

# Situating Mexican Immigration in Contemporary U.S. South

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***Abstract:** As immigration has become embedded with issues of national security in the twenty-first century, leading ultimately toward an escalation of enforcement actions pursued at all levels of government and an unprecedented growth in the immigration detention system, dominant discourse in the United States has bent mostly, though not exclusively, toward highlighting the supposed criminality of the Mexican immigrant population. In order to understand the significance of the period, this essay examines how the dominant narrative of criminality has been reflected in the metropolitan area of Charlotte, North Carolina, in the first decade of the new millennium. The analysis is provided within a historical context of Mexican immigration to the United States, which is directly linked to U.S. government economic and military policies from the mid-nineteenth century to the present.*

***Keywords:** Immigration enforcement policy – U.S. South – immigration – North Carolina – Mexican labor*

## **Introduction**

One defining feature in the Southeast United States region, also known as the U.S. South, has been the increased presence of Latina/o communities, particularly since the 1990s, and predominantly of Mexican ori-

gin.<sup>1</sup> According to a 2005 report entitled the *New Latino South* by the Pew Hispanic Center, six states in the Southeast United States – Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee – each registered at least a 200 percent increase in their Latina/o populations from 1990 to 2000.<sup>2</sup> Results from the 2010 United States Census confirm that a regional Latina/o presence has continued. For example, persons identified as Latina/o grew from 4.3 percent to 7.6 percent of the total population in North Carolina from 2000 to 2010. In Mecklenburg County, the central location of this study, Latinas/os were numbered at 111,944 persons or 12 percent of the total population in 2010, compared to 44,871 or 6 percent in the year 2000. As we continue into the second decade of the new millennium, it is clear that Latina/o families and communities represent an important and permanent presence in the region.

One response to this demographic shift has been the intellectual formation of a new literature in the past decade, reflected mostly in anthologies and scholarly articles.<sup>3</sup> To date, this scholarship has provided an important role in documenting and interpreting varied experiences of Latina/o migration and settlement in the contemporary period. The present article seeks to contribute to this growing body of scholarship by analyzing how the politics of immigration enforcement, expressed through local policy legislation, have played out in the metropolitan area of Charlotte, North Carolina, and surrounding communities during the first decade of the twenty-first century. My primary focus in this study is to discern and critique the main rationalizations used in conjunction with local immigration enforcement policy in this one area, particularly in relation to the representations of Mexican residents living and working in the area. As immigration has become embedded with issues of terrorism and homeland security in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, communities throughout the country, including in the U.S. South, have witnessed an escalation of enforcement actions pursued at all levels of government and an unprecedented growth in the immigration detention system. During 2005

- 1 The term “Latina/o” is utilized here to designate persons whose ancestral belonging originates from countries in Latin America and who reside in the United States. This article is dedicated to my parents, Antonio C. and Gloria L. Vásquez.
- 2 Rakesh Kochar, Roberto Suro, and Sonya Tafoya, “New Latino South: The Context and Consequences of the Rapid Population Growth,” *Pew Hispanic Center*, 26 July 2005, ii.
- 3 Due to the different historical experiences of Mexican migration and settlement, the states of Texas and Florida have been included and excluded from existing scholarship on Latinas/os in the U.S. South. Concurrent with the most recent work, the Southeast United region includes Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, West Virginia, and Virginia.

and 2006, for example, the state of North Carolina gained recognition, with Pennsylvania, for pursuing the highest total number of enforcement measures in the country. These ranged from making proclamations of English as the official language of government to discontinuing contracts with businesses that knowingly employ workers without citizenship documentation.<sup>4</sup> As one of the first locations to pursue an immigration enforcement agenda in North Carolina and the U.S. South, including the now controversial 287(g) Program that will be discussed further in this article, the metropolitan area of Charlotte provides an excellent case study to discern real and potential human costs at the local level and to understand the contemporary politics of immigration enforcement in relation to prior historical periods of anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican sentiment in the United States.

