵³, ‘without ties elsewhere’, the race of African Americans was an ideological legacy of ‘natal alienation’ rather than national alienation.⁵⁴

The defenders of Mexican immigration drew on both the anomalous character of ‘the black man in America’s’ Americanness and the sense that ‘his’ presence was ‘known’ to chart the multiple racial threats presented by restriction. In its 1930 report, in a section entitled ‘Shall the Negro Problem Be Spread More Widely?’, the Agricultural Legislative Committee of California laid out a question at the heart of their defense of the Mexican labour: ‘The question is, Shall we eliminate the Mexican and force people who have tremendous financial investments at stake to bring in Filipinos and Porto Rican negroes?’ It answered this question by stating: ‘The American negro we all know. Are we Americans, with a full knowledge of the very serious racial problems which he has brought to the South and other parts of America, willing deliberately to spread him over the rest of the country in ever-increasing numbers?’⁵⁵ Similarly, Fred J. Hart, managing editor at *California Farm Bureau Monthlies*, explained his objection to potential Puerto Rican labour, by stating: ‘You

know what the problem is. I don't have to tell you about the negro problem and I don't want to discuss it. But the Mexican is our best bet.'⁵⁶ Thus, knowledge of the 'negro problem', so well-established it was thought to need no explanation, was used to define the alleged social traits and related biological degradations of two lesser 'known' populations.

Anti-restrictionists' continual reference to 'Porto Rican negroes' clearly sought to racially conflate Puerto Ricans with African Americans. As Sheridan astutely points out, Harry Chandler's description of 'yellow negroes from Porto Rico' highlighted the mixed African ancestry of many Puerto Ricans to evoke fearful connotations of 'miscegenation' as well as 'uppity' mulattos.⁵⁷ However, anti-restrictionists' arguments showed little concern for the accepted 'scientific' racial divisions of 'mankind'. Racialized constructions of Filipinos, described in the Agricultural Legislative Committee of California's report as having 'well-developed social aspirations and reeking with disease', were just as seamlessly fused with those of African Americans, commonly emphasizing their desire for 'social equality' and white women.⁵⁸ John Garner, an anti-restrictionist congressman from Texas and future vice president, also took up the argument that, like African Americans, Filipinos and Puerto Ricans desired to marry 'American whites.' He asserted that excluding the Mexican would 'spread the negroes over the rest of our fair land... As a matter of fact it will mean spreading not only those now in this country but many more from Porto Rico and the Philippines.'⁵⁹ The ambiguous framing of the three groups – 'the negroes' now in the country and the 'many more' who will be brought in from 'Porto Rico' and the Philippines – completely elides any racial distinction between them.

Critically, intertwined with these claims was a further linkage made between the three groups in the geographic and political conditions of their presence. Throughout the hearings, proponents of Mexican labour claimed that one of the great advantages of Mexican immigrants was that they were itinerant, moving seasonally through the American social body to do much needed labour, before returning to Mexico, with ‘neither desire nor ambition to become a permanent fixture or citizen.’⁶⁰ In reports submitted both in 1928 and 1930 to the House Committee, the California Legislative Committee highlighted these qualities by pointing to the permanence of the other groups: ‘The Mexican is closer home and can, and does, return there sooner or later in large numbers, whereas the task of returning negroes is much greater and almost impossible in the case of Porto Ricans and Filipinos.’⁶¹ In the event that the Mexican declined to return when desired, his presence still posed little problem: ‘The Mexican can be deported; the Filipino, the American, and Porto Rican negroes are citizens and could not be deported.’⁶² The unique ease with which Mexicans, and ethnically Mexican American citizens, could be removed was demonstrated over the course of the next decade as an estimated one million were expelled, often forcibly, to Mexico.⁶³ While the report’s assessment of the other three groups was not entirely correct, it was nonetheless revealing.

