Tracing the migrant stream from the Southwest to the Midwest: History, folklore, and challenges for the future

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Chapter 1

Tracing the Migrant Stream from the Southwest to the Midwest: History, Folklore, and Challenges for the Future

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The idea for this paper was originally presented at the Hispanics in the Southwest Conference (2007), where I focused on some unique historical examples of Mexican immigration from the southwestern to the midwestern United States. The intersection between the history of immigration and the democratic values that have served as the foundation for this country provide a rich discourse for analyzing the complexity of the current immigration debate and its implications for the future education of Mexican immigrant children. Many people in the United States are aware of the current controversies surrounding illegal immigration, and the politicized rhetoric has been generally focused upon Mexican immigration. Rarely do the conservative critics who decry illegal immigration to the United States or the media that sensationalize their views take into account the fact that Mexican immigration has had an extensive history within the North American continent. In this chapter, I argue that the current political rhetoric that surrounds the issue of immigration has grave undertones that directly implicate the democratic ideals the United States was founded upon. The purpose of this chapter is to refute some of the negative criticism surrounding the immigration debate through some unique historical examples that help reinforce the argument about how Mexican immigration could be better understood as an integral component of the shared democratic ideals we should all value in the United States. The complexity of the immigration debate will be discussed with implications for educational reform and as to how Mexican immigrants should be fully integrated within the social and cultural evolution of the United States.

People of Mexican descent share an indigenous ancestry with Native Americans upon the North American continent. We can begin to analyze the depth of that history before the arrival of the Mayflower upon Plymouth Rock in 1620 and even before the discovery of the New World by Christopher Columbus in 1492. The historical pattern of Mexican immigration should be interpreted within its entire scope and not framed on politicized indictments aired on conservative talk radio and television. If we can begin to understand the scope of that history, then we can begin to add a more sophisticated analysis about the correlating cultural beliefs that influence a corrosive social discourse. One of those beliefs would include a connection between the Protestant work ethic that was a guiding principle in the foundation of the United States and how persons of Mexican descent embrace a similar work ethic when they immigrate to this country. While both groups could claim valuing a work ethic, history clearly reveals that European Americans have benefited from a privileged ideological perspective.

Despite the economic realities of Mexican immigrants' labor and other contributions to the welfare of United States, Huntington (2004) encapsulates best the sense of encroachment felt by white middle-class populations that are only beginning to sense the demographic impact of the consistently increasing Mexican American presence in the United States:

In this new era, the single most immediate and most serious challenge to America's traditional identity comes from the immense and continuing immigration from Latin America, especially
from Mexico, and the fertility rates of these immigrants compared to black and white American natives. (Huntington, 2004, p. 44)

Our society has to presently contend with the reality of recognizing new populations of citizens that are culturally and linguistically different. It is not so much that Huntington has noticed the growing prominence of the Mexican immigrant population across a changing American landscape, but he is also appealing for a stabilization that could never happen because persons of Mexican descent have been interwoven into the American social fiber in ways that are only now beginning to be reconsidered and recognized.

Despite Huntington's argument, an echo of popular conservative views in the guise of political science, Mexican immigrants are consistently being sought out for their labor and have served to advance the social and economic interests of the United States. In many cases, immigrants have been exploited for their contributions and a myriad of disheartening examples of their disenfranchisement exist. More recently, millions of Mexican immigrants who participated in the bracero agricultural migrant program between 1942 and 1964 had been assured by the governments of both Mexico and the United States that a portion of their deducted wages would be held in trust for them until their retirement. These retirement wages are currently in dispute and lost in a bureaucratic quagmire, leaving countless numbers of aging Mexican immigrant farm workers with no compensation for their contractual agreement for their labor (Rodriguez, 2008; Washington Valdez, 2009).

Regardless of past abuses, the democratic values that are a fundamental cornerstone for the United States have been advanced through the participation of Mexican immigrants. Their work is evident in the unskilled labor sectors of agriculture, construction, and manufacturing. Their current contributions include domestic childcare, cleaning, and restaurant work. The democratic ideals that we aspire to as a nation should not be relegated to a privileged few, and we should not treat our democracy as a caste system even though the mediation of a capitalist economic system requires a foundation of labor to sustain our economy. Democratic participation is not exclusive to any privileged group, but should remain a universal beacon that taps into our potential to create a better society.

