

Introduction

In 1928, University of Texas at Austin professor Max Sylvius Handman delivered a paper in Chicago to the American Sociological Society. To provide context to this group of scholars interested in rural sociology, he informed them that European nations with higher standards of living recruited people from neighboring countries to fulfill their labor demands. He used Europe to describe the intricacies of immigrant labor, how such arrangements were formulated, and how agreements were undertaken over space and time. His audience, however, did not attend his session to learn about European labor. They attended because they wanted to know about Mexican immigrant workers who were coming to the United States. Handman contended that immigration from Europe to America had come to a virtual standstill, that African Americans were moving from rural areas to urban centers, and that the Mexican Revolution of 1910 had pushed thousands of Mexicans to the United States. Given these events, Handman declared that Mexicans had become the chief source of agricultural and railroad labor in the United States.¹

While the geographic proximity of Mexico to the United States simplified labor recruitment, Handman claimed that US farmers and the railroad industry preferred Mexicans over other groups because they worked harder, for lower wages, and because they tolerated living in conditions others would not accept.² Handman believed these two industries were ruining the United States because Mexicans were establishing permanent roots in the United States and, as a by-product of their settlements, they were creating “slum conditions” and causing problems in locations where their numbers had “reached a certain height.”³ Handman deemed Mexicans to be so inferior that “[e]ven the Negro has managed to climb higher in the general raising of the average standard of living.”⁴ Given

these circumstances, Handman predicted that Mexicans would one day become the group in the United States that would symbolize “how the other half lives.”⁵

Toward the end of his presentation, Handman asserted that the United States faced an uncertain future because Americans did not have a “social technique for handling partly colored races.” He explained that the United States had “a place for the Negro and a place for the white man,” but that “the Mexican is not a Negro, and the white man refuses him an equal status.”⁶ Handman essentially informed his audience that Mexicans were neither Black nor White. He saw them as a partly colored race, declared they were unwanted in the United States, and believed they needed to be controlled. Handman, however, did not explain what it meant for communities to have “a place” for Blacks and Whites, did not offer examples how Whites refused to see Mexicans as their equals, and did not describe what social techniques were needed to control them. By having a “place for the Negro and a place for the white man,” we assume he was referring to the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, the US Supreme Court ruling that upheld racial segregation under the doctrine of “separate but equal.”⁷ He must have also recognized *Plessy* and the segregation resulting from Jim Crow laws as some of the “social techniques” that empowered Whites and marginalized African Americans. Given the social, political, and economic disposition of his paper, Handman appeared to be nervous that what was legally “in place” to control African Americans did not include Mexicans, a partly colored race.

It is difficult to understand why Handman did not say more about the conditions Mexicans faced in the United States. As a professor of economics at the University of Texas from 1926 to 1931,⁸ Handman knew most Mexicans were relegated to segregated *colonias* and knew they were exploited in the labor market.⁹ However, he was reticent to discuss how other forms of segregation often applied to Mexicans, how Jim Crow-like conditions also applied to them, how their children were generally placed in separate classrooms or separate schools, and the brutal conditions some endured in the United States.¹⁰ Put another way, Handman did not acknowledge the fine line that existed between the legal segregation intended for African Americans and the “unofficial” social techniques that were used to segregate, relegate, and control Mexicans.¹¹

About ten years after Handman delivered his paper in Chicago, Gunnar Myrdal, the Swedish sociologist/economist, was funded by the Carnegie Corporation to study race relations in the United States. By 1944, Myrdal

published the highly acclaimed book, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. Myrdal argued that the United States faced a moral dilemma, one that conflicted with the “American Creed.”¹² The American Creed was a set of values and principles related to liberty, equality, individualism and values that, in the abstract, all Americans were supposed to enjoy.¹³ Throughout the book, however, Myrdal explained how values in the American Creed were not extended to African Americans as they were denied social, political, and civil rights. Myrdal’s book, said historian Walter A. Jackson, was “one of the most influential works of social science ever written in America.”¹⁴

We partly draw from Myrdal’s *American Dilemma* to make sense of the Mexican-origin experience in American society. While Myrdal was commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation to study the African American experience, he acknowledged the lives of Mexicans in America. Myrdal described how in “many parts of the country Mexicans are kept in a status similar to the Negro’s or only a step above,”¹⁵ that “Mexicans . . . have as much segregation as Negroes,”¹⁶ and that “Mexicans, have not been allowed to assimilate as have European immigrants.”¹⁷ Myrdal’s observations were compelling. He identified how the social status of Mexicans was similar to that of African Americans, how both groups were almost equally segregated, and how Mexicans were not permitted to assimilate into the American mainstream as other European immigrants were allowed to do.