A secondary goal in this article is to contextualize the study of Latinas/os in the U.S. South within the larger historical narrative and counter-narratives of Mexican incorporation struggles in the United States, connecting with and amplifying concerns that have resonated in Chicana/o Studies.<sup>5</sup> While the majority of existing scholarship on Latinas/os in the U.S. South continues to make important insights in highlighting issues at the micro level, I seek to demonstrate in this essay the importance of situating the contemporary within the historical. For Mexican peoples living in the United States, as inheritors of “double colonization,” their historical incorporation as subordinate subjects became defined in the mid-nineteenth century with the colonization of northern Mexican territories through the Mexican American War and consequent economic subordination of Mexico.<sup>6</sup> “The U.S. conquest of Mexico in the mid-nineteenth century,” Dionicio Valdés states, “marked an important shift in the direction of economic and political power between the two countries.”<sup>7</sup> The resulting conquests have

4 Mai Thi Nguyen, “Immigration Ordinances in North Carolina,” *Institute for Emerging Issues Innovation Online*, 29 August 2007.

5 The emergence of an official Chicana/o Studies intellectual formation took place in the late 1960s as a counter to traditional academic literature that either ignored the presence of Mexican-descent populations in the United States or dehumanized them.

6 Gilbert G. Gonzalez and Raul A. Fernandez, *A Century of Chicano History: Empire, Nations, and Migration* (New York, London: Routledge Press, 2003), 29-65. The term “double colonization” is adopted from the work of Laura Gómez, *Manifest Destinies: The Making of the Mexican American Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

7 Dionicio Valdés, “Region, Nation, and World-System: Perspectives on Midwestern Chicana/o History,” in *Voices of a New Chicana/o History*, eds. Dionicio Valdés and Refugio Rochín (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2000), 132.

influenced the terms of unequal engagement between the United States and Mexico at the international level, which continue to the present. In this regard, the unprecedented migrations of Mexican peoples to and from the U.S. South since the 1990s, coinciding with the North American Free Trade Agreement and the large-scale displacement of low-income workers in Mexico, should be contextualized as a consequence of U.S. colonial conquests. And in concert with the historical record, the anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican current expressed during the first decade of the twenty-first century, in places such as Charlotte, North Carolina, as will be discussed in this article, is part of a larger and ongoing story of real and symbolic violence experienced by Mexican-descent communities at the hands of the state and dominant culture in the United States.

In order to season this discussion, the present article will start by highlighting major trends of immigration enforcement at the national level since 2001, under the banner of national security. Following this brief overview, attention will turn toward analyzing how these policies have been reflected in the metropolitan area of Charlotte, North Carolina. Given the primary role that they play as policymakers in drafting and implementing measures at different levels of government, I have decided to focus in this section on the voices of local political leadership. The types of policies they prioritize and advocate have direct consequences for families living in that jurisdiction. In addition, the local political representatives have greater access to community resources, such as mainstream media, and, thus, they are in an important position to shape public perceptions in the dominant culture regarding a specific issue, in this case the need for immigration enforcement at the local level. This essay will conclude with a brief discussion on the significance of Mexican migration and settlement in the U.S. South for present and future generations. Before moving forward, it is also important to briefly recognize the varied sources of data that have informed the analysis of this study. Newspaper articles from *The Charlotte Observer* and *Gaston Gazette* were particularly useful. Other sources included press releases and website material, a congressional hearing on local law enforcement, the Mecklenburg County Sheriff's Department, a Gaston County resolution, and Spanish-language newspapers *Mi Gente* and *Que Pasa*. In the end, this single-case study will help provide a glimpse into how the politics of immigration enforcement, which include the use of anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican sentiment, reinforce both the historical subordinate positioning of Mexican peoples, and racial and economic inequalities in the United States.

### Contemporary Immigration Enforcement without Reform

Concurrent with the increased immigration from Mexico to the United States in the past three decades has been the intensification of immigration enforcement. In the absence of federal legislation, at least two trends have defined enforcement in the first decade of the twenty-first century, what Walter A. Ewing has described as “enforcement without reform.”<sup>8</sup> While enforcement and detention have been steadily growing since the 1990s and particularly with the “Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act” of 1996, the events surrounding September 11, 2001, further stimulated the expansion of actions nationwide in the form of worksite enforcement and increased state and local collaboration.<sup>9</sup> The most visible expression of worksite enforcement was the escalation of nationally coordinated and highly publicized immigration raids. According to the Department of Homeland Security, for example, the number of worksite arrests increased from approximately 510 in 2002 to 6,287 in 2008. This marked an increase of roughly 1,133 percent within a six-year period.<sup>10</sup> In addition to immigration raids, other strategies included increased fines and penalties against employers, the use of undercover agents at various worksites, and the implementation of an employment verification (e-verify) system, all trying to implement “a culture of compliance and enforcement.”<sup>11</sup>