Children of Mexican descent, who may themselves be truly entitled United States citizens, are directly implicated within the most negative arguments related to the repeal of their citizenship due to the illegal status of their parents, the denial of higher education opportunities, and the stigmatization of their home language in public schools. We need to reform educational opportunities to create a greater hope for the future of our society:

Whatever the medium intended for educating, the provision of total inclusion is a moral imperative in a democracy and, it is essential to point out, a practical necessity for the health of all and for the continued renewal of a democratic culture. (Goodlad, Mandle-Bromley, & Goodlad, 2004, p. 7)

The moral imperative can begin with a sincere examination of Mexican immigrant history, such as that briefly presented here. A better understanding about the scope of history should help to reduce cultural resentment and can advance a more sophisticated understanding for our core democratic values in our social framework that would allow for a superior education for all children.

The presence of Mexican immigrants in the United States has a pattern and some of the examples that will be discussed here are intended to illustrate the depth and uniqueness of their presence. The prominent historical pattern of Mexican immigration has come to be known as the migrant stream from Mexico to the United States. Even before the establishment of present-day geopolitical boundaries, immigration within North America that could be conceptualized through
the livelihood of human beings who sought out opportunities for coexistence with other communities of people who shared the same incentive for survival. The process of immigration began with indigenous people who can truly claim to be the original citizens of this continent. While geopolitical boundaries may be contested and changed, the pattern of immigration along the migrant stream has been a consistent feature in the historical evolution of North America:

![Figure 1. Migrant stream](image)

The trails along the migrant stream are a generalized representation of a migratory pattern emanating from Mexico. Other factors that have determined the pattern of migration include the human need for subsistence agriculture where natural resources were abundant along the Mississippi River delta and other areas of the Midwest where there grew a human exchange and commerce among the pre-Columbian natives of that era. Early indigenous populations also shared ceremonial contact through such examples as the construction of step pyramids and mound structures. The 1800s saw two significant migration patterns by white Europeans who sought gold in their westward expansion toward California. For Mexicans, a significant migration pattern occurred between the Southwest and Kansas as part of the cattle drives of that era. The 1900s saw a greater expansion of agricultural labor across the migrant stream where seasonal migrant laborers have followed the crops and other work, such as railroad work in Illinois. The following section conveys a few examples from each of the time periods during which Mexican immigration to the Midwestern United States occurred.

**Pre-Columbian Evidence of Mexican Migration**

People of Mexican ancestry have an indigenous background similar to that of Native Americans in North America. The archaeological record across the migrant stream reveals some fascinating examples of early migration. As early as the 1800s, American archaeologists were theorizing about the Mexican origin of Native American structures located in North America (Hildreth, 1843). Two prominent existing structures include the step-pyramids in Cahokia, Illinois, and the effigy mounds in Adams County, Ohio. The step-pyramid structure is a known architectural element within Mesoamerican pyramids in Mexico, and their existence in Illinois provides some early evidence of Mexican immigration along the Mississippi river, an area rich in agricultural resources that allowed for farming and hunting for the inhabitants of the region. The stepped pyramid structures are indicative of a ceremonial function in context with the communal cosmological reverence to the sun.
and nature. Pyramids in Mexico are positioned with a similar orientation to the sun, moon, and various star clusters (Aveni, 2001).

The basic rationale for aligning these early reference points to the heavens is a testimony to the sophisticated intellectual level of the Native American cosmology that embraces a natural order of existence. Native American and Mesoamerican indigenous people both shared these cosmological views that included awareness about how the earth, sun, moon, and stars could be observed and recorded through a systematic pattern of movement in time and space. The depth of their understanding is revealed today in archaeological evidence that reveals a profound scientific understanding. Through an analysis of Maya codices, acclaimed scientist Richard Feynman found that early Mesoamericans had analyzed and decoded with amazing precision the ellipsis, or axis-wobble, of the Earth (Sykes, 1994). Early Mesoamericans had accomplished this level of analysis without the use of telescopes or computers that astrologers today would find indispensable for determining such calculations. Consequently, we have to consider early pre-Columbian contributions to science as not only being legitimate, but grossly under-appreciated or recognized.

