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**"Ethnic" some days, white the rest:
Whittier, CA as a case study in Mexican-American racialization
and assimilation in Los Angeles County**

submitted to
Professor Lily Geismer
and
Professor Ken Miller

by
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In partial fulfillment of the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Per the U.S. Census Bureau, the Latino population in the United States stands at 60.5 million. This thesis tells the story of a few hundred-thousand Mexican-Americans in Southeast Los Angeles County's suburbs, who live in a region nicknamed the "Mexican Beverly Hills." This is a unique site of middle-class ethnic affluence, but also a place where questions of "Hispanic" racial identity, assimilation, and belonging are played out. The Mexican Beverly Hills promises residents the fulfillment of their own (Mexican-) American Dream, but also plays into tropes of model minorities, demands assimilation and ethnic betrayal from its residents, and is the latest expression of the American project to control Latinos within its borders. This has resulted in the regional embrace of whiteness over ethnic kinship and genuine cultural belonging. Though not all residents fall into these tropes or assumptions, evidenced by widespread criticism over the term "Mexican Beverly Hills" and action against local anti-immigrant efforts, the "good Mexican" is still highly visible in the region's political scene. City council-members have used the trope to their benefit, resulting in a landscape that stereotypes Mexican-Americans into performing for white acceptance. The Mexican Beverly Hills, and the trope of the "good Mexican," are a warning regarding the perils of affluence and assimilation and should be used to educate other ethnic groups who pursue wealth and notions of intra-ethnic superiority.

Keywords: Latinos, Latino race and identity, Latino politics, ethnoburbs, ethnic affluence

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“Why am I compelled to write?... Because the world I create in writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease my appetites and anger ...To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy... To convince myself that I am worthy and that what I have to say is not a pile of shit ... Finally, I write because I'm scared of writing, but I'm more scared of not writing.”

— Gloria Anzaldúa, *Speaking in Tongues*

“I am like a turtle, wherever I go I carry ‘home’ on my back”

— Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*

INTRODUCTION

Inspiration for this thesis began with my application for the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship Program at the Claremont Colleges my sophomore year at Claremont McKenna College. I was curious about ways to supplement my curriculum in Public Policy, which though interesting, was lacking opportunities for me to explore subjects that mattered to me. These included abstractions such as: why was my hometown different than the hometowns of my Latino peers? How did this shape me in my girlhood? Where did I fit into the racialized landscape of the United States? And finally, how did my hometown of Whittier, California, fit into the landscape of Los Angeles County?

The first iteration of this project took place under the advisement of Professor Wendy Cheng. I completed an independent study that traced the history of Los Angeles's suburbs, and investigated the concept of the "Mexican Beverly Hills," a collection of uniquely-affluent Mexican-American and Latino cities in Southeast Los Angeles County. Whittier, my hometown, is one of these cities. The term "Mexican Beverly Hills" has been around in the local vernacular for a few decades, though its etymology is unprecise. Every few years, the Los Angeles Times or the New York Times writes an exposé on the region: highlighting the paradox of Latino wealth, and profiling community members who talk of pulling themselves up by the bootstraps, or of how much their place in the Mexican Beverly Hills meant to them.¹ It is clear that in Mexican Los Angeles, a home in the Mexican Beverly Hills is the most pure fulfillment of the (Mexican-) American Dream. But for other Mexican-Americans and Latinos, the "Mexican Beverly Hills" is a

¹ Cindy Carcamo, "Latinos' Rising Fortunes Are Epitomized in Downey."; Canedo and Galindo, "The 'Mexican Beverly Hills.'"

term to laugh at: one that equates ethnic success with white approval and does not represent the true character of the region or their city.^{II} It is simply a mere reference to the fact that journalism does not capture the true character of their hometowns, though these pieces do take care to reference the fact that yes, these cities do have *something* different about them.^{III}

Through my exploration of the Mexican Beverly Hills, I became intrigued by questions of socioeconomic mobility, Latino racial privilege, relational racialization, the policy history of Los Angeles' suburbs, and the influence Latino political power holds in the region. I began looking for answers to these questions through my Mellon Mays research, at research colloquiums, and through academic conferences, but did not feel as if I had explored them sufficiently. As such, I chose to adopt these themes as the topic of my senior thesis. The central inquiry of my thesis is as follows: how have Mexican-Americans been racialized in the United States and the Los Angeles region? How has this racialization affected community development and the question of assimilation, and how can we describe its regional manifestation? And finally, how is racialization visible in the local Latino political landscape?

As a student of both American Studies and Public Policy, (and American History through the American Studies major) I employed a variety of methods and academic theories to answer these questions. Primarily, I am concerned with the question of Mexican-American racialization: it is the first chapter in my thesis, and it informs the rest of my discourse and arguments. As such, I rely heavily on the sociological theory of

^{II} Vasquez, "No, Downey Is Not 'Mexican Beverly Hills.'"

^{III} Gustavo Arellano, "Of Course Latinos Can Assimilate into American Society. Just Look at Whittier."

racial formation. Originally conceived of by Michael Omi and Howard Winant, this theory argues that race is a socially constructed concept, informed by social, economic, and political circumstances.^{IV} It is intimately connected to the process of racialization, which refers to the process of how a group or community is ascribed racial characteristics.^V

My analysis and understanding of Mexican-American racial formation and racialization is instructed by public policy and immigration laws in the United States and Los Angeles, from the 19th century to the present. I begin with an inspection of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, issued at the conclusion of the Mexican-American War that ceded northern Mexico to the United States.^{VI} The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo “Americanized” the former Mexican citizens, granting them a number of privileges, including that of American citizenship. In 1848, citizenship was exclusively reserved for white, Anglo-Americans, resulting in a tenuous racial categorization of the visibly non-white Mexican population. This quasi-whiteness was not respected by American officials, settlers, or the law, resulting in a major loss of land for Mexican farmers across the American southwest.^{VII} In the first chapter I pay special attention to Governor Pío Pico, whose racial status, famously vast land-holdings, and eventual legal misfortune, I believe exemplify the tenuous racialization of early Mexican-Americans in California.

My subsequent analysis of regional and national Mexican-American racialization is informed heavily by Mae Ngai, scholar of Asian-American studies, national

^{IV} Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States*.

^V “Racialization Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster.”

^{VI} Nicholas Trist, “Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo.”

^{VII} Carlos Manuel Salomon, *Pio Pico: The Last Governor of Mexican California*.

immigration policy, and ethnic and racial formation in the United States. Primarily, I draw heavily on her piece, “The Architecture of Race in American Immigration Law: A Reexamination of the Immigration Act of 1924,” which argues that through policy,

“‘Illegal’ became constitutive of “Mexican,” referring, not to citizens of Mexico, but to a wholly negative racial category, which comprised both Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans in the United States ... casting Mexicans as foreign distanced them both from Anglo-Americans culturally and from the Southwest as a region: it stripped Mexicans of the claim of belonging they had had as natives, even as conquered natives.”^{VIII}

Ngai’s theorizations that American immigration policy categorized Mexicans and Mexican-Americans as “conquered natives” and “illegal aliens”^{IX} is paramount to this thesis.

Further, on the matter of Mexican-American racial privilege, I rely heavily on Claire Jean Kim’s article, “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans.” Kim argues that Asian-Americans have been racialized as both “perpetual foreigners” and quasi-white, vis-à-vis subjugation of Black Americans and supremacy of Anglo-Americans.^X I argue that Mexican-Americans occupy a similar space in American society: at several points, immigration policy and the United States Census categorized Mexicans as “white,” but mandates such as the Immigration Act of 1924, the Bracero Program, and Operation Wetback, also racialize Mexican-Americans as “perpetual foreigners.” This is supported by the above Ngai quotation, which explains how Mexican-Americans were purposely stripped from their ancestral claim to the American Southwest. Kim’s

^{VIII} Mae Ngai, “The Architecture of Race in American Immigration Law: A Reexamination of the Immigration Act of 1924.”

^{IX} I preserve Ngai’s term, “illegal aliens,” as she argues that it captures the pejorative view Anglo-Americans hold toward Mexican-Americans and encapsulates the xenophobia immigration policy often perpetuates. In my writing I use the term “Mexican” or “Mexican immigrant,” to describe someone of Mexican national origin residing in the United States, and “Mexican-American” to refer to someone who is born in the United States but claims Mexican ancestry.

^X Kim, “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans.”

theorizations of racial triangulation are rooted in political science, which I allowed me to conduct policy analysis of the aforementioned programs to affirm my own conclusions.

The racialization of Mexican-Americans as “conquered natives,” “perpetual foreigners,” and “illegal aliens” informs my own theorization of the “good Mexican.” I have created this term to capture the current racialization of *some* Mexican-Americans as superior to their ethnic kin, largely through their assimilation and betrayal of co-ethnics. This term valorizes Mexican immigrants and Mexican-Americans who submit to Anglo-American demands in culture, socioeconomic status, and national loyalty. Unlike past racializations, which were imposed on Mexican-Americans by the dominant Anglo culture and government, the “good Mexican” trope requires participation from Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in the United States. This participation is rewarded through the illusion of acceptance. Categorization of individuals or communities as “good Mexicans” is sometimes involuntary, but this thesis will focus on individuals who embrace the term with pride. Further, I argue that the term “good Mexican” *can* apply to other Latinos, the term “Mexican” refers only to the fact that Latinos are racialized through Mexican-American racialization processes. Additionally, it makes sense in the scope of this thesis, which concerns itself largely with the matter of Mexican-Americans in the United States.

At the national level, the “good Mexican” trope is visible through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. DACA grants *some* undocumented immigrants temporary work and school authorization and a “deferral” on their deportation, granted they can pay the hefty application fine, pass an extensive

background check, and remain out of trouble.^{XI} The United States generously offers this program to a fraction of its undocumented population, while demonizing the rest.

Locally, I argue that the “good Mexican” trope is most visible in the Mexican Beverly Hills, and more specifically that the Mexican Beverly Hills are in fact a *manifestation* of the “good Mexican” trope.

My discussion and timeline of Mexican-American history in Southeast Los Angeles County supports this manifestation. The Mexican Beverly Hills were settled in two waves, the first was largely through military families and GI families that were branded as “good Mexicans” through their participation in World War II, and had several generations of ancestry in the United States. The second wave occurred from the 1970s onward, and is defined by the socioeconomic mobility of Mexican-Americans who “made it out” of low-income brown enclaves, such as South Central Los Angeles, Bell, Huntington Park, and others. Their standing as “good Mexicans” comes from local beliefs that assert wealthy Latinos are better, morally, than their poorer co-ethnics because of their access to education and higher-paying jobs.

Over time, descendants of the first wave of families in the Mexican Beverly Hills have become the region’s political elites. I supplement this with an analysis of the election of two of Whittier’s three Latino city councilmembers, Josue Alvarado, and Jessica Martinez. I place both their election and actions while in office as in line with the “good Mexican” trope. These include Alvarado’s ban on taco trucks in Whittier’s Uptown district, and Martinez’ decision to sue Governor Gavin Newsom for providing

^{XI} USCIS - United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, “Consideration of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) | USCIS.”

pandemic relief to undocumented immigrants, despite representing Whittier's majority-Latino district.^{XII}

Reaction to the “good Mexicans” in local politics has been swift. Other regional officials, such as Los Angeles County’s Sheriff Alex Villanueva, have publicly expressed their contempt for Latino elites, arguing that their behavior amounts entitlement and ethnic betrayal.^{XIII} Though Villanueva is no stranger to scandal, including the matter of his department’s deputy gangs, he offers an alternative example of Latino political leadership. Villanueva’s leadership is also of interest to this thesis: he heads the nation’s largest Sheriff’s Department, which is 54% Latino to the County’s 49%, and serves a number of Whittier’s residents.^{XIV} Further, he embodies what I argue is the impending public reaction and resentment of the “good Mexican” trope.

I conclude my thesis with an discussion of alternative racializations. I focus on Asian-America, in observance of the quasi-white status Mexican-Americans and Asian-Americans share, as well as my reliance on Asian-American theories of racial formation to explain that of Mexican-Americans. To do so, I turn to the nearby San Gabriel Valley, which is overwhelmingly Latino and Asian, and shares its borders with the Mexican Beverly Hills. I present the San Gabriel Valley, as an example of less problematic regional racial formation, as observed in Wendy Cheng’s book, *The Changs Next Door To The Díazes: Racial Formation in Suburban California*. Though Cheng takes care to note the privilege each group holds over the other, she also reasons that the San Gabriel

^{XII} Gustavo Arellano, “Of Course Latinos Can Assimilate into American Society. Just Look at Whittier.”; Mike Sprague, “Whittier Councilwoman Faces Wrath for Suing to Block Financial Aid to Undocumented Immigrants.”

^{XIII} Arellano, “L.A. County’s Sheriff Leans on His Latino Identity. Does He Exemplify Our Worst Traits?”

^{XIV} Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department, “Sheriff Alex Villanueva.”

Valley is a site of ethnic understanding and tolerance. Further, as a longer-existing community than the Mexican Beverly Hills, I argue that the San Gabriel Valley can offer important lessons and a plan for a more tolerant Mexican-American identity and community.

Finally, I want to acknowledge that this thesis focuses explicitly on the Mexican-American experience in the United States, perpetuating the assumption that Mexicans and Mexican-Americans should be the center of Latino and Latino-American studies, both in the United States and abroad. Central-American, South-American, and Caribbean-descended individuals have contributed greatly to the development of the Los Angeles region and form much of the current Latino national racial landscape. These stories are just as important, and similarly deserve academic attention and investigation. As a Mexican-American woman, who immigrated from Mexico, and grew up in a predominantly Mexican-American community, I do not believe it is my place to speak on other Latino experiences. I hope in the future to work alongside Central-American, South-American, and Caribbean scholars who can provide their community's perspectives on the matter of Latino racialization and assimilation in the United States.

**CHAPTER 1:
REGIONAL AND RACIAL HISTORY OF MEXICANS AND
MEXICAN-AMERICANS IN LOS ANGELES AND CALIFORNIA**

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter explores the history and racial formation of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles, as well as in California, and the United States more broadly. As the introductory chapter, this section will lay out my definition of Mexican-American racialization, ultimately explaining how the institutionalization of race-based discrimination is the most crucial aspect of Mexican and Mexican-American racialization in California.

This section spans California's earliest years as a Spanish colony, Mexican rule, and American conquest, with special attention paid to the evolving social status of the residents within its borders. I rely heavily on Mae Ngai's theorizations of racialization through policy, such as the Immigration Act of 1924, the Bracero Program, Operation Wetback, and others. I also rely on Clare Jean Kim's theory of triangulation to understand the relational racialization of Mexicans as adjacent to whiteness. Ngai's understanding of Mexican-Americans as "conquered natives" and presently "illegal aliens," and Kim's argument of "perpetual foreigners," shaped my argument that the present racialization of Mexican-Americans (and Latinos more broadly) can be best described with the term "good Mexicans." I posit that this trope has roots in over two hundred years of white American subjugation and oppression; I will use this term to frame my argument and understanding of Mexican-American racialization and assimilation over the course of this thesis.

The Los Angeles Basin has been occupied since at least 8,000 BCE by the Gabrieliño-Tongva people, who refer to the basin as *Tovangaar*, “the world.”^I The Tongva people settled the area in a concentric “circle” of communities, creating an interconnected web of people, place, and trade. The geographic subject of this thesis, the outer San Gabriel Valley and Rio Hondo area, known now as Southeast Los Angeles County, were prized for their agricultural riches, and were sites of violent colonization and Spanish occupation.^{II}

The area was “discovered” by Spanish explorers and missionaries in 1769, who shortly after established the Mission San Gabriel Arcángel in 1771.^{III} The San Gabriel Mission was the fourth in California, and soon Catholicism, Spanish rule, forced conversion, and enslavement of the Tongva people transformed the area into a network of ranchos (land concessions from the Spanish crown) and agriculture.^{IV} Nearby, the *Pueblo de Los Angeles* was founded in 1781, connecting the San Gabriel Valley to the future metropolitan hub of Southern California.^V

Mexican independence secularized the Valley, and expanded the network of ranchos and citrus farms, the latter owing their success to the San Gabriel Mission’s abundance of lemon and orange seedlings.^{VI} This secularization brought a more liberal racial code, that saw the colonial castes relaxed, but not fully erased. At the conclusion of the Mexican-American War in 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo transferred

^I Craig Torres, “Perspectives on A Selection of Gabrieliño/Tongva Places.”