In conjunction with worksite actions, the first decade also ushered in the increased involvement of state and local governments in the business of immigration enforcement. The two most notable examples of this collaboration have been the unprecedented growth of the 287(g) Program and, subsequently, the Secure Communities Program. Through 287(g), selected state and local officers – such as highway patrol, city police, or county sheriff officials – are able to receive training administered by ICE and thereafter be-

8 Walter A. Ewing, “Enforcement Without Reform: How Current U.S. Immigration Policies Undermine National Security and the Economy,” *JSRI Research Report No. 38* (East Lansing: Julian Samora Research Institute, Michigan State University, 2008).

9 David Manuel Hernández, “Undue Process: Racial Genealogies of Immigrant Detention,” in *Constructing Borders/Crossing Boundaries: Race, Ethnicity, and Immigration*, ed. Carolina B. Brettell (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2007), 59-86.

10 “ICE Worksite Enforcement Overview,” U.S. Customs and Immigration Enforcement, Department of Homeland Security, 30 April 2009, accessed March 2010; available at <http://www.ice.gov/pi/news/factsheets/worksite.html>.

11 Laurie M. Dawn, Mahsa Aliaskari, and Joe Whitley, “2008: The Year of Increased Worksite Enforcement,” in *Homeland Security: Legal and Policy Issues*, eds. Joe D. Whitley and Lynne K. Zusman (Chicago, Illinois: American Bar Association Publishing, 2009): 123-139.

come certified as agents for immigration enforcement in their local municipalities. Each 287(g) Program is approved through individual memoranda of understanding agreements (MOAs) between ICE and the participating state and local agencies. Although existent since 1996, only in the twenty-first century has this operation become a tool for immigration enforcement. In 2002, for example, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement was the only agency with an existing agreement. By December 2009, there were approximately 71 active agreements across the country, with the majority located in communities across the U.S. South.<sup>12</sup> A more recent development in the enforcement agenda has been the institutionalization of the Secure Communities Program. Established in 2008, the Program authorizes local law enforcement officers to fingerprint persons transported to participating jails. The fingerprints are then compared to federal databases available through the Program, which determine their immigration status.

Both these programs have been subjected to varied forms of criticism. In an open letter to President of the United States on August 25, 2009, well over 500 national, regional, state, and local organizations in the United States voiced opposition to the 287(g) Program, highlighting the practice of racial and ethnic profiling as evident in the “disproportionate numbers of Latinos in particular places, for arrest,” and other civil rights abuses.<sup>13</sup> The Congressional Hispanic Caucus issued its own letter in September 2011, calling for an immediate end to the Program based on similar concerns.<sup>14</sup> While more recent, the Secure Communities Program has also been challenged. In a July 20, 2011, letter to the Director of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, over 200 groups called for a halt to the operation due mainly to its lack of transparency and, in turn, accountability, the encouragement of racial profiling, and its “driving a wedge between local police and the communities they serve.”<sup>15</sup> In addition to worksite enforcement such as immigration raids, both the 287(g) Program and Secure Communi-

12 In December 2009, there were sixty-six mutually signed agreements and five active agreements “pending good faith,” according to the Department of Homeland Security; the top four states with the largest number of 287(g) agreements were, in numerical order, Arizona, Virginia, North Carolina, and Georgia. When accessed in March 2011, the number of active agreements shown was sixty-nine; available from <http://www.ice.gov/news/library/factsheets/287g.htm#signed-moa>.

13 “Letter to President Obama Regarding 287(g) Program,” National Immigration Law Center, 25 August 2009.

14 “Letter to The Honorable Barack Obama,” Congressional Hispanic Caucus, 28 September 2009.

15 “Letter to Director John T. Morton,” National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, 20 July 2011.

ties Program have been in practice in localities in North Carolina. In early 2006, Mecklenburg County became the first jurisdiction in the state, and one of the first in the region, to establish the 287(g) Program. And by March 2011, despite concerns from immigrant rights advocates, all 100 counties in the Tar Heel state had signed-on to utilize Secure Communities. This development is congruent with the push by the current administration to establish the Secure Communities Program in every jail across the United States by the year 2013.

