

**“It’s great to be a problem” by J. W. Work**  
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It’s Great to be a problem,  
A problem just like me;  
To have the world inquiring  
And asking what you be.  
You must be this,  
You can’t be that,  
Examined through and through;  
So different from all other men,  
The world is studying you.

My grandfather cursed my father;  
For Noah cursed Ham, you know;  
Therefore, my father’s children,  
The rocky road must go.  
We can’t turn here,  
We can’t turn there,  
Because the world’s in doubt,  
What we would do,  
Where we would go,  
What we would be about.

I’m sullen if I speak not,  
I insolent if I speak;  
Must curb my aspirations,  
I must be lowly, meek.  
I can’t eat here,  
I can’t sleep there,  
Must “Jim Crow” on full fare;  
The world can’t know  
What I would do,  
If I were treated square.

It’s great to be a problem, a problem just like me;  
To have the world inquiring  
And asking what you be.

## —Chapter Seven—

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### **Promising Problems: Working Toward a Reconstructed Understanding of the African American and Mexican Worker**

*False notions, if believed, false preconceptions, may control conduct as effectively as true ones.*

Charles Johnson, NCSW (1923)

*Many of the important features of Negro life and interracial relations have in the past been the subject of imperfect knowledge and acrimonious debate rather than of scientific inquiry.<sup>1</sup>*

“Race Relations and Negro Work”

*Unless the Mexican immigrant in the United States is made articulate, unless his economic contribution to the development of the western United States is recognized and rewarded, unless his needs and interests are considered from his own point of view, any attempt to solve the problem will lack the most vital of all values, the human value.*

Ernesto Galarza, NCSW (1929)

Continued interplay among labor, race, migration, and immigration concerns during and after WWI created a space where advocates and experts on Mexican and black workers could press for new public understanding of each of these groups’ place in U.S. society. By the early 1920s for black workers and mid decade in the case of Mexican workers, an emerging body of scholars seized this moment of uncertainty surrounding migration and violence in race relations in an effort to challenge prevailing notions about race in America. They also strove to integrate the labor question racially so that it more clearly reflected the growing importance of, and difficulties faced by, black and Mexican workers in industry and agriculture. As in the case of the Women’s Bureau (WB), the research

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<sup>1</sup> “Race Relations and Negro Work, 1926-27,” Series 3, Box 101, Folder 1021 Negro Problems 1927-1929, p. 1, Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Collection (LSRM), Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC).

conducted in this period became of form of activism. This effort to reveal migrants and immigrants as “real workers” achieved some important success, particularly in promoting the rethinking of ideas about race and race relations; yet, as with the Women’s Bureau example, the larger goal of integrating the labor question was continually frustrated by consistent efforts to separate economic issues from race and gender concerns.

As in the case of earlier work by the WB and the Division of Negro Economics (DNE), a significant amount of this activism focused on undermining assumptions about black and Mexican workers specifically, and about race relations generally. These efforts were based on the belief that a better public knowledge of the aspirations, ability, and accomplishments of minority racial groups would lead to improvements in race relations, and conversely, that the overt racism of the period was in part the result of distortions disseminated by movements and figures who—either intentionally or unthinkingly—repeated stereotypes that contained false assumptions. As Charles Johnson argued at the 1928 meeting of the National Conference on Social Work (NCSW), “False notions, if believed, false preconceptions, may control conduct as effectively as true ones.”<sup>2</sup> Faith in the power of inquiry to inform and correct was shared by philanthropic and nonprofit organizations that helped to facilitate this research, such as the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), which funded important investigations into the migration of Mexican and black workers. The chairman of the SSRC, economist Wesley Mitchell, concurred with Johnson’s sentiments, writing in support of such efforts, “There seems to be no group of social problems in which men’s attitudes have been characterized by a larger measure of emotion and a smaller measure of science.”<sup>3</sup>

The efforts of these investigators have not been fully understood. Carey McWilliams, in his survey of the New Era “Mexican Problem,” noted a dramatic increase in attention to the issue during the decade, but he described the research in this period as a “depressing mass of social data . . . consistently interpreted in terms of what it revealed about the inadequacies and the weaknesses of the Mexican character.” These alleged weaknesses included a lack of thrift, enterprise, “leadership, discipline, and organization,” as well as voluntary segregation.<sup>4</sup> Yet although such anti-Mexican sentiment did indeed permeate a significant section of the literature on Mexican workers in this period, McWilliams overlooked an emerging body of expertise on Mexican and Mexican-Americans that worked to undermine these same stereotypes. The work of

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<sup>2</sup>Charles S. Johnson, “Public Opinion and the Negro” *NCSW* (1923), 498.

<sup>3</sup>Mary Van Kleeck, forward to *The Negro in American Civilization: A Study of Negro Life and Race Relations in the Light of Social Research* by Charles S. Johnson (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1930), vii.

<sup>4</sup>Carey McWilliams, *North from Mexico: The Spanish-Speaking People of the United States* New edition, Updated by Matt S. Meier (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 188-189.

organizations such as the National Urban League provides evidence of a similar trend underway in research on African Americans.

McWilliams may have missed much of the decades interesting work on the “Mexican Problem,” but he was onto something when, in his 1948 *North from Mexico*, he asserted that much of the work was “deeply colored by the ‘social work’ approach,” which he characterized as one with a “morose preoccupation with consequences rather than causes.”<sup>5</sup> Yet despite Williams’ negative attitude, many of the experts and investigators examining the Negro and Mexican Problems found an audience before the NCSW. This affinity was no doubt as much a result of the difficulty they had in cultivating audiences elsewhere than it was that these experts were making a choice from a range of different approaches to New Era social and economic reform. Indeed the NCSW was an ambitious body in this period and one willing to take on a variety of issues related to race and gender that other organizations marginalized or simply ignored. Where McWilliams was mistaken was in his conflation of the views of those experts who spoke before the NCSW with the ideas of social workers, who often embraced more behavioral—as against social and structural—explanations for poverty.

In fact, the work of Johnson on the Negro Problem and that of Paul S. Taylor and Ernesto Galarza on the Mexican Problem, and Mary Anderson and Mary Van Kleeck on the issue of women in the workforce all pointed to problems in American industry and society that could not be ameliorated by altering the behavior of the party being discriminated against. Looking back once more to the earlier discussion of the Women’s Bureau, Paul Douglass’ mistaken assertion that women were “incidental members of the labor supply” could also be applied to much of America’s understanding of the issues affecting Mexican and black workers who were never fully integrated into the larger labor question.

McWilliams assessment of social work as a tradition of inquiry does help us to better understand the importance of institutions and their locations. Whereas the formation of the Women’s Bureau provided Van Kleeck, Anderson, and others the institutional space and state-sanctioned legitimacy to speak out on a range of issues affecting women workers, advocates of African American and Mexican workers were left searching for a similar platform. Absent the state, they turned to nonprofit and philanthropic organizations that took up issues that the federal government tried to ignore or simply dismissed.

### ***Framing the Post-war Immigration Policy Debate***

Dramatic demographic changes and racial conflict made possible, indeed compelled, a rethinking of prevailing assumptions about racial groups and race relations. After the war, African American internal migration continued, as did the flow of Mexican workers. During the war, Mexican workers stepped up a

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<sup>5</sup> McWilliams, 188.

migration stream precipitated by both political unrest in Mexico traced back to the Mexican revolution in 1910 and the mounting demand for agricultural and industrial labor in the United States. As head of the wartime Food Service Administration and as part of a successful effort to expand wartime agricultural production, Hoover strongly and successfully advocated for a loosening of immigration restrictions so as to spur agricultural production. The number of Mexicans in the United States skyrocketed from 222,000 in 1910 to 478,000 by 1920 and then approximately 639,000 by 1930.<sup>6</sup> The majority of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans worked and lived in the southwest, but between WWI and the onset of the Great Depression more than 58,000 found work in Midwestern industry and agriculture.<sup>7</sup>

A persistent belief among policymakers that Mexican workers returned to Mexico meant that the “Mexican Problem” received somewhat less attention than the Negro Problem, but by mid-decade an emerging group of experts began working to reshape the public’s understanding of the experiences, aspirations, and hopes of Mexican and Mexican Americans in the U.S. Seldom framed as discrete issues, the Mexican and Negro problems were inexorably intertwined by policymakers and by those who worked to challenge prevailing ideas concerning the present and future of race relations. Increasing concern over the “Negro Problem” sensitized some policymakers in the federal government to the troubled history of American race relations and also to the prospect, as they saw it, of heightened racial conflict if the Mexican immigration continued. In the halls of Congress, Albert Johnson, Chair of the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, made this linkage clear in 1926 hearings contemplating limits on Mexican immigration. Pointing to the growth of the Mexican population, Johnson worried that the “white people of the lands . . . shall be dwarfed . . . by a different type of people getting on the lands, producing other citizens who will get into the body politic.” Johnson elaborated on the nature of his concerns, along the way alluding cryptically to the gravity of the situation by referencing the demographic outcome for the earlier introduction of black people into the territory that became the United States

The committee knows from its studies that the largest number of black people ever brought in any one year to the United States was less than 8,000. Who would have thought at that time that a fearful racial problem would have come, leading to a great war, from the introduction of those blacks? This committee knows that 1 person in every 12 in the United

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<sup>6</sup> David G. Gutiérrez, *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States* (Wilmington: A Scholarly Resources Inc., 1996), xiii.

<sup>7</sup> Zaragoza Vargas, *Proletarians of the North: A History of Mexican Industrial Workers in Detroit and the Midwest, 1917-1933* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 1.

States is black skinned. We can see problems here that we do not discuss, but which are dangerous and troublesome.<sup>8</sup>

For a problem too “dangerous and troublesome” to discuss, the perceived national peril that accompanied a continuation of Mexican immigration to the United States received significant public airing. In hearings two years earlier, Congressman John C. Box (D-TX) queried Mr. S. P. Frisselle, a California supporter of continued Mexican immigration in the interest of agriculture, “Have you ever known how the country or read of one in history which filled the body of citizenship with underling labor that did not have some dire consequences, just such as the South had from bringing black labor from Africa?” Though Frisselle insisted that Mexicans were not immigrants, as they were not “coming here for permanent residence,” Box answered his own question with a firm, “I have not.”<sup>9</sup> Box continued with this line of thinking in 1928, when he argued, “All the strife that we had for 50 years before the Civil War . . . we have reaped as the consequences of a great race question.” Box then equated the immigration debate with the constitutional convention: “The country has adopted [a] restrictive [immigration] policy. If it had adopted it in the constitutional convention, if it had been possible to do so, the country would have been a hundred percent better off right now.”<sup>10</sup>

The tortured search for solutions to the New Era race and labor problems that satisfied employers’ need for labor without undermining a racialized understanding of citizenship was laid bare in the decade’s frequent congressional hearings and debates concerning the issue. In 1926, 1928, and 1930, Box led unsuccessful efforts to restrict immigration to the United States from nations in the western hemisphere that had not been included in the decade’s earlier immigration restriction acts. To balance the interests of industry and those who fought to eliminate Mexican immigration, some advocates for continued migration went so far as to suggest clearly unconstitutional solutions to the “problem” of Mexican settlement in the United States. In 1926 hearings, for instance, Congressman Bird Vincent, who represented a downstate Michigan district with a significant number of sugar beet farmers, asked skeptically, “Have we got to adopt a plan of bringing in folks” and saying to them “‘you are different from everybody else; you have to work at one thing, or you go.’ Can we start with

