

# Envisioning Victims and Creating Saviors: Colonialist Representations of Mexican Repatriation in Mainstream American Newspapers, 1931 – 1933

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The repatriation of Mexican immigrants and Mexican-Americans during the Great Depression is historical fact, yet it is often glossed over in American History courses. Indeed, as Francisco Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez declare in *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s*, it is often omitted entirely from the textbooks. They also note that when it does elicit comments, it is frequently referred to as a migration in which individuals “left ‘voluntarily’” (305). Recent scholarship has revised the framework for discussing the repatriation, but many are still unaware that it ever occurred.<sup>1</sup>

Such a state of affairs is not surprising. The relative lack of knowledge of this episode of American history stems from earlier colonialist representations that situate the repatriation into a narrative that reinforces the United States as a beneficent force in the trajectory of the history of Mexico and Mexican-Americans. I argue that most of the journalism inscribes the repatriation within a colonial discourse that is explained by Inderpal Grewal in *Transnational America*, in which post-colonial subjects are constructed as victims and the nations in which they claim asylum become their saviors. Although Grewal’s work is situated within human rights discourse in the Sikh community, the fundamental victim/savior binary she elaborates serves as an appropriate optic for analyzing mainstream news articles about the repatriation.

The articles cited in this study were published in the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times* in the early 1930s. Although many hundreds of articles related to repatriation appeared in these publications, I have selected the pieces that contain not only facts and statistics about repatriation, but also editorial content about the phenomenon. This investigation is predicated on the assumption that the articles chosen for this study reveal not only the opinions of the individual journalists, but also reflect more generally held attitudes in contemporary American society. Although they consider a wide range of events and positions, the articles reproduce colonialist discourse in specific ways. The first group portrays repatriates as victims and American government and private organizations as saviors altruistically motivated in their quest to aid them in their journey. The second group retains the construction of repatriates as victims but places the government of Mexico in the savior position. In the third set of articles, the subject positions are reversed as the repatriates become the saviors of a technologically backward Mexico. The fourth group is composed of articles that contest this dy-

namic by representing repatriates alternatively as simple and primitive or as a burden to Mexico's economy. Despite the different ways in which this journalism portrays the various actors of repatriation, as a whole they are invariably founded on some variation of Grewal's victim/savior colonial discourse.

### The Anatomy of Colonial Discourse

In order to demonstrate that newspaper articles written during the years of the repatriation reproduce the colonial discourse of the colonizer as savior and the victim as colonized, a brief discussion of colonial discourse is important. In *The Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology*, Allan Johnson notes in his entry on colonialism that, in addition to being a system of economic exploitation between powerful countries and weaker ones, "the term *internal colonialism* has been used to draw attention to the fact that exploitative relationships can exist within societies as well as between them." His example is that "dominant ethnic or racial groups may exploit subordinate groups" (par. 3). Of course, although colonial dominance is typically motivated by economics, corollary relations of power and ideological positions are also established by the colonizer. Such relationships are often conceived according to structuralist modes of seeing and can thus be expressed in binarisms of how colonizers perceive themselves in contrast to how they view the colonized. Paraphrasing Edward Said, Ania Loomba explains that "if colonised people are irrational, Europeans are rational; if the former are barbaric, sensual, and lazy, Europe is civilisation itself [...]" (47). Inevitably, the ultimate objective of such discourse is to justify the authority of the colonizer through the construction of himself as morally superior to the colonized (Spurr 110). Although most of Europe's colonies were dismantled following

World War II, David Spurr argues that the discourse of imperialism has survived the formal end of colonialism, as has colonial discourse (5). Consequently, it serves as an appropriate tool for analysis of the ways in which American journalism of the 1930s constructed American culture and government as superior not only to Mexican culture, but to Mexican immigrants and Mexican-Americans themselves. The use of journalism is particularly fitting, considering Spurr's remark that "journalism follows on more systematic orders of discourse, adapting them to particular events and translating them into the language of popular appeal" (3). Perhaps, then, we should not even expect contemporary news articles about the repatriation to produce an objective narrative—rather, we should anticipate the reproduction of a colonial discourse.