^{II} Ibid

^{III} Ibid

^{IV} Lloyd, Annie, “A Brief History Of LA’s Indigenous Tongva People.”

^V “History of Los Angeles County - Pre-History to 1799.”

^{VI} “The History of Citrus in California.”

“ownership” of northern Mexico to the United States, and made the cadre of Spanish settlers, former missionaries, onetime Mexican citizens, farmers, and laborers, American citizens by law.^{VII}

Treaty Articles 8 and 9 formally stipulated that these new citizens would be entitled to “enjoyment of all the rights of citizens,” in an apparent guarantee of civil rights, as well as protection for this conquered group.^{VIII} However, the reality was far different. Though white Mexicans were able to enjoy the privileges of citizenship, the area’s Indigenous groups, Indigenous Mexican communities, and Afro-descended Mexicans were racialized as “others,” who were forced into illicit enslavement or indentured labor.^{IX} Though their *mestizo* counterparts did not face this same fate, they were regularly denied privileges of land-ownership, voting, and education, and were similarly stripped of civil rights.

California entered the Union as a free state in 1850 but did not grant its residents of color any recognition or reform. That same year, California legislators conferred together to decide the blood quantum guidelines for individuals of Mexican descent, concluding that “a person with one-half or more Indian blood was considered non-White.”^X A year later this was restricted further, so that Mexicans and Mexican-Americans of “one-fourth Indian descent were considered non-White,” a provision that lasted until the twentieth century.^{XI} This contingency regularly denied Mexican-

^{VII} Nicholas Trist, “Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo.”

^{VIII} Ibid

^{IX} Martha Menchaca, *Recovering History, Constructing Race: The Indian, Black, and White Roots of Mexican Americans*.

^X Ibid

^{XI} Traynor, J, *Perez v. Sharp*.

descended Californians any sort of political rights, such as in the case of *People vs. De La Guerra* (1886).^{XII} De La Guerra escaped accusations of Indigenous ancestry, and was legally recognized as a white Mexican citizen, but the same judge upheld that California had a right to set and enforce racial restrictions and definitions as it saw fit.

Though the state's blood quantum restrictions were austere, some Indigenous communities chose to identify as Mexican, knowing that the former identity would disadvantage them more than the latter.^{XIII} Indigenous Californians were subject to cruel treatment from the Bureau of War and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, who were granted a wide degree of power to incarcerate, relocate, and sometimes kill, "nomadic" Indigenous people. Though Mexicans in California experienced discriminations, they were also allowed to submit land grant claims, and overall hold more power, privilege, and stability than their Indigenous neighbors.^{XIV} Not all Indigenous groups assumed Mexican identities, but those that did became part of the intricate racial web of California, and served as examples of the true extent of acculturation and assimilation both colonial Spanish and independent Mexican governments pushed for over two hundred years.^{XV}

California's racial restrictions were punitive and mechanic, but nevertheless, a very small number of Mexicans fared well and saw some wealth for a time. Pío Pico, the last Mexican governor of California, born in the San Gabriel Mission, and famous for a political career that opposed American acquisition of "Alta" California, is remembered widely for his wealth and vast land ownership.^{XVI} Pico became one of the wealthiest

^{XII} Currey, Judge, *People v. De La Guerra*.

^{XIII} Menchaca, *Recovering History*

^{XIV} *Ibid*

^{XV} *Ibid*

^{XVI} Carlos Manuel Salomon, *Pio Pico: The Last Governor of Mexican California*.

landowners in California following the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo; his holdings totaled some quarter million acres and included at least half of modern-day Whittier. Though the last years of his life were mired by debt and legal reform, his legacy and mansion have been preserved through Pío Pico State Park, and the group of schools and cities that hold his name.^{XVII}

The immortalization of this Mexican(-American) man was undertaken by the area's white elites, including Harriet Williams Russell Strong, who more famously financed the Hoover Dam and served as a representative for the Whittier Chamber of Commerce to the United States Chamber of Commerce.^{XVIII} Pico's legacy and mansion have been described by the state of California as, "a compromise between Mexican and American cultures," in a repudiation of Pico's colonial connections and the area's Spanish/Mexican/Indigenous history.^{XIX}

Pico's legacy is representative of the region's racialization of Mexican-Americans: as explained earlier, the end of the Mexican-American War marked the beginning of the area's Mexican-American history, and of the complicated racial boundaries Mexican and Indigenous communities faced. After Guadalupe-Hidalgo and the racial constructions of the California constitutions, newly Americanized Mexican residents of California were faced with a myriad of discriminatory laws, the most famous of which has become known as The Greaser Act (1855).^{XX}

^{XVII} Salomon, *Pio Pico*; "CHL # 127 Casa De Governor Pio Pico Los Angeles."

^{XVIII} Salomon, *Pio Pico*

^{XIX} "CHL # 127 Casa De Governor Pio Pico Los Angeles."

^{XX} California State Assembly, The Anti-Vagrancy Act.

The Greaser Act permitted violence against those of “Indigenous and Spanish blood,” empowered militias to patrol and terrorize Mexican communities, and institutionalized nativism that branded Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, and their descendants as perpetual “foreigners.”^{XXI} The Act was justified in the face of large-scale foreign migration following the 1849 Gold Rush, with many Mexicans from the border state of Sonora arriving to seek wealth.^{XXII} First discouraged by a steep fee courtesy of The Foreign Miners’ Tax of 1850, many Mexican-Americans and their American-born descendants were further oppressed by The Greaser Act’s anti-vagrancy laws, which made movement inside California difficult. Further, Californios faced a massive loss of land ownership due to enormous tax burdens, complicated legal systems that denied them their deeds, as well as the high cost of travel and fees involved in court appearances. Between 1850 to 1870, California’s Spanish-speaking population^{XXIII} dropped from fifteen-percent to four-percent.

The state’s flagrant disregard for Mexican-American property rights is a particularly cruel dismissal of their promised, “life, liberty, and property.”^{XXIV} Even for Pío Pico and his family, whose onetime land holdings defined their legacy, the state did not hesitate to grant squatters and homesteaders the right to tear away and own parts of his estate.^{XXV} Though this particular example is not unique, it challenges Pico’s historical status as part of the California elite, and the idea that wealth could elevate Mexican-Americans to the status of any white American. Pico’s success and wealth was assured

^{XXI} Ibid

^{XXII} Menchaca, *Recovering History*

^{XXIII} Ibid

^{XXIV} Locke, John, *Second Treatise on Government*.

^{XXV} Pico vs. United States.

only when it did not pose any affront to the white political order, or the eventual need to house white migrants.

Mexicans remained in California, albeit in smaller numbers than before, and with substantially less power and autonomy. At the turn of the 20th century, some working-class Mexicans occupied the banks of the Rio Hondo and San Gabriel Valley rivers, in communities known as *colonias*.^{XXVI} These *colonias* were deliberately settled, eschewing the racially restrictive covenants and other laws that prohibited home ownership nearby. These covenants and laws were pursued and enacted in large part due to the large number of Mexicans who were immigrating north due to violence and poverty resulting from the Mexican Revolution.^{XXVII}

Up until then, Mexicans had composed a small percentage of California's population, further reduced by the large influx of white Americans from the East and South during the Gold Rush. As such, the sudden "flooding" of Mexican nationals posed an overwhelming threat to California's political order, one that could not be fixed by stripping this group of land rights or suffrage.^{XXVIII} Prior attempts to control the migration of Mexican nationals had taken the form of taxation for entry to the United States, stricter guidelines for deportation eligibility, as well as hefty fees and the threat of jailtime.

However, the most direct attempt to control the large movement of bodies in the Southwest was addressed by the Immigration Act of 1924. This Act halted all legal migration from Mexico and formalized discriminatory practices to maintain US

^{XXVI} Jerry González, *In Search of the Mexican Beverly Hills: Latino Suburbanization in Postwar Los Angeles*.

^{XXVII} *Ibid*

^{XXVIII} Menchaca, *Recovering History*

homogeneity in the face of rising nativism.^{XXIX} New laws restricted who could become eligible for citizenship and entry, contradicting earlier agreements such as the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. As Mae Ngai writes in “The Architecture of Race in American Immigration Law,” “Illegal” became constitutive of ‘Mexican,’ referring, not to citizens of Mexico, but to a wholly negative racial category, which comprised both Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans in the United States ... casting Mexicans as foreign distanced them both from Anglo-Americans culturally and from the Southwest as a region: it stripped Mexicans of the claim of belonging they had had as natives, even as conquered natives.”^{XXX}

This “illegality”, Ngai theorized, created a new category of people in the United States; for “illegal aliens,” their lives in this country were at once “a social reality but a legal impossibility.”^{XXXI} This contrast occurred alongside a new focus on America’s land borders, Ngai described as “both highly visible and problematic,”^{XXXII} and a national discourse on the “deservingness” of immigrants to be either deported or punished for their transgressions. Thus, Mexicans in the United States had to negotiate their identity and lives as quasi-Americans, quasi-foreigners. Though the 1924 Act restricted “legal” migration from Mexico, unauthorized or “illegal” immigration ran in the hundreds of thousands per year throughout the 1920’s, totaling one million entries by the end of the

^{XXIX} Johnson, Albert, Immigration Act of 1924.

^{XXX} Mae Ngai, “The Architecture of Race in American Immigration Law: A Reexamination of the Immigration Act of 1924.”

^{XXXI} Ibid

^{XXXII} Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*.

decade,^{xxxiii} creating one million “illegal aliens” who had to find a space to exist in a country that did not want them there.

Though the Mexican Revolution, and the subsequent instability, contributed to this migration, so did the explosion of agribusiness in the West. Land-owners developed an insatiable demand for cheap agricultural labor, eager to turn over high profits.^{xxxiv} Across California, eighty-thousand migrant laborers picked alfalfa, melons, and cotton in the Imperial Valley, peas, cotton, and asparagus in the San Joaquin Valley, and citrus in the Los Angeles-Orange County-Inland Empire region every year. By the mid 1920s, 80-95% of these workers were Mexican nationals.^{xxxv}

Mexican officials did little to hinder this mass migration north, despite national laws restricting an exodus of this scale and size. However, the Revolution had not materialized real change for most of the working class, despite promises it would bring social mobility and opportunity for all.^{xxxvi} As such, Mexico’s political elites made the calculated decision to allow able-bodied men to leave to the United States, with the hopes that their remittances would quell any possible uprising.^{xxxvii} These migrant laborers were landless, and worked under terrible conditions for pitiful wages, a fact that did not improve their perception by American society.

As described, the political economy of California and the West depended on this cheap, almost endless supply of Mexican labor, though legislators in Washington, DC were horrified by the porous border and number of unauthorized migrants. In conjunction

^{xxxiii} Ibid

^{xxxiv} Ibid

^{xxxv} Kelly Lytle Hernández, *Migra! A History of the U.S. Border Patrol*.

^{xxxvi} Ibid

^{xxxvii} Ibid

with the Immigration Act of 1924, Congress authorized the creation of Border Patrol in 1925.^{XXXVIII} These complementing efforts transformed Mexicans from laboring emigrants to criminal, “illegal” immigrants in the span of a few short months. Further, these actions were justified by the continuing rise in “illegal entry,” and a report from Immigration Service that estimated some 1.4 million individuals in the United States were residing as “illegal aliens.”

Historically, immigration to the United States was maritime, occurring either through East Coast ports or Ellis Island. There had been some sort of a “border patrol” in place since America’s earliest years, but this patrol had been composed of vigilantes and minutemen who confronted and fought Indigenous tribes as Americans moved westward. Along the US-Mexico border, Immigration Services had long ceded that migration of Mexicans century was fine being regulated by the labor market, up until a change in rhetoric in the early 20th century.^{XXXIX} Despite that, Anglo settlers had long feuded with Mexicans in the area. Border Patrol’s first agents in the borderlands were men like Dogie Wright, born part of Austin’s “old three hundred families,” who had grown up witnessing his father and uncles’ violence towards Mexican migrants and laborers that traversed the Southwest. Wright’s coworkers were former cowboys, ranch owners, and farmers, many with Ku Klux Klan affiliations or sympathies.^{XL} Decentralization and a lack of input from Congress meant that Wright and his fellow agents enforced and carried out laws “according to the customs, interests, and histories of the borderland communities where

^{XXXVIII} Ibid

^{XXXIX} Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*

^{XL} Hernández, *Migra!*

they lived and worked,”^{XL1} as well as according to the rising political pressures of nativism and Anglo-American supremacy.

The threat of deportation, as well as the threat of violence from Border Patrol agents was central to constituting Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, and Mexican migrants as “illegal aliens.” Beyond the permanent anxiety deportation posed, new laws passed by Congress in 1929 stripped those seeking entry of their 4th and 5th Amendment rights in immigration courts. Further, illegal entry was marked a separate criminal action, and conviction made reentry impossible. These actions occurred in tandem to the rise and desirability of “proper visas” to entry the country, marking the beginnings of what are referred to today as “documented” and “undocumented” migration/immigrants.^{XLII}

Determining individuals as either legal or illegal was, and is, a dehumanizing practice that facilitated and justified the violence, distrust, and later, mass deportation of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. Nativist sentiments had continued to rise steadily, and the retroactive application of illegal entry as a felony, and deportable offense, had made millions of assimilated Mexican-Americans “illegal aliens” overnight.^{XLIII} The southern border of the United States (a newly created site of exclusion, punishment, fear, and violence) had seeped towards the interior (previously, a site of inclusion, safety, and belonging), creating a national culture of mistrust and doubt towards all Mexicans. This mistrust was racialized and dependent on colonial ideas of race, as lighter skin afforded some Mexicans more privilege than their darker-skinned counterparts.^{XLIV}

^{XL1} Hernández, *Migra!*

^{XLII} Ibid

^{XLIII} Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*

^{XLIV} Menchaca, *Recovering History*

The end of the decade brought the Great Depression, and with it, a wave of xenophobia and violence towards Mexican-Americans. Though Mexican immigration slowed down in this period, largely due to a lack of jobs and the United States' flailing economy, many Anglo-Americans intensified their hostility towards Mexicans, explaining their bigotry with the claim that these "foreigners" were taking "American" jobs away from those who needed them.^{XLV} The perception of this group as inherently "foreign," combined with the perception of Mexicans as "illegal aliens," regardless of their place of birth, became a powerful rhetorical justification for the ensuing discrimination and deportation.

Another tool for violence and "repatriation" became the US Census, which included "Mexican" as a race for the first time in 1930 and was feared for its potential to make Mexicans in the United States vulnerable to government deportation. Alongside this fear, however, was the disdain of many Mexicans, who simply wished to be considered "white" on the Census.^{XLVI} This fear was amplified by even the Mexican government, who saw this classification as another violation of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The implication was that if Mexicans were racialized as a non-white other, they would lose the scant political rights they held as quasi-white Americans, leaving them especially vulnerable to deportation. Here, the link between whiteness, assimilation, Americanness, and perceived "safety" is clear. For Mexicans in the United States, whiteness granted security, as well as a greater guarantee of belonging. However, legal whiteness is not the same as perceived whiteness. Darker-skinned Mexicans, Afro-

^{XLV} Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*

^{XLVI} Gene Demby, "Why 'Hispanic' Isn't a Race On the Census."

descended Mexicans, or Mexicans with stereotypically Native features would not see their day-to-day treatment, or safety, increase if the law considered them “white.”

Mass deportation (or, “repatriation” campaign) targeted *all* Mexicans – regardless of their skin-color, whether they were native-born Americans, naturalized citizens, “legal,” or “illegal” immigrants. These efforts were conducted at state and local level, as well as by charitable aid agencies, despite a common belief that they ordered by Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS), or some other federal authority. Though the total number of displaced Mexicans is unknown, estimates range from 500,000 to over 2 million forced and coerced deportations, about 1.2 million of those being for natural-born citizens.^{XLVII}

Some 400,000 American citizens and “legal” immigrants were repatriated to Mexico in California alone, a fact that was acknowledged by the state in a bill of apology in 2005. In Los Angeles, repatriation and deportation efforts were led by then Mayor John C. Porter, County Supervisor Frank L. Shaw, Los Angeles Times publisher Harry Chandler, Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce President John C. Austin, and various city officials and business executives.^{XLVIII} These men were inspired by President Hoover's Emergency Committee for Employment (PECE), and plotted a strategy of fear and terror to encourage Mexicans and Mexicans to deport themselves.^{XLIX}

This strategy involved high-profile announcements of an impending immigration raid, with manpower from adjoining districts, followed by a few publicized arrests and

^{XLVII} Dunn, Joseph, Apology Act for the 1930s Mexican Repatriation Program.; Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*

^{XLVIII} Hoffman, “Stimulus to Repatriation: The 1931 Federal Deportation Drive and the Los Angeles Mexican Community.”