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<sup>8</sup> Statement of Albert Johnson in U.S., Congress, House, Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, *Hearings on Seasonal Agricultural Laborers from Mexico*, 69<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1926, p.39

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>10</sup> Gutierrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, 53. House Committee on Immigration, *Immigration from Countries of the Western Hemisphere: Hearings*, 1930, 221. Check this to see if it is in 1928 or 1930

that principle?” Despite the growers’ demands, many on the committee seemed dubious about the prospects for such a system. Noting that Mexicans were “already developing citizenship,” Chairman Johnson pointed out that the children of these workers born in the U. S. had “rights and cannot be kicked out.” Perhaps unaware of the Fourteenth Amendment, I. D. O’Donnell, representing farmers of Wyoming and Montana, cavalierly suggested that Congress was “big enough to create a board or organization, or enact some law to control it.” Seizing the opening, Box asked incredulously, “You think when the Constitution of the United States vests him with citizenship because of birth we could deport him”? Undeterred, O’Donnell continued along these lines, suggesting that given the overall population of the nation, the relatively small number of Mexican immigrants would little matter. To this Johnson replied that a similar belief had been held about the early phases of Chinese and Japanese immigration to the west coast.<sup>11</sup>

Congressional discussions like these underscored the public nature of immigration and migration concerns and suggested an opportunity to provide the public and policymakers with a fuller and more accurate assessment of exactly who it was that posed these great problems. With the disappearance of the DNE, inquiry into changes in the African American population increasingly moved outside of the state and into the nonprofit sphere. Various advocates for a new understanding of Mexican nationals and Mexican-Americans adopted a similar approach, looking to burgeoning nonprofits such as the Social Science Research Council for support. This necessary turn to non-state institutions was damaging in some degree, in that it left investigators without the legitimacy that only the federal government could provide. But it was also liberating, in that investigators in nonprofits could more clearly address controversial issues related to racism, race relations, and the uneven nature of citizenship in New Era America, often with less concern over procuring and sustaining congressional funding.

Together the two bodies of experts who studied African American and Mexican groups made the case that the problems that arose out of these two migration streams were both economic and social. Whereas past immigrant groups could hope to assimilate into the larger white population over time, Mexican and black workers were faced with racial barriers that in some respects increased during a decade when policymakers and the public rethought the United States relationship to the rest of the world. As these investigators and advocates made clear, black and Mexican workers made great economic strides in the New Era and in many situations found employers and white fellow employees who tolerated an integrated workplace. Nonetheless, persistent racism and discrimination challenged the notion that with time new groups would have the

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<sup>11</sup> “Seasonal Agricultural Laborers from Mexico” Hearing Before the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, House of Representatives 1926 72 [need to check cite on early part of Johnson quote which could be on 68,70, or 72] 94-95.

opportunity, if they so chose, to assimilate fully into the broader society. For integration to occur, these experts increasingly argued, Americans would have to be much more forthright in addressing racial barriers to integration that were actively constructed and maintained by white Americans and institutions.

The nature of expert inquiry concerning African Americans changed significantly over the decade. Violent racial conflict during and following the war pushed labor experts to go beyond the largely descriptive studies and delve into race relations in a more substantive way. As was observed in the previous chapter, state governments took the lead in this area and established commissions to investigate the wartime and postwar surge in racial violence in cities such as East St. Louis and Chicago.<sup>12</sup> The growing importance of the nonprofit sector to black labor inquiry was evident in these federal and state investigations, which drew heavily from nonprofit organizations such as the National Urban League (NUL) in filling their ranks of investigators.<sup>13</sup> Following the war, the disappearance of the DNE left a gaping hole in policymakers' resources for making sense of issues affecting black workers. This forced innovative experts and advocates of black workers to construct non-state institutions of labor inquiry with the assistance of nonprofit and philanthropic organizations such as the National Urban League, the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial, and the

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<sup>12</sup> For examples and analysis of WWI era race riot investigations see, Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922); State of Illinois, Council of Defense, Committee on Labor, *The Race Riots at East St. Louis* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1918); and U. S. House of Representatives, 65<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., *Report of the Special Committee Authorized by Congress to Investigate the East St. Louis Riots at East St. Louis* (Washington D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1918). For analysis of these studies see Elliot M. Rudwick, *Race Riot at East St. Louis, July 2, 1917* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964); James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); and William M. Tuttle, Jr., *Race Riot, Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

<sup>13</sup> As with the Women's Bureau, resourceful DNE investigators attempted to overcome a chronic lack of resources by fortifying their own investigations with research by a variety of government and non-government institutions of inquiry. The DNE used data and observations from religious organizations, state advisory boards, local branches of the NUL, USES, Inspection and Investigation Service (a service within the BLS), Census Bureau, YMCA, Red Cross, and state and local governments. DNE, *The Negro at Work During the World War and Reconstruction; statistics, problems, and policies relating to the greater inclusion of Negro wage earners in American industry and agriculture* (Washington D. C.: GPO, 1921; reprint, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 41. Local NUL branches provided expertise to state and federal agencies concerned with black workers. For instance, the Department of Labor paid the salary of an Urban League executive to supervise the "industrial details of the United States Employment Service for Negroes with the aid of an assistant furnished by the United States Employment Bureau." Newsletter from Eugene Kinckle Jones to Mr. John D. Rockefeller, 28 May 1919, Series 3, Box 99, Folder: 1918-1922, page 2, LSRM, RAC.

Carnegie Corporation. In many respects, this amounted to the most ambitious and substantive phase of New Era inquiry into the Negro Question.

The work of the newly formed SSRC deserves special mention in this context because it funded the most important inquiries into the Mexican Problem during the era, but also because it attempted, unsuccessfully as it turned out, to link the dramatic demographic changes in the black and Mexican populations. The SSRC's Committee on Scientific Aspects of Human Migration (renamed the Committee on Population in 1927) grew out of earlier studies by the National Research Council, though the SSRC studies focused much less on race as a biologically concept and more on how socioeconomic factors explained the relative position of groups. According to anthropologist Casey Walsh, the SSRC saw the migration of African Americans and Mexicans as related and chose to fund one group of studies on Mexican immigration by Taylor, Gamio, and Robert Redfield and another on African American migration. Though the Council would eventually sponsor a fine study by Johnson on the Negro problem that culminated in the publication of *The Negro in American Civilization*, this happened only after a multi-year study of the African-American migration from the south by Frank Ross was abandoned, apparently due to Ross's inability to deliver a publishable report. Given the attention that Taylor in particular, and Gamio to a lesser degree, received upon publication of their respective reports, it is interesting to contemplate how the Council's work on these two related "problems" might have been able to shape public and policymakers' understandings of these issues—which was almost certainly the Council's intent—had Ross's study come to fruition in a timely manner.<sup>14</sup>

Nonetheless, given the importance of Gamio, Taylor, and Redfield's work on issues related to immigration and migration from Mexico, the Council's work is significant. Though Gamio described in some detail racism encountered by Mexicans in the United States and explained how such experiences made assimilation unlikely, his 1926-27 study suffered from his constant effort to straddle "the line between racial and socioeconomic approaches."<sup>15</sup> Though he had studied at Columbia with Franz Boas, a fierce critic of scientific racism, Gamio's analysis of Mexicans in the United States too often suffered from a preoccupation with the Indian and *mestizo* culture of immigrants, which he deemed determinative of Mexican immigrants' inferior status in American and Mexican society. In part due to the selective reading it likely received, Gamio's work would have largely confirmed many policymakers' and much of the white

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<sup>14</sup> I am most grateful to Casey Walsh for providing me with a copy of his unpublished study of the SSRC's migration studies, from which most of the preceding paragraph is derived. Casey Walsh, "The Social Science Research Council and Migration Studies (1922-1933). See also *idem.*, "Ethnic Acculturation: Manuel Gamio, Migration Studies, and the Anthropology of Development in Mexico, 1910-1940," *Latin American Perspectives* 31 (September 2004), 118-145.

<sup>15</sup> Walsh, "Ethnic Acculturation," 125.

public's assumptions about Mexican inferiority, and in a perverse way helped to justify it. Gamio implied that it was not that all Mexicans were culturally inferior, but rather mainly those from whom the immigrant stock was derived.

The second of the three outstanding scholars of Mexican immigration funded by the SSRC was Robert Redfield. Redfield earned a law degree from Chicago, was Park's son-in-law, and after switching to Sociology became an emerging expert on Mexico and immigration. His studies for the SSRC in this period examined the three districts that Gamio had identified as "now furnishing the most immigrants to the United States."<sup>16</sup>

Of the three, Taylor produced the work that was and remains the most important. A 1922 University of California-Berkeley Ph. D. who joined the economics faculty upon graduation, Taylor produced a more detailed, nuanced, and ultimately useful study of Mexican workers in the United States between 1927 and 1929 that helped to undermine many of the prevailing assumptions concerning Mexican immigration to the United States. In doing so, Taylor added his voice to those of an emerging group of labor and immigration experts who, like those who reexamined the Negro Problem, sought to take advantage of a period of dramatic change to reshape Americans understanding of the labor problem. Through his research and publications, Taylor fought to undermine several damaging assumptions about people of Mexican descent in the United States.

These stereotypes had fierce and public advocates from two separate camps: one that opposed, and another that advocated continued migration from Mexico. Together, they developed a three-part understanding of the Mexican Problem that proved relatively serviceable for their purposes through the mid-1920s. First, hoping to undermine policymakers' concerns over the potential of continued migration to further complicate race problems in the United States, the agricultural interests that advocated continued migration argued that Mexican workers were not immigrants at all; instead, this group contended, Mexicans in the United States were a discrete group of temporary workers who had a "homing instinct" that made their return to Mexico inevitable. Return to Mexico was, of course, not a myth fabricated from whole cloth. Given discrimination in the U.S. and the relatively open border, unsurprisingly many Mexicans who came to the U.S. in search of work did return, but the intent of propagating the homing idea was to ease nativist concerns, not to provide an empirically accurate characterization of the situation. For Mexican-Americans and their advocates such depictions undermined efforts to achieve the full rights of citizenship in the United States.