Inderpal Grewal's *Transnational America* in chapter 4 of *Transnational America*, Inderpal Grewal elaborates the difficulties of various cases of female Sikh refugees seeking asylum in the West in the 1990s, particularly in the United States. Initially, colonialism and refugee/asylum discourse would seem to be located on opposite ends of the spectrum. However, Grewal's work demonstrates that the asylum process constructs "the refugee as a universal subject," but always within the framework of colonizing relations (166). More specifically, the author shows that Sikhs, rather than being permitted to relate their own account of troubles in their homeland and their reasons for requesting asylum, must instead conform to a particular narrative strategically circumscribed by the transnational first-world discourse of human rights. This "official" narrative requires the asylum-seeking subject to position herself as a victim, and asylum-granting agencies are consequently always constructed as saviors. In citing the work of Sherene Razack, for example, she contends that Asian women seek-

ing asylum in Canada were “compelled to represent themselves as victims and their cultures as pathological” (170). This discourse, though specific to the purpose of granting asylum, is subject to the classic colonial binary that constructs the sending country as backward, repressive, and inferior and the host country as advanced, enlightened, and superior.

### A Brief History of the Repatriation

The massive repatriation of Mexicans and Americans of Mexican descent during the 1930s was a complex phenomenon that cannot be attributed to a singular cause. It should also be noted that repatriation is not synonymous with deportation. In fact, nearly all repatriates traveled to Mexico voluntarily, assuming that it would be relatively simple for them to return when economic conditions improved. In fact, Abraham Hoffman indicates that many repatriates were led to understand that they could come back whenever they desired or even explicitly told that this would be the case (91). However, he subsequently introduces this qualifying statement: “to say that these families ‘volunteered’ or to charge that one way or another they were ‘coerced’ would be to oversimplify their problems” (105). While their departure en masse may have officially been considered voluntary, immigrants and Mexican-Americans certainly did not leave the United States without external pressure.

Many Americans were searching for a scapegoat on whom to place the blame for the economic hardships of the Great Depression. Unfortunately, this scapegoat was frequently found in both the Mexican immigrant and Mexican-American community. The public viewed Mexican immigrants alternatively as taking jobs from white Americans and as charity cases (Hoffman 90). However, once repatriation was underway, distinctions among different demographic

groups were lost—Mexican nationals, Mexican-born legal residents of the U.S., and even U.S.-born Mexican-Americans were repatriated to Mexico. According to Camille Guerin-Gonzales in *Mexican Workers and American Dreams: Immigration, Repatriation, and California Farm Labor, 1900-1939*, programs were established at local government levels that “made no effort to distinguish between immigrants and U.S.-born Mexicans” (78). In fact, the entire community was subject to subtly intimidating practices by immigration officials such as “scareheading,” in which publicity campaigns were developed with the express purpose of scaring both Mexicans and Mexican-Americans into leaving the country (Guerin-Gonzales 78). Perhaps the most notorious instance of this tactic occurred in January of 1931 when Charles Visel, director of the Los Angeles Citizens’ Committee on Coordination of Unemployment Relief, convinced local newspapers and radio stations to run press releases announcing the impending roundup of all illegal residents of the city and their subsequent deportation. Visel’s hope was that “an army of aliens would walk out on first publicity actuated by fright and that this would release jobs for unemployed citizens” (Guerin-Gonzales 81). Because many newspapers (including those published in Spanish) reported that *all* Mexicans would be deported, many legal residents and even U.S.-born citizens of Mexican descent left the country out of fear. Therefore, despite the assertion that “no pressure was applied in either country” (Starr-Hunt 110), no resident of the community was immune to intimidation. As tactics such as scareheading demonstrate, large sectors of the population were simply coerced to leave through informal means.

In addition to the daunting methods of immigration officials, the economic hardship of the Depression was an undeniable impetus to repa-

triation. As with the rest of United States' workers, Mexicans lost their jobs en masse. However, when employers were compelled to reduce their workforces, they "often fired ethnic Mexicans first," which essentially became another subtle tactic of coercion to repatriate (Meeks 94). When Mexicans did repatriate they often found that, even if they had their own automobiles and possessions, they had to leave many of them behind due to strict weight limits placed on duty at the border (Guerin-Gonzales 92). As a result, repatriates were economically dispossessed of whatever they had managed to accumulate. In many cases, families were separated and women were forced to make the journey without their husbands and with or without their children (many of whom, having been born in the U.S., refused to repatriate). Once repatriates arrived in Mexico, most of them discovered that U.S. authorities had not simply returned them to their native land, "but [had] sent many American citizens into exile in a foreign country" (Guerin-Gonzales 94). A phenomenon that was generally perceived as an immigrant group returning to their places of birth actually represented, in effect, a significant number of American citizens being banished from their country of origin.