The measurement of solar patterns also became interwoven with agricultural needs because an understanding of the earth’s relationship to the sun provided optimum reference points for planting, harvesting, sowing, all in conjunction with the solar year. Since it entails a cosmology, these practical observations were also integrated with spiritual beliefs. These beliefs were shared through symbolic and architectural elements that still exist today. Similar to Mesoamerican pyramids in Mexico, the orientation of the Cahokia pyramid structures is aligned in conjunction with the movement of the sun, with markers for the annual stations of the sun, such as the solstices and equinoxes (Mehrer, 1995).

Figure 2. Cahokia Step Pyramids

Further archaeological evidence of Mexican indigenous migration to the midwestern United States is illustrated by the effigy mounds in Ohio and Oklahoma (Maya-like relics found in 1938). The notable example described here is the serpent mound in Adams County, Ohio. This particular effigy mound has been associated with the shape of Quetzalcoatl, or the plumbed serpent of Aztec
mythic lore. The snake symbolism attributed to early Native cosmology has been a consistent subject of historical speculation related to the origin and meaning of that symbolism (Barnhart, 2005).

![Figure 3. Ohio Serpent Mounds](image)

Further evidence of shared contact and immigration between indigenous peoples in North America can be traced through the influence of language contact. Linguistic anthropologists have long examined the interrelationship between language families around the world. Although the similarities between languages do not necessarily negotiate a political boundary, they do provide a shared sense of cultural influence, community, and commerce that has filtered up from Southern Mexico to North America. There are multiple examples of intercultural contact between indigenous populations.

In my own personal experiences participating in sundance ceremonies in rural areas in Central Mexico, I was initially surprised to encounter how Hopi Native Americans from New Mexico, who were also attending the sundance, could communicate in their native Hopi language with the native Nahuatl language speakers in Mexico. At first, I could not figure out how this could happen until I discovered the shared Uto-Aztecan heritage between both Hopi and Nahuatl languages. Nahuatl is the ancient language of the Aztecs that is still spoken extensively today in Mexico. Similarly, on another occasion, while attending peyote ceremonies with the Ojibwa tribe in rural Minnesota, I discovered that they had in their repertoire of traditional peyote chants numerous songs in Nahuatl. It was explained to me that these had come up from the Mississippi River, along with the peyote ceremony. The use of peyote as a ceremonial sacrament is still presently used among members of the Native American church (Stewart, 1993). While the ceremony has expanded to Native American tribes in the northern United States, such as the Ojibwa and Lakota, the peyote itself can only be harvested in certain regions in Mexico and a small area of southern Texas. Thus the expansion of the ceremony and associated chants and language is a further example of the historical migration of indigenous Mexicans through the expansion of their cultural practices.

In New Mexico, there is evidence of *tlachtli* ball courts. *Tlachtli* is a ceremonial game played with rubber balls (García Arroyo, 1969). Similar to the cultural exchange of peyote, the sap used to make rubber can only be tapped from rubber trees in tropical regions of Southern Mexico and areas in South America. Mesoamerican civilizations have been documented as having a long-range trade in rubber balls for the purpose of playing these games (Santley & Pool, 1993). Extensive trade from pre-Columbian Mexico and the Southwest also occurred with the exchange of seashells (Seymour,
1988), ceramics (Blinman & Wilson, 1993), obsidian (Findlow & Bolognese, 1982), and turquoise (Weigand & Harbottle, 1993).