Second, those both in favor of and opposed to this migration viewed Mexican workers in general, as Mark Reisler has argued, as docile, indolent, and backward. Whereas restrictionists found these characteristics to be un-American

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<sup>16</sup> Walsh, "The Social Science Research Council and Migration Studies," 25.

and threatening, the anti-restrictionists identified these characteristics as “splendid prerequisites for the type of labor they required.”<sup>17</sup> Farmers in the southwest cast Mexican workers as docile and well suited to the difficult work in the fields who could be tied to one employer by way of “cheap” wages that made quitting economically infeasible. Writing in the *Saturday Evening Post*, Charles Teague, himself a California farm owner, described Mexican workers as uniquely suited to hot, heavy, and seasonal work that “white labor refuses to do and is constitutionally unsuited to perform.” For those who might consider bringing in “Puerto Rican [sic] Negroes or Filipinos” to do the work, Teague noted the added advantage that a significant portion of Mexican workers returned home and did not need “to be supported through the periods when there was no work to do.”<sup>18</sup>

Third, the Mexican worker lacked ambition and was no threat to enterprising American workers. Rather than hoping to move from low-paying and arduous work as agricultural labor to better paying manufacturing work, Mexican workers preferred agricultural labor and would not, in fact could not, compete with white and ethnic industrial workers. As Louisiana Congressman Riley J. Wilson put it, “The Mexican does not save money and has no ambition to own any land. He is a gambler and he is always broke and always looking for more wages, and therefore you have a constant population that does not develop good citizenship or become landowners.”<sup>19</sup>

The depictions offered of Mexican workers varied between those of outright restrictionists who wanted to end immigration from Mexico and those of employers in agriculture and industry who required workers who would labor for low wages. Whereas agricultural interests saw something redeeming in continuing immigration from the south, advocates of a dramatic reduction in this stream saw danger. As historian Mae Ngai characterized this tension, “Anti-Mexican rhetoric invariably focused on allegations of ignorance, filth, indolence, and

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<sup>17</sup> Mark Reisler, “Always the Laborer, Never the Citizen: Anglo Perceptions of the Mexican Immigrant during the 1920s” in Gutiérrez, *Between Two Worlds*, 25. See also Kathleen Mapes, “A Special Class of Labor’: Mexican Im(Migrants), Immigration Debate, and Industrial Agriculture in the Rural Midwest” *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 1 (Summer 1004), 65-88; David Gutiérrez, *Wall and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 47-68; Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 40-63; and Mai Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 56-90.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Teague, “A Statement on Mexican Immigration,” *Saturday Evening Post* 107 (March 10, 1928), 169-170.

<sup>19</sup> U.S., Congress, House, Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, *Hearings on Seasonal Agricultural Laborers from Mexico*, 69<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1926, p.25.

criminality.”<sup>20</sup> Both groups, however, decidedly agreed that Mexican workers should not be eligible for citizenship. While encouraging Congress to rethink U.S. immigration policy as it concerned Mexico, the *New York Times* concluded that it was “folly to pretend that the more recently arrived Mexicans, who are largely of Indian blood, can be absorbed by and incorporated into the American race.”<sup>21</sup>

The quality of the migrant population was not the only issue under discussion among experts and policymakers. In examining the immigration policy in the 1920s, historian Daniel J. Tichenor has argued that “neither legal nor illegal Mexican inflows prompted great concern among national policymakers.”<sup>22</sup> In fact, there was considerable attention to the issue of Mexican labor among national policy makers in the New Era, but there was also a discernable shift in the nature of this discussion, nurtured by emerging bodies of evidence that challenged these widely held behavioral, racial, and cultural assumptions about the nature of immigration from Mexico.

What changed in this debate was not the presence of concern with the issue, which was debated frequently and heatedly throughout the 1920s, but rather the assumptions about the relationship of Mexican workers to issues central to the larger labor question, including citizenship, permanence, upward mobility, skill, and aspirations. Recognition that prevailing beliefs about the nature of Mexican immigration were inaccurate began to percolate in the post-war era as opponents of this immigration stream warned that Mexican workers had moved well beyond their presumptive place as temporary laborers in agricultural, domestic, and railroad occupations in the Southwest. Early in the 1920s, former Texas congressman James L. Slayden noted with concern that three-quarters of immigrants from Mexico came in illegally and found work as far north and east as Minneapolis and Chicago. Slayden, like others in Congress and beyond, equated Mexican workers with African Americans, noting that both groups were “gregarious” and had “developed a taste for the movies and the white lights.”<sup>23</sup>

By the late 1920s, experts such as Ernesto Galarza, Emory Bogardas, Manuel Gamio, and Paul Taylor worked to supplant earlier assumptions, replacing them with a more nuanced representation of the Mexican and Mexican-American experience that undermined many of the assumptions held by both

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<sup>20</sup>Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 53.

<sup>21</sup>“Singling Out Mexico,” *New York Times* 16 May 1930, 19.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel J. Tichenor, *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 172.

<sup>23</sup>James L. Slayden, “Some Observations on Mexican Immigration,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 93 (January 1921), 122-123.

restrictionists and non-restrictionists. While a wide swath of the workforce that arrived from Mexico planned to and did return to Mexico, new data challenged the representation of the Mexican worker as an individual who worked short bouts of exclusively unskilled labor, only invariably to return to Mexico. As David Gutiérrez, Gabriela Arredondo, and others have clearly demonstrated, the path to citizenship for Mexican and Mexican Americans—to the extent that one was sought—was “fundamentally different” from that of European immigrants.<sup>24</sup> By mid-decade, the arguments of restrictionists and anti-restrictionists alike crumbled in the face of continued settlement and immigration from Mexico and inter-regional migration within the United States. The combination of threatened presumptions about the nature of this immigration stream and increases in the overall Mexican and Mexican American population residing in the U. S. led to increased calls for restrictions on immigration from Mexico. Those who believed that “playing the race card” would help to promote restriction also turned to making a more concerted effort to identify people of Mexican descent as non-white.

### ***Reconstructing Public Perception of the Negro Problem***

The effort to maintain a national focus on the “Negro Problem” did not die with the conclusion of the Chicago investigation and with the demise of the DNE. In the place of state sponsored investigations, the NUL led a contingent of organizations, scholars, and researchers funded by philanthropic foundations such as the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial (LSRM), SSRC, and the Carnegie Foundation that constructed a body of labor knowledge comparable to that created by the DNE and the Women’s Bureau.<sup>25</sup> An \$8,000 grant by the Carnegie

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<sup>24</sup> Gabriela F. Arredondo, *Mexican Chicago: Race Identity, and Nation, 1916-39* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 106.

<sup>25</sup> The NUL had a much more developed research department than the NAACP, which is why I focus here on the NUL rather than the NAACP. In fact, my examination of NAACP papers suggests that the NAACP relied on the DNE and NUL for information concerning black workers. For example, see T. Arnold Hill, Executive Secretary of the Chicago Urban League to Walter F. White, Assistant Secretary NAACP, 14 November 1919, Reel 9, Group 1, Series C, Administrative File Cont. Group 1 Box 319. File: General Labor, September 1919-December 1919, Papers of the NAACP: Part 10, Peonage, Labor, and the New Deal, 1913-1939, Library of Congress. In this letter, Hill provides White with detailed information on northern black workers for a talk White would give later titled “The Negro Migrant in the Industrial World in the North.” White had similar correspondence with other NUL branch offices. For a summary of the competition between the NUL’s *Opportunity* and the NAACP’s *Crisis*, see Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963*, 153-156. Lewis describes an internal evaluation of the *Crisis* by NAACP leader Mary Ovington who suggested that the *Crisis* had never produced a “good piece of research.” She contrasted the plight of *Crisis* with *Opportunity* which she described as “the magazine now in ascendant.” Lewis, *The Fight for Equality*, 155. L. Hollingsworth Wood to LSRM, 17 December 1918, Series 3, Box 99, Folder 1005, LSRM Collection, RAC. Even readers of the *Crisis* recognized that it was lacking in this area. William N. Jones, a reader from Baltimore, wrote, “I believe an industrial department with an aggressive program would greatly augment the work of the organization.” William N. Jones,

Foundation in 1923 provided the initial funding for the NUL’s Department of Research and Investigation. In response to a 1924 plea from L. Hollingsworth Wood, the LSRM appropriated \$5,000 as a “special contribution” in addition to its annual NUL appropriation for “research and investigations conducted by the League.”<sup>26</sup> By 1926, the NUL budgeted more than \$23,500 toward research and investigation making it by far the largest department in the NUL.<sup>27</sup> The establishment of the NUL department and Charles Johnson’s appointment as director of research was well received by many observers concerned with the Negro Question.<sup>28</sup> The *Southern Workman* asserted that Johnson’s research and investigations “should receive the active support of every open-minded man and woman, because it aims to assemble and interpret the facts of American life as they have a bearing on the welfare of Negroes.” The Tuskegee Institute’s Monroe Work pointed to “the tremendous educational value to the Nation” evident in Johnson’s work.<sup>29</sup>

The NUL was not new, of course, to its role as an authority on black workers. During and immediately after WWI, employers and government officials often turned to the NUL for assistance. Historian James R. Grossman’s analysis of the Chicago branch of the Urban League, describes the difficulties the league faced in the north where it was expected to serve “three masters”: “It advised industrialists and helped them to increase productivity; it improved conditions for migrants; and it took a step toward eliminating one manifestation of the newcomers’ behavior which so annoyed black Chicago’s Old Settlers.”<sup>30</sup>

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“NAACP and Labor,” *Crisis* 34 (April 1927): 59. A number of NUL employees assumed supervisory positions within the DNE see “Appeal of the NATIONAL LEAGUE ON URBAN CONDITIONS AMONG NEGROES to the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial,” 31 December 1918, Series 3, Box 99, Folder: NUL 1005, 1918-1922, LSRM Collection, RAC.

<sup>26</sup> L. Hollingsworth Wood to Beardsley Ruml, Series 3, Box 99, Folder 1006 NUL, 1923-1924, LSRM Collection, RAC. In 1921, the Carnegie Corporation provided a special three year grant of \$8,000 per year to the NUL in order to form the Department of Research and Investigations. John D. Rockefeller Jr. gave the Department of Industrial Relations \$4500 between 1925 and 1931.

<sup>27</sup> Leonard Outhwaite to Hollingsworth Wood, 4 June 1926 Series 3, Box 99, Folder 1007 NUL 1925-26, LSRM Collection, RAC.

<sup>28</sup> Implicit recognition of the value of NUL work came from an interesting number of unpublicized donors including an “anonymous” 1931 donation of \$500 by President Hoover to the NUL, which made Hoover one of the more generous individual contributors to the League at a time of declining donations from other quarters. “National Urban League” 16 December 1931, Series 3, Box 100, Folder 1014 NUL Reports, LSRM Collection, RAC.

<sup>29</sup> “The Urban League,” *The Southern Workman* LI (January 1922): 4-5.

<sup>30</sup> James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 204. For instance, in May of 1918, the Department of Labor published the Proceedings of the Employment Managers’ Conference, which included an “extemporaneous talk on the ‘Psychology of the Negro Working-man’” by NUL Executive

Other philanthropic organizations also contributed to this effort and drew on the body of experts gathered around the NUL and now defunct DNE. For instance, as Johnson transitioned from NUL to Fisk University, the SSRC helped fund a study by the National Interracial Conference eventually published as Johnson's *The Negro in American Civilization*. Interestingly, George E. Haynes, former DNE director, served as the executive secretary of the committee while Johnson served as the research secretary.<sup>31</sup>

The NUL's reliance on philanthropists for much of its funding left the organization open to the criticism that its officers were mere "Negro administrators of white philanthropy," as Sterling Spero and Abram Harris suggested in their 1930 study, *The Black Worker*.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, foundation leaders did more than simply fund investigations. Through their funding choices and reviewing of proposals, they played a key role in shaping the development of knowledge concerning black workers and communities. A 1926 LSRM report conceded, "It should be borne in mind that the amount of work undertaken [by the NUL] has to a certain extent been determined by a deliberate Memorial policy."<sup>33</sup> But Harris and Spero went much too far in their dismissal of the NUL's work and in their willingness to lump all recipients of philanthropic aid into one category. Whereas previous foundation funded research and labor policy development had accommodated southern racist traditions, the work of the NUL in the 1920s candidly analyzed impediments to black workers' upward mobility and assigned

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Secretary Eugene Kinckle Jones. A 1919 NUL newsletter sent to NUL supporters credited this speech with clearing the way for the placement of "a number of Negro welfare workers in some of the large industrial plants." Newsletter from Eugene Kinckle Jones to Mr. John D. Rockefeller, 28 May 1919, Series 3, Box 99, Folder: 1918-1922, page 2, LSRM Collection, RAC. The NUL maintained a program that advised foremen "on methods of handling Negro working-men" in a number of cities including Chicago, Cleveland, St. Louis, and Pittsburgh. Eugene Kinckle Jones to W. S. Richardson (LSRM), 10 January 1921 Collection, Series 3, Box 99, Folder 1005 NUL, 1918-1922, LSRM, RAC.