^{XLIX} Ibid

deportations, complete with extensive pictures of the altercation. Mexican nationals and some Mexican-Americans had already been barred by the County and the City from unemployment aid and work on any public works projects (The Alien Labor Act), and were subsequently facing the reality of destitution if they remained in place.^L Though the strategy was botched by carelessness, and failure to execute, officials continued raiding Mexican neighborhoods, going so far as to walk city streets until they found someone “deportable,” relying heavily on racist identifiers and/or stereotypes.

Despite general “strategy” failure, Los Angeles’ Mexican and Mexican-American community was traumatized by the outpouring of threats and discrimination. Large-scale self-deportation ensued, transforming the Mexican-American community in Los Angeles permanently.^{LI} The Depression halted Mexican immigration to the United States and was accompanied by the mass “voluntary” repatriation. In total, around one third of Los Angeles’ Mexican population left the city. These factors meant that the remaining Mexican-American population was largely American-born and identified as second- or third-generation Mexican-American.^{LII}

In evidence of this, the 1940 Census revealed that for the first time, a majority of Spanish-speaking people were native-born American citizens.^{LIII} In this same Census, “Mexican” was dropped as a race, and no other Latin-American or Hispanic identity has been listed as a racial identifier since.^{LIV} The 1940 Census did not give Americans the

^L Ibid

^{LI} Ibid

^{LII} Fernando, Mark Overmyer-Velazquez, and Alanis Enciso, *They Should Stay There: The Story of Mexican Migration and Repatriation during the Great Depression*.

^{LIII} Castillo, Richard “The Los Angeles ‘Zoot Suit Riots’ Revisited: Mexican and Latin American Perspectives.”

^{LIV} Demby, “On The Census, Who Checks ‘Hispanic,’ Who Checks ‘White,’ And Why.”

opportunity to identify as Mexican, Hispanic, or Latino in any way besides the question of earliest language spoken in childhood, or what the status of their citizenship was.^{LV} The apparent loss of Mexican (or Latino) identity in the census presents an interesting contradiction to the continued discrimination against Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in the decade, but bodes well with Ngai's theorizations that Mexican identities are and continue to be a social reality, but legal impossibility.^{LVI}

This group of young, second-generation "Americanized" Mexicans were distinct from their newly arrived co-ethnics; as George Sánchez argues in "Becoming Mexican American," they forged an identity of "ambivalent Americanism," marked by their limited connection to Mexico, their entry into the workforce and subsequent political activism, as well as the racial strife of the decade.^{LVII} Here, the discussion and examination of racialization of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans becomes complicated; though both groups continued to share commonalities, such as skin tone and general perception by the American public, they are made distinct by the treatment of the other. Mexican-Americans *became* Mexican-Americans in the post-Depression years, developing a separate identity, culture, and politics than their older relatives. In Los Angeles, Mexican-American families were concentrated in East Los Angeles, where many worked factory or industry jobs. Mexican immigrants, though not present in large numbers at this time, would arrive through the Bracero program in the next few years.^{LVIII}

^{LV} Ibid

^{LVI} Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*

^{LVII} George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945*.

^{LVIII} Ibid

Young Mexican-Americans expressed greater commitment towards their lives in the United States than their older relatives had. Much of the political activism and unionization efforts of the 1930s and 1940s were led by these young women, marking an “orientation” away from Mexico in quotidian life.^{LIX} Concurrently, many Mexican-American families began shifting away from the mindset that their stay in the United States was temporary, and began focusing on working towards the best life for their children and progeny, a trend that coincided with a rise in labor activism.^{LX} The activism of Mexican-American youth during this time anticipates the later Chicano Movement, which also revolved around questions of assimilation and the group’s “American” identity.

Their status as second- or third generation- Mexican-Americans, as well as their “American” roots, did little to protect Mexican youth from white anger. Anti-Mexican sentiments continued to rise in Los Angeles, coming to a head in the Zoot Suit Riots in 1943. These riots were sparked by massive anti-Mexican hysteria, and narrowly by the baggy “zoot suits” Pachuco youth wore.^{LXI} The loose-fitting garments were a perceived repudiation of American wartime efforts and the rationing of luxury goods (such as fabric). “Pachuco” youth rejected assimilation into American society and its cultural hegemony, but did not see themselves as truly “Mexican,” either.^{LXII} Their counter-culture was, again, a predecessor to the more widespread “Chicano” culture of the 1960s

^{LIX} Ibid

^{LX} Ibid

^{LXI} Castillo, Richard “The Los Angeles ‘Zoot Suit Riots’ Revisited: Mexican and Latin American Perspectives.”

^{LXII} Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American*

and 1970s, and the overarching need for recognition and distinction in white America as an “other” to be respected and seen.

The Zoot Suit Riots, or “Pachuco Riots,” were highly publicized across America and Mexico, revealing to both groups the true status of Mexicans in the United States.^{LXIII} The Riots followed the conviction of young Mexican-American men for a murder at Sleepy Lagoon, and are best described as an extended^{LXIV} period of pillage and destruction by American servicemen both stationed and directed to engage in the chaos in Downtown Los Angeles. The violence of the servicemen is largely faulted to the rhetoric of major media outlets covering the murder case: Mexican-American/Pachuco youth were type-cast as “baby gangsters,” and decried for their supposed violent tendencies, in an extension of the “illegal alien” stereotype assigned to Mexican immigrants and temporary laborers.

Concurrent to the violent racialization of Pachuco youth was the resurgence of Mexican immigrants as both “illegal aliens” and low-skill laborers in the American public imagination. This was driven by the creation of the Bracero Program, a joint effort between the State Department, the Department of Labor, and Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) to solve the agricultural and railroad construction labor shortage resulting from WWII. The Bracero Program guaranteed these temporary workers, known as “braceros,” steady work, stable living conditions, and a minimum wage, with earnings to be sent back to private bank accounts in Mexico. Over its twenty-two-year history, the program employed an estimated five million Mexican nationals in

^{LXIII} Castillo “The Los Angeles ‘Zoot Suit Riots’ Revisited.”

^{LXIV} Calavita, Kitty. *Inside the State: The Bracero Program, Immigration, and the I. N. S.*

twenty-four states. Most interestingly, however, labor contracts stipulated that Braceros would *not* face race-based discrimination such as exclusion from “whites-only” spaces.^{LXV}

The latter point is of special note: being a guest worker afforded Mexican nationals more privilege than their counterparts who were American born. Though there is no evidence as to whether this claim was enforced, by Braceros, American citizens, or agricultural businessmen, it is safe to assume it did not result in any substantial privilege for these men. Perhaps the symbolic white racialization of Braceros was a response to the earlier mass deportation of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, or to the American men they were replacing. However, this stipulation did result in the “blacklisting” of certain states from receiving Bracero laborers or any other authorized Mexican labor.^{LXVI} These states most famously included Texas, whose proximity to the border and racial discrimination was denigrated by the Mexican government. Other states included Colorado, Illinois, Wyoming, Minnesota, and others, all for reports of discriminatory wage practices.^{LXVII} Regardless, Braceros became a salient part of American agricultural life over the following decade. Many American growers and agribusiness leaders also recruited Mexican nationals to work “under the table,” not wanting to bother with the Bracero Program, or wishing to underpay and exploit them.

The Bracero Program created a steady stream of exploitable labor, not unsimilar to earlier agricultural contracts for migrant laborers.^{LXVIII} Since the program was the only

^{LXV} Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*

^{LXVI} Ibid

^{LXVII} Mize, Ronald, “Operation Wetback, 1954.”

^{LXVIII} Ibid

“legal” form of migration for Mexicans wishing to seek a better life in the United States, the flow of migration became akin to that of cattle or some other livestock: flowing in and out of the borderlands according to some greater agricultural or business need.^{LXIX} This flow of bodies was not taken kindly by American laborers upon their return from war, with even President Dwight D. Eisenhower claiming this mass migration of Mexicans was depressing wages for more “deserving” Americans.^{LXX} Eisenhower’s comments, and the general American distaste for Braceros is evidence of the contradiction that consuming Mexican labor created: it was permissible, and even desirable, as long as the Bracero program persisted until the early 60s, though its demise began with the emergence of Operation Wetback in 1954.

Operation Wetback was a binational immigration campaign to deport and prevent the surge in “illegal” border immigration by undocumented/unauthorized Mexican-Americans. Its name stems from the racial epithet “wetback,” a reference to Mexican nationals who would enter the United States via wading through the Rio Grande in Texas, hence their dampened clothes and “wet backs.”^{LXXI} That summer, eight hundred Border Patrol officers conducted a series of raids, roadblocks, and mass deportations across the borderlands and American Southwest.^{LXXII} These raids culminated in 1.1 million apprehensions and deportations the first calendar year, before continuing at mere tenths of the original number in the years and decades after.^{LXXIII}

^{LXIX} Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*

^{LXX} Ibid

^{LXXI} This violent crossing, which claimed the life of at least one Mexican national a day, was used as a slur publicly until at least the 1960s by the American government.

^{LXXII} Hernández, Kelly Lytle. “The Crimes and Consequences of Illegal Immigration: A Cross-Border Examination of Operation Wetback, 1943 to 1954.”

^{LXXIII} Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*

From the 1950s to the present, Mexican-American racialization has been defined by Mae Ngai's "illegal alien" trope, and through the concept of "perpetual foreigners," a term I borrow from Claire Jean Kim's 1999 theory of racial triangulation.^{LXXIV} Though Kim's theory is specific in its regards to Asian-Americans and those of Asian descent in the United States, its central message, which is that some groups are simply deemed "unassimilable" by American society, but can also retain and earn privilege due to their proximity to whiteness, applies here. At times, Mexicans in the United States have been valorized in relativity to their Black counterparts (though Afro-descended Mexicans haven't been), particularly in their ability to claim whiteness or "Spanish" descent, but have similarly been categorized as "un-American," despite regional ancestral homelands and the ever-present promises of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo.

The 1960s and 1970s brought the rise of the Chicano Movement, a youth-led movement to improve the material conditions of Mexican-Americans in the United States, as well as the advent of the identifier "Chicano," which furthered Sánchez' claims of unique and distinct Mexican-American experiences in the United States. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which once more severely restricted migration from Latin America and Mexico to the United States, served as a perennial reminder that Mexican-Americans were only allowed when their labor could be exploited and used for profit.^{LXXV}

From the Reagan era onward (1980s-present), Mexican migration has increased dramatically, due largely to the Immigration and Reform and Control Act of 1986, which

^{LXXIV} Kim, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans."

^{LXXV} Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*

granted amnesty to undocumented immigrants who resided in the United States prior to 1982, and the economic crises that struck Latin American that same decade.^{LXXVI} Once more, Mexican, and other Latino migrants moved northward for work, stirring fears of “illegal” immigration and a southern “invasion” of brown faces. Such sentiments drove the inclusion, and success, of Proposition 187 on California’s 1994 ballot. Prop 187 prevented undocumented immigrants from accessing state benefits, such as non-emergency healthcare service and public schooling, and included stipulations that would have required citizens to report any suspected “illegal aliens” to law enforcement for deportation and prosecution. Frequently publicized as the “SOS: Save our State” ballot initiative, its key supporters included Governor Pete Wilson, and the California Republican party, both of whom claimed the state would be made stronger with its passage.^{LXXVII} Prop 187 was brought down by emergency injunctions, lawsuits, and eventually, its removal from California educational and health codes, though its legacy continues to reverberate across the state and nation.^{LXXVIII}

The explicit racism and xenophobia of Prop 187 has been reflected in similar laws and/or ballot propositions in Arizona, Texas, and other parts of the Southwest, and most famously in Donald Trump’s 2016 political campaign, which relied on the denigration of Mexican immigrants, the deportation of all eleven million “illegal aliens,” and the construction of a massive border wall to stoke fear and support from his base. The popularization of such political rhetoric is deeply problematic.

^{LXXVI} Ibid

^{LXXVII} Margolis, Jeffrey R. “Closing the Doors to the Land of Opportunity: The Constitutional Controversy Surrounding Proposition 187.”

^{LXXVIII} Pete Wilson, “ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE.”

Other legacies of xenophobia and fears of “illegal aliens” have appeared in the California and national political landscape in the shadow of 9/11, which shifted the majority of Mexican-American day laborers from work in agriculture to the service industry in attempts to escape immigration penalties by staying in one locale for years or decades.^{LXXIX} The 2010s and Obama-era policies largely cemented Mexican-Americans and other Latinos as staunch Democrats, in the face of continued and ongoing Republican tactics to dehumanize and demonize undocumented, and sometimes documented, immigrants, despite both Democratic and Republican tactics contributing to the insecurity and prosecution of the group.

Despite Obama’s façade of friendliness with Mexican-American and other Latino groups, he has been nicknamed as “Deporter-In-Chief” due to the Department of Homeland Security’s deportation of some 2.5 million undocumented immigrants between 2009 and 2015.^{LXXX} This violence is often contradicted with his contemporaneous creation of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA) program, which allows individuals who were brought to the country “illegally” as children to request deferred action on their deportation, and authorizes them with work and education permits on a two-year basis, with the option to renew and re-apply then.^{LXXXI}

The simultaneous mass deportation of Latinos and the relative success of DACA introduces a new narrative that draws on concepts of the “illegal alien,” “perpetual

^{LXXIX} Bolter, Muzaffar Chishti, Sarah Pierce Muzaffar Chishti, Sarah Pierce, and Jessica. “The Obama Record on Deportations: Deporter in Chief or Not?” migrationpolicy.org, January 25, 2017. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/obama-record-deportations-deporter-chief-or-not>.

^{LXXX} Ibid

^{LXXXI} USCIS - United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, “Consideration of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA).”

foreigner,” and now, what I refer to, as the “good Mexican.” This latter term is defined by the promise of acceptance from white America in exchange for assimilation and betrayal of ethnic solidarity. White America’s “acceptance,” is itself a spectrum, that ranges from celebration to mere tolerance of the individual or group. This approval is contingent on the Mexican person or group in question being able to claim some justly-earned accolade (not granted by affirmative action, or any other similar program), act as a model community/community member, and/or being able to defend one’s existence as exemplary and “American.” Increasingly, this acceptance is also dependent on whether one is willing to denigrate their “less-deserving” co-ethnics for their failure to submit to white America’s ideals and desire its approval.

The “good Mexican” trope, I argue, is nothing but an inevitable evolution of Mexican-America’s development in the face of two hundred years’ worth of discrimination, negative racialization, and unjust treatment. However, this new, “nicer,” identifier, is nothing but another tool white America has employed to control, subjugate, and mold its Mexican/Latino population into an assimilable and “acceptable” ethnic group. This trope relies heavily on the participation of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, for whom a sliver of acceptance by white America is enough justification to reject, betray, and disparage their community.

The participation of Mexican-Americans in this trope deserves special discussion. Different ways to approach this engagement range from empathy to cold-hearted criticism. An empathetic take may sympathize with the long-standing plight of Mexican-Americans and Mexican immigrants, for whom success in the United States is a goal assimilation promises to achieve. However, this understanding does not incorporate the

realities of racial, citizenship-based, and socioeconomic privilege. White Mexicans will face less discrimination than their darker-skinned counterparts and are not privy to the full range of race-based discrimination present in the United States. Mexican-American citizens, whether through birth, wealth, or luck, do not live in the permanent terror that plagues their undocumented brothers and sisters, and wealthy Mexican-Americans have already achieved the success those they look down upon are chasing.