Both the Philippines and Puerto Rico were annexed by the United States at the end of the Spanish American War, yet they were approached and administered as colonial possessions in quite different terms. Filipinos were classed as ‘nationals’ rather than citizens of the United States. As such they were legally not aliens and thus not subject to 1924 immigration law that excluded other would-be Asian immigrants. However, though allowed to migrate freely, Filipinos were still excluded from becoming American citizens because they were not white.⁶⁴ On the other hand, while

Congress had conferred US citizenship on the inhabitants of Puerto Rico, perceived to be more 'tractable' and 'loyal' than those of the Philippines, the second-rate nature of the citizenship that was granted - one that did not offer the same civic and political rights guaranteed to 'real' Americans - reaffirmed the fundamentally unequal and permanently colonial nature of that relationship. Rather than equality or inclusion, bestowing US citizenship on its people was intended to signal, as one legislator put it, that 'Puerto Rico belong[ed] to the United States'.⁶⁵ In conflating the distinct legal statuses of these groups, the assertion that 'the Filipino and the American and Porto Rican negroes are citizens' had a downward discursive pull on all of them. While the non-citizenship of Mexicans, like that of the figure of the Indian with whom they were associated, placed them benignly outside the American social body, the 'citizenship' of these alleged racial menaces fixed them permanently, irreparably, within it. In being put on a par with 'the American negro' (who is never just 'an American'), the combined legality and undesirability of Puerto Ricans and Filipinos' presence was cast firmly in the Negro problem mould, presenting their 'citizenship' as a misfortune and a grounds from which to insinuate themselves into the intimate lives of Americans. Though when Taylor pointed to the difficulties involved in 'returning negroes' he presumably meant to the South, the comment itself brings to mind the long history of colonization schemes seeking to address the problems of slavery and inequality by extirpating African Americans from the nation. Longing for a solution to the Negro problem that would simply remove the Negroes themselves had not been completely extinguished at the time of the hearings. Though recognizing its impracticality, Stoddard wrote that colonization should nevertheless 'be seriously pondered, and should always be kept in mind as a possible solution.'⁶⁶

On the other hand, the association with these two groups of non-English speaking, cultural outsiders, whose presence in the nation was the result America's empire building and thus marked their subordination, served to further erode the Americanness of African Americans. In describing 'the negro from the south, Puerto Ricans from the West Indies and Filipinos from the Orient' (rather than, for example, American citizens and nationals of US territories) the report emphasizes the foreignness of Puerto Ricans and Filipinos, the 'West Indies' and 'the Orient' evoking geographic imaginaries of racial savagery and alien civilizations. Placing 'the negro from the south' among this grouping and on a par with two colonial peoples recently annexed as non- and 'rights-poor' citizens discursively diminishes the theoretically full-citizenship of African Americans.⁶⁷

Conclusion: 'A problem beyond solving'

That restrictionists failed to obtain the legislation they desired was by no means an indication that their positioning of Mexican immigrants as a race toxic to the American nation was ineffective. In response to restrictionist pressure, the government introduced a law that made aiding illegal immigration a felony and the State Department instigated the strict enforcement of visa requirements to effect the restriction of Mexican immigration administratively.⁶⁸ Such policies, as Ngai writes, 'rearticulated the U.S.-Mexico border as a cultural and racial boundary' that became ever more stringently policed.⁶⁹ Correspondingly, neither does the legislation's failure indicate that anti-restrictionists' arguments that Indian-blooded Mexican labour was necessary to save the Southwest from the true racial peril were convincing or even sincere. Their attempts to use racial logic to respond to the fierce and authoritative argumentation of their opponents often suggest cynical pragmatism rather than

conviction. Nevertheless, these arguments, like those of their opponents, bear the imprints of the historical struggles and relations of power from which they emerged.