<sup>31</sup>Van Kleeck "Forward," v-xi.

<sup>32</sup> Spero and Harris included interracial committees in this category as well. Sterling Spero and Abram Harris, *The Black Worker: The Negro and the Labor Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), 464-465.

<sup>33</sup> "Race Relations and Negro Work, 1926-27" Series 3, Box 101, Folder 1021 Negro Problems 1927-1929, LSRM Collection, RAC. Eugene Kinckle Jones expressed a deep and personal gratitude for the aid provided by the LSRM and Rockefeller Foundation in general, and the Rockefeller family in particular. In a candid letter to John D. Rockefeller Jr., Jones wrote that he "like many other thousands of Negroes from the South had a deep-seated sense of appreciation of what" John D. Rockefeller, Sr. had "done for us as a race." Eugene Kinckle Jones to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 21 March 1921, Series 3, Box 99, Folder 1005, NUL 1918-1922, LSRM Collection, RAC.

blame to a number of white-led organizations.<sup>34</sup> In fact, Johnson’s analysis of the causes of black worker problems in industry resembled Du Bois’s controversial labor analysis more than it did that of Booker T. Washington’s, another important recipient of foundations aid often charged with public appeasement of white racism. Part of the explanation for this had to do with timing. The confusion surrounding the impact of the migration on American society and the absence of other institutions to make sense of what was going on provided a window for Johnson and others to engage in a broader inquiry into race and labor relations than had been possible in the pre-WWI south.

As Director of Research and Investigation, Johnson functioned as editor of the NUL monthly *Opportunity*. Scholars have usually characterized *Opportunity* as a vehicle to publicize the achievements of Harlem Renaissance artists and, in Johnson’s words, “to inculcate a disposition to see enough of interest and beauty in their own lives to rid themselves of the inferior feeling of being Negro.” But the journal also served as an outlet for publicizing the work of the Research Department.<sup>35</sup> In the first edition of *Opportunity*, Eugene Kinckle Jones wrote that the journal would “try to set down interestingly but without sugar coating or generalizations the findings of careful scientific surveys and the facts gathered

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<sup>34</sup>For examinations of the relationship between philanthropists and the groups and organization they funded see Barry D. Karl and Stanley N. Katz, “Foundations and Ruling Class Elites,” *Daedalus* 116 (March 1987), 1-40; Barry D. Karl and Stanley Katz, “The American Private Philanthropic Foundation and the Public Sphere, 1890-1930,” *Minerva* 19 (Summer 1981), 236-70; David T. Critchlow, “Think Tanks, antistatism, and democracy: the nonpartisan ideal and policy research in the United States, 1913-1987,” in *The State and Social Investigation in Britain and the United States*, eds. Mary O. Furner and Michael Lacey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 279-322; David C. Hammack, “Foundations in the American Polity, 1900-1950” in *Philanthropic Foundations: New Scholarship, New Possibilities*, ed. Ellen Condliffe Lagemann (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 43-68; David Hammack and M. Stanton Wheeler, *Social Science in the Making: Essays on the Russell Sage Foundation, 1907-1972* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1994), Alice O’Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*; James Smith, *The Idea Brokers: Think Tanks and the rise of a New Policy Elite* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, ed. *Philanthropic Foundations: New Scholarship, New Possibilities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

<sup>35</sup> L. Hollingsworth Wood to Beardsley Ruml, Box 99, Folder 1006 NUL, 1923-1924, LSRM Collection, RAC; Charles S. Johnson, “The Rise of the Negro Magazine,” *Journal of Negro History* 13 (January 1928): 18. For more on the journal and Johnson’s role as a chronicler and advocate of the Harlem Renaissance see Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* particularly 113-118, 179, 198-99. In the second volume of his biography of Du Bois, Lewis describes a sudden change in *Opportunity* as it “switched within a couple of issues from being a forum for the cutting-edge articles of distinguished social scientists and educators to become the premier review for literary and artistic effusion of the so-called New Negro.” Lewis is correct to point to a shift in the periodical particularly after 1926 when the Research Department struggled for funding, but I find that in the biography—and in *When Harlem Was In Vogue*—Lewis overemphasizes the shift, not only in *Opportunity* but in Johnson’s thinking as well. Though Johnson was one of the key players in the Harlem Renaissance, he also developed an equally important role as the leading expert on the “Negro labor question” in the 1920s. For Lewis’s characterization of *Opportunity* see David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000), 156.

from research.”<sup>36</sup> Reflecting on the mission of the monthly in 1928, Johnson wrote,

The policy of the magazine as it has developed has emphasized the objectives of making available for students, writers and speakers dependable data concerning the Negro and race relations for their discussions, with the thought that truth carries its own light, that accurate and demonstratable facts can correct inaccurate and slanderous assertions that have gone unchallenged.<sup>37</sup>

After two years of publication, *Opportunity* had a monthly circulation of 6,000, which included more than one hundred public and university libraries. As a testament to the usefulness of the journal to social scientists, Jones reported “over forty classes in sociology use it for reference.”<sup>38</sup> From the LSRM’s perspective, *Opportunity* furnished “the medium through which synopses” of NUL studies “are published and distributed.”<sup>39</sup>

NUL investigators and contributors, often from NUL branch offices, examined wages and hours, but they also worked to reveal the nature of the color line and the decisive role that white workers played in maintaining it. By surveying the state of race relations across industries and regions, they demonstrated that a color line did exist, but that the line varied significantly. Johnson, in particular, never fully rejected the Chicago-school model, which suggested that interracial tension would diminish as white ethnic and black workers assimilated to the common mores of modern industrial society; even so, he insisted that white workers’ willingness to work side-by-side with black workers and accept them as a legitimate part of the labor market was the decisive factor in the future of the color line.

The League’s commitment to evaluating the condition of black America through the lens of African American workers increased during the decade. Throughout the era, Johnson’s work provided a window into workplace race relations. By mid-decade, T. Arnold Hill, formerly of the Chicago NUL, joined the national office as head of the Department of Industrial Relations, while Johnson’s Department of Research and Investigation expanded its scope to

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<sup>36</sup> Eugene Kinckle Jones, “Cooperation’ and ‘*Opportunity*’” *Opportunity* 1 (January 1923): 5. Also quoted in Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 95.

<sup>37</sup> Charles S. Johnson, “The Rise of the Negro Magazine,” 19.

<sup>38</sup> Kenneth Chorley to Beardsley Ruml, 5 February 1925, Series 3, Box 99, Folder 1007 NUL 1925-1926, LSRM Collection, RAC. Eugene Kinckle Jones to Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial, 15 January 1925, Series 3, Box 99, Folder 1007 NUL 1925-1926, LSRM Collection, RAC.

<sup>39</sup>“Race Relations and Negro Work, 1926-27,” Series 3, Box 101, Folder 1021 Negro Problems 1927-1929, 4, LSRM Collection, RAC.

include greater attention to the relationship between organized labor and black workers.<sup>40</sup> In explaining the increased attention to these issues, the League cited an “embarrassing poverty of information of any sort” and the potential for this vacuum in the public’s understanding of black workers specifically and of race relations more generally to be filled by “careless generalizations which contribute nothing but confusion and more trouble to this issue.”<sup>41</sup>

To fill this void the NUL conducted a series of studies describing how understanding that racism was socially constructed helped to explain the relative lack of occupational mobility among black workers. In Johnson’s studies of workplace race relations in the Midwest, Northeast, and South, he found greater emphasis on *de jure* segregation in border states such as Missouri, Kentucky, and Maryland, where “the necessity has been felt for being explicit on absolute segregation in residential areas, enforcing the issue with an ordinance.”<sup>42</sup> Johnson cited Allison Muir, personnel executive of the General Electric Company, who confirmed a hardening of racial divisions “the nearer you get to the Mason Dixon Line.” According to Muir, in Birmingham you would find white workers who preferred to work with skilled black workers rather than “poor white trash,” but in “Baltimore the white workers demand separation in everything.”<sup>43</sup> Johnson found that white workers maintained degrees of segregation through grassroots activism and through institutional means that limited black workers’ access to particular occupations. Among barbers, motion picture operators, horse-shoers, public accountants, and portable engineers, state examining boards exercised “a very rigid selection and by this means have been known to hold down the number of Negroes’ licenses.”<sup>44</sup> In other cases, white workers’ militant refusal to work alongside black workers proved an adequate deterrent to the employment of black labor. In its work with employers, the NUL’s Department of Industrial Relations found that the “almost invariable answer given by an employment manager to one seeking jobs for Negroes is ‘Our white employees will not work with them.’”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> “Negro Labor and Communism,” 3 *Opportunity* (December 1925): 354. Johnson would remain in this position until 1928 when he divided his time between the NUL and the Interracial Conference Committee. In the fall of 1928, he moved to Fisk University where he became the head of the Department of Social Science, though he remained as a Contributing Editor. Elmer Anderson Carter replaced Johnson as editor in October 1928 and Ira De Reid assumed the position of director of Research and Investigations.

<sup>41</sup> “The New Industrial Outlook,” 3 *Opportunity* (May 1925): 133.

<sup>42</sup> Charles S. Johnson, “Negroes at Work in Baltimore, Md: A Summary of the Report on the Industrial Survey of the Negro Population,” *Opportunity* 1 (1923): 12-19.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-19.

In these urban studies, the NUL did the most sophisticated work of the decade in analyzing the costs of industrial segregation. Johnson and the NUL utilized the method Du Bois' had used in the *Philadelphia Negro* of comparing the occupational distribution for white and black workers to demonstrate the degree to which discrimination isolated black workers in low-skilled and low-paying occupations.<sup>46</sup> In his study of Baltimore, Johnson found that despite being only 14.8 percent of the total population, black workers made up 65.6 percent of domestic and personal service workers and 47 percent of unskilled workers.<sup>47</sup> In a survey of black workers in St. Louis for the NUL, William V. Kelly found that although black male workers found employment in most industries, they were “generally doing porter’s work and are so underpaid that the woman in the family must find a job to supplement the income of the man.” As Kelly observed regarding St. Louis, “It is far easier for a woman to find employment than it is for a man.” In an observation that foreshadowed controversial work that focused more on the black family and less on structural deficiencies in the economy by scholars including E. Franklin Frazier and later Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Kelly suggested that this arrangement, “gives rise to serious social problems within the family.”<sup>48</sup>

In addition to its message to the broader public, advocates for a new understanding of black workers cultivated a more narrowly focused, two-pronged message—one to employers and another to organized labor—meant to underscore the central point that a clear understanding of the “Labor Problem” required that black workers concerns and experiences be recognized. The message to employers and unions was similar, but the tone was not. Like the DNE, the NUL reached out to employers, often with testimonials from other employers challenging older notions of black workers as inferior and substituting a description of the successful efforts of black migrants to learn new trades, work efficiently, and remain loyal to employers, particularly during periods of labor

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<sup>45</sup>“Outline of Work and Activities of the Industrial Relations Department of the National Urban League, March 15<sup>th</sup>, 1925-May 31<sup>st</sup>, 1926,” Series 3, Box 99, Folders NUL 1007, 1025-1926, LSRM Collection, RAC; T. Arnold Hill, “Labor,” *Opportunity* 7 (January 1929): 23.