**“No more excuses. You’re drunk. You’re driving. You’re illegal. You’re deported. Period.”**

In concert with the spread of anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican sentiment nationwide, the turn toward local immigration enforcement was realized in jurisdictions in North Carolina during the year 2005. In the area under study, this turn was expressed through several proposals, including making English the official language of county government, limiting the number of persons in rental homes, penalizing businesses who employ undocumented workers, and certifying local officers as agents for immigration enforcement.<sup>16</sup> In September 2005, for example, following a fatal accident that led to the death of a local school teacher, U.S. Representative Sue Myrick (R-NC) introduced the “Scott Gardner Act,” calling for the deportation of undocumented persons charged with drinking while driving. At the same time, she introduced the “10K Run For the Border Act,” meant to penalize employers who hire undocumented workers. In December 2005, a Charlotte Immigration Task Force met for the first time, formed by then-Mayor Pat McCrory. The formation of the Task Force led to a series of recommendations on immigration enforcement at the community level. Additionally, in December 2005, three Mecklenburg County Commission members presented a three-part resolution that sought to deny county services for undocumented persons, implement an immigration verification system for companies, and require local sheriff officers to screen their inmate population. One of the provisions, known as the 287(g) Program, was eventually approved in February 2006 by Mecklenburg County Commission. And, in November 2006, neighboring Gaston County approved a resolution that

16 Nguyen, “Immigration Ordinances in North Carolina;” “Policy: To Adopt Policies and Apply Staff Direction Relating to Illegal Residents in Gaston County,” Gaston County Commission, 9 November 2006.

sought to limit the number of persons per rental home, discontinue local programs servicing undocumented residents, and stop issuing contracts with companies employing undocumented workers. Given the call for immigration enforcement in and around Charlotte, North Carolina, during this period, it is important to understand how these measures were proposed.

While preliminary, one clear trend in reviewing the literature that accompanied these immigration enforcement policies was the overwhelming negative portrayal of Mexican residents living and working in the area, depicted as law breakers, burdens to society, or threats to national security. When the "Scott Gardner Act," for example, was introduced in September 2005, Representative Myrick stated the following: "No more excuses. You're drunk. You're driving. You're illegal. You're deported. Period."<sup>17</sup> And in December 2005, in response to another drinking and driving incident, Representative Myrick stated, "I'm going to offer an amendment on the floor that says, 'I don't think that we need to give them two more times to kill somebody.'"<sup>18</sup> When introducing the 287(g) Program in Mecklenburg County, Representative Myrick was quoted as stating: "For too long, illegal aliens have really just flaunted the law. With this program we hope we can identify those people, detain them and send them back home."<sup>19</sup> When Representative Myrick introduced legislation to deny state driver's licenses to undocumented persons, she stated: "Our feeling is that a driver's license is a privilege for citizens and legal aliens and it shouldn't be something given to somebody who broke the law."<sup>20</sup> The depiction of the law breaker was present throughout all material reviewed in this study.

In terms of the representation of Mexicans as burdens to society, this is best exemplified by the measure proposed and implemented in neighboring Gaston County. The resolution adopted by the Gaston County Commission called for a county-wide tightening of immigration enforcement. The measure was justified with the following narrative:

Impact issues include: overcrowding in school classrooms, public parks and recreational facilities, depleting affordable housing which was already in short supply for lower in-

17 "Myrick Seeks Immigration Crackdown," *Charlotte Observer*, 16 August 2005.

18 "Bill Puts N.C. in Borders Debate: House Representatives From State Push to Toughen Legislation," *Charlotte Observer*, 9 December 2005.

19 "Local Action On Immigrants—Mecklenburg County Deputies To Screen People Charged with Crimes For Illegal Status," *Charlotte Observer*, 7 February 2006.