This book is about the experiences of Mexican immigrants, Mexican Americans, and Hispanos in their schools and communities between 1912 and 1953. We examine specific communities during particular years in Arkansas, California, Colorado, Kansas, Louisiana, and Texas. Our goal is to add to the existing literature that chiefly focuses on the Southwest by exploring other regions of the nation and by drawing from archival sources that have rarely been used.¹⁸ This regional exploration is important as it highlights the existence of the “social techniques” that Handman was concerned about and how they appeared throughout the country as the populations of people of Mexican origin increased above the “certain height.” While each of our chapters in this book has specific arguments, our overall contention is that the experiences of the Mexican-origin population in the United States were similar to that of African Americans in important ways in that there were social techniques being used to segregate and otherwise marginalize Mexicans throughout the United States. Whether Mexicans were recent immigrants, longtime residents, or Hispanos with deep roots in the United States, they were forced to live in segregated neighborhoods,

Jim Crow laws crafted for African Americans were unofficially aimed at them, their children were placed in separate classes or separate schools, were not expected to melt into the American mainstream, and were seen as a “mongrel” race.¹⁹ But, unlike the experiences of African Americans in their schools and communities, the segregation of the Mexican-origin population in the United States was different because it evolved in a way where laws did not have to be ratified in order to foster their separation. We also examine how communities engaged in attempts to “race” the Mexican population in various ways to maintain social control. From declaring them Caucasian in Colorado, to disagreements and confusion over how to classify Mexicans in Louisiana, to the creation of a triracial school system in Kansas, City, Kansas, this book seeks to identify how the racialization of Mexicans was used as a technique of social control across communities.

As we explore intersections between the Mexican-origin population with that of African Americans, we recognize that African Americans came out of slavery, an experience no other group in America can claim. Comparisons have also been made between Mexicans and southern and eastern European immigrant groups.²⁰ We maintain, however, that the experiences of the Mexican-origin population were different from those immigrant groups. David Tyack reminds us in *The One Best System* that Stanford University professor Ellwood P. Cubberley in 1909 viewed Southern and Eastern European immigrants as “illiterate, docile, often lacking initiative, and almost wholly without the Anglo-Saxon conceptions of righteousness, liberty, law, order, public decency, and government.”²¹ These Southern and Eastern European immigrants were seen as inferior and were discriminated against on many fronts. Tyack also informs us how these groups came to the United States with distinctive skills and experiences, how some acquiesced to, or contested, Americanization,²² and “why certain immigrant groups prospered academically while others did not.”²³ We claim that while Southern and Eastern European groups were seen as inferior and had different experiences in the United States, they assimilated into the American mainstream.²⁴ Whereas these immigrant groups were eventually embraced by the American Creed, Mexicans, Mexican Americans and Hispanos/as were rejected.

We highlight Max Handman as the paragon of the “inferior” Eastern European immigrant who became an American and how he succeeded in a short period of time. Handman was born in Romania in 1885, immigrated to the United States in 1903 at the age of eighteen, earned his bachelor’s

degree in 1907 from the University of Oregon, became a US citizen in 1915 at the age of thirty, and received his PhD in 1917 from the University of Chicago.²⁵ As we saw, Handman became a professor of sociology and economics and spent part of his career studying Mexican immigrants. He must have been socially and politically aware during his lifetime as both a college student and academic that Southern and Eastern Europeans were seen as inferior in the United States. As an Eastern European immigrant who became a prominent scholar, he focused on Mexicans, saw them as a threat to the United States, believed White communities needed to create “social techniques” to control them, claimed they were inferior, and identified them as a “partly colored race.”²⁶