#### **Repatriates as Victims Saved by the U.S.**

Grewal's elaboration of the victim/savior colonial discourse is culturally and temporally situated within the Sikh refugee community applying for asylum in the United States in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nonetheless, U.S. newspaper articles of the 1930s, and particularly those in the *Los Angeles Times*, also seem to reproduce this discourse. In contrast to the situations described by Grewal, the victims are Mexican repatriates; another important difference is that they are not constructed as such by their own narratives, but by journalists who were typi-

cally white and middle-class. The saviors are a myriad of local government, and sometimes private, organizations. "Horde Departs for Native Soil," published in the *L.A. Times* in 1931, states rather succinctly that repatriates were subjects with complete agency: "[They are] unable to obtain work to earn sufficient money to sustain themselves and their families under present economic difficulties, and they feel they may fare better near friends and relatives in their native land" (A1). Repatriates are thus constructed as rational actors arriving at independent decisions with no regard to the larger structural forces that condition their choices. As a result, state and immigration officials are absolved of any responsibility they bear in influencing Mexicans to repatriate. The same article features a photograph which the caption represents as a "sad-faced group of Mexicans [. . .] preparing to leave the United States for their native land." The conjunction of the image and the text has the effect of essentializing the subjects as "belonging" to a certain space, despite the fact that some of them are children likely born in America. The article not only absolves the state from any culpability, but also proceeds to laud American big business for its altruistic concern for the well-being of the repatriates: "Southern Pacific officials ordered extra equipment for each train to insure as much comfort as possible for the travelers and their children" (A1).<sup>2</sup> Yet even though such a vigorous campaign was mounted to portray repatriation assistance as a "gift" to the Mexican population, accusations of a deportation drive must have arisen, as the article deems it necessary to mention that "immigration authorities [. . .] deny a campaign against any single nationality and assert they are interested only in those subject to deportation under law" (A1). In addition to painting the actions of officials as a narrowly-focused targeting of illegal residents, the

article omits any discussion of subtle means of intimidation, such as Visel's scareheading tactics of announcing deportation campaigns through the local media, that made repatriation the only possibility for many legal residents of the United States.

In 1931 the *New York Times* published the article "Mexicans Return Home" which claims, as does the aforementioned *L.A. Times* article, that "the government has provided free transportation for more than 70,000" (22). But unlike the previous article, this one distinguishes itself by revealing the deplorable conditions of the repatriation, citing the deaths of more than twenty-six Mexicans in Ciudad Juárez from "pneumonia and exposure" (22). Before the reader can assign any blame to the American government for pushing people to repatriate, the article closes by emphatically affirming that "the government has taken urgent measures to remedy this condition." Once again, the state is not held to account for any suffering caused by the repatriation (including the loss of material goods accumulated over a lifetime in the U.S.) but instead is seen as motivated only by its desire to improve conditions for the emigrants. This discourse is further reinforced by the 1932 article "Repatriate Move Aided by Bay Area" in the *L.A. Times*, which details a "unique arrangement between the Mexican government and the city of Santa Monica together with Santa Monica Rotarians," under which, "contrary to the prevailing methods of dealing with repatriates Santa Monica folk are providing them with food and tents in which to live until adobe houses may be erected, as well as other facilities" (A8). A recurring pattern emerges in which repatriates are constructed as victims not of intimidation of any state apparatus, but as victims of the *force majeure* of the Great Depression. Government and private civic organizations are therefore

portrayed as never coercing anyone to repatriate; instead, they are represented as merely providing financial and material assistance to those who have already decided to do so.