<sup>46</sup> For an analysis of Du Bois' *Philadelphia Negro* see Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*, 33-39. The NUL studies might provide us with a link between Du Bois' turn of the century work and St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton's work in *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945).

<sup>47</sup> Charles S. Johnson, “Negroes at Work in Baltimore, MD,” *Opportunity* 1 (January 1923): 14.

<sup>48</sup> William V. Kelly, “Where St. Louis Negroes Work,” *Opportunity* 5 (April 1927): 116. For similar sentiments in the period, see E. Franklin Frazier, “The Scourges of the Negro Family,” *Opportunity* 4 (July 1926): 210-213, 234. Forrester B. Washington, “The Effect of Changed Economic Conditions Upon the Living Standards of Negroes,” *NCSW* (1928): 471-473. For more on the relationship between research on the black family and policymakers understanding of poverty, see O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge*.

unrest when white workers walked off the job. While these NUL reports outlined progress, they recognized that the effort to bring black workers into industry would take work and that there was evidence of places where—for lack of training and discipline or as a result of hostility from employers, unions, or white employees—black workers had struggled. The overriding message to employers, however, focused on the progress and ability black workers had shown when given the opportunity and training necessary to succeed on the job.<sup>49</sup>

More interesting, however, is the case the NUL made to organized labor. If the NUL offered employers the carrot, they unapologetically threatened organized labor with the stick. Though they occasionally referenced places where black workers made good union members, the thrust of the League's investigations into organized labor focused on identifying discriminatory practices of unions and drawing attention to places where black workers eroded organized labor's power.<sup>50</sup> Although "economic necessity" had "overcome in large measure the prejudices of employers," The NUL argued, organized labor remained an impediment to racial integration.<sup>51</sup> In many respects the AFL's unwillingness to organize black workers served as a useful foil for experts and advocates who used it to demonstrate clearly the absurdity of ignoring the centrality of black labor to a realistic understanding of modern industrial American society. While AFL leaders argued that few of their member unions actually denied black workers membership, the NUL mocked a craft union model that increasingly in practice, if not policy, resulted in exclusively white, skilled unions. Such a misunderstanding of the labor market persisted in unions, black workers' advocates argued, despite clear evidence that organized labor needed to expand its understanding of the labor market to include workers of color and unskilled workers.

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<sup>49</sup> For more a sampling of employers assessment of black workers performance, see "A Summary of 1920 Accomplishments of the National Urban League," Series 3, Box 99, Folder 1005 NUL, 1918-1922, LSRM Collection, RAC; Edgar E. Adams, "Assimilation Into Industry," *Opportunity* 4 (February 1926): 56-57; Charles S. Johnson, "The Negro Population of Waterbury, Connecticut: A Survey by the Department of Research and Investigations of the National Urban League," *Opportunity* 1 (November 1923): 302; "The South Studies the Migrant in the North," *Opportunity* 2 (June 1924): 2; Eugene Kinkle Jones, "Negro Migration in New York State," *Opportunity* 4 (January 1926): 7-11. "Industrial Employment of the Negro in Pennsylvania," *Monthly Labor Review* 22 (June 1926): 1225; T. Arnold Hill, "Labor," *Opportunity* 78 (January 1929): 23; John T. Clark, "Negro in Steel," 4 (March 1926): 87-88; "Negroes as Workers," *Opportunity* 4 (March 1926): 90. For an analysis of the relationship between immigrant and black workers see Charles S. Johnson, "Substitution of Negro for European Immigrant Labor," *Proceedings of National Conference of Social Work* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1926): 317-327.

<sup>50</sup>For evidence that the NUL wanted better relations see "Labor and Race Relations," *Opportunity*, 4 (January 1926): 4-5.

<sup>51</sup>"The New Industrial Outlook," *Opportunity* 4 (February 1926): 37. For a dissenting view in *Opportunity*, see A. Philip Randolph, "The negro and Economic Radicalism," *Opportunity* 4 (February 1926): 62-64.

If the AFL hoped that the problems for organized labor brought on by the Great Migration would pass, the NUL argued that this was a crossroads for unions, not an ephemeral problem. In a 1928 *American Federationist* article, Hill described the movement of black Americans north while noting that they were settling in urban industrial cities and now make up one-eighth of industrial workers. Hill described these workers as being at a crossroads—if they joined unions they become less valuable to employers: if they chose not to join, they jeopardized the position of all workers.<sup>52</sup> The choice of overriding importance, however, once again, was the one facing white workers and unions, who discriminated against black fellow workers at their own peril. As Howard University sociologist Kelly Miller nicely described the dilemma that black workers faced, “Logic aligns the Negro with Labor, but good sense arrays him with capital.”<sup>53</sup>

Along these same lines, Johnson and others noted frequently that organized labor’s fear of black workers undermining union strength was well founded and that black workers had materially benefited from crossing picket lines. White workers’ “fear is warranted,” Johnson concluded, “for not only is there a menace to union objectives in the availability of Negro workers, but it has so happened that many of the greatest advances which Negroes have made in industry . . . are due to strikes and their part in breaking them.”<sup>54</sup> The problem, as Thomas L. Dabney phrased it, turned on white worker efforts “to acquire class consciousness while remaining race conscious.”<sup>55</sup> Implicitly arguing that the problems of white workers were largely the same as those faced by black workers, the NUL directly criticized the AFL’s craft union structure, which failed to serve white and black workers alike. Noting the paltry results of the AFL’s southern

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<sup>52</sup> T. Arnold Hill, “Negro Labor” *American Federationist*, 35 (December 1928), 1452-1456; *idem.*, “The Negro in Industry,” *American Federationist*, 32 (October 1925), 915; T. Arnold Hill, “The Dilemma of Negro Workers,” *Opportunity* 4 (February 1926), 39. Also see A. Phillip Randolph *American Federationist*, November 1926, 1334. For more on the NUL as an advocate for unionization of black workers and critic of organized labor’s policies toward black workers, see the following articles, “A Successful Negro Labor Union,” *Opportunity*, 1 (May 1923) 21; “Negro Miners in the Coal Strike,” *Opportunity* 2 (July 1924): 195; Abram L. Harris, “The Plight of the Negro Miners,” *Opportunity* 3 (October 1925): 303, 312; Arnold T. Hill, “The Negro in Industry, 1926,” *Opportunity* 5 (February 1927): 51-52; Helen G. Norton, “The Brookwood Conference on Negro Labor,” *Opportunity* 5 (August 1927): 244-45; Claude A. Barnett, “We Win A Place in Industry,” *Opportunity* 7 (March 1929): 82-86; “The AFL and the Negro,” *Opportunity* 7 (November 1929): 335-336; “A Cause for Apprehension” *Opportunity* 7 (October 1929): 304.

<sup>53</sup> “Labor and Race Relations,” 4 *Opportunity* (January 1926): 4-5; T. Arnold Hill, “The Dilemma of Negro Workers,” *Opportunity* 4 (February 1926): 39.

<sup>54</sup> Jesse O. Thomas, “The Negro Industrialist,” *NCSW* (1928): 459; Get Johnson cite from Survey; Johnson, *The Negro in American Civilization*. See also, William L. Evans, “The Negro in Chicago Industries,” *Opportunity* 1 (February 1923): 15.

<sup>55</sup> Thomas L. Dabney, “Southern Labor and the Negro,” *Opportunity* (November 1929): 345.

campaign and the unions' inability to organize even ten percent of the nation's workers, *Opportunity* editorialized that the AFL "then not only has failed to unionize the black worker; it has failed to unionize the white worker."<sup>56</sup>

In the longer term, the NUL's appeal to unions can be cast as a success. After all, when John L. Lewis organized the CIO he explicitly reached out to the NUL and other civil rights organizations in order to assure them that labor's cause was the cause of black and unskilled industrial workers throughout the nation. The near term, however, was a different story. As the NUL noted, the number of African American local unions plummeted from 169 in 1919 to 21 in 1929, representing an overall decline in the percentage of black locals among the total union movement from 18.7 percent to 5.4 percent.<sup>57</sup> Meanwhile, the AFL remained indifferent to rethinking of the union's goals and membership, even to the point of rejecting the NUL's offer, in both 1925 and 1926, to pay for half the salary for a "competent Negro who would work under [William Green's] direction" to smooth the relations between black workers and the union.<sup>58</sup> In a 1926 article for *Opportunity* entitled, "Why Belong to the Union," AFL President William Green gave a generic sales pitch for unionization that could have been written of any group of workers, demonstrating a lack of interest in the unique issues facing black workers.<sup>59</sup> Other union leaders, such as one of the intellectual forces in the AFL, John P. Frey, were outright hostile to the needs of black workers.<sup>60</sup> In a 1929 speech before the National Interracial Conference, Frey, adopting the same rationale that Congress had used in rejecting calls to make the DNE a permanent department, argued that black workers suffered no injustices that had not been experienced by Polish, Italian, Jewish, or Russian workers and adding that black leaders impeded the progress of organized labor in the organizing of black workers.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> "The AF of L and the Negro," *Opportunity* (November 1929): 335; "President of the A. F. of L. Replies," *Opportunity* (December 1929): 367. Green reply is also published in same edition on pages 381-382.

<sup>57</sup> Further evidence that the AFL abandoned black workers in this era can be found in the number of paid organizers on staff, which fell from three in 1911 to zero in 1929. Ira De A. Reid, "Lily-White Labor," 8 (June 1930): 172.

<sup>58</sup> T. Arnold Hill, "Open Letter to Mr. William Green, President, American Federation of Labor," *Opportunity* 8 (January 1930): 57.

<sup>59</sup> William Green, "Why Belong to the Union?" *Opportunity* 4 (February 1926): 61-62

<sup>60</sup> *American Federationist*, March 1929, 296

<sup>61</sup> John P. Frey, "Attempts to Organize Negro Worker," *American Federationist*, 36 (March 1929), 296-305; "The American Federation of Labor and the Negro," 36 (July 1929): 241. The similar suggestions of a lack of progress by decades end see, T. Arnold Hill, "The Present Status of Negro Labor," *Opportunity* 7 (May 1929): 144-145.