Unfortunately, the cultural exchanges during the pre-Columbian era were not without problems. The discovery and subsequent colonization of North America by European immigrants occurred through a process of systematic oppression and extermination of indigenous people upon the continent. It has been estimated that approximately twelve million indigenous Americans lost their lives in the process of colonization (Ross, 1998). While much of the indigenous population was decimated through disease, many were also eradicated through warfare and slavery, such as the encomienda system that allowed Spaniards to control large numbers of indigenous people for agricultural expansion. Thus, the brutal transition between cultures that portended a new era became the foundation for the establishment of European immigrants and their sense of entitlement and superiority over indigenous peoples, and those seeds of oppression are still in flower today. I maintain that only by understanding the sources of these indifferences can we begin to understand the ideological ramifications that need to be reformed for the purposes of a more positive social and educational outcome for children of immigrant families who still feel alienated from becoming true participants of a democratic society.

Initial Contact in the United States

During the early history of the United States, blatant racism against oppressed minority groups was an accepted societal practice that was even validated by the scientific community (Gould, 1981; Zinn, 2003). As soon as white European immigrants encountered Mexicans living within the present boundaries of the United States, they sought to establish economic, social, and political control over them. The first major contact between Mexican and white populations was in the aftermath of the Texas Revolution between 1835-1836 and the Mexican American War between 1846-1848. Those two major conflicts led to the United States's acquisition of large sections of land from Mexico consolidated in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed in 1848. This treaty guaranteed Mexicans living within the new boundaries of the United States democratic rights to their land and their language. Except for the acquisition of land, the other parts of the document were never honored in the sad and conflicted tradition of so many other broken treaties between the United States and indigenous populations (Acuña, 2006). Consequently, in considering the status of persons of Mexican descent, their treatment in policy resonated with the treatment of Native American populations and pointed toward the disenfranchisement of both groups by a colonizing power.

After the Mexican American War, negative white public opinion continued to rise against Mexican Americans and was largely generated through scathing newspaper editorials written in English (Camarillo, 1979). Takaki (1993) further corroborates that Texas newspapers criticized Mexican Americans’ legitimate right to vote. Poll taxes limited their opportunity to vote (Camarillo, 1979). Mexican Americans were vilified by white settlers for being lazy, criminal, ignorant, speaking an incomprehensible language, and having a heathen religion (Camarillo, 1979), and they were stripped of their lands throughout the Southwest and California. Barrera (1979) specifically describes how the implementation and enforcement of English land laws were instrumental in dispossessing Spanish-speaking Mexican Americans in Texas.

It is important to note how the use of the English language enforces a system of control that can still be correlated today through the focus on language as a present-day attack against Mexican immigrant groups and bilingual education programs. Anzaldúa (1987) has termed this form of oppression “linguistic terrorism,” and Macedo (2000) has observed English-only policy to be another process in the colonial subordination of the minorities in the United States. The shared linguistic contact between indigenous people that had initially occurred through a more communal
exchange, has now become a hallmark of the establishment of both Spanish in Mexico and English in the United States as official codes for the language of power. Failing to adapt to those codes of power further resulted in exploitation within the emerging capitalist economy that required cheap unskilled labor to secure a profit for the dominant ruling class.

**Mexican Migration and Agriculture**

Mexican immigrants currently migrate to the midwestern United States largely attracted by the demand for agricultural labor from the cattle, meatpacking, and farming industries, but during the 1800s the most significant migration pattern occurred with cattle drives from the Southwest to the Midwest by Mexican vaqueros, or cowboys. One target destination was the growing cattle stockyards in Kansas, and Paredes (1958) documented how Mexican vaqueros participated in these cattle drives beginning in the late 1860s. Paredes noted that some of the oldest corridos, or folk ballads, in recorded history include the one entitled “El Corrido de Kiansis,” which describes the adventurous cattle drives from the Southwest to the midwestern United States (Paredes, 1958):

### El Corrido de Kiansis

| Quinientos novillos eran,       | translated:
| todos grandes y livianos;      | Five hundred steers there were
| y entre treinta americanos     | all big and quick;
| no los podian embelar.         | and thirty Americans
| Llegan cinco mexicanos,         | couldn’t keep them bunched together.
| todos bien enchivarrados,      | Then five Mexicans arrived,
| y en menos de un cuarto de hora,| all of them wearing good chaps,
| los tenian encerrados.         | and in less than a quarter-hour,
|                               | they had the steers penned up.