### Mexico as Savior of the Repatriates

Just as American government agencies are often represented as saviors of the repatriates in contemporary news articles, the Mexican government is often constructed as fulfilling this role as well. One 1932 article from the *L.A. Times* explained the objective of Mexico's efforts to set up colonies for repatriates as to "remove them from a condition of jobless dependence and put them onto fertile land where they can make their own living and regain happiness and prosperity" ("More Mexicans" 12). According to this classically colonialist attitude, the repatriates are incapable of success without the paternalistic intervention of their "native" government. Another *L.A. Times* article from 1933, "Mexico Colony Life Described," depicts the attempt to build colonies, out of previously uninhabited territory, as a "social experiment" with the utopian vision that will lead to a "semi-Arcadian 'new life'" (11). The thoughtful reader may wonder how Mexico, which at that time was suffering even more from the Depression than the Colossus of the North, planned to realize such idealistic dreams for the repatriates. The article lists the elaborate planning of the colonies, which included rationing of staples, water, land for agriculture, schools, and cooperation with the native population. In addition, the Mexican government was counting on the technologically advanced equipment and training the repatriates would bring with them, which would "immediately place [them] in a condition favorable toward effecting a transformation" (11). Indeed, this source indicates that the colonists would receive a great deal of

assistance that would render their success quite probable. This prognosis is belied in *Decade of Betrayal*, in which Balderrama and Rodríguez provide an account of how these colonies actually fared. Efforts to colonize Valle de las Palmas failed because of insufficient rainfall, which led to “prolonged irrigation [that] depleted the water table and brought harmful alkalines to the surface, rendering intensive farming impossible” (219). Pinotepa, a colony in Oaxaca State and the subject of the latter article, failed even more miserably than Valle de las Palmas. Guerin-Gonzales asserts that, although the colony received extensive investment from the Mexican government and was set up for a capacity of half a million inhabitants, the population reached its maximum of approximately 800 in 1933. Several years later, most of its intrepid denizens had either left or perished as a result of the many perils of the tropical climate, such as poisonous insects and snakes (104-05). Therefore, despite efforts to create flourishing repatriate enclaves out of the Mexican wilderness, the projects were ultimately failures that simply compounded the nation’s problems as the Depression continued into the mid-1930s. In summary, the representation of the Mexican government as savior to the impoverished victims of the repatriation was contradicted by the reality of the difficulty in establishing colonies for them.

### **The Repatriates as Coming to Mexico’s Rescue**

The previous articles manipulate colonial discourses to construct repatriates as victims, yet much of the contemporary journalism reverses the dynamic by constructing them as saviors and the Mexican government as the victim. For example, in “Nationals Welcomed by Mexico,” which appeared in the *L.A. Times* in 1932, the Mexican Secretary of the Interior, Eduardo Vasconcelos, is said to believe that the repatriation

will be “not a problem to Mexico but a benefit” (3), and then he is quoted directly: “The experiences gained in the United States by these Mexicans should be a valuable asset to Mexico” (3). Vasconcelos is decidedly vague, perhaps because he is uncertain exactly how his statement is true, or whether it will prove true at all. Nevertheless, he implies that they will help rather than hurt the country. However, in a 1933 *L.A. Times* article entitled “Repatriation of Mexicans Wins Praise,” a Mexican consul insisted that “the value to Mexico by the return of the 13,000 Mexicans versed in the ways of American agriculture is unlimited,” and that “their knowledge of American irrigation [. . .] has added untold millions of dollars of value to the Mexican republic” (3). The consul (who is, rather importantly, based in Denver) makes much more pointed statements than Vasconcelos. His aggrandizement implies that the agrarian skills of the repatriate population are significantly greater than those of any Mexican who has never worked in the United States. This same opinion is voiced in Starr-Hunt’s 1933 *L.A. Times* article “The Mexicans Who Went Home,” but with even more vigor and conviction. He proudly boasts that the repatriates “are already introducing into sections which were untouched by anything American the latest in American educational, agricultural and industrial ideas.” Furthermore, he finds that the repatriates “absorbed American atmosphere, American ideas of organization, and American methods. There are now Mexicans in Mexico who ‘understand Americans’” (110). Starr-Hunt, besides extolling the benefits of having U.S.-acculturated Mexicans and Mexican-Americans introduce American technology and industry to Mexico, also looks forward to the repatriates transforming Mexico to become culturally more like its neighbor. These repatriates are thus potential saviors of their (presumed) native

homeland; all of which has been made possible, no less, by the generosity of the American agricultural sector in which they were privileged to have been allowed to participate.