***Considering the Relative Position of the Negro and Mexican Worker***

Not surprisingly given Johnson's training with Robert Park and the changing demographics of the workforce, the NUL was not satisfied with looking solely at black-white relations. When Johnson turned his attention to workplace race relations in Los Angeles, he found further evidence of the malleability of inter-racial labor relations. In part to debunk myths concerning black workers' suitability for particular occupations, Johnson drew attention to the diversity of occupations where black workers found work, including railway, management and manufacturing occupations.<sup>62</sup> Better relations between white and black employees partially accounted for greater opportunities. According to Johnson, despite "understandable" and "well founded" employer fears of friction between black and white laborers, little disorder occurred in firms with a mixed workforce. Johnson noted with some surprise, "No outstanding instance of racial disorder resulting from the use of Negro and white labor in the same plants came to the attention of this study."<sup>63</sup> In plants with an interracial workforce, Johnson found evidence that the objection to black workers "is not a permanent or deeply serious contingency" and "further evidence that the objection has faded after a short period of contact."<sup>64</sup>

For advocates of racial justice for African Americans such as Johnson, constructing an argument that confronted white worker and union racism were relatively straightforward, but the analysis became considerably more complicated when a third or fourth racial group was introduced into the mix. Looking comparatively at the experiences of a diverse working class, Johnson identified similarities in the experiences of black and Mexican workers who struggled to break into skilled occupations. In addition to obstacles posed by racism, Johnson attributed the difficulty that these two groups of workers faced in gaining employment in skilled occupations in part to a lack of "industrial background." "Like the Southern Negroes," Mexican workers in California "have been agricultural," he explained.<sup>65</sup>

But lack of industrial experience told only part of the story. Johnson took great interest in examining how the addition of large numbers of Asian, Mexican,

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<sup>62</sup> Charles S. Johnson, *Industrial Survey of the Negro Population of Los Angeles* (no publisher, 1926), 41; Charles S. Johnson, "Negro Workers in Los Angeles Industries," *Opportunity* 6 (August 1928): 235.

<sup>63</sup> Charles S. Johnson, "Negro Workers in Los Angeles Industries," *Opportunity* 6 (August 1928): 238.

<sup>64</sup> Charles S. Johnson, *Industrial Survey of the Negro Population of Los Angeles*, 36.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

and Mexican-American workers led to further variability in the drawing of the color line. It appeared to Johnson, for instance, that in iron, steel, brick, clay, and gas manufacturing, Mexicans greatly outnumbered African Americans, while in railroad work and public service, blacks outnumbered Mexicans.<sup>66</sup> Johnson found that the relationship between white, Mexican, and black workers varied radically across plants and firms. He reported, “White workers in one plant have demanded Mexicans and in another refused to work with them; insisted on separate lavatories in plants and accepted unsegregated ones in others; objected to Mexicans in one place and accepted Negroes in another.”<sup>67</sup>

Johnson did not work alone in wrestling with these issues. At this critical juncture, as both populations were in flux, there was an active process of evaluating the position of each group relative to the other. While there was certainly evidence of white workers’ resistance in the West to working alongside Mexican workers, the widespread and virulent grassroots resistance that became so obvious in white attacks on black workers and residents in the East St. Louis and Chicago riots was not present. In fact, some investigators suggested, sometimes very subtly but at times not, that the Mexican and Mexican American experience of workplace discrimination in the U.S. was quite distinct from that of black Americans. For instance, in observing increased confusion over race issues in Texas as the population of Mexicans increased dramatically, sociologist and economist Max Sylvanus Handman—another Ph. D. from the University of Chicago—succinctly observed, “The theory that the Mexican is a white man is receiving its acid test.” Although Handman noted that the U.S. had no experience in handling non-white peoples as “anything but a subordinated or isolated group,” he also recognized that Mexicans, in the treatment they received and demanded, were distinct from African Americans and becoming more so as they increasingly put down roots.<sup>68</sup> Taylor and Gamio too wrestled with the comparability of the Mexican experience with that of earlier European immigrants and black Americans. When it came to finding a comparative immigrant experience in residential patterns, Taylor concluded that while Mexicans and Americans occupied the same “natural geographic area,” the “race-class-culture line of separation” for Mexicans made the African American experience, rather than the northern European, a more apt comparison.<sup>69</sup> For Gamio, however, skin color,

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid. and “Negro Workers in Los Angeles Industries,” *Opportunity*, 234-240.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 238. For further examples see *Negro Population of Los Angeles*, 45-46. Idem., *The Negro in American Civilization: A Study of Negro Life and Race Relations in the Light of Social Research* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1930); 78-79.

<sup>68</sup> Max Sylvannus Handman, “The Mexican Immigrant in Texas,” *NCSW* (1926), 336; idem, “The Mexican Immigrant in Texas” *Southwestern Political and Social Science Quarterly* 8 (1926), 334.

low pay, and a tradition of subservience among the class of Mexicans who came to the U.S. assured that they would remain in the “lowest American social strata,” with the exception of African Americans. Gamio noted, “It should be recognized . . . that the race prejudice which exists toward the Mexican has never been so pronounced or exaggerated as that felt toward the Negro.”<sup>70</sup>

Experts on both the Mexican and Negro problem, then, had to decide to what degree they wanted to emphasize commonalities and differences between these two groups of workers who were just then entering industry in significant numbers. This, to put it mildly, was a tricky business. Both groups made the case for assimilation and all recognized major changes in the demographics of the labor force, but they struggled with how to depict the progress of one group relative to the other. To be sure, the evidence on this question was mixed and there was no consensus even within studies. For instance, Taylor’s painstaking, multi-volume study, *Mexican Labor in the United States*, contained a close analysis of relations among black, white, white-ethnic, and Mexican workers that stressed variability in these relationships depending on region, workplace, management, and make-up of the workforce, among other factors. Such variability left the general characterization of these relationships open to interpretation.

Whereas Johnson emphasized the malleability and variation in race relations over time and space, some experts on Mexican workers suggested that while Mexicans felt the brunt of white worker racism, they had experienced considerably less resistance than black Americans in integrating white workplaces and neighborhoods and in many cases themselves felt a racial antipathy toward black workers. Describing a divergence from the African American experience in northern housing, Taylor—writing now for a broader audience in the *Survey*—found less segregation in northern cities than in the Southwest. Taylor noted that Mexicans in the Midwest and East lived in neighborhoods either abandoned or currently occupied by European immigrants. Contrasting what he had encountered in the Southwest, Taylor concluded that Mexican workers’ housing “reflects the position Mexicans themselves hold among the other immigrants in northern industry; it is less distinctive and less isolated than that which, as members of *la raza*, they occupy in the Southwest.”<sup>71</sup> J. Blaine Gwin of the

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<sup>69</sup> Taylor, *Mexican Labor in the United States Imperial Valley*, 83.

<sup>70</sup> Manuel Gamio, *Mexican Immigration to the United States: A Study of Human Immigration and Adjustment* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1971), 156. Taylor too found evidence to suggest that there was less racial prejudice directed at Mexican relative to black workers. Paul S. Taylor, *Mexican Labor in the United States: Chicago and the Calumet Region*, University of California Publications in Economics, vol. 7, no. 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1932), 109.

<sup>71</sup> Taylor, “Mexicans North of the Rio Grande,” 197, 200.

Associated Charities in El Paso and the American Red Cross noted that while Mexicans “tend to congregate in sections by themselves,” these “sections are not so closely defined as the sections where the colored race is found.”<sup>72</sup>

The effort to distinguish between the Mexican and African American reception extended to the workplace. Gwin described less racial antipathy toward Mexican workers, suggesting, “Nowhere has the race question been raised where Mexicans work side by side with other peoples.”<sup>73</sup> In his examination of the Imperial Valley, Taylor further noted “a dislike which Mexicans profess to living among colored people.”<sup>74</sup> Though he had no sympathy for either race, former Congressman Slayden too described a “jealousy and dislike” between these groups brought on in part due to classification of Mexicans as white in southern states.<sup>75</sup>

On the issue of Mexican workers replacing or succeeding black workers in industry, uncertainty reigned, but the stakes and investigators’ interest were unquestionably high. If black workers could be shown to be moving into more skilled positions as newer Mexican workers entered the workplace, then Johnson and others could point to industrial progress for black Americans who were taking the next step toward assimilation. But if Mexican workers were supplanting black workers in industry that case would be more difficult to make. Indeed, Johnson pointed to just that phenomenon, noting that new Mexican workers were taking jobs in regions abandoned by white and black farmers or industrial jobs first taken up by black migrants during the war. According to Johnson, “As yet there is but little actual competition, the Mexicans taking the least desirable jobs, pushing up Negroes one grade as the Negroes in turn pushed up the foreign born, who in turn pushed up the native whites.”<sup>76</sup> Taylor concurred in general but with some significant qualifications. He found that between WWI and 1928, the situation varied between industries and as a result of company recruitment strategies, but

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<sup>72</sup> J.B. Gwin, “Social Problems of Our Mexican Population,” *National Conference On Social Work* (1926); 331.

<sup>73</sup> Gwin, 330.

<sup>74</sup> Taylor, *Mexican Labor in the United States Imperial Valley*, 23. Taylor would find corroborating evidence to support this point. See idem., *Mexican Labor in the United States: Bethlehem, Pennsylvania*, University of California Publications in Economics, vol. 7 no. 6 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1931), 17. Paul S. Taylor, *An American Mexican Frontier* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 1934).

<sup>75</sup> Slayden, “Some Observations on Mexican Immigration.” 124.

<sup>76</sup> Charles S. Johnson, *The Negro in American Civilization: A Study of Negro Life and Race Relations in the Light of Social Research* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1930), 37; Charles S. Johnson, “Some Economic Aspects of Negro Migration,” *Opportunity* 5 (October 1927): 297-299;

that there was evidence of Mexicans replacing black workers. The more significant and larger trend, however, was in the proportion of black and Mexican workers in industries like steel and meatpacking that had increased dramatically. The overall trend, Taylor concluded, suggested that it was “clearly the ‘whites’ who have been replaced during this longer period.”<sup>77</sup>

A closer look at the work of Johnson, Taylor, and others reveals an even more complicated and significant story concerning inter-racial and ethnic relations in industry. Advocates for black and Mexican workers could take comfort in evidence that suggested that traditional patterns of immigration and assimilation had trumped racism in industry. But there was evidence of a more troubling scenario that suggested competition for entry-level positions between Mexican and black workers. Roden Fuller, for instance, found a, “gradual displacement of Negro labor by Mexican labor in the main occupations open to both throughout” Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona.<sup>78</sup> Handman added that the “displacement of the Negro by the Mexican on railroad construction is proceeding at a rapid pace.”<sup>79</sup> In a chilling finding that must have alarmed Johnson, he too described employers in cities with a large Mexican population who believed that black workers could perform satisfactorily if given a chance, but who also, since white workers refused to work with African Americans found it more convenient to hire Mexicans instead.<sup>80</sup> As the doors to immigrants closed during the 1920s, the possibility that black and Mexican workers could be sequestered at the bottom of American industry competing for the most meager of wages and opportunities surely troubled advocates for racial justice.

### ***Remaking the Public Image of the Mexican Problem***

If the relative progress of black and Mexican workers posed a dilemma for experts and advocates of each of these groups, there was unquestioned agreement on the efficacy of using new expertise and knowledge as a means of attacking long held and racist stereotypes. As in the case of black workers, one of the first tasks was to debunk the idea that Mexicans lacked the ability and aspirations to

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<sup>77</sup>Paul S. Taylor, “Some Aspects of Mexican Immigration.” *The Journal of Political Economy* 38 (October 1930), 615; Paul S. Taylor, *Mexican Labor in the United States*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1931), 48.