CHAPTER TWO:

EARLY MEXICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY IN WHITTIER, CA

(1887-1977)

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Whittier, California sits on the edge of Los Angeles County, Orange County, the San Gabriel Valley, and a region known as the “Gateway Cities.” Named for the poet and abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier, the city is known for its Quaker origins, and more famously, as the birthplace of President Richard Nixon. Lesser known, however, is its membership in the “Mexican Beverly Hills,” a small collection of suburbs in Southeast Los Angeles County named for their affluence and relatively large number of middle-class and affluent Mexican-Americans. I use Whittier as a case study in the Mexican Beverly Hills for its notable affluence, its white, largely Quaker past, and the fact that it is my hometown.

This chapter will explore Whittier’s origins as a Quaker colony, its emergence as a citrus giant, and its more transformation from white enclave to a bustling Mexican-American neighborhood. This period is foundational to the “Mexican Beverly Hills,” which I argue emerge later, but first become visible in the post-war period. This assertion will be supplemented with information from its premier newspaper, the Whittier Daily News, images of its landscape, and primary sources from the Whittier Museum and Historical Society’s archives. This chapter provides the reader with an overview of the city’s Mexican-American history, setting up later discussions of ethnic affluence, and providing examples of the effects Mexican-American racialization had on the region

Whittier's modern origins begin in 1887, when a group of east coast Quakers, led by Aquila Pickering, purchased a 160-acre lot in the area, hoping to create a new community in California.^I Whittier became the site of this "Friends Colony," and that same year, the Southern Pacific Railroad Company built the first railroad spur in the city, leading to a boom in population and industry. A few decades later, the Southern Pacific Railroad Company returned to Whittier, adding a trolley line for its "Big Red Cars," which facilitated movement back and forth from nearby Los Angeles.^{II}

Like much of Southern California, Whittier became a giant of citrus and agriculture. In 1901, this same Quaker group established the Whittier Citrus Association, and shipped out almost a thousand train-car loads of citrus a year. Other agricultural pursuits transformed Whittier into the largest walnut growing area in the United States, supplying both Los Angeles and the nation.^{III}

Whittier's Mexican-American history begins after the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, with Governor Pío Pico's legendary land-holding and the preservation of his nearby estate.^{IV} Less notably, Mexican labor tended to the city's citrus and agriculture; much of the city's early Mexican residents were day laborers, working for wealthier patrons, and caring for families that they'd either brought with them, or were sending remittances to. The paternalistic relationship between Quakers and day-laborers began out of the perception that Whittier's Mexican community needed salvation.^V The city's

^I City of Whittier. n.d. "A Short History." City of Whittier. Accessed April 3, 2022. <https://www.cityofwhittier.org/about>.

^{II} Chiland, "Mapping LA's Red Car System in Its 1920s Heyday."

^{III} City of Whittier. "A Short History"

^{IV} Carlos Manuel Salomon, Pío Pico: The Last Governor of Mexican California.

^V Anna Bell Taber, A History of the Work of California Friends Among the Mexican People of the Whittier Area.

Protestant faith, as well as the missionaries who came from far to tend to the Mexican residents, were in opposition to the Mexican laborers' Catholicism.^{VI}

A book from the Whittier Museum titled, "A History of the Work of California Friends Among The Mexican People of the Whittier Area," and written by Anna Bell Taber, outlines the exact conditions under which Mexicans in the area became wards and devotees of the Quaker faith, in a history stemming from 1895 to 1929.^{VII} Taber wrote the book as tribute to her parents, who in her perception, had dedicated their lives to improving and bettering the local Mexican community.

Taber's first recorded missionary couple, her parents Ervin and Margaret Taber, traveled from Mexico to Whittier after considering that there was just as much exotic missionary work and "soul-saving" to be done domestically. Her parent's account describes the Mexican laborers as pitiful, and as a group who often slept in old railroad cars when the weather turned cold. Their Quaker paternalism is described as exhausting and expansive, from Anna Bell Taber we can deduce that the elder Tabers spent every penny they could on resources for the "vagrant" Mexicans or on hay and oats for their buggy.^{VIII} Their missionary work was conducted in Spanish, and involved household visits, whether those households were rickety or more permanent. This effort eventually culminated in the establishment of a Sunday School in nearby Los Nietos, on the unincorporated, western-most edges of Whittier. Taber records the "delight" of the

^{VI} Ibid

^{VII} Ibid

^{VIII} Ibid

Mexican children, as well as the methods they used to convert their parents, and keep them invested in the faith.^{IX}

Most startlingly, Taber goes from gently characterizing the Mexican population as a group who needed faith and evangelization to a deviant one, remarking that large Mexican families would often show up to her house at dinnertime, hoping to be fed and take advantage of the Taber's religious generosity. This shift in tone is intended as a testament to her mother's religious zeal, but to a modern reader, reads like a scathing indictment of missionary work, and how it functions as little more than a method of virtue signaling one's "goodness" to outside viewers.^X

However, Taber continues, and devotes the rest of this collection of papers to talk of a home local missionaries and religious groups devoted to Mexican girls in the area. The women who operated this house were described as "self-sacrificing," and once more, Taber takes great care to speak about their saintly character and composure. The objectives of this house involved getting the girls away from their households, so they could learn domestic skills and grow up to become good Christian daughters. This record details the great economic burden these girls posed on the matrons and sponsors, as well as the great inconveniences their illnesses caused. The home shut down in 1929, a fact that does not seem to bother Taber, as she simply begins writing about the next interesting missionary that affected the lives of Whittier's residents.^{XI}

Interestingly, the account of the girl's home speaks of an Esther Milhous who provided music lessons to the girls. Esther might have been a relative of President

^{IX} Ibid

^X Ibid

^{XI} Ibid

Milhous Nixon, whose family belonged to the Quakers of this area.^{XII} Nixon's mother, Hanna Milhous, was a devoted Quaker, whose religiosity would deeply influence her son's life and political career, in a reflection of his hometown's values and faith.

Taber's accounts end around 1930, around the same time Whittier's uptown district was flourishing into an economic success.^{XIII} This success was cut short by the Great Depression, and the ensuing economic slump. Mexican residents experienced a scarcity in agricultural work, and the nearby Rio Hondo's agrarian colonias suffered. The advent of the New Deal and other Depression-era developments transformed Whittier and brought opportunity to some residents, while solidifying economic inequality for others.

The Works Progress Administration funded artistic and educational pursuits in Whittier, including the creation of some mosaic murals, a park, an art school (named after Whittier's own First Lady Lou Henry Hoover), along with elementary, middle, and high schools to better accommodate local populations, though these benefits were largely enjoyed by the area's white residents.^{XIV} Mexican populations did not receive the same, and with the Home Owners' Loan Act of 1933, another New Deal development, were unknowingly snarked out of fair housing for future decades.^{XV}

The Home Owners' Loan Act established the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC), a program that was originally meant to help struggling homeowners with mortgage payments, and refinance homes according to the best credit outcome.^{XVI} The

^{XII} "Richard Nixon: Biography, Accomplishments, Watergate, Impeachment, Resignation, & Facts."

^{XIII} Mike Sprague, "Whittier Has Grown from Its Quaker Roots."

^{XIV} "New Deal Projects."

^{XV} Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*.

^{XVI} *Ibid*

HOLC, and its sister agency, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), would change the face of the American housing market permanently, through a system of discriminatory system of evaluation and lending known now as “redlining.”^{XVII} The HOLC divided cities into tracts and evaluated each one according to their racial/ethnic makeup, average income, the condition of the homes, residents’ occupation, and other similar determinants. The most desirable neighborhoods were given an A-grade, colored green on the map, and so on. The “worst” neighborhoods, those full of foreign residents, low-income people, non-white residents, and other “subversive racial elements” were given a D-grade, and colored red, hence the term.

Between 1934 and 1962, the FHA, and after WWII, the Veteran’s Administration (VA) financed and subsidized over \$100 billion dollars in brand new housing.^{XVIII} Over this same period, the FHA and VA helped 11 million families purchase a home, and some 22 million in making home improvements. Over 98% of their money and investments went to white families in white neighborhoods, institutionalizing a system of residential segregation and housing discrimination for America’s suburbs.^{XIX} Further, banks and lending institutions denied applicants of color mortgage backing at higher rates than their white counterparts, even if their incomes and backgrounds were identical. At the same time, many white Americans wrote racially restrictive covenants into house deeds, guaranteeing the white ownership of neighborhoods for decades to come.

In Los Angeles and elsewhere, white American soldiers returned home with full benefits of the GI Bill, which included provisions that made home-ownership accessible

^{XVII} Terry Gross, “A ‘Forgotten History’ Of How The U.S. Government Segregated America : NPR.”

^{XVIII} George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*.

^{XIX} *Ibid*

through the FHA, and now, the VA. Mexican-American soldiers were not as lucky, and struggled much more to find housing. The agricultural *colonias* of the Rio Hondo and the San Gabriel Valley had been transformed into either neat subdivisions, or existed as low-income neighborhoods; much of the Mexican population in the area was either living in either East Los Angeles, or was being pushed out of the Eastside by the dawn of highway construction to a scarcity of housing options.^{XX}

In Los Angeles, this massive surge in population coincided with metropolitan decentralization and the rise of suburbia. Historian Andrew Wiese, in an article for the *Journal of Urban History* entitled, “Stubborn Diversity: A Commentary on Middle-Class Influence in Working-Class Suburbs,” writes that there are distinctly different values that drove suburbanization in the twentieth-century.^{XXI} Namely, Wiese focuses on the distinction between what he refers to as “elite” suburbs” and working-class suburbs. The region’s agricultural *colonias*, discussed in the former chapter, were resented by the new Mexican-American middle class, who saw both the residents and their “slums,” as blight on the landscape. This class-based, intra-ethnic, paternalism shaped the landscape of Los Angeles suburbs’ as well as that of Whittier: already faced with intense discrimination in the housing market, middle-class Mexicans wanted their dwellings to reflect the assimilated, “America,” status they dreamed of.^{XXII}

The contrast of working-class Mexicans in run-down neighborhoods, versus Mexican-American families in newly built homes invites a discussion of the “honorable

^{XX} Jerry González, *In Search of the Mexican Beverly Hills: Latino Suburbanization in Postwar Los Angeles*.

^{XXI} Wiese, Andrew. “Stubborn Diversity: A Commentary on Middle-Class Influence in Working-Class Suburbs, 1900-1940.”

^{XXII} González, *In Search of the Mexican Beverly Hills*

Mexican” trope, its origins and influences in the region, as well as the implications The “Mexican Beverly Hills” holds for local racialization, socioeconomic mobility, and suburbanization. Though the previous chapter characterized the “honorable Mexican” as a trope borne out of 2010s immigration policies, and made visible nationally due to DACA, in Los Angeles, the “honorable Mexican” was visible as early as the 1950s. In the “Mexican Beverly Hills,” the “honorable Mexican” was a well-deserving WWII veteran, whose achievements earned him access to homeownership and the benefits that came with it. This emphasis on military participation can be read several ways. First, is the attempt to “Americanize” oneself, by establishing allegiance and loyalty to the United States through military service, and the act of physically endangering one’s life in the name of a greater cause. Second, is the disingenuous belief in this “Americanization,” joining the armed forces out of perceived obligation to the United States, for the sake of socioeconomic mobility, and lastly, as a result of mandatory conscription.

Due to this, the “Mexican Beverly Hills” was witness to several enclaves of Mexican-American military families. Military affiliation remains a point of pride in the region, and is frequently used in local elections as evidence of qualification and personal character.^{XXIII} The 30th Senate District, which encompasses much of Southern Los Angeles County and the “Mexican Beverly Hills,” is represented by Senator Bob Archuleta, whose military accolades are the center of both his policy advocacy and re-election strategy.^{XXIV} In Whittier, several city council members boast either personal or familial military ties as evidence of their dedication to the community.^{XXV}

^{XXIII} Ibid

^{XXIV} “Senator Bob Archuleta Announces His Candidacy for the 30th Senate District.”

^{XXV} “City Council Profiles | Whittier, CA.”

For non-military families, rapid industrialization had afforded some Mexican-American families humble homeownership options along the Eastside corridor, namely in South Gate, where in 1950, 72% of Latino residents owned their homes.^{XXVI} These new developments were an explicit response to a need for labor, and their occupation was limited to factory workers and their families. Nearby Pico Rivera and Montebello, part of the “Mexican Beverly Hills,” experienced similar industrialization and suburbanization,

Eventually, Los Angeles’ suburbs added housing for Mexican-Americans, and racist practices were undone, at least in recorded law. In 1954, Judge Alfred E. Paonessa’s ruling on *A.T. Collison and R.L. Wood v. Nellie Garcia et. al.* rendered racial covenants illegitimate, on the basis that there was no “Mexican race”, and no “American race” to discriminate against, years after *Shelley v. Kramer* had already declared these covenants unenforceable.^{XXVII} However, Mexican-Americans’ tenuous whiteness had rendered this *Shelley*’s outcome useless for Los Angeles area families.

Mexican-American racial privilege, as recorded by the decisions such as Judge Paonessa’s declaration of Mexicans as “white,” abetted Latino suburbanization, and eventually their increasing socioeconomic mobility. Where Asian, Black, and sometimes Jewish populations could not escape persecution or housing discriminations, light-skinned Mexicans could.^{XXVIII} Mexicans of majority European descent could claim Spanish (or sometimes even Italian) descent and circumvent discriminatory policies. This privilege was recorded legally too; since the debacle of a “Mexican” race in 1930, the US

^{XXVI} González, In Search of the Mexican Beverly Hills

^{XXVII} Marianna Gatto and Hayley Moore, “Judge Alfred Paonessa and The Early Civil Rights Movement in California.”

^{XXVIII} González, In Search of the Mexican Beverly Hills

Census categorized Mexican and Latinos as “white” by default, in a privileged racialization that contrasted the ongoing treatment of Mexican laborers, Pachuco/Chicano youth, darker-skinned Latinos, and less privileged Mexican-American families.^{XXIX}

For the latter group, many challenges remained. In nearby El Monte, realtor associations had to comply with certain company codes that effectively prohibited them from renting or selling property in white areas to non-white individuals, a move that allowed individuals to visibly identify Mexican individuals as non-white, regardless of legal determination.^{XXX} Realtors occupied a unique space in society as “gatekeepers” of the American Dream (home ownership), and also as supervisors of Mexicans’ dual whiteness/“otherness.” Further, the first wave of white GI Bill homeownership, HOLC-sponsored redlining, freeway construction, and regionwide reluctance to incorporate Mexicans into white neighborhoods had already permanently engrained racial discrimination and segregation into the housing landscape of Los Angeles.

Shifts and changes in the Mexican population during this period are hard to track down in government records. The lack of a consistent “Latino” ethnic identifier on the Census for this period (roughly 1940s-1970s) complicated this further. However, general population records reveal that Whittier experienced steady population growth, and then an explosion: in 1950, the city had 23,433 residents, 33,663 residents in 1960, and a stunning 72,863 in 1970.^{XXXI} These trends also align with statewide shifts, between 1960

^{XXIX} Demby, “On The Census, Who Checks ‘Hispanic,’ Who Checks ‘White,’ And Why.”

^{XXX} González, *In Search of the Mexican Beverly Hills*

^{XXXI} “Historical Census Records of Racial/Ethnic Groups, Los Angeles County, California.”

and 1970, California's population increased by a stunning 53.3%, reaching a little over ten million residents.^{XXXII}

By the 1970s, Mexicans and Mexican-Americans were recognized as an integral part of Whittier's community. In 1972, The Whittier Daily News began a series titled, "Americans By Destiny," an homage to its newest residents. The Whittier Museum and Historical Society holds a special reprint of these articles, gifted by the Daily News in recognition of the series' popularity.

This series of 37 articles traces the origin and current status of Mexican-Americans in Whittier, serving as a particularly effective characterization of white resident's opinions towards this group. The author of this series, Richard Singer, is described as "no stranger to the area [Whittier] or to the Mexican American people."^{XXXIII} His credentials for writing a comprehensive account of Mexican-American history are largely, that he attended and taught in the nearby schools for many years, and that his journalistic endeavors concerned the Mexican-American community.

The first "chapter" of the series opens with a quote from Luis Hernandez' poem, "A Forgotten America," reprinted below:

Christians By The Grace of God;
Gentlemen, Thanks To Our Spanish Descent;
Noble Lords From Our Indian Ancestry;
Mexicans By Pride and Tradition;

^{XXXII} "Historical Population Change Data (1910-2020)."