The sample of lyrics from the passage reflects a sense of pride among the Mexican vaqueros who viewed their cattle-drive skills as superior to those of white American cowboys. The sense of resilience in the face of the arduous reality of herding cattle across the migrant stream is still evident when immigrants today view themselves as being able to withstand hardships that others will not put up with. The iconic representation of the American cowboy has long been an internationally recognized symbol of the United States, yet much is owed to the origin of that identity with regard to the Mexican vaquero, who initially acquired the colonial legacy of horsemanship from the original cowboys of Salamanca, Spain.

**Hometown Heroes**

Mexican immigrants from the town of Silvis, Illinois, along the Mississippi River were first attracted to this area because of the demand for labor in railroad maintenance for Union Pacific. The consistency of available work allowed persons of Mexican descent to shift from a migratory to settled status, and many who arrived in this small Midwestern town lived with their families and friends along one unpaved street. With the advent of World War II, another demand for military
service was placed upon the Mexican families who sent off their sons to fight in the war. Subsequently, the street name was later changed to “Hero Street” because of the significant contributions made by the children of those early immigrants who performed military service in World War II. It has been documented that of the twenty-two Mexican families who lived along the street, they sent eighty-four of their children to serve in the armed forces during World War II (Rochín & Fernández, 2005).

![Hero Street Memorial Park](image)

Figure 4. Hero Street, Illinois

The contribution to the war effort by these Mexican families has been considered significant because no other group of families along any other single street in the United States sent as many children to serve their country. It was at the time a dubious distinction because of the several soldiers who enlisted to fight in the war and were killed, their bodies still returned home to the only unpaved street in the town. Further, Mexican American veterans who returned home after the war were denied membership to the local VFW post whose admission was reserved for only white service members.

The unselfish patriotism exhibited by the families along Hero Street represents an important example of the frequently unnoticed sacrifices that contribute and serve to sustain the very fabric of our democracy, that serve to maintain the very essence of our freedom. What could be a more important calling by those who would lay their life upon the mantle of our freedom? It becomes unthinkable that these veterans were still denied an appropriate measure of recognition for their service by being marginalized along one of the only unpaved streets in the town and by being denied
membership in the VFW. These injustices reify an archaic ideological positioning of a colonial mentality that viewed the subordination of persons of Mexican descent with indifference to their valuable contribution.

Current migration patterns reveal that the ethnic composition of migrants to the Midwest has shifted from whites, African Americans, Mexicans, and Mexican Americans to almost exclusively Mexicans and Mexican Americans (King-Stoops, 1980; Prewitt Díaz, Trotter, & Rivera, 1990). One way we can measure the extent of Mexican migration to the Midwest is through the growth of migrant education programs, which are designed to serve the educational needs of the children of migrant farm workers. Over the years, migrant education in the Midwest has changed considerably. Mexican immigrants who traditionally migrated from the Southwest to the Midwest and other parts of the United States are now settling in greater numbers than ever before. The traditional migratory pattern is shifting from migration to settlement in communities where it is economically and socially viable. There is also a shift from Mexican immigrant populations to move away from urban cities to rural areas where it may be somewhat easier to raise a family. The following early example describes how one community experienced migration for employment that later led to settlement and to one of the greatest contributions to the sustenance of our democracy.

Discussion and Implications

If we examine the historical record of Mexican immigration, we can also begin to examine how identity has been shaped through colonization and social domination. The Mexican population first diversified its ethnic and cultural characteristics through the mixing of blood, or mestizaje, with European settlers. Contemporary Mexican Americans share inherited physical and cultural features as a result of contact with Spain, France, and the United States. However, Mexico's contact with these three colonial powers was not always a joyous blending of different cultures, but historically more of a process of systematic subordination. Colonial powers have had a pervasive impact upon the culture, language, and livelihood of Mexicans.