As we have seen, restrictionists did not delineate Mexicans' qualities as a racial population in isolation but within a broader historical narrative of nation and race. While in this narrative racially objectionable immigrant labour was made commensurate with slavery, falsely conceptualized as a form of 'cheap labour', the perceived problem of African Americans' presence, as we have seen, emerged as salient in restrictionists' historical arguments against Mexican immigration. Unlike the problems of European or Asian immigration, it was understood to be so deeply rooted as to be inextricable. When Roy L. Garis, Professor of Economics at Vanderbilt University, testified that Mexicans would create a 'race problem that will dwarf the negro problem of the South', destroying 'all that is worth while in our white civilization,' he used the 'negro problem' to illustrate the terrifying potential of the emergent Mexican problem, implicitly confirming the former as the benchmark of racial calamity.⁷⁰ During the 1930 hearings before the House Committee, John Garner used the same characterization of the 'negro problem' to repel comparisons between Mexicans and African Americans: 'The negro problem is a different problem. It is a problem beyond the solving of man at the present time, because of the race.'⁷¹ As we have seen, anti-restrictionists forged their defense of 'the Mexican' as racial population through a formula of association and disassociation. The construction of African Americans as 'a problem beyond solving' provided discursive weight to both sides of this equation: Mexicans were like Indians who were unlike African Americans and Mexicans were unlike Filipinos and Puerto Ricans who were like the 'American negro.'

Within the configurations offered by both sides, each of which betray the variegated imprints of conquest, exploitation and slavery, assessments of Mexicans' supposed racial qualities and the perceived relationship between them and other 'racial elements' shifted considerably; however, assessments of African Americans as a 'tragic anomaly' - racially discordant and historically regretful – remained constant. The use of 'the negro' as an instrument for establishing the meaning of Mexicans' presence illustrates the profound importance of slavery and the anti-black racism it engendered in shaping the United States as a multiply-racialised landscape, as well as the singular rigidity with which they shaped the position of African Americans within it.

Notes

¹ de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 457.

² Fields, "Of Rogues and Geldings," 2.

³ de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 458-459.

⁴ Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow*, 56. Reisler gives a detailed account of the various bills introduced in these years to restrict 'Western Hemisphere' immigration, all of which were ultimately unsuccessful, not because the measures lacked support but because the State Department intervened through diplomatic fears over the impact of such legislation in Mexico and Latin American. For an excellent account of constructions of Mexican immigrants as potential citizens and labourers within these debates, see also: Sheridan, 'Contested Citizenship.'

⁵ Sheridan, *Contested Citizenship*, 10.

⁶ In the hearings transcripts, the word Negro consistently appeared in lowercase.

⁷ Foley, *White Scourge*, 62.

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- ⁸ Kim, 'Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans,' 106.
- ⁹ Tuck, *Not with the Fist*, 50.
- ¹⁰ Zolberg, *A Nation by Design*, 245.
- ¹¹ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 7. The Nationality Act of 1790 limited eligibility for naturalized citizenship to 'free white persons'. This was ammended in 1868 to include 'persons of African nativity or descent' in what Ngai describes as 'a gratiutous gesture to former slaves,' facilitated by the extreme unlikelihood that people of African descent would emigrate. *Ibid.*, 37-38.
- ¹² Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 96.
- ¹³ Stoddard, *Re-Forging America*, 376.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 257.
- ¹⁵ Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 239-40.
- ¹⁶ Martinez, "Mexican Americans and Whiteness."
- ¹⁷ On Mexicans' ambiguous racial positioning, see for example: Gross, "'The Caucasian Cloak'"; Fox and Guglielmo, "Defining America's Racial Boundaries."
- ¹⁸ Reisler, *Sweat of Their Brow*, 136-37. For Laughlin's comments (my italics): COIN, *Hearings: Immigration*, 714.
- ¹⁹ COI, *Hearings*, 49.
- ²⁰ COIN, *Hearings: Immigration*, 791.
- ²¹ COIN, *Hearings: Western Hemisphere Immigration*, 218.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 14-15.
- ²³ On the analytical fallacy in reducing slavery to merely an extreme form of labour exploitation, which elides the 'permanent seizure of the body essential to enslavement' and the specificity of both its history and its consequences, see Sexton, *The Vel of Slavery*.