^{XXXIII} Singer, "Chapter One: Mexican American Story One Of A Changing People."

And Americans By Destiny.

Thus We Are Mexican-Americans,

And We Ask Nothing From No One.^{XXXIV}

Hernandez' characterization of his people frames Singer's analysis of Mexican-American history in the region: Mexicans are a proud, independent people, who do not dare take handouts from white America, and are determined to earn the rights given to them by the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. Singer opens this chapter noting that over time, Whittier's Mexican population has transformed from poor laborers to middle-class neighbors, who now account for around 20% of the city's population. This increased wealth is not explained in detail, but Singer does note that much of the city's new Mexican-American middle-class moved eastward from East Los Angeles, a demographic pattern that persists to this day.^{XXXV}

The importance of the city's cultural changes is exciting, but also overdue. Singer briefly outlines the Mexican and Indigenous history of the area, the popularity of Mexican cuisine, and the names "Yankee America" kept to name schools: La Serna (my high school alma mater), El Rancho, Rio Hondo, and others.^{XXXVI} Outside of Whittier, Mexican-America has exploded, and created a demographic that demands importance and recognition. Singer writes that at the time of writing, the Los Angeles Metropolitan Area housed "more people of Mexican descent than any other urban area in the western hemisphere, with the exception of Mexico City."^{XXXVII} Mexican-Americans had also

^{XXXIV} Ibid

^{XXXV} Ibid; Canedo and Galindo, "The 'Mexican Beverly Hills.'"

^{XXXVI} Singer, "Chapter Thirteen: Quiet Village Boys Take Pride In Their Barrio."

^{XXXVII} Singer, "Chapter Fourteen: Word 'Chicano' Stirs Mixed Emotions Here."

recently become the second largest minority in the United States, second to Black Americans. Singer shrouds these developments in anxiety and concern: are Mexican-Americans second-class citizens? Has this group realized the disparities they face in housing, healthcare, and education? And most importantly, how severely will they disrupt the status quo when they act to change their plights?^{XXXVIII}

Singer's reporting takes a paternalistic tone when he describes the composition of this ethnic group. He writes extensively about the problem of Mexican-American youth, this group's composure, and the faults parents hold by enabling their children's delinquency.^{XXXIX} This misbehavior he writes, is a result of lazy parenting and the violence parents inflict on their children as a tool of control, and has resulted in an overflow of criminal gangs in the area. These youth gangs are plagued by machismo and a lack of belonging, not unrelated to what he writes, is the problem of changing cultural identification.^{XL}

Though racialization, belonging, and characterization were explored in the previous chapter, Singer's description of local frustration towards ethnic identifiers demands attention. Primarily, Singer is concerned with the popularity of the term "Chicano," which had drawn ire from local residents for its political associations with the Chicano Rights Movements.^{XLI} Chicano, as Singer explains, is the term of a "new breed" of Mexican-Americans, similar to what George Sánchez theorized when he wrote about

^{XXXVIII} Ibid

^{XXXIX} Ibid

^{XL} Singer, "Chapter Thirteen: Quiet Village Boys Take Pride In Their Barrio."

^{XLI} Ibid

Mexican-American social identity in the 1930s.^{XLII} Chicano was an identifier that refused to center Anglo approval, and was tightly interwoven with notions of Mexican nationalism, pan-indigeneity, and a romanticized Aztec heritage. This emphasis on indigeneity can be read as a response to the perpetual question of a Mexican-American “race,” or even in protest of the centuries-old Spanish conquest of the region.^{XLIII}

Singer’s recognition of this perpetual confusion is impressive; though his perception of Mexican youth skews racist, he characterizes Whittier’s Mexican-American population respectfully, and recognizes the centuries of complication, paradox, and resistance this group has endured. These complicated notions of being and belonging manifest themselves in the question of assimilation and Americanization, neither of which Singer pushes as a solution to the group’s issue of belonging and incorporation into the city.

Neither Singer, nor this collection of stories, characterize Mexican-Americans in Whittier as “assimilated,” an observation that on a surface level, seems to contradict the validity of the “honorable Mexican” trope in the region.^{XLIV} However, Anglo recognition is not paramount to the trope’s cogency: rather, it is Mexican-American idealization of Anglo approval that is most critical. And since the Mexican voices featured in these pieces express little opinion on the question of assimilation, preferring to discuss material realities such as economic opportunity, quality of school, or the worrying activism of their children.^{XLV}

^{XLII} Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945*

^{XLIII} Singer, “Chapter Fourteen: Word ‘Chicano’ Stirs Mixed Emotions Here.”

^{XLIV} Singer, “Chapter Sixteen: Anglo, Mexican Lifestyles Clash in California.”

^{XLV} *Ibid*

Singer's last chapter provides predictions for the future of Whittier's Mexican population. Namely, Singer and Martin Ortiz, director of the Chicano Studies program at Whittier College, theorize that by 1977, less than five years from the series' publication, Mexica-Americans will make up 40% of the city's population.^{XLVI} This claim is supported by the rising Mexican populations in Pico Rivera, La Habra, and Santa Fe Springs, where the 40% threshold had already been reached.

Singer ends this series on a somber, yet sarcastic tone. He writes,

“And this must be the final conclusion: that the Mexican American resident of this area has faced and continues to face varying intensities of discrimination; that educational institutions must still work to meet his needs; that communities must begin to gear themselves to his problems as he moves in at an ever-increasing rate – but that the opportunity for his social, educational and economic advancement now exists, and he can make the most of that opportunity if he is sufficiently motivated to do so.”^{XLVII}

Singer sufficiently sets up discussion of the Mexican-American futures, namely that there are a number of issues the “Mexican” must fix before he claims his political and socioeconomic power.

^{XLVI} Singer, “Chapter Forty: Mexican American Population Here Creates Paradoxes.”

^{XLVII} Ibid

CHAPTER 3:

MEXICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY IN WHITTIER (1980s-PRESENT):

THE MEXICAN BEVERLY HILLS

This chapter continues the previous chapter's discussion of Whittier origins and its Mexican-American history, both of which set up the Mexican Beverly Hills as a site of contention and possibility. This chapter will explore modern conceptions of the Mexican Beverly Hills, Whittier's role as a major site of Mexican-American community, as well as how the city fits in with the "ethnoburbs" of greater Los Angeles.

I posit that the Mexican Beverly Hills has been formed by two, distinct, waves of settlement. The first occurred in the immediate postwar period: it was largely driven by the suburbanization of the county, and powered by GI and military wealth. The second, and present, settlement is dependent on "self-made" social mobility, which involves the improvement of one's material conditions through a university education or high-paying job, and increasingly denigration of the barrio. This section explores the latter settlement, its motivations, reasons, and future. Special attention will be paid to the "phenomenon" of middle-class Mexican-Americans, the factors that presently allow for social mobility, and the role of Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), such as Cal State Los Angeles, in producing regional wealth.

Since the 1980s, Mexican-Americans in Whittier have grown into a stunning majority. The city's population hovers around 68 thousand residents: 30.8 thousand residents identify ethnically as Hispanic, with a racial background of "Other," and some 24.2 thousand also as Hispanic, albeit with a "white" racial background. In total, approximately 55 thousand of Whittier 68 thousand residents claim some Hispanic background, comprising 80% of the city's population.^I

The last section's predictions of a "brown" Whittier have come to life, and have amassed several changes, socially and economically, that have transformed the city. The Mexican Beverly Hills of the last chapter was a site for families of the GI Bill, where discrimination was tolerable, in comparison to other housing options nearby. The modern Mexican Beverly Hills have come to rely instead on patterns of settlement in East Los Angeles, assimilation, immigration, and socioeconomic mobility brought by increased access to education.

In its modern iteration, "making it" to Mexican Beverly Hills follows a path down the Whittier Boulevard. It involves the children of immigrant families, who settled and lived the first part of their life in South Central Los Angeles, East Los Angeles, or another brown enclave west of the Los Angeles River.^{II} With time, wealth, sometimes a college education, and usually a well-paying job, these children gradually start moving eastward, eventually settling in a city like Whittier, Downey, or La Habra Heights.^{III} These cities promise nicer houses, better schools, a sense of accomplishment, and a

^I Deloitte Industries. "Whittier, CA."

^{II} Canedo and Galindo, "The 'Mexican Beverly Hills.'"

^{III} Gustavo Arellano, "Of Course Latinos Can Assimilate into American Society. Just Look at Whittier."

realized American Dream. Families from the GI generation, who still live in Mexican Beverly Hills, have since assumed political power and prominence. They have become the city councilmembers, local politicians, and the city's elites.^{IV} Though the new generation has similarly gained socioeconomic power, there remains a distinction between who is recently arrived and who is more Americanized.

As more families have flocked to the Mexican Beverly Hills, this identifier has become both a source of pride and conflict. Some Latinos and Mexican-Americans openly welcome it, heralding the recognition of their accomplishments and a different, more elite status than their co-ethnics, in a public alignment with the "good Mexican" trope.^V Others make fun of it, deriding the idea that first, Latinos should be held to a white standard, but also that Southeast Los Angeles County is some promised land.^{VI} Further, a common criticism is that the term holds ethnic affluence and accomplishment to a white standard, a fact made more salient when one remembers that the "true" Beverly Hills was originally planned as an all-white suburb.^{VII} A Mexican iteration does not undo the racist associations of the original Beverly Hills, but it does introduce an interesting point of comparison with the "good Mexican" trope.

Regardless of its perception, the Mexican Beverly Hills have evolved into a distinct region since the 1970s. Increased affluence, college education, and naturalization have all contributed tremendously: this will be explored later in the chapter. For now, the simple facts are that the suburbs of Southeast Los Angeles County are distinctly wealthier

^{IV} "City Council Profiles | Whittier, CA."

^V Cindy Carcamo, "Latinos' Rising Fortunes Are Epitomized in Downey."

^{VI} Arellano, "Of Course Latinos Can Assimilate into American Society."

^{VII} Ibid

than other “brown” enclaves nearby. Whittier, for example, boasts a median household income of \$77k, Downey \$75k, La Puente \$64k, and La Habra Heights a stunning \$115k.^{VIII} In contrast, Bell, one such city from where Latinos in Whittier move from, has a median household income of some \$44k. Other cities on that side of the County have incomes ranging from \$37k in South Central, to \$42k in Huntington Park.^{IX} Even if the suburbs of Southeast Los Angeles are not particularly special, as some critics argue, it is undeniable that these cities are distinct from other Mexican-American neighborhoods.

Often, this increase in affluence is associated with a betrayal of culture referred to as “white-washing.” Frequently used as an indicator of a lack of ‘authenticity’, intense assimilation into mainstream Anglo culture, and a disdain for one’s heritage, to be “white-washed” is to reject the pejorative assumption that come with being Latino.^X It is intimately tied to the concept of the “good Mexican,” but also criticized heavily, as both terms imply that there is a racial stereotype Mexican-Americans must conform to. Assimilated Mexicans, those who have achieve the American Dream and pulled themselves up by the “bootstraps”, and actively believe in concepts of the “good Mexican,” like many in Whittier do, will tell you they fear little more than being branded a foreigner, ‘low-class’, or as undocumented.^{XI} These terms and identifiers of course, are not negative ones: there is nothing wrong with being born abroad, working blue-collar jobs, or not having documentation or citizenship. They become a problem for this group because it implies they are not truly “American,” and are forsaking all they have achieved

^{VIII} Mapping L.A. Project, “Median Income Ranking of Los Angeles County.”

^{IX} Ibid

^X Alvarado, “The Troubling Term That’s Undermining Latino Identity.”

^{XI} Carcamo, “Latinos’ Rising Fortunes Are Epitomized in Downey.”

in the US at the cost of being branded what Mae Ngai called an “illegal alien.”^{XII} For immigrant families, especially newly-arrived ones, or those who are first or second-generation in the US, working-class jobs and tenuous documentation are a fact of life, either for themselves, or for close relatives.

However, California’s history, and the matter of fourth, or even fifth generation Mexican-American families complicate this narrative. Families who have spent decades, perhaps even a century or more in the United States, have forgotten what are likely their humble origins to distance themselves from the perceived shame of poverty or a working-class background.^{XIII} The longer families are in the United States, the more wealth they can accumulate and pass down, and the more their livelihoods become different from their great-grandparents, or whoever their first relative to immigrate was.^{XIV} This quirk, and others, is a core reason why relativity is a central tenet of the Mexican Beverly Hills: families here are better off in these suburbs than in the “barrios” of South Central Los Angeles and Boyle Heights, but are not nearly as wealthy as those in the actual Beverly Hills, the affluent Westside, and increasingly, Orange County. Even among rampant racism discrimination, the Mexican Beverly Hills still seem like a better alternative than the imagined *rancho* some long-forgotten relative left for a chance at a better life. The Mexican Beverly Hills exist as both a transitional and final site of affluence, where

^{XII} Ngai, *Immigration Act of 1924*

^{XIII} Elizabeth Vega Aguilera, “THE OVERLOOKED LATINO MIDDLE CLASS: DEEP ROOTS AND CONTINUED GROWTH.”

^{XIV} Laura Pulido and Manuel Pastor, “Where in the World Is Juan—and What Color Is He? The Geography of Latina/o Racial Identity in Southern California.”

individuals can pride themselves for making it “out of the hood,” but can also dream of a life in Brentwood or on the docks of Newport Beach for their children or grandchildren.

The regional wealth of the Mexican Beverly Hills comes from increased access to college education and higher-paying jobs, both markers of congruent social advancement. Southeast Los Angeles County is in proximity to several Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). HSIs are defined by a large Latino population (at least 25%), their mission is, “to expand educational opportunities for; and improve the academic attainment of Hispanic students.”^{XV} Proximal examples of these institutions are Rio Hondo College, California State University (CSU) Long Beach and Los Angeles, University of La Verne, Cal Poly Pomona, University of California, Irvine, among others. Most notable among these is California State University, Los Angeles (CSULA), which boasts a 66.7% Latino population, and was ranked as the number one university in the United States for social mobility in 2017.^{XVI}

This classification for CSULA is impressive and significant. The Equality of Opportunity Project surveyed over 2,000 undergraduate institutions to examine whether undergraduate institutions were accessible for poor students (<20% poorest of the population), and whether these students were first, able to earn wealth and social mobility, and two, maintain it.^{XVII} Mobility rates explained the following: at CSULA, nearly 10% of students come from the bottom quintile of income distribution, and in turn,

^{XV} “Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) | White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity for Hispanics.”

^{XVI} Office of Communications and Public Affairs, “Cal State LA Ranked Number One in the Nation for Upward Mobility.”

^{XVII} Chetty et al., “Mobility Report Cards.”

after an education there, reach the top quintile. CSULA, and neighboring Glendale Community College, far outperformed Ivy League, and Ivy League-adjacent universities, in a demonstration of the transformative educational power helping Latinos in Los Angeles County.^{xviii}

Increased wealth resulted in impressive homeownership figures in the region and elsewhere. Dowell Myers, from the USC Sol Price School of Public Policy, wrote that in Los Angeles County, the gap between Latino and white homeownership is the lowest anywhere in the country.^{xix} Nationwide, this gap measures around 24.9 percentage points, but in 2019 in Los Angeles County, measures a scant 15.2 percentage points. Largely, this difference is owed to the fact that white Americans in Los Angeles County own their homes at lower rates than their counterparts nationwide, due to high housing costs in the region. As a result, high rates of Latino homeownership are made more impressive when considering the economic landscape.^{xx}

Latino homeownership in Los Angeles has increased steadily since the 2009 recession; between 2009 and 2014, Latinos saw a net increase of 455,000 home-owners. From 2009 to 2019, homeownership among all groups increased by 1.511 million, and by 1.434 million among Latinos.^{xxi} Latinos accounted for a stunning 95% of all homeownership growth, a figure that firmly evidences the reality of increased socioeconomic power among this demographic. In contrast, white ownership in this *same*

^{xviii} Ibid

^{xix} Myers, Dowell. "Hispanic Homeownership Advancement through Recession and Boom: Tracking Cohort Aging and Replacement with 5-Year American Community Survey Data in the United States, Los Angeles, and a Gentrifying District."

^{xx} Ibid

^{xxi} Ibid

period decreased by 1.237 million individuals.^{XXII} The new Mexican Beverly Hills I write about in this chapter is experiencing a period of immense growth, with predictions positing (Mexican) Millennials as the next home-hungry cohort of the next decade.