20 "Myrick Threatens N.C. Funds," *Charlotte Observer*, 10 November 2005.



come citizens, creating havoc and death on our highways; increasing crime rate due to lack of comprehension of the English language and inability to read and follow established laws; and lack of social and personal health care standards. The illegal immigrant population is estimated to be increasing by about a million people annually.<sup>21</sup>

In commenting on the need for the resolution, Gaston County Commissioner John Torbett was quoted as saying: "It's like giving a green light to illegals. And if they're here, they're going to access county services."<sup>22</sup> Commissioner Torbett went on to state that the approved resolution directs the local law enforcement to "diligently battle the ever-increasing criminal element, which is growing daily with the influx of the illegal population."<sup>23</sup> In addition, the former-Mayor of Charlotte Pat McCrory expressed support for immigration enforcement during an unsuccessful run for the Governor of the state in 2008. Part of the justification was provided in the following, which was sent as part of a message on immigration to possible supporters during his campaign: "How would you like to be one of these kids who doesn't get pregnant, works hard in school, doesn't join a gang, goes to church on Sunday, but when they go down to the fast food restaurant, they are told we can't hire you because we need bi-lingual employees. It goes on and on and it needs to stop now."<sup>24</sup> One implication in this statement, at the very least, is that immigration enforcement at the local level is necessary to remove the undocumented population who, as criminals, do nothing to contribute to society.

A final negative portrayal that emerged in this study was the association of Mexican immigration with terrorism and national security. This connection was expressed by former Mecklenburg County Sheriff and current Commissioner Jim Pendergraph in promotion of the 287(g) Program. In a written testimony before a congressional hearing in August 2006, then Sheriff Pendergraph stated the following:

Even though I have great concern for the flood of illegals coming across our southern border looking for a better way of life, my bigger concern is for those crossing our porous

21 "Policy: To Adopt Policies and Apply Staff Direction Relating to Illegal Residents in Gaston County," *Gaston County Commission*, 9 November 2006.

22 "Reducing Illegals?," *Gaston Gazette*, 9 November 2006.

23 Ibid.

24 "NC: Gov Republican Candidate Calls Hispanics Pregnant, Stupid, Murdering, Atheists with Great Jobs?" *The Daily Kos*, 23 October 2008, accessed September 2010; available from <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2008/10/23/639693/-NC:Gov-Republican-candidate-calls-Hispanics-pregnant,-stupid,-murdering,-atheists-with-great-jobs>.

border looking to cause harm and commit acts of terrorism against the United States. This is a serious Homeland Security issue.<sup>25</sup>

Appealing to issues of national security in a *Charlotte Observer* article in December 2006, he also commented that “[h]e can be carrying a dirty bomb in a suitcase, or there can be two or three of them separately carrying parts to a bomb.”<sup>26</sup> Representative Myrick also highlights this link between immigration and national security in her opposition to the issuance of driver’s licenses to persons without documentation. From her campaign website, for example, Representative Myrick states the following: “If we don’t secure our borders, illegals will continue to come into our country. It is a national security issue when we do not know who is in our country.”<sup>27</sup> Myrick goes on to state in reference to the drivers’ license issue: “I don’t support illegals getting any form of government ID. It allows them to drive on our roads, open bank accounts, or even get on planes, like we saw on 9-11.”<sup>28</sup> In this case, the call for immigration enforcement was justified by directly linking Mexican undocumented residents with the acts of violence on September 11, 2001. In sum, through this analysis, it is clear that these negative representations were part of the political discourse for immigration enforcement in Charlotte, North Carolina. The following section further analyzes the significance of this discourse.

### **The Human Costs of Local Immigration Enforcement**

There are several contradictions that can be discerned from the dominant narrative provided in this study. One clear concern is the consistent negative portrayal of the local Mexican residents who, due to their citizenship status, were represented as a threat, a “criminal element,” by local political leader-

25 Jim Pendergraph, “Written Testimony for ‘Empowering Local Law Enforcement to Combat Illegal Immigration,’” in *Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy, and Human Resources of the Committee on Government Reform, United States House of Representatives, One Hundred Ninth Congress, Second Session, 25 August 2006.*

26 “His Mission, Fame: He Sends Illegal Immigrants Home-Mecklenburg Sheriff Embraces Visible Role in U.S. Program,” *Charlotte Observer*, 10 December 2006.

27 “Illegal Immigration,” Sue Myrick Profile Website; available from <http://www.suemyrick.com/site/PageServer?pagename=Immigration>.