Current assumptions about Mexican immigrants and their status in the United States should be viewed within the scope of a continuously evolving history. Persons of Mexican descent have contributed to the prosperity and growth of the United States, and their contributions should be acknowledged with respect to their legitimate democratic participation. How can we really sanction descendents of indigenous populations for their right to exist within geopolitical boundaries that shifted long after the history of the physical presence of their people and communities began upon this continent? Anglas Grande (2000) similarly recognizes that the status of indigenous populations, both Native American and mestizo, merits more careful consideration in light of the injustices that have been committed upon those populations in the name of democracy. When we begin to analyze the historical context of how immigration has occurred, and indeed continues to occur, we also have to contend with how identity is framed around categories of legitimacy.

Are these categorizations based upon rationale analysis, or are they used to reify a historically dominant process of colonization by white Europeans? If those stigmatized indifferences are not framed by race, then certainly they begin to be defined through oppressive ideological differences. In an analysis of colonial identity, Said (1979) has observed how the dominant colonizing power, in this case white Europeans, engage the process of defining and categorizing subordinated classes of people subject to their colonial authority. In turn, the dominant colonial power also defines itself as a superior class of people. Understanding the scope of Mexican immigration through a historical process of colonization and subordination is but one lens from which to disaggregate a myriad of social problems. For the purposes of ensuring a better future for the children of these immigrants,
we should recognize as a foundation for our shared efforts their eventual integration into a democracy.

Those who categorize the existence of a migratory population inherently position themselves as the part of that subjective categorization. A person or organization denouncing immigrants also lays claim to a form of power and control of a particular geographic location by determining who is sanctioned to exist within that location. The role and status of people of Mexican origin have been disputed by the authority of those political and sociocultural forces that sought to dominate them. There exist extreme examples of how persons of Mexican descent have been subjugated through the process of their physical crossing into the United States. In an analysis of early newspaper accounts, Romero (2005) documented the fact that thousands of Mexicans crossing the border into the United States were subjected to chemical sprays and even gasoline baths for the purpose of deousing them so they could not infect other people. These allegations contained no basis in truth and resulted in serious degradation of basic human rights.

Negative sentiments against persons of Mexican descent have a historical origin. Paredes (1984) accounts for how present-day racism has emanated from these earlier beliefs and attitudes that included how European Protestants were vehemently opposed to the Catholic church, which in turn divided devoted Mexican Catholics and European Protestant immigrants; how European notions of beauty equated the white phenotype with goodness and purity, and the black phenotype with evil and impurity; how England and Spain’s early military engagements placed them at odds with one another. The most famous of these confrontations was the Spanish Armada in 1588; when the European rationalization for the brutal conquest of Mexico and indigenous peoples in all of North America exaggerated the savagery of the conquered heathens, and prominent racial views condemned miscegenation and portrayed Mexicans and Mexican Americans as the negative consequence of mixed breeding, or mestizaje.

The colonial subordination of the Mexican people resulted in a sense of inferiority that also had effects on the perception of male-female roles and relationships. In a review of historical research on Mexican Americans, (Gutiérrez, 1995) observed that three prominent Mexican intellectuals, Samuel Ramos (1938), Leopoldo Zca (1952), and Octavio Paz (1961) came to the conclusion that

The Mexican psyche had been deeply affected by three centuries of Spanish colonial domination and repeated foreign penetration of their sovereign national space. The living legacy of this past was a profound sense of inferiority among Mexicans, compensated for and displayed by men as hypermasculinity, or machismo. (Gutiérrez, 1995, pp. 212).

Gutiérrez (1995) extends the observation on machismo through the work of psychiatrist Díaz-Guerrero (1955), who delineates the basic aspects of machismo within the Mexican family; the father is the total and unquestioned authority figure, and the mother is subordinated into the service of the father. Sons are socialized into male-machismo roles, and daughters are socialized into female domestic and child-rearing roles. Díaz-Guerrero (1955) concluded that the excessive psychological demands upon the mutual male and female expectations ascribed to machismo result in the development of neuroses. Families of Mexican background in the United States also can be understood through the influence of machismo. Their migration and subsequent integration into the United States contrasts with historically different white male and female roles.
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