Socioeconomic mobility and opportunity have landed Gen X, and later, Millennial Latinos in the Mexican Beverly Hills and surrounding Los Angeles. This process, however, was aided largely by the privileges of parental citizenship. In a study that invites comparison to Mae Ngai's discussion of the "illegal alien" and "perpetual foreigner" status of the Los Angeles Mexican, Professor Jody Vallejo, of the University of Southern California, explained that the rise of this Latino middle class was largely dependent on processes of assimilation undertaken by immigrant parents, namely achieving naturalization or acquiring other forms of legal status.^{XXIII} She remarked, "legal status is the critical mechanism that allows parents to move up the economic ladder and provide a middle-class life for their children."^{XXIV} Other factors included an abundance of union jobs, familial and community support, as well as the presence of existing Mexican enclaves in Los Angeles. Further, these Mexicans and Mexican-Americans experienced working-class or low-income childhoods: they enter the middle class for the first time as adults, only after having gained access to greater affluence, education, and/or opportunities that were not available to their parents.^{XXV} As a result, this segment of the population is also more likely to engage in the process of "giving back" to their less

^{XXII} Ibid

^{XXIII} Jody Agius Vallejo, *Brown Picket Fences: Patterns of Giving Back, Ethnic Identity and Ethnic Associations Among the Mexican-Origin Middle Class*.

^{XXIV} Ibid

^{XXV} Agius Vallejo, *Brown Picket Fences*; Vega Aguilera, "THE OVERLOOKED LATINO MIDDLE CLASS."

affluent family members, due to familial backgrounds and adherence to traditional family values.^{XXVI}

Vallejo shares that in Metropolitan Los Angeles, over four-fifths of the Mexican population are either foreign born or are first-generation Americans.^{XXVII} Today's Mexican Beverly Hills retains much stronger ties to the homeland than the first iteration did; cementing the "Mexican," and not "Mexican-American" qualities of the Mexican Beverly Hills. The greater affinity to Mexican values and tradition is present in Whittier and elsewhere.^{XXVIII} Across Uptown, the city's central hub for shopping and eating, new upscale Mexican eateries pop up every few months, and there are at least two boutiques who cater to high-end Mexican aesthetics.^{XXIX} This demand is also driven by the Millennial movement into Whittier and elsewhere, who want the Whittier of their youth transformed into a more refined version of itself.^{XXX} This process of "gentefication" will be discussed later.

Agius Vallejo's theorizations are in line with my own arguments: the Mexican Beverly Hills was settled in two distinct periods, and this newer era presently retains greater affinity to their Mexican heritage and community values. In my next chapter, I will argue that the first generation in the Mexican Beverly Hills have evolved into regional elites: they compose the area's most visible politicians and law enforcement officers. Their longstanding "Americanization," as defined by their military roots, have

^{XXVI} Ibid

^{XXVII} Agius Vallejo, *Brown Picket Fences*

^{XXVIII} Vega Aguilera, "THE OVERLOOKED LATINO MIDDLE CLASS."

^{XXIX} Whittier Area Chamber of Commerce, "City Businesses."

^{XXX} Rivera, "How Gentefication Is Putting Small Businesses at Risk."

contributed to institutionalization of the “good Mexican” trope through politics and campaign missions, further classifying the Mexican Beverly Hills as an elitist space.

Such perceptions of the Mexican Beverly Hills have been echoed in local journalism and elsewhere. In 2015, the Los Angeles Times published a piece titled, “Latinos’ rising futures are epitomized in Downey.”^{XXXI} Downey is another city in the Mexican Beverly Hills, similar in both ethnic composition and wealth to Whittier. The author took an account from residents, one man, Rick Rodriguez, said that in his first year in these eastside suburbs, he proudly told his neighbor he would not be “one of those Mexicans” who had chickens and a broken-down truck in their front yard.^{XXXII} Since then, Rodriguez’ private security firm has earned him a house overlooking the local country club, in evidence of his “bootstraps” success, and superiority to the families who still let old truck rust outside.^{XXXIII} For all intents and circumstances, this piece could have as easily substituted Downey for Whittier; all points and arguments would remain relevant.

The piece features other local figures, such as Gilbert Alarcon, who recounted the fear of being branded as “one of those Latinos” if he washed his car in his front yard. He took it instead to a carwash, insisting that in Downey, some things are done differently, and he had to act “less Mexican” to fit in, fearing his upward mobility would be betrayed if he did not adhere to the secret rules of affluent suburbs.^{XXXIV} Alarcon clarified however, that his careful behaviors were eventually a performance for other Mexican and

^{XXXI} Cindy Carcamo, “Latinos’ Rising Fortunes Are Epitomized in Downey.”

^{XXXII} Ibid

^{XXXIII} Ibid

^{XXXIV} Ibid

Mexican-American families in the area, particularly those who were more established, and were fourth or fifth-generation in the United States.

What Rodriguez and Alarcon tell us, is that the Mexican Beverly Hills demand a secret social contract from its residents: be Mexican, but not too Mexican. Leave your poverty habits behind. Show everyone around you how respectable you are, and don't let them think you're "one of those Mexicans," presumably poor, badly behaved, and conforming to a bevy of racist stereotypes. In the Times piece, both men perceive these requirements as a necessary trade-off for their increased socioeconomic status. Sure, Alarcon and Rodriguez recognize the comments and perception of their status as racial slights, but they understand them as a necessary evil, more so when the stereotypes are perpetuated by their fellow Latinos.

What kind of community demands ethnic betrayal from new arrivals and longtime residents? The Mexican Beverly Hills does. As explained in the previous chapter, this region is special, and distinct from other "brown cities" in the region, but the mechanics of difference are endlessly problematic. Instead of priding themselves on their educational and work accomplishments, Latinos and Mexican-Americans have opted for an air of superiority that renders them "superior" to the very communities they came from. What kind of pride can you have as an affluent Mexican if you mock or look down on those who did not have the same privileges or wealth you did?

In 2018, local reporter, Gustavo Arellano, published a piece titled, "Of course Latinos can assimilate into American society. Just look at Whittier" that began

approaching these questions.^{XXXV} He established first, that Whittier should be considered the epitome of ethnic wealth in the region, not “Downer Downey:” Whittier’s median income is five thousand higher than Downey’s, and more importantly, it is the metaphorical and physical “last stop” on the Whittier Boulevard path to affluence.^{XXXVI} His reading and tone is sarcastic, writing that Whittier is the response to Trumpian offenses that suggest Mexicans are inassimilable. For Arellano, Whittier elites have assimilated and adopted American culture, and no, he does not mean this as a compliment. He writes,

“Conservatives should think of Whittier any time they whine that California is becoming Mexico. I wish! Yaktivists like myself, immigrants in the country illegally and gang members might get all the mainstream news coverage on Latinos, but the silent majority moves into the middle class and adopts the same mores as their white peers, making talk of Reconquista laughable. It doesn’t take long for it to happen, either. My cousins are natural Republicans who vote Democrat only because the GOP thinks of our formerly undocumented parents as the enemy.”^{XXXVII}

His concluding thoughts read, ““Ethnic” some days, white the rest. That’s America to the core. That’s Uptown Whittier.” This phrase has permeated my research thoroughly; it has become the very heart of this thesis’ argument and the magnitude of its importance: in Whittier, Mexicans can easily shed and reclaim ethnic identity depending on how much it conveniences them. Mexican-American identity has morphed into something no more meaningful than a fancy shirt one throws on for special occasions: it is brought out at Dia De Los Muertos Festivals, the neighborhood Mexican restaurant, and sometimes, when one needs extra “ethnic appeal.” Whittier’s population of Mexican-

^{XXXV} Gustavo Arellano, “Of Course Latinos Can Assimilate into American Society. Just Look at Whittier.”

^{XXXVI} Ibid

^{XXXVII} Ibid

American elites have forgone all cultural authenticity, even when it is less than a generation away.

Arellano's assessment of how quickly Mexican-Americans are to shed their roots contradicts Agius Vallejo's research on Mexican-American generational affinity, as well as her insistence that the group Arellano describes *would* feel tied to their parent's homeland. However, considering Whittier's political and social order, it would be fit to assume that Agius Vallejo's work could not have foreseen the ease, and willingness, with which Mexican-Americans shed the "inconvenience" of their heritage.

The rest of Arellano's article deals with matters of Whittier's political scene, which will be covered in a later chapter. However, his rhetoric and continued sarcasm towards the city's elite conveys both frustration and disapproval. This is evidenced in his criticism of the city's decision to support its Uptown district over local food trucks. Whittier's Uptown district is home to a bevy of trendy, higher-end, Mexican-inspired restaurants. Such institutions include the ever-popular Kalaveras, Modern Shaman, and the colorful A Toda Madre Mexican Kitchen.^{XXXVIII} Increasingly, these restaurants are uprooting "mom and pop" shops, neighborhood panaderias, and other local businesses. Superficially, these changes are a classic example of gentrification: higher-end restaurants pushing out local businesses under the guise that more expensive cuisine will attract the "right" crowd. However, this scenario's demographics, both parties are Mexican/Latino, challenge the accusations of gentrification.^{XXXIX}

^{XXXVIII} Whittier Area Chamber of Commerce, "City Businesses."

^{XXXIX} Guerrero, Jean, "'Gentrification' Is Complicated. One Cultural Barrio Shows a Way Forward."

Instead, what arises, is a unique process of *gentefication*. This term binds the word *gente*, meaning “people” in Spanish, and gentrification, to create a unique, yet equally problematic term to explain the phenomenon of brown faces pushing out other brown businesses.^{XL} These *gentefiers* are often community members, many young, educated Latinos, returning home, and wishing to see trendier food and dining options in their parent’s neighborhoods. The term was first used by activists in Boyle Heights, but has since expanded in the County, and even to mainstream streaming services, where shows like Netflix’s “Gentefied” capture the intra-ethnic turmoil.^{XL1} In Whittier, *gentefication* is yet another facet of the “good Mexican” trope: returning second- or third-generation affluent youth are opening restaurants and shops they are sure will improve economic conditions in their hometown, while driving out the livelihoods of the city’s working class.^{XLII}

What the phenomenon of *gentefication* captures, however, is deep seated anger towards gentrifying Chipsters (Chicano hipsters) from local community members, who argue that as former “barrio”-goers, they should know better than to decimate their childhood businesses.^{XLIII} This anger is far more widespread than that towards “good Mexicans” in the Mexican Beverly Hills or elsewhere, though that may be because *gentefication* avoids the awkwardness of white acceptance and influence amidst a “brown” conflict.^{XLIV} In Whittier and elsewhere in Los Angeles County, *gentefication* is geared towards the tastes of Chicanos, and not the white elite. Though it does engage

^{XL} Ibid

^{XL1} Manuel Betancourt, “Cast and Crew of Netflix’s ‘Gentefied’ Explain ‘Gentefication.’”

^{XLII} Vega, Priscilla, “For L.A. Latinos, Whittier Boulevard Offers Change and Hope - Los Angeles Times.”

^{XLIII} Gustavo Arellano, “Column: Can ‘chipsters’ and Barrio Activists Find Common Ground?”

^{XLIV} Ibid

with reasoning that pits Mexican-Americans against one another and operates on assumptions that wealth and status grant you cultural authority, participants can escape accusations of being “white-washed:” their new businesses are ethnic, of course!^{XLV}

Uptown Whittier, and the new higher-end restaurants that pop up every few months will continue to transform the city and will take the last vestiges of working-class resources with it. Working-class and low-income folks still live in Whittier, despite how glamourized the region’s elite become, but *gentefication* threatens to obscure what little visible representation remains.

^{XLV} Guerrero, Jean, “‘Gentefication’ Is Complicated. One Cultural Barrio Shows a Way Forward.”

CHAPTER 4:
THE “GOOD MEXICAN” IN LOCAL POLITICS:
REACTIONS AND CONSEQUENCES

This chapter explores the manifestation of the “good Mexican” trope in Whittier politics; beginning with the election of the first Latino to the city council in 1978, the forty-year absence of Latinos on the Whittier City Council, and the resurgence and goals of Mexican-Americans in local politics over the 2010s and 2020s. This analysis will be supplemented by local coverage of these issues (Whittier Daily News and The Los Angeles Times, namely).

Further, this chapter will also explore the election and influence of Los Angeles County Sheriff, Alex Villanueva, who though not a Whittier local, has perpetuated stereotypes of hardworking Latinos as the best asset for his department. Villanueva’s Nixonian personality and support of sheriff’s gangs expand the discussion of unconventional Latino politicians to the County level. Further, his tenure and his “antics” serve to amplify the County’s intra-ethnic conflict between Latino groups: the “good Mexicans,” Villanueva’s “silent majority,” and other elites.

In 1968, Whittier's most famous resident, President Richard Nixon, shared his anxieties about the newly-passed Voting Rights Act, and the new numbers of (presumably Democratic) Black voters it would empower.^I He suggested that the Republican Party should spend its political capital and energy targeting Latinos: "they were more religious, family-oriented, and were more focused on building small businesses" than their Black neighbors. By some estimates, Nixon garnered 40% of the Latino vote in his 1972 re-election, having established a Cabinet Committee on Opportunities for Spanish Speaking People, and having appointed more Latinos (including Treasury Secretary Ramona Banuelos) than any other president would until Barack Obama.^{II} Nixon's Cabinet Committee Chairman, Henry Ramirez, would remark years later, that Nixon was the best friend Latinos ever had in the White House.^{III} Unbeknownst to Ramirez, or the cadre of Latinos in the White House inner circle, Nixon's 1968 comments that framed Mexicans and Mexican immigrants as a humble, hardworking people, would be echoed by his hometown's politicians and political hopefuls almost fifty years later.

Whittier's politics are a microcosm of the extended consequences the "good Mexican" trope poses to the Mexican Beverly Hills and other Latino communities: the city's Mexican-American politicians have repeatedly enacted policy to harm their co-ethnics, convincing all the brown faces who elected them that *yes*, this is what Latino elected officials do to help their people.^{IV} As I intimated in previous chapters, Whittier's

^I Jon Wiener and Gustavo Arellano, "Gustavo Arellano on The Sheriff vs. Black L.A., and Michele Goodwin on Ketanji Brown Jackson."

^{II} Garvey, Marshall. "The First Latino President."

^{III} Castro, Tony, "Richard Nixon Was America's First 'Latino Vote' President."

^{IV} Gustavo Arellano, "Of Course Latinos Can Assimilate into American Society. Just Look at Whittier."

political elites are the descendants of the first generation in the Mexican Beverly Hills: born from GI or military families, have deep conviction and love for the United States and its Armed Forces, and believe that their assimilation and American identity should be at the center of both their election strategies and politics.^V

This chapter is titled “Hispanic Republicans” for a number of reasons. First, is the obvious reference to Geraldo Cadava’s book of the same title, in which he explores the growth and history of Latino Republican voters.^{VI} Second, is that I believe this descriptor fits well with my conceptualization of “good Mexicans” as a significant number of the population in Whittier, CA. “Hispanic,” though an accurate descriptor for someone who is of Mexican descent, as much of Whittier is, centers Spanish conquest as the central component of the group’s identity; the term refers to a Spanish-speaking or Spanish-identifying group. This repudiation of Indigenous or Afro-descended roots aligns with the remnants of colonization that have since been transformed into racism and colorism in Latin America. Like the “good Mexican” rejects his Mexican roots and identity, so too does the “Hispanic” reject notions of Indigenous ancestry.

And third, I believe that a Republican political identity is inextricable from the values and beliefs of “good Mexicans.” Whittier’s political elites, in fulfillment of the “good Mexican” trope and in performance as Hispanic Republicans, have consistently undertaken politically conservative decisions that I argue, better align with Republican ideals than Democratic ones, and either do not support, or unequivocally harm, Mexican-

^V “City Council Profiles | Whittier, CA.”

^{VI} Cadava, Geraldo, *The Hispanic Republican: The Shaping of an American Political Identity, from Nixon to Trump*.

American populations. Such decisions include the banning of working-class food trucks, the use of inflammatory rhetoric that demonizes undocumented immigrants, and finally, participation in the January 6th insurrection.