Quite obviously, American journalism of the day exhibited a decidedly positive outlook toward Mexico's future as a direct result of the repatriation, particularly during the early years of the phenomenon. However, some journalists began to counter this assumption by reporting that the repatriates were not unanimously welcomed into Mexico. As early as 1931, the *New York Times* reported that many Mexican states found themselves overcrowded with an "enormous influx of repatriates" ("Idle" 10). The article estimates that 60,000 people had repatriated by that time. Considering that conservative estimates place the total number of repatriates at approximately one million (Balderrama and Rodríguez 151), it is unlikely that the situation improved as repatriates continued to cross the border. Two years later, the *L.A. Times* reported that the repatriates were "no longer being welcomed [...] to this side of the border, due to the fact that the unemployment situation in Mexico has become acute and it has been impossible to find work for the thousands of repatriates who have already entered the home country." The article even states that "in many instances these people are being refused permission to enter this country by immigration authorities" ("Mexico Chills" 20). This grim reality stands in stark contrast to the optimistic picture woven in other articles proclaiming the repatriates as possessing the intellectual capital necessary for the salvation of the pre-industrial, agrarian Mexican economy.

Despite the tendency to imbue the repatriates with technological skills which their Mexican-born counterparts do not possess, they are still often depicted as simple, primitive, and un-

preoccupied with their impoverished economic conditions. In the same article cited in the previous paragraph, Starr-Hunt reports about repatriates placed by the Mexican government in a cooperative farming project in Baja California: "A peso a day is paid to the colonists in provision and clothing, and many went through the season without so much as a centavo in their pockets, yet were comfortable and happy" (110). This group of people, just described by the same author as possessing unsurpassed technological skills, now embodies the stereotype of the blissfully ignorant savage who neither needs nor expects more than what is provided to him by his paternalistic overseer. In the 1932 article "The Repatriados" by Joseph Park, the repatriates are similarly portrayed as skillful workers, yet a large photograph of a repatriate farmer is captioned, "Sugar cane, hauled in primitive steer-drawn carts, is given to the repatriates at Hermosillo" (13). Even more unflattering is the 1931 article "Hegira of Mexicans Bother California" in the *New York Times*. Certain to offend anyone of Mexican descent who might read it, its author contends that "Mexicans are depended on for certain classes of labor and field work for which the more highly organized United States born worker is not fitted" (58). This statement racializes and essentializes all workers in the U.S. born in Mexico as culturally (and perhaps biologically) suited only for lower-paying, more physically demanding labor. Therefore, although repatriates are often held up as a great hope for the Mexican state with all of the technological mastery they acquired in the U.S., they are still represented as the *other*, and consequently as inferior in comparison to native-born Americans.

### Conclusion

I have intended to show that the repatriation of Mexican immigrants and Mexican-

Americans during the Great Depression was a complex event that was filtered in contemporary mainstream journalism through a colonialist perspective. In one form or another, they all evince Grewal's victim/savior binary, whether repatriates are portrayed as victims and American or Mexican government agencies as their saviors or the repatriates themselves become the saviors of a benighted pre-industrial Mexico. While some articles contest these narratives, the colonial discourse that runs through them is never problematized.

The limited scope of this investigation can merely serve as a preliminary study in an area which is only now being opened to revisionist scholarship. Future research will hopefully concentrate on the vast primary sources surrounding the repatriation. In addition to text contained in the numerous newspaper articles I have excluded, many of them contain photographs that in and of themselves constitute colonially situated representations of repatriates. Other types of journalism, such as newsreels, are fertile territory for analysis, as are government documents (a variety of which are included in Balderrama and Rodríguez's volume) and any private narratives of the repatriation that become available. It seems certain that the representations surrounding the repatriation will continue to be challenged and sources will continue to be scrutinized. Only by deconstructing colonialist ways of seeing the event and by finding the voices of the repatriates can we begin to arrive at a narrative that encompasses more than a hegemonic and monolithic view of this extraordinarily complex episode of American history.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The events described in this study should be distinguished from Mexican federal, state, and local efforts to attract Mexicans that had emigrated to the U.S. during the postrevolutionary period. This investigation focuses

instead on the discourses surrounding the Mexican Repatriation and Deportation Campaign, in which local government agencies reacted to economic pressure caused by the Great Depression by intimidating Mexican nationals, Mexico-born U.S. citizens, and native-born Mexican-Americans into settling in Mexico.

<sup>2</sup>Balderrama and Rodríguez maintain that similar assertions were made in Mexico City's newspaper *Excelsior*, and Mexican officials continuously maintained "that efforts were made to assure the comfort and well-being of the repatriates" (141). Their *Decade of Betrayal* is an excellent introduction to the repatriation that documents the abuses and suffering of those who were forced to resettle in Mexico.

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