<sup>78</sup> Roden Fuller, “Occupations of the Mexican-Born Population of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, 1900-1920,” *Journal of the American Statistical Association* 23 (March 1928), 66. For similar though often inconclusive sentiments see Max Sylvannus Handman, “The Mexican Immigrant in Texas,” *NCSW* (1926), 335-336; T. Arnold Hill, “The Negro in Industry,” 52;

<sup>79</sup>Handman, 336.

<sup>80</sup>Charles S. Johnson, “Negro Workers in Los Angeles Industries,” 239. See also “Ira DeA. Reid, “Negro Life on the Western Front,” *Opportunity* 7 (September 1929): 275.

move out of unskilled manual labor. Taylor and others drew on employers' testimonials and aggregate occupational data to make this point. For instance, at Bethlehem Steel, President Grace described recently arrived Mexican workers as "doing better than expected"; while most were working as unskilled laborers, "some have done so well that they have been advanced."<sup>81</sup> Others joined Taylor in emphasizing upward mobility of Mexican workers. McLean boldly proclaimed that the "Mexican is the Atlas who holds upon his broad shoulders the industrial world in the Southwest."<sup>82</sup> Gwin further undermined the stereotypes of Mexican workers, adding that they had "shown ability to develop as skilled workmen if given time and patient instruction."<sup>83</sup>

Few stereotypes of the Mexican worker came under more consistent skepticism than the hard-to-kill "homing" thesis. Agricultural interests were deeply invested in the myth that Mexican workers automatically returned to Mexico, which justified the openness of the border. But they were not alone in this concern. As the congressional discussion referenced in this chapter's introduction suggests, many white Americans were vexed by the implications for American racial identity if still another dark-skinned race were allowed to settle in the U.S. and eventually claim the full rights of citizenship. Undeterred, Taylor and others developed a two-pronged attack that aimed first, to describe the "Mexican Problem" as a national concern, and second, to demonstrate the folly of voluntary or coercive efforts to eradicate a ethnic Mexican population from the United States.

Like the DNE and Johnson, Taylor and others demonstrated repeatedly that the Mexican Problem was a national rather than merely a regional concern. Echoing the case made by the DNE concerning the nationalization of race issues, Taylor detailed the tremendous increase in Mexican workers in northern industry and compared the migration of Mexican workers to the Great Migration. "In the long run" he concluded, "there is probably about as much, but no more, reason to regard the Mexican population as confined to a region than the Negro population."<sup>84</sup> In reporting his investigation of the Imperial Valley during the spring and summer of 1927, Taylor described a settled and permanent Mexican population that was "vastly more important numerically than the group which crosses the line for seasonal work . . . and of infinitely greater social significance

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<sup>81</sup>Paul S. Taylor, "Mexican Labor in the United States, Volume II," 13.

<sup>82</sup>McLean, "Mexican Workers in the United States," 536.

<sup>83</sup>J.B. Gwin, "Social Problems of Our Mexican Population," *National Conference On Social Work* (1926); 329, 330.

<sup>84</sup>Paul S. Taylor, "Some Aspects of Mexican Immigration," *The Journal of Political Economy* 38 (October 1930), 612.

to the United States, for these are becoming a permanent part of the culture of the valley.”<sup>85</sup> Along these same lines and earlier than most, Ernestine M. Alvarado of the New York YWCA argued strongly as early as 1920 for greater integration of Mexican immigrants into the social, economic, and educational fabric of the nation. According to Alvarado, Mexican workers would be a “very useful element” in the “social life and prosperity of the nation,” if only unions, workers, schools, and employers would treat them and their children fairly.<sup>86</sup>

Similar to the NUL’s strategy of using organized labor to undermine any understanding of the labor problem that did not include African Americans, advocates for Mexican workers worked toward a more integrated “Labor Problem” by attacking the homing myth. As early as 1921, Gwin argued that coercive mechanisms to force Mexican immigrants to return had almost entirely failed and that “no one knows where” more than twenty percent of the workers admitted to the U.S. under war-time measures were. Preliminary estimates by the American Counsel at Chihuahua suggested that only fifty percent of those who migrated ever returned and, more broadly, that more peaceful conditions in Mexico had “no effect” on immigration to the United States.<sup>87</sup> Addressing the NCSW in 1929, Robert McLean of the Board of National Missions in Los Angeles spoke about the “pious hope” that, left alone, the Mexican problem would take care of itself as Mexicans returned to Mexico. Specifically addressing the Congressional hearings concerning the Box and Harris bills, McLean described interviews with Mexican workers who not only planned to stay in the U.S. as a result of preference by their children and the higher wages available in the U.S., but who overwhelmingly supported immigration restrictions to prevent further competition from new Mexican immigrants. McLean concluded, “The roots of our Mexican population are down too deep in our social and economic soil to permit of the possibility of a return.”<sup>88</sup> California Department of Industrial Relations investigator Louis Bloch’s analysis of actual and reported immigration of Mexicans added that “only a very small number of Mexicans return to their native land.”<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Paul S. Taylor, *Mexican Labor in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1930), 19.

<sup>86</sup> Ernestine M. Alvarado, “Mexican Immigration to the United States,” *NCSW* (1920), 479-480.

<sup>87</sup> J. Blaine Gwin, “Immigration along Our Southwest Border,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 93 (January 1921), 128, 129.

<sup>88</sup> Robert N. McLean, “Mexican Workers in the United States,” *NCSW* (1929), 534-535.

<sup>89</sup> Louis Bloch, “Facts About Mexican Immigration Before and Since the Quota Restriction Laws,” *Journal of American Statistical Association*, 24 (March 1929), 60. For a sampling of similar analysis see, Emory S. Bogardus, “The Mexican Immigrant and Segregation,” *The American Journal of Sociology*, 36 (July 1930), 77; Charles A. Thompson, “Mexicans—An Interpretation,”

Challenges to the “homer” thesis had an effect, even in Congress. When S. M. Nixon, a representative of southeastern Texas farmers, argued before the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization in 1926 that “Mexicans go south when the cold weather sets in,” the chair of the committee was skeptical. Drawing on recently concluded investigations by the Department of Labor, Chairman Albert Johnson challenged Nixon’s assertion, noting of those that came in legally for the fiscal year ending last July, only a small proportion went back.”<sup>90</sup> Testimony before the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization in 1929 led Johnson to conclude on behalf of the committee that the assertion that “Mexicans coming to the United States returned to Mexico after temporary, seasonal employment” could “not be sustained” given recent evidence of these workers consistent employment on and in the railroads and mills in the southwest “and elsewhere far removed from the southern border.”<sup>91</sup>

Investigators increased attention to the expectations and aspirations of the children of Mexican immigrants also helped to undermine traditional understandings of Mexicans and Mexican Americans while pointing to injustices against them that made citizenship in the United States impossible and, in some respects, undesirable from the point of view of the migrant. The work of sociologist Emory Bogardus provides an excellent example of this shift in thinking. Like Johnson, Bogardus earned his Ph.D. in Sociology under Park at Chicago. He moved to the University of Southern California in 1911 and in 1915 established a sociology department and five years later a school of social work. Bogardus’s work pointed to a generational shift within the Mexican American community. Earlier generations of immigrants had maintained a cultural if not physical tie to the homeland based on frequent return to Mexico in some cases and on a cultural nationalism born of ethnic pride and exclusion on the basis of race from American citizenship. In the 1920s, however, a second generation of American-born Mexican Americans wrestled with a more braided identity. Bogardus argued that this generation “is no longer satisfied with his parental culture; he feels himself a part of the United States and would like to be accepted as such.”

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*NCSW* (1928), 502; Ernest Galarza, “Life in the United States for Mexican People: Our of the Experience of a Mexican,” 399-404; Glenn E. Hoover, “Our Mexican Immigrants,” *Foreign Affairs* (October 1929), 3-4. Secretary of Labor James J. Davis to U. Senator William J. Harris, 28 December 1928, File 23 Migration Study Box 13, Paul S. Taylor Papers, Bancroft Library Manuscripts Division; Paul S. Taylor, *Mexican Labor in the United States: Bethlehem, Pennsylvania*, 23-24.

<sup>90</sup> U.S., Congress, House, Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, *Hearings on Seasonal Agricultural Laborers from Mexico*, 69<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1926, p. 45—check page number on this cite.

<sup>91</sup> House, Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, *Immigration From Countries of the Western Hemisphere*, report prepared by Albert Johnson, 71<sup>st</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1930, p.3-4

Rejecting antiquated and pedestrian conceptions of the “Mexican Problem,” Bogardus argued against a faith in the ephemeral nature of Mexicans in the United States and for an understanding of the Mexican-American experience that paralleled Dubois’ description of the dual-identity. According to Bogardus, “To be American-born of intelligent Mexican parents and to be versed in American culture, but at the same time to be viewed as Mexican, a ‘foreigner.’ And sometimes unjustly to be called a ‘dirty greaser’ causes the second generation Mexican to lose faith in us and in our country, even in humanity.”<sup>92</sup> Bogardus used American racism itself to explain why some Mexican migrants had less interest in citizenship. Comparing the experience of U.S. citizens in Mexico with that of Mexicans in the U.S., Bogardus reasoned that rejecting citizenship in one’s native land would lead to one less layer of protection: “By remaining a citizen of Mexico and by calling on the Mexican consul for Assistance the Mexican immigrant often can secure justice, whereas if he becomes an American citizen, he feels helpless.”<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Emory S. Bogardus, “Second Generation Mexicans,” *Sociology and Social Research* 13 (January 1929): 276-283. *idem.*, “The Mexican Immigrant and Segregation,” 74-80.

<sup>93</sup> Bogardus, “The Mexican Immigrant and Segregation,” 78. For more on the relationship between conditions in the US and the desire for citizenship see the investigation conducted for the Interchurch World Movement by G. Bromley Oxnam and summarized in G. Bromley Oxnam, “The Mexican in Los Angeles from the Standpoint of the Religious Forces of the City,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 93 (January 1921): 130-133.