The first Latino to take seat on the Whittier City Council was Victor “Vic” Lopez, a beloved local figure who was elected in 1978.^{VII} He was a longtime coach and educator at Whittier High School, serving three terms on the council, two terms as mayor and one as mayor pro-tem. His presence on the city council reflected a “browning” Whittier, and can be understood as a hopeful inclusion of the city’s growing Latino population. Though “Vic” Lopez had a successful run for city council, immediately there are questions of why he had to be a beloved and revered figure to win the election; most candidates do not require such extreme local love to be elected. There is scant information on Lopez’ term and politics, and as such, I cannot type him as a “good Mexican” decisively. He might have been encouraged to run as a result of his impact on the city, or he might have done so seeing a need for Latino representation. Regardless, Lopez’ term was the last time Whittier elected a Latino for over thirty years.

This discrepancy raised questions: for a city that would soon approach a 4/5 Latino population, why didn’t its elected officials reflect this demographic diversity? One such answer is the presence of an at-large voting system for city council.^{VIII} In such a system, voters elect all members of the city council at once; candidates need not focus on neighborhood-specific issues or on attracting votes from constituents in their local streets. Political science literature, such as David Leal’s “The Politics of Latino Education: The

^{VII} Collier, Jeffrey, “Latino Was Elected to Whittier Council in the 1970s.”

^{VIII} McNary, Sharon, “Whittier Latinos May Use CA Voting Rights Act to Seek District Elections.”

Biases of At-Large Elections” argues that at-large elections dilute the power of the “minority” vote, which certainly true in Whittier.^{IX}

The desire for Latino representation coincided with local support of the California Voting Right’s Act (CVRA), a California law passed to increase the power of minority votes in local elections.^X The CVRA “prohibits the use of an at-large election in a political subdivision if it would impair the ability of a protected class, as defined, to elect candidates of its choice or otherwise influence the outcome of an election.”^{XI} For Whittier, the “protected class” is the city’s Latino voters, who have not succeeded in electing city councilmembers who reflect their community and values.^{XII}

Following a lawsuit from the Mexican-American Legal Defense Fund (MALDEF), the city of Wittier changed its city charter under Ordinance 3033 to allow for by-district elections, and establishing the city’s four council districts. A year earlier, the city had also amended the city charter to allow for the direct election of the city’s mayor, once more citing the threat of noncompliance with the state’s Voter Right’s Act.^{XIII}

The success of the California Voting Right’s Act has been limited. In 2016, Josue Alvarado became the second ever Latino elected to the city council, representing the majority-Latino District 1.^{XIV} His campaign touted his Latino identity as a central aspect of his campaign, believing that the District deserved someone that looked and behaved

^{IX} Leal, David, *The Politics of Latino Education*.

^X Mike Sprague, “Attorneys Threaten Whittier with Lawsuit over At-Large City Council Elections.”

^{XI} Polanco, Richard, AB-182 California Voting Rights Act.

^{XII} Sprague, “Attorneys Threaten Whittier.”

^{XIII} McNary, Sharon, “Whittier Latinos May Use CA Voting Rights Act to Seek District Elections.”

^{XIV} Mike Sprague, “Josue Alvarado Appears to Have Won Whittier City Council Election.”

like them.^{XV} His campaign goals did not explicitly express “good Mexican” tropes, though his politics soon would soon reveal them. Instead, Alvarado focused on his promise of being a voice for his district, and filling the much-needed absence of Latino representation in City Hall. However, Alvarado’s promises of racial representation and a better, browner, future for Whittier evaporated soon after he entered office.^{XVI}

In the 2018 piece, “Of course Latinos can assimilate into American society. Just look at Whittier,” author Gustavo Arellano tackled Alvarado’s betrayal of the city’s Mexican population.^{XVII} In his piece, Arellano resents that Latino city leaders, including then Mayor Pro-Tem Josue Alvarado and President of the Whittier Business Association Frank Medina, banned loncheras in the Uptown region of the city. Loncheras are a type of food truck commonly associated with working-class men, and were formerly a fixture in that region of the city.^{XVIII} This ban on food trucks was justified with the rise of new eateries in Uptown, fancier and more expensive than the working man’s lonchera. Though Whittier city councilmembers do not declare a political party, they beliefs, actions, and stances on local policy illustrate their ideologies clearly. Alvarado’s preference of newer, fancier restaurants over working-class food options evidence him as someone who has taken the “good Mexican” trope to heart: denigrating his neighbors for the sake of “economic development,” despite local newspapers describing him as a registered Democrat. Frank Medina, though not an elected official, is also an example of an individual who fulfills the “good Mexican” trope in the city: he is dedicated to

^{XV} Ibid

^{XVI} Mike Sprague, “Whittier’s Second Elected Latino Is Leaving the City Council but Will Still Be on Your Ballot.”

^{XVII} Gustavo Arellano, “Of Course Latinos Can Assimilate into American Society. Just Look at Whittier.”

^{XVIII} Ibid

protecting businesses that pose greater economic benefits for the city, rather than ensuring Whittier residents who want affordable lunch options have them.^{XIX}

Alvarado chose not seek re-election, and as such his seat was won by Jessica Martinez in 2020, making her the first Latina to sit on the city council.^{XX} Similar to Alvarado, she spoke about her district's needs, and how she would be able to fill them as a member of the Latino community. Her election consolidated the supermajority of Republicans in Whittier's city politics, though the city council maintains that the members should not rely on ideology, but rather on the needs of the community. Martinez, in conversation with the Whittier Daily News, remarked that she expected to get along with all other city councilmembers despite political party, and anticipated working on homelessness and focusing on economic development and increasing resources to needy members of her district.^{XXI} Her promises were destroyed, however, soon after her election, when she sued Governor Newsom for including undocumented immigrants in his pandemic stimulus package.^{XXII} This lawsuit, filed in conjunction with The Center for American Liberty, of which Martinez is a member, criticized Newsom for reckless spending, and for not allocating more money to "law-abiding Californians."^{XXIII} Martinez' co-plaintiff, Ricardo Benitez, is an immigrant from El Salvador, who was seeking election to the 39th Assembly District.^{XXIV} He has publicly said that he arrived

^{XIX} Ibid

^{XX} Sprague, "Whittier's Second Elected Latino Is Leaving the City Council."

^{XXI} Mike Sprague, "Whittier Election Surprise: Republicans Now Have 4 of 5 Council Seats – Whittier Daily News."

^{XXII} McGreevy, Patrick, "Newsom Sued over Coronavirus Aid Plan for California Immigrants Who Lack Legal Status."

^{XXIII} Mike Sprague, "Whittier Councilwoman Faces Wrath for Suing to Block Financial Aid to Undocumented Immigrants."

^{XXIV} McGreevy, "Newsom Sued."

“illegally,” and was thus himself, undocumented for a period, before eventually becoming an American citizen.

Councilmember Martinez’ claims of resources and economic development for her district does not extend to its undocumented members, or to any non-citizen Martinez does not approve of. At the same time she claims pride in being the first Latina to serve, she denigrates and denies California’s majority-Latino undocumented population benefits, a group who are, by all other means, her kin.^{XXV} Skin tone and racial background do not dictate an individual’s political beliefs, but there is an abject cruelty that despite waging her ethnic background as her most electable quality, Jessica Martinez has repeatedly shown she will not care for her co-ethnics, and deny their humanity at that.

This sentiment was multiplied when reports that Councilwoman Martinez had attended the January 6th insurrection broke out in local media.^{XXVI} A quick search through Martinez’ social media accounts reveals a plethora of support for Donald Trump, Islamophobic content, and radical right-wing, anti-immigrant sentiments.^{XXVII} As with the issue of pandemic relief for undocumented immigrants, Martinez opted to side with a group whose core beliefs were deeply racist and xenophobic, and decidedly in contrast with the needs and wants of her constituents. Though this is, of course, a drastic example, of betrayal of one’s own neighbors, it merits attention because of how public Martinez’s

^{XXV} Ibid

^{XXVI} Wigglesworth, “These Southern California Officials Rallied in Washington. Now They Face Calls to Resign - Los Angeles Times.”

^{XXVII} Quaker Campus, “Examining the Questionable Tweets of Whittier City Council Member Jessica Martinez.”

behaviors are. In a virtual city council meeting to discuss whether Martinez' participation in the insurrection merited official censure, Martinez rattled on about her love of country, her family's history of service in the armed forces, and how she was proud to be a fourth generation *American*.^{XXVIII} Despite her earlier 'pride' in her Mexican heritage, and the belief that it allowed her to serve the city better, it was conspicuously absent from her claims to appeal to an otherwise all-white city council. Whittier of course, has been a traditionally white suburb, and Martinez is just the third city councilmember to claim Latino heritage. One could argue that her ascension to politics required her to betray and deny her racial affiliations and obfuscate her character, fulfilling every criteria of the "good Mexican" trope. For her, it might have been easier to present herself as a country-loving American to a city council that is 4/5 white, 4/5 Republican, and traditionally opposed to what would be perceived as "leftist" identity politics, but it does not excuse her vitriol, or betrayal, despite claims she was trying to "preserve the integrity of our Constitution."^{XXIX}

The city council meeting ended with Mayor Joe Vinatieri blocking Martinez' censure, and deriding Henry Bouchot, the only Democrat on the council, for bringing up the councilwoman's politics and personal decisions as evidence of her inability to perform her duty to the city of Whittier.^{XXX}

^{XXVIII} Mike Sprague, "Whittier Election Surprise: Republicans Now Have 4 of 5 Council Seats – Whittier Daily News."

^{XXIX} Mike Sprague, "Whittier Councilwoman Faces Wrath for Suing to Block Financial Aid to Undocumented Immigrants."

^{XXX} Mendez, "Whittier City Council Split After Member Attends Jan. 6 Rally."

At the time of writing (April 2022) Jessica Martinez still holds her seat. An unsuccessful recall election served only to further these racial animosities and raises the question of whether there is any hope at all to aspire towards a kinder Mexican-American elite, and whether one can simultaneously tarnish undocumented immigrants and claim to serve as their representative.^{XXXI} As evidenced by her rapid ascent into politics, her enduring supporters, the constituents that refuse to oust the only Latina on the council, Martinez has firmly established herself as one of the “good Mexicans” in Whittier. Her harmful ideologies and personal actions are backed and defended by the city’s white elites, she will continue to perpetuate harmful ideology under the auspices that she is qualified and acting in good faith, despite the bevy of petitions that have come up to censure, recall, or remove her from her seat.

What does City Councilmember Martinez have in common with Mayor Pro-Tem Josue Alvarado and Whittier Business Association President Frank Medina? All three individuals have foregone their racial ties and ethnic backgrounds to cater to the perceived approval of white Whittierites: Alvarado and Medina threw out the livelihoods and community staples of poorer (and browner) citizens, in favor of the rapidly gentrifying businesses the city favors. ‘Clean,’ vegan, small-bites restaurants will draw more revenue and prestige for the area than a food truck would, and serve a more ‘refined’ clientele.^{XXXII} Martinez denigrated her own community members, violated her

^{XXXI} Zenaida Huerta, “Remove Jessica Martinez: Domestic Terrorists Have No Place on the Whittier City Council.”

^{XXXII} Rivera, “How Gentrification Is Putting Small Businesses at Risk.”

oath of office, and participated in an attempted coup, but raised her Latina identity as reason enough she should stay on the council.

Across town, and across the County, Sheriff Alex Villanueva and his deputies similarly uphold notions of Latino supremacy but seem to lambast and criticize the “good Mexicans” of the region. Villanueva’s despisal of Latino elites allows us to consider how the reaction to the “good Mexican” is taking place in a highly visible arena. Sheriff Villanueva was elected in 2018 and heads the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department (LASD); the department employs 18,000 individuals and serves Los Angeles County and its unincorporated areas. This includes West Whittier-Los Nietos, Whittier Narrows, Northeast and Northwest Whittier, East Whittier, and South Whittier.^{XXXIII} As such, the intimate relationship between the Sheriff’s Department and the Whittier area renders the discussion of Villanueva’s actions and the Department exceptionally valuable.

Villanueva’s tenure of the Department is best defined by his “working man” personality, weekly Facebook livestreams, the scandal of Sheriff’s Gangs, and unique blend of “Latino populism and rancho libertarianism.”^{XXXIV} Coverage of his tenure has been wide-ranging, with some journalists praising his decision to eject ICE from Los Angeles County prisons, and others decrying his mishandling of brutality targeting Black and brown Angelenos.^{XXXV} Though Villanueva is of Puerto-Rican descent, and was born in Chicago, I argue that his politics, decades of work in Los Angeles County, and rhetoric

^{XXXIII} “Unincorporated Areas.”

^{XXXIV} Arellano, “L.A. County’s Sheriff Leans on His Latino Identity. Does He Exemplify Our Worst Traits?”

^{XXXV} Plevin, “L.A. County Sheriff to Further Restrict Transfers of Immigrant Inmates to ICE Custody.”

when discussing immigration and the area’s Latino population is sufficient to brand him as someone who engages substantially with the “good Mexican” trope.

Gustavo Arellano’s coverage of Sheriff Villanueva’s antics is especially valuable in this discussion. Arellano is a frequent target of Villanueva’s ire; he branded Arellano as a “vendido,” a sellout, during one of his livestreams, and seems to regard him with the same contempt he regards Los Angeles County District Attorney George Gascón.^{XXXVI} In an interview between the two men, Villanueva chatted about the diversity of his deputies (LASD’s employees are 54% Latino, the County 49%), as well as the character of the community he serves. In a quote that captures the sentiments of the “good Mexican” trope, Villanueva remarked:

“They [Mexican and Latino immigrants] walk 2,000 miles to get here. They come here to *work*, and send money home. They don’t come here to smoke dope and complain about why isn’t government [giving] them free stuff. That’s anathema to their point of concept.

But the crowd that’s here — that has been here too long? [second- and third-generation Latinos]. [They’re] kinda — I guess, I don’t know — spoiled to that mentality that the government owes something to them. Whereas the newly arrived in the first generation, you’re like ‘No, you got to do it all yourself.’”^{XXXVII}

Villanueva’s characterizations do not end here. He also quips,

“If you talk to the average Latino out there, the hardworking people that are pushing two jobs and just trying to get food on the table, their kids and education, they care about work, they care about faith [and] community. And they don’t have a tolerance for what the woke elite like to think.”^{XXXVIII}

^{XXXVI} Arellano, “L.A. County’s Sheriff Leans on His Latino Identity”

^{XXXVII} *Ibid*

^{XXXVIII} *Ibid*

From this interview and his track record as Sheriff, we can gather Villanueva deeply despises the “elite” Latinos who believe themselves to be better than their co-ethnics, in a clear repudiation of the “good Mexicans” in Whittier and the Mexican Beverly Hills. This matter, however, is also complicated with Villanueva’s perception that he represents the silent majority of Los Angeles County; that he knows best what the people need, and that he represents Latinos who have long been trodden underfoot by the “establishment.” The Nixonian references are ripe and too blatant to ignore. Villanueva, per my evaluation, is little more than an elected politician who derides the “elite” in public and does everything possible to maintain his power in private, exemplifying the worst traits of the “good Mexican” trope, but also seemingly escaping it. He does not yearn for white approval, either from journalists, or County officials, and despite his conservatism, brands himself a Democrat, unlike Whittier Councilwoman Jessica Martinez.

His distaste for elitism does not extend to the issue of his department’s gangs, however. In a watershed report from community-based journalism project Knock LA, reporter Cerise Castle exposed the long history of deputy gangs inside the Los Angeles Sheriff’s Department.^{XXXIX} Since at least 1970, deputy gangs have committed atrocities, namely, murder, against men of color in Los Angeles.^{XL} Most deputies faced minimal or zero consequences. These gangs stretch the whole of the Country, from the “Wayside Whities,” East Los Angeles “Little Devils” and “Cavemen,” to the Lynwood “Vikings,” and more.^{XLI} Sheriff Villanueva’s reponse to allegations of deputy gangs in his

^{XXXIX} Cerise Castle, “A Tradition of Violence: The History of Deputy Gangs in the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department.”

^{XL} Cerise Castle, “Part One: The Protected Class.”

^{XLI} Ibid

Department have been marked, with Villanueva alleging it is racist to use “gangs” as a descriptor, considering LASD is majority Latino.^{XLII}

The latest development on the matter (as of April 24th, 2022), is that Sheriff Villanueva will soon be forced testify about the presence of deputy gangs, after resisting a subpoena for over a year.^{XLIII} This, combined with an investigation from the LASD citizen’s oversight committee, will surely trouble his primary odds come June.