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- ²⁴ COIN, *Hearings: Western Hemisphere Immigration*, 15-16.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.
- ²⁶ Coin, *Hearings: Immigration*, 78.
- ²⁷ See for example: COIN, *Western Hemisphere Immigration*, 232-33.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.
- ²⁹ On racial constructions of ‘coolies’, see: Jung, *Cane and Coolies*.
- ³⁰ COIN, *Hearings: Immigration*, 702, 04, 05.
- ³¹ Stoddard, *Re-Forging America*, 260.
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ Monetajano, *Anglos and Mexicans*, 262.
- ³⁴ "Transactions of the Commonwealth Club, Volume 21," 27.
- ³⁵ COI, *Hearings*, 79.
- ³⁶ COIN, *Hearings: Western Hemisphere Immigration*, 221.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 221-22.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 317.
- ³⁹ Clark, "Mexican Labor in the United States," 512.
- ⁴⁰ COIN, *Hearings: Western Hemisphere Immigration*, 61.
- ⁴¹ Wolfe, "Land, Labour and Difference: Elementary Structures of Race": 884.
- ⁴² De Genova, "Introduction".
- ⁴³ Jordan, *White over Black*, 90.
- ⁴⁴ Commons, *Races and Immigrants in America*, 16.
- ⁴⁵ Earlier policies had linked Native Americans’ potential as US citizens to their individual ability to adapt ‘the habits of civilized life.’ Rather than marking their successful inclusion in the body politic, Walter Benn Michaels argues, the Citizenship Act reflected that ‘Indians were increasingly relegated to "a peripheral role in

society” and that their cultural assimilation had come to be seen as irrelevant. "The Vanishing American,” 222.

⁴⁶ COIN, *Hearings: Western Hemisphere Immigration*, 67-68.

⁴⁷ Wolfe, "Land, Labour and Difference: Elementary Structures of Race," 885.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁴⁹ COIN, *Hearings: Immigration from Countries of the Western Hemisphere*, 715.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 704.

⁵¹ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 8.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 704.

⁵³ Early European Americans also distinguished Native Americans from African Americans on this basis. Jordan argues, maintained in settlers’ eyes ‘the quality of nationality.’ On the other hand, all Africans were subsumed into an ‘eminently governable sub-nation,’ in which ethnic differences between them were ignored and subdued. Jordan, *White over Black*, 90.

⁵⁴ Orlando Patterson has described ‘natal alienation’ as the defining constituent of the social relations of slavery. ‘Alienated from all “rights” or claims of birth, [the slave] ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order.’ This ‘secular excommunication’ meant that both the familial ties and ancestral heritage of the enslaved were disregarded by the masters’ society. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 5.

⁵⁵ COIN, *Hearings: Western Hemisphere Immigration*, 238.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁵⁷ Sheridan, "Contested Citizenship," 32, n.31.

⁵⁸ COIN, *Hearings: Western Hemisphere Immigration*, 238.

⁵⁹ *Hearings: Western Hemisphere Immigration*, 166.

⁶⁰ *Hearings: Immigration*, 325.

⁶¹ *Hearings: Western Hemisphere Immigration*, 238.

⁶² *Hearings: Immigration*, 325.

⁶³ Balderrama and Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal*, 151.

⁶⁴ An exception to this exclusion from American citizenship was ex-servicemen who were allowed to become citizens. "Status of Filipinos," 811. In 1934, the Tydings-McDuffie Act outlined a plan for the independence of the Philippines, which also saw Filipinos reclassified as 'aliens' and which reduced Filipino immigration to 50 persons a year. Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*.

⁶⁵ Cabranes, "Citizenship and the American Empire," 487.

⁶⁶ Stoddard, *Re-Forging America: The Story of Our Nationhood*, 324.

⁶⁷ For more on 'rights-poor' Puerto Rican citizenship see: Erman, "Meanings of Citizenship."

⁶⁸ Reisler, *Sweat of Their Brow*, 218.; Zolberg, *Nation by Design*, 268.

⁶⁹ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 67-68.

⁷⁰ COIN, *Hearings: Western Hemisphere Immigration*, 435.

⁷¹ COI, *Hearings*, 22.

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