28 Ibid; it should be noted here that the particular language has since slightly changed on the profile website; it now reads “...It allows them to drive on our roads, open bank accounts, and get on planes while unlawfully present in the country. We saw this happen on 9-11, and it is an issue of national security.”

ship. This narrative was crucial in pursuing an immigration enforcement agenda in Mecklenburg County. One example demonstrating this tendency was the overwhelming attention involving the drinking and driving tragedies in 2005, which led to the “No more excuses” statement and a series of policy proposals by Representative Myrick. Yet when a similar tragedy occurred in the same year that involved the death of a Mexican resident at the hands of a European American driver, one Latina community advocate asked: “Now, we have a Hispanic that was killed by an Anglo. What are we going to do about this? ... It was blown out of proportion. We keep saying drinking and driving is a social problem, not a Hispanic problem.”<sup>29</sup> By intentionally linking the issue of drinking and driving with immigration in Charlotte, North Carolina, the local policymakers neglected the varied social and economic contributions made daily by Mexican residents. At the same time, the narrative conveyed a message that Mexican lives are not as worthy, contributing to the perception of Mexicans as “illegals,” that is, as criminals and a problem to society.

A second point to highlight is the inherent contradiction in confining Mexican immigration within the framework of terrorism and homeland security. On the one hand, for example, the local proponents expressed support for greater immigration enforcement as a means of keeping communities safe. At the same time, local political representatives highlighted in this study also argued against giving driver’s licenses to undocumented residents. Yet, one way to confirm who is living in this country – based on the framework of national security – would be for every eligible person to be issued a driver’s license or identification card. Denying this resource means having persons who live in the community but are outside the scope of the U.S. government, making communities “less safe” in this regard. At the same time, denying driver’s licenses also makes the roads less safe for all drivers. As one Mexican resident was quoted: “I can’t work without driving. So I drive.”<sup>30</sup> Since driver’s licenses are needed to obtain auto insurance, for example, drivers without driver’s licenses cannot be held responsible when traffic accidents occur. This inability contributes to the perception of Mexicans as being burdens to society. At the same time, the denial of driver’s licenses has detrimental effects on low-income families living and working in the area.

29 “Hispanic Leaders: Issue is Drinking, Not Legal Status,” *Charlotte Observer*, 7 December 2005.

30 “Latinos’ Anti-DWI Efforts A Tough Sell,” *Charlotte Observer* 15 January 2006.

A third related point is to recognize the contradiction between the call by local policymakers for greater immigration enforcement and, yet, increased reliance and exploitation of low-wage Mexican workers. In the state of North Carolina, several industries, such as in textile and apparel, have closed shop over the past decades and relocated elsewhere in pursuit of more capital. Those remaining have increasingly pursued more low-wage labor. These have included agriculture, construction, and meat and poultry industries, in which the labor from Mexico has contributed significantly. To bring this contradiction home to Charlotte, one clear example is a local news story that was published December 2006. As part of this story, it was learned that the stepson to Representative Myrick was employing undocumented workers in his restaurants. This included the place where Representative Myrick celebrated her re-election campaign in November that same year.<sup>31</sup> The continued reliance on Mexican and Latina/o labor has also taken place in a period of large-scale displacement of families and communities in countries of origin as a result of U.S. economic and military policies abroad. In the case of Mexico, the North American Free Trade Agreement continues to stand out, which contributed to a process aptly described by Francesca Coin as “immigration by dispossession.”<sup>32</sup> In this regard, while local policymakers in this study called for greater immigration enforcement at the local level, they continued to neglect the pivotal role of the U.S. state in creating the conditions of displacement and migration.

A fourth important point in this study is the contradiction embedded in the continued use of the terms “illegal” and “alien” in U.S. dominant culture. Historically, the term “illegal alien” was constructed amid the emerging “Mexican problem” discussions in U.S. dominant culture of the 1920s. Mae N. Ngai traces the creation of this term to the U.S. Immigration Act of 1924 that “created a new class of persons within the national body – illegal aliens – whose inclusion in the nation was at once a social reality and a legal impossibility.”<sup>33</sup> The racial and cultural boundary that created illegal immigration, therefore, became the U.S.-Mexico border, as evident with the

31 “Hijastro de Sue Myrick Emplea Inmigrantes Indocumentados en sus Restaurantes,” *Mi Gente*, 18 December 2006.

32 Francesca Coin, “Organizing Labor in a Right-to-Work State,” in *Being Brown in Dixie: Race, Ethnicity, and Latino Immigration in the New South*, eds. Cameron D. Lippard and Charles A. Gallagher (Boulder and London: FirstForum Press, 2011), 238.