Villanueva is one of the most visible, and powerful, Latino politicians in the country: he is responsible for the safety of 10 million Angelenos in America’s largest county. His populist attitude, combined with his open hatred of elites, provides a startling viewpoint on the damage the “good Mexican” trope seems to pose, not just in Whittier and the Mexican Beverly Hills, but for Latino communities nationwide. That is, that the “good Mexican” trope is not sustainable, threatens any hope of ethnic kinship, and feeds into dangerous narratives of intra-ethnic Mexican-American supremacy. The next chapter will provide an example of a middle-class Mexican-American community that has appeared to evade the threat of the “good Mexican” trope, and has evolved alongside Asian-American neighbors. The nearby San Gabriel Valley provides us with a critical discussion of Asian-American racialization, serving as a useful comparison to Latino racialization, and introducing the narrative of a uniquely Latino/Asian hub in Southern California.

^{XLII} Arellano, “L.A. County’s Sheriff Leans on His Latino Identity”

^{XLIII} Tchekmedyian, Alene, “Sheriff Alex Villanueva to Testify on Gang-like Deputy Groups.”

**CHAPTER 5:
ALTERNATIVE RACIALIZATIONS: ASIAN-
AMERICAN/MEXICAN-AMERICAN PASTS AND FUTURES**

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter explores the racialization of Asian-Americans in conjunction with Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles, and California more broadly. The aim of this is first, to contextualize Latino racialization with that of another ethnic group, but also to explain and include the racial histories of the area. Asian-American and Mexican-American histories are intimately linked: Mexican-Americans were not the only group racialized by the United States after all. Asian-Americans suffered a bevy of discrimination, exclusion, and presently, are also experiencing the plights of being a “model minority,” which I argue is not unlike the plight of the “good Mexican.”

The lack of racial and ethnic solidarity in Whittier begs the question: why is this absent here, and where can we observe other forms of minority solidarity nearby? The answer to the former question lies in the hyper individualism that the “good Mexican” trope pushes: so long as you are actively denigrating others and emphasizing your superiority, solidarity is little but an obstacle to your own success. Consideration of the latter question demands a visit to the nearby San Gabriel Valley (SGV), where Latino and Asian-American families live in a near-perfect display of community.

The SGV shares its borders with Whittier and the Mexican Beverly Hills and is similarly a unique site of ethnic affluence. Latino and Asian communities grow and succeed together and serve as a site of racial possibilities for both groups. Further, ethnic identity operates differently for Latinos in the area: the “good Mexican” trope is less visible, local political representation is browner, and also kinder. These distinctions will serve to also cement my construction of the Mexican Beverly Hills as a truly unique site of ethnic betrayal.

The tenuous whiteness of Asian-Americans is paramount to understand the racial privilege of Latinos and Mexican-Americans in California. Both group's histories are intimately linked through strife and legislation. As Natalia Molina writes and Cheng paraphrases, "Mexican was a category constructed from what it was not: not white, not Chinese, not Japanese ... what it meant to be 'Mexican' was determined in part by what it mean to be 'Japanese.'"

The state's Asian-American history begins as early as the 16th century, with Filipino sailors travelling all the way to California's coast in small numbers. However, the first significant wave of migration happened alongside the California Gold Rush of 1849. News of wealth reached China, spurring many men to travel across the Pacific in search of wealth. The first man to undertake this travel was an English-speaking merchant named Yuan Sheng, who in July of 1849 became one of fifty Chinese nationals to inhabit the newly won California.¹ Just months before, the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo had ceded northern Mexico to the United States; Yuan Sheng's neighbors were likely Native Californians and newly-American Mexican ranchers.

In the following years, gold fever brought hundreds of thousands of miners to California, many white, and many from overseas. By some estimates, Chinese men composed up to a fifth of California's gold mining camps, and as the gold dried up, also took jobs as cooks, launderers, and merchants. Their economic success empowered them to either set up small businesses in nearby San Francisco, forming the basis of the city's Chinatown, or to return home with their wealth. Those who stayed in California earned

¹ Mae Ngai, *The Chinese Question: The Gold Rushes and Global Politics* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2021).

wealth and had successful enterprises, eventually attracting resentment from white miners who had not fared well economically. This resentment grew into scapegoating the Chinese community for their success, creating what Mae Ngai terms the “Chinese Question:” which is, did the Chinese present a threat to white American order? The political response resoundingly answered, yes, and acted on several decades of mounting anti-Chinese sentiments. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 suspended the immigration of Chinese laborers for ten years, allowing the current Chinese population to stay, and allowing some exceptions for merchants, diplomats, and ministers.

The Chinese Exclusion Act was the first piece of American legislation to “name a specific group for exclusion on the grounds of its alleged racial unassimilability,” troubling precedent that would harm other ethnic groups, including Mexican-Americans, and later Japanese-Americans. The law affirmed local racism, and triggered mass expulsion of Chinese laborers and merchants from California.

This expulsion and widespread nativism was the first act of Asian-American racialization: as it had with Mexican ranchers and *Californios*, the American government had chosen to demonize and make “foreign” all non-white minorities. Similarities between the Chinese Exclusion Act, and the treatment of Mexicans in California after the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo are numerous: the relative success and wealth of both groups was stripped away by white Americans through legislation and local entitlement. Many Chinese were robbed, with livelihoods destroyed, with local populations acting on the assumption that they were a dangerous threat to white order.

The most stunning, and important, act of racialization in this period came through the *Chinese Exclusion Case* (1889), in which the Supreme Court wrote that they

“considered Chinese emigrants a foreign power,”^{II} making their presence and perceived “violence” a matter of national security, though it was native Anglo populations who perpetuated harm. This ruling was expanded in 1893, through *Fong Yue Ting v. United States*. In their ruling, the Supreme Court “extended the principle of national security to matters of deportations, declaring aliens may “be and remain in this country, except by the license, permission, and sufferance of Congress,”^{III} stripping Chinese immigrants, and by extension *all* immigrants of any constitutional rights regarding their entry, presence, and deportation in the United States. Ngai concludes her examination astutely, writing that “the principle that immigration is a matter of national security continues to underwrite American immigration law to this day.”^{IV}

Viewing Mexican-American racialization and immigration policies through a framework of national security policy offers a depressing perspective, especially considering the current limitations of DACA, TPS, and visa programs for Mexico and Latin-America. Politicians, such as Donald Trump have also spewed rhetoric that labels Mexican immigration as a danger to the American way of life, most famously asserting, “They [Mexicans] are not our friend, believe me. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.”^V

This near criminal racialization of Chinese immigrants, and by extension, Mexican-Americans and other “foreign” minority groups was also manifest in the Immigration Act of 1924. This thesis has explored the impact of this Immigration Act for

^{II} Ibid; Stephen Johnson Field, *Chae Chan Ping v. U.S.*

^{III} Ibid

^{IV} Ibid; Horace Gray, *Fong Yue Ting v. United States*

^V “Here’s Donald Trump’s Presidential Announcement Speech.”

Mexican-Americans and Mexican immigrants, but for Asian immigrants, the consequences were also dire. Where Mexicans could seek passage into the United States by way of the Rio Grande, or the southern border, Asian immigrants could not do the same. Further, the racialization of Asian immigrants involved racial classification that rendered Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos living or aspiring to live in the United States as one and the same.^{VI} This racialization also affirmed this group's unassimilability, which had been enshrined in the previous century.

Mexican-Americans, as the reader will remember, were racialized as "illegals," per Ngai's interpretations, but retained, however slim, the privileges of American citizenship afforded to them by the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. This difference reinforces what Wendy Cheng calls "racialized privilege" in her book, "The Changs Next Door To The Díazes: Remapping Race in Suburban California," which is itself an exploration of Asian/Latino racialization and community.^{VII} Racialized privilege refers to a "a highly context-dependent enjoyment of greater expectations and opportunities among one nonwhite group, relative to others."^{VIII} As such, until the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, which repealed the racial unassimilability of Asian-Americans, Mexican-Americans were privileged through their citizenship, which afforded them substantial protection in the years approaching World War II.^{IX}

In February of 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt issues Executive Order 9066. This order allowed for the internment of Japanese immigrants and Japanese-Americans in

^{VI} Mae Ngai, "The Architecture of Race."

^{VII} Wendy Cheng, *The Changs Next Door to the Díazes: Remapping Race in Suburban California*.

^{VIII} Cheng, *The Changs Next Door to the Díazes*

^{IX} McCarran and Francis E. Walter, Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952.

the United States under the guise of national security after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.^X This interment destroyed Japanese and Japanese-American communities and contributed to the past racialization of Asian-Americans as foreign actors who threatened the way of life in the United States. In this context, neither Ngai's theorization of non-white immigrants as "illegal," or Kim's rendering of Asian-Americans as "perpetual foreigners" seems too meek: this racialization is far too violent and damaging. Japanese-American interment destroyed the livelihood of thousands of families and issued a scathing warning to other Asian and Asian-American families in the United States: their belonging was fragile and would be destroyed with whatever xenophobic whim captured the American mind.

Other Asian groups fared differently over the course of World War II. Foreign-born Chinese and Filipino nationals were enlisted into the American army frequently; Chinese soldiers were granted American citizenship en masse, to comply with army regulations. Filipinos, as American "nationals," and colonial subjects, were similarly naturalized, and enlisted in segregated platoons.^{XI} Upon conclusion of their service, like some Mexican soldiers, also benefitted from GI privileges. The release of Japanese and Japanese-American families from their interment was also realized in this period, following Japan's alliance with the United States in the Pacific Theater. In the Los Angeles area, a great number of Chinese and Japanese families settled in the San Gabriel Valley.^{XII}

^X Franklin Roosevelt, Executive Order 9066.

^{XI} Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History*.

^{XII} *Ibid*

The post-war period introduced the “model minority” trope into the American mainstream. Like Latinos with the “good Mexican” trope, Asian-Americans were expected to perform as assimilable, and “superior” community members, who would work diligently and without complain at their treatment, even after the atrocities of interment.^{XIII} As with the “good Mexican” trope, the model minority ideal relied on government-sponsored racialization, as well as participation from the groups in question. Some post-war events that affirmed the American stance on Asian-Americans as the “model minority” included: Cold-War tensions and fear of communism, increased Asian representation in colleges and universities (from domestic *and* international students), and State Department-sponsored immigration from China, and later, Hong Kong.^{XIV}

The model minority trope persists through the present, and allows us to return to Los Angeles County, where we will examine its persistence and role in the creation of Asian/Latino communities in the San Gabriel Valley. Like Whittier and other parts of the Mexican Beverly Hills, the San Gabriel Valley was a place where minority families could pursue home-ownership without the rampant discrimination that plagued the rest of the County. The result was a collection of cities where newly-arrived Mexican-American families were neighbors to second- or third-generation Chinese-American families, in a near perfect “melting pot” of Eastern and south-of-the-border influences. As Cheng describes in “The Changs Next Door to the Díazes,” locals have embraced and shared a “prevalent Latino/a and Asian world, ... in which at least one full generation had come of age in a racial mix that was over 90 percent Latino/a and Asian.”^{XV} The outer edges of

^{XIII} Ibid

^{XIV} Hsu, Madeline Y. “Gateways and Gates in American Immigration History.”

^{XV} Cheng, *The Changs Next Door to the Díazes*

the San Gabriel Valley blur a little with that of the Mexican Beverly Hills, such as in Montebello and Monterey Park, but those cities do not lay claim to the same wealth and elitism Whittier carries, thus creating possibilities for multi-ethnic enmeshment.

Cheng characterizes the importance and significance of the San Gabriel Valley's multi-ethnic character through its quotidian regional racial formation. By centering the slow turn of the calendar, rather than the large-scale policy decisions and immigration quotas of this thesis, Cheng provides an intimate portrait of a multi-ethnic community, whose character and composition provide hope for a fractured Whittier. Life in the San Gabriel Valley appears to amount to a more peaceful experience; folks here describe the comfort of coming of age in a nonwhite setting, a feeling that has not been captured in any literature or op-ed I've read about Whittier or other cities in the Mexican Beverly Hills.

However, the San Gabriel Valley still produces racial and economic inequality. Namely, racial privilege, immigration status, and class continue to divide families and neighborhoods. As in the Mexican Beverly Hills, lighter-skinned Latinos can assume white-passing identities, something that boosted their socioeconomic status in the region: like in Whittier, white-passing Latinos could purchase homes and properties with much greater ease than other minorities. This racialized privilege is reminiscent of earlier policy discrepancies that granted Mexican-Americans protections through citizenship and belonging.

As a multi-racial "ethnoburb,"^{xvi} the San Gabriel Valley has a uniquely "ethnic," history: large numbers of both Asian and Latino families began occupying homes in the

^{xvi} A portmanteau of "ethnic" and "suburb"

50s and 60s, as opposed to cities like Whittier, where the influx of Mexican-American families has been recent, and the city still touts its white Quaker heritage as its defining character.^{XVII} Regardless, the strict post-war development of the SGV means the first generation of residents experienced the eastward assimilation from Boyle Heights and Chinatown in Downtown Los Angeles. Later and current generations did not/ This “geography of differentiated space,” as Cheng describes it, mean that the generation of children raised here expressed an “expectation or acceptance of difference” that I argue is not present in Whittier or the Mexican Beverly Hills.^{XVIII}

Mexican-Americans in Whittier have a lot to learn from their neighbors in the San Gabriel Valley: including clear and present recognition of racialized privilege as well as an “acceptance of difference” when it comes to socioeconomic class and immigrant generations. Though the backgrounds of these two communities are similar, the SGV is not glamorized or idealized on nearly the same scale that the Mexican Beverly Hills has been. I argue that this forms the crucial distinction between the two sites: Mexican-Americans in Whittier face an undue pressure to prove their “worthiness” to both white and brown neighbors alike, whereas Mexican-Americans in Alhambra and elsewhere have grown up within the multi-racial bounds of the San Gabriel Valley and are comfortable with their life in the “ethnoburbs.” This presents some hope as I conclude this thesis: perhaps as Mexican-Americans occupy Whittier and the Mexican Beverly Hills longer, they too will adopt mores of acceptance and do away with the weight of the “good Mexican” trope.

^{XVII} Cheng, *The Changs Next Door to the Díases*

^{XVIII} *Ibid*

CONCLUSION

What's next for the Mexican Beverly Hills and the "good Mexicans" in Whittier? If we take the San Gabriel Valley as another parable in ethnic wealth, perhaps the next generation will become more cognizant of the deep inequalities that the shroud of ethnic wealth hides, and in turn create a community that welcomes diversity, in socioeconomic and racial terms. The other option ahead involves a regional, and eventually nationwide, I believe, repudiation of the "good Mexicans" in Southeast Los Angeles County, and a dismissal of the circumstances that led to the trope and region's presence. Such a future, I believe, will harm other ethnic communities in the United States. Eventually, more and more ethnic groups, or small communities within them, will also seek out wealth and white acceptance, recreating the circumstances of early Mexican-America. Ignoring the perils will only force this cycle to happen again in different pockets of the United States.

Evidence of valorizing some members of ethnic groups is everywhere in the United States. Such is present in the "model minority" trope I discussed earlier, in the O-1 "genius" visa, and I argue, in the student visa model that grants students in STEM a two-year extension their peers in other fields cannot apply for.

Ultimately, this thesis does not address every question and intricacy involved in racial and ethnic formation. As I continue my education as a PhD student this fall, I intend to keep exploring questions of Mexican-American racialization in Los Angeles, with the resources of USC's History Department at my disposal. In particular, I want to explore the intersections of racial formation and housing policy, suburban development, and community spaces. I also want to assemble an ethnographic account involving Whittier's business owners, *gentefiers* and not, to capture an image of one city in turmoil

and transition, both for posterity, and as a source of knowledge for other ethnic communities who will undergo their own version of *gentefication*.

This thesis has provided me with the opportunity to feel confident in my academic potential, and for that I am thankful. I also had the opportunity to conduct meaningful research on topics involving my hometown and my own racial formation, and visit the Whittier Museum for the first time since elementary school. Thank you once more to my readers, as well as my family and loved ones, for supporting me through this endeavor.

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