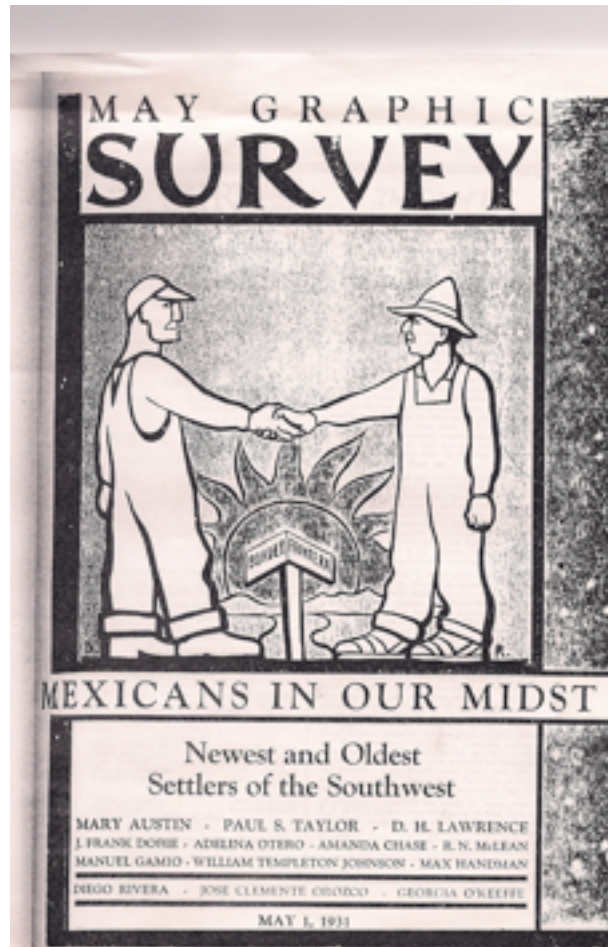


Figure 7.1 May 1, 1931 Cover of *Graphic Survey*

Some reviewers of Taylor’s SSRC studies expressed frustration with his failure to develop a clear hypothesis to go along with the voluminous data he had collected, but by the end of the decade Taylor, joined by a cadre of new voices on Mexican workers, published many articles that undermined the foundation of 1920s assumptions about Mexican immigration.<sup>94</sup> The May 1931 edition of *The Survey*, titled “Mexicans in Our Midst: Newest and Oldest Settlers of the Southwest,” featured a mix of social science and cultural celebration that—though certainly not as consistently laudatory of Mexican culture and its contribution to American life—echoed the magazine’s celebration of the Harlem Renaissance in its November 1924 edition edited by Alain Locke and Johnson. The 1931 edition

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<sup>94</sup> For one such review see, Walther T. Watson, “Mexican Labor in the United States: Dimmit County, Winter Garden District, South Texas,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 37 (September 1931), 312-313.

brought together the leading experts, including McClean, Taylor, and Gamio as well as leading artists such as Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco, Ansel E. Adams, and Georgia O’Keeffe. The volume had a reflective quality to it, which Taylor suggested in announcing that, as a result of the economic downturn, increased nativist sentiment, and stepped up effort to maintain control of the border, “the epoch of Mexican mass migration is now closed.”<sup>95</sup> Once again rejecting the notion that the Mexican presence was, or ever had been, an ephemeral phenomenon, contributors to the volume described the many contributions ethnic Mexicans had made and were making to American economic and cultural life.

Taylor’s anchoring article systematically decimated nearly all of the restrictionist and anti-restrictionist arguments concerning the status, aspirations, and ability of Mexican workers in the United States while at the same time underscoring the alienating impact of discrimination. Taylor drew, with hearty approval from the SSRC, on his extensive investigation to provide a broad overview of the importance of Mexican labor to American agriculture, but he also described the foothold these workers had achieved in northern industries, including steel, packing, and automobiles.<sup>96</sup> Taylor explicitly rejected the anti-restrictionist case that Mexican workers were somehow only capable of agricultural labor, arguing that they “show capacities seldom attributed to them by their agricultural employers.” Rather than viewing Mexican workers as somehow outside traditional immigration patterns, Taylor placed this migration stream and employment trajectory in the context of European immigrants and black migrants who entered industry first as unskilled and low paid workers before moving into better paying semi-skilled positions. Taylor noted that most of these workers were “still on the lowest rung of the ladder, but appreciable numbers are rising to the ranks of the semi-skilled” and earning higher wages.<sup>97</sup>

In the field of education, Taylor explicitly argued against notions of Mexican intellectual inferiority resulting from Indian or *mestizo* lineage. Here, too, Taylor’s research is suggestive of larger shifts in the analysis that clearly broke with older ideas concerning the determinative nature of race in explaining the aspirations and abilities of different racial and ethnic groups. Where other

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<sup>95</sup> Paul S. Taylor, “Mexicans North of the Rio Grande,” *The Survey* LXVI (1 May 1931), 205

<sup>96</sup> Robert Lynd congratulated Taylor on the article writing, “You are doing a genuine service in making the material you have gathered available to this wider group; all of which bears out the statement that I think I made to you when I was in Berkeley that dollar for dollar the Council has reason to be extraordinarily satisfied with its investment in the study of Mexican Immigrants under you.” Robert S. Lynd to Taylor, 5 May, 1931 Carton 10 Folder 1 Correspondence, Paul S Taylor Papers, UC Berkeley Bancroft Library, Manuscripts Collection.

<sup>97</sup> Paul S. Taylor, “Mexicans North of the Rio Grande,” *The Survey* LXVI (1 May 1931), 140. See also Max Sylvius Handman, “San Antonio: The Old Capital City of Mexican Life and Influence,” *ibid.*, 166.

observers had attributed the slow educational progress by Mexican youth to racial inferiority, Taylor argued that “social and economic grounds,” including poor schools and the need for wages, provided a sufficient explanation. While acknowledging that the vast majority of immigrants were some combination of Indian and *mestizo*, Taylor argued that the children of these working-class immigrants had “made brilliant records in high schools and even colleges, at times ranking as valedictorians.”<sup>98</sup> In an effort to subvert the collection of useful fictions expounded by employers who defended Mexican immigration as a way of recruiting cheap and docile laborers who had few aspirations aside from agricultural labor, Taylor quoted one land owner who lamented, “If the Mexicans learn English, they don’t work so well; if they get educated a little they don’t make such good farm hands.”<sup>99</sup> As to the idea that Mexican were inherently docile, Taylor offered up several instances of worker resistance to low wages and concluded, “The ‘docility’ of Mexican laborers, so frequently extolled by employers who seem to have believed them racially strike-proof, is not to be taken too literally.”<sup>100</sup>

In many respects, Ernesto Galarza embodied themes reflected in Bogardus’s and Taylor’s analysis of generational change. By decades end, Galarza began to emerge as one of the most forceful and durable advocates for an understanding of the Mexican problem rooted in the experiences of Mexican immigrants. In spearheading this effort to re-represent Mexicans and Mexican-Americans and challenge received conceptions of the race, Galarza drew attention to Mexican immigrants who had already settled in the United States, their problems, and their vital economic contributions. Born in Mexico in 1905, Galarza came to California with a wave of immigrants who left Mexico during the rise of the Mexican revolution. After graduating from Occidental College, he was awarded a scholarship to Stanford, where he earned a Master’s degree in Political Science and History. Before the National Conference on Social Work in 1929 and in the 1931 Taylor-edited *Survey*, Galarza explicitly took up the cause of articulating the Mexican problem from the point of view of the Mexican immigrant who had already settled in the United States. Galarza argued, “Unless the Mexican immigrant in the United States is made articulate, unless his economic contribution to the development of the western United States is recognized and rewarded, unless his needs and interests are considered from his own point of view, any attempt to solve the problem will lack the most vital of all values, the human value.”<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Taylor, “Mexicans North of the Rio Grande,” 200-201.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>101</sup> Galarza, “Life in the United States for Mexican People” 404

Galarza reasoned that the absence of an accurate understanding of Mexican workers resulted from three factors, namely disorganization, disillusionment, and consistent effort to discredit all peoples of Mexican descent. Galarza described a level of disorganization rooted in the persistent poverty that compelled Mexican workers to move frequently, inhibiting community formation. Identifying Mexicans as a disillusioned people resigned to disappointment and “without benefit of lobby,” Galarza nicely evoked philosopher John Dewey in his *Survey* article, suggesting that the person of Mexican origins in the United States “is what John Dewey might call a pathetic public with its tragic problem.”<sup>102</sup> Signaling still a more dramatic break with Gamio’s racial determinism, Galarza took aim at efforts to diminish the contributions of Mexican immigrants based on their background. Frustrating assimilationist efforts, according to Galarza, was a consistent effort to paint Mexican contributions to American culture and society as “representative of a degenerate Indian stock” and somehow outside “the ‘practical’ spirit of the times.”<sup>103</sup>

As a young immigrant in his late twenties and early thirties, Galarza, more effectively than anyone else in the period, made conspicuous the many problems associated with the one-dimensional portrayal of the Mexican as singularly a worker. Such an understanding was particularly problematic for the children of immigrants who occupied, according to Galraza, a “difficult borderland through which it seems that all second generation immigrants must pass.” Those who had the opportunity to attend public schools rejected the hard labor taken up by their parents and experienced a cooling of affinity for Mexico. Instead, and in words that echoed Alvarado’s call before the NCSW in 1920 and those of experts on African Americans who made a similar effort, they embraced much that was American, but as a result of prejudice they were unable to secure a “place in the social scheme of their adopted country.”<sup>104</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Johnson’s reflections on the relationship between conceptions and conduct in the chapter’s opening quote suggests the importance that all of these investigators placed on the need for knowledge that challenged the basic ideas about race groups that helped to prop up and justify a racism that was woven into the fabric of New Era American society. Johnson nicely summed up the significance of these efforts and the stakes if they were unsuccessful: “The riots in Washington, Atlanta, Chicago, East St. Louis, and Omaha, are striking examples of accumulated resentments, unchallenged mutual beliefs, the one race [has] about the other. If these beliefs can be made accessible for examination, there is hope

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<sup>102</sup> Galarza, “Life in the United States for Mexican People,” 404; Ernest Galarza, “Without Benefit of Lobby,” *The Survey* LXVI (1 May 1931): 181.

<sup>103</sup> Galarza, “Without Benefit of Lobby,” 181.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 402.

that many of them may be corrected.”<sup>105</sup> By drawing attention to variations across industries, workplaces, and regions, these experts demonstrated that segregation, racism, and discrimination were choices, not inevitabilities or conditions. Investigations into women, Mexican, and black workers worked with some, though not complete, success to dispel these “false notions” by demonstrating that these Americans were permanent parts of the nation’s workforce whose rights and expectations needed to be integrated into the larger discourse regarding the “Labor Problem.” During this crucial period, these experts began to examine more closely the nature of racism and discrimination in northern and western cities. The belief that black and Mexican workers would, either, naturally move up through the ranks in industry or continue to labor in their present station without protest was replaced by an understanding that emphasized the need for direct action to overcome institutional and individual impediments to racial advancement.

The nationalization of the Negro and Mexican problems aided this effort. If the Mexican and Negro problems could be described as regional concerns, they could easily be ignored, but when they became an American problem the stakes were much higher for policymakers, who were beginning to ratchet up the rhetoric against the emerging Soviet threat. By drawing attention to the national injustices visited upon Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, and African Americans, this group of social scientists and their supporters established a tradition of publicizing the insupportable contradictions in American democracy and race relations that would culminate in Gunnar Myrdal’s 1944 epic study of American race relations, *American Dilemma*, though Myrdal’s study would not maintain the attention to political-economic issues so characteristic of the 1920s studies of race and race relations.

In the end, these efforts also were meant to pose a challenge to all Americans. In an address before the New York State Conference of Charities and Corrections in 1925, Eugene Kinkle Jones summed it up nicely. “We are engaged in America in an experiment of national life which at present is an example to the rest of the world. We have made great strides forward in handling most all of the social problems we face. Probably we have made less progress in solving the problem of race contacts than in any other direction.” Then in language that linked Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass’ challenge to America in the nineteenth century to the modern civil rights movement, Jones linked the civil rights struggle to the survival of American democracy in a way that would have resonated with Anderson, Van Kleeck, Galarza and others in this period: “The opportunity for statesmanship service to humanity is ours. The obligation is ours. We cannot pass on to posterity the responsibility for work which we should

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<sup>105</sup>Johnson, “Public Opinion and the Negro,” 498.

assume. The challenge of democracy is before us. The Negro is probably the real test of democracy in America. Shall this democracy endure?”<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Jones, “Negro Migration in New York State,” 11.