33 Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), 57.

formation of the Border Patrol during that period. This historical inquiry into the construction of “illegal alien” is useful here, as it demonstrates how the term, from the very beginning, was equated with being Mexican; within this framework, then, to be Mexican meant not to be “American” in the U.S. public imagination. Along the same lines, the use of “illegal alien” became code words for anti-Mexican sentiment.

Previous scholarship in Chicana/o Studies has well documented how anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican sentiments have affected Mexican communities in prior historical periods in the United States. During the repatriation campaign of the 1930s, for example, although Mexicans and Mexican Americans represented less than one percent of the total U.S. population, they accounted for 46 percent of all persons subjected to deportation.<sup>34</sup> A similar outcome occurred during the 1950s, exemplified by the call for unprecedented deportations under “Operation Wetback” in 1954.<sup>35</sup> In the current study, it is clear that the “illegal alien” narrative espoused by local political leadership in North Carolina represents a continuation of anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican sentiment, with comparable results. This was evident with the proposed legislation by Representative Myrick called “10K Run for the Border.” Although designated to increase the fines for employers who hire undocumented workers, the imagery of the border specifically targeted Mexican residents in the area; with the underlying message again that they did not belong. In this regard, the mechanisms employed to define what it means to be “American” are no longer confined to the geographical region along the U.S.-Mexico border, what Scott Michaelsen has described as a “race surveillance camp.”<sup>36</sup> The boundaries take place wherever Mexicans reside in the United States, as their very presence threatens notions of belonging and American identity in U.S. dominant culture.

At the same time, the continued use and incorporation of “illegal alien” perpetuates a dehumanizing rationalization that justifies the control and exploitation of low-income communities at the level of the everyday. Within a Gramscian framework of building consent, the term gives legitimacy to

34 Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 53, 121; Abraham Hoffman, *Unwanted Mexican Americans in the Great Depression* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1974), 166-169.

35 For background information, see Juan Ramón García, *Operation Wetback: The Mass Deportation of Mexican Undocumented Workers in 1954* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980).

36 Scott Michaelsen, “Between Japanese American Internment and the USA PATRIOT Act: The Borderlands and the Permanent State of Racial Exception,” *Aztlan* 30, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 89.

the acceptance of hate violence, what Rachel Ida Buff calls the “deportation terror.”<sup>37</sup> A closer examination of the location under study also reflects how the “illegal alien” narrative has detrimentally extended to Mexican and Latina/o families representing other countries of origin. Since its inception in 2006 up to 2010, for example, the Mecklenburg County Sheriff’s Office listed 10,035 persons who were subjected to deportation through the 287(g) Program. From this number, the overwhelming majority, approximately 9,258 persons or 92 percent, represented the countries of Mexico (6,305), Honduras (1,759), El Salvador (670), and Guatemala (524), respectively.<sup>38</sup> While the circumstances are different compared to other regions in the United States and prior historical periods, the case of Mecklenburg County demonstrates how the politics of immigration enforcement continue the entrenchment of racial and economic inequalities.

### **Conclusion**

This essay has provided an introductory mapping of how politics of immigration enforcement have been reflected in the metropolitan area of Charlotte, North Carolina, in the first decade of the twenty-first century. While limited in scope, this research demonstrates the critical importance of common sense discourse not only in justifying certain actions, in this case support for policies of immigration enforcement, but also in shaping relations of domination and inequality at the community level. In this regard, the negative representations of criminality provided the ideological framework in perpetuating the acceptance of hate violence in the time period being discussed, which resonates with the historical treatment of Mexican-descent populations at the hands of the state and dominant culture. While the long-term impact of increased immigration enforcement and detention remains to be seen in localities like Charlotte, North Carolina, it is clear that variations of this dominant narrative, unless challenged, will continue in the years and decades ahead. Equally important is the need for the new scholarship on Latinas/os in the U.S. South to meet this challenge.

37 Rachel Ida Buff, “The Deportation Terror,” *American Quarterly* 60, no.3 (2008): 531.

38 “Countries of Aliens Processed,” Mecklenburg County Sheriff’s Office, accessed March 2011; available from <http://charmeck.org/mecklenburg/county/MCSO/Pages/immigration.aspx>.

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