The Politics of Mexican Consuls in the United States

In addition to primary and secondary sources collected in the United States, we also draw from the National Archives in Mexico City. The Archivo Histórico Genaro Estrada, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores stores Mexican consul archival records, including numerous complaints filed by Mexicans who were living in the United States during our period of analysis. Records from the Archivo Histórico in Mexico City led us to particular states, specific communities, and individual school districts in the United States. As we use these archival sources, one needs to understand the evolution of Mexican consuls, why they were established, and the role they played in the United States. In brief, the United States recognized Mexico as a nation after it won its independence from Spain in 1821. Mexican envoys were subsequently established in the United States. Mexican diplomats were supposed to protect the interests of Mexico and its citizens living in the United States. During and after the United States–Mexican War of 1846–1848, however, relations were fractured and national boundaries were redrawn. After Mexico lost what is now the American Southwest, relations were eventually restored and Mexican diplomats returned to the United States. But it was not until 1899 that a Mexican Embassy was established in Washington, DC.²⁷ Mexican consul offices were opened in selected locations and by the mid-1930s approximately fifty-two were functioning across the United States.²⁸ Similar to other nations from around the world that had consul offices in the United States, they all had similar responsibilities—to maintain diplomatic relations with the United States. A particularly important objective for Mexican

consuls in the United States, said Lareen Laglargon, was to “protect its citizens . . . from discrimination and exploitation.”²⁹ Finally, Mexican consuls located in various cities communicated with the Mexican Embassy in Washington, DC. The Mexican Ambassador reviewed complaints, communicated with the Secretaría in Mexico City, and grievances were sent to the US Department of State.

As we use Mexican consul archival records, we acknowledge that some historians have examined Mexican consuls and the degree to which they provided adequate or inadequate support to Mexican nationals in the United States.³⁰ In *Mexican Consuls and Labor Organizing*, Gilbert Gonzalez draws from labor historians to look deeper into their activities.³¹ It was clear that Mexican nationals had different experiences with Mexican consuls. Gonzalez used four variants to explain how consuls were perceived by Mexican nationals. In short, the first variant saw Mexican consuls in a positive light, as Mexican workers felt protected. The second perceived them as providing minimal protection and felt subordinated to the Mexican government and American employers. The third took a middle-ground position; it felt Mexican consul involvement was dependent on specific interests and only intervened when it benefited them. The fourth viewed consuls to be either minor players or that they were omitted in most affairs. As we look at these experiences, some Mexican workers valued their services, others felt subordinated, there were those who believed they responded to specific interests, and there were those who believed they were inconsequential.³²

The work of Mexican consuls was politically sensitive. They had no authority in the United States and relied on diplomacy to resolve Mexican national complaints. It is also worth noting that Mexican consuls sometimes blurred the line as to whom they were supposed to serve in the United States. That is, they occasionally assisted Mexican Americans. On this point, Francisco Balderrama discusses how US government officials treated Mexican nationals and Mexican Americans in Los Angeles during the Depression era of the 1930s, a period when most Americans were experiencing hard times. “Mexican nationals,” said Balderrama, “were categorically denied assistance because of a ‘citizen only’ policy.” Denying assistance to non-US citizens was not surprising and politically expected. However, said Balderrama, “Mexican Americans were also frequently refused help by public officials . . . [because they] . . . did not recognize their citizenship.”³³ In other words, Mexican Americans were often treated as non-US citizens. Because some Mexican Americans had maintained

close ties with Mexico, they sought assistance from Mexican consuls and sometimes received their support.³⁴

As we examine these issues, we want to make an important observation. Records accessed in Mexico City allowed us to better understand what highly trained Mexican government officials were thinking about the treatment of Mexicans in their schools and communities. They were witnessing social and educational structures being created by White Americans to segregate and disenfranchise Mexicans. We were given insights as to how high-ranking Mexican consuls were challenging school segregation and Jim Crow in different parts of the nation. In California, for example, the Mexican consul in San Francisco, California, wrote to the Mexican Ambassador in Washington, DC, to inform him that “El Mexicano, en vista de que sus condiciones economicas son muy parecidas a las del negro, es clasificado como este y recibe el mismo tratamiento” (The Mexican, after looking at his economic conditions, they are similar to that of African Americans, are classified as such, and receive the same treatment).³⁵ In the South, Mexican consuls also learned how local authorities became perplexed with Mexicans and did not know how to treat them in their racial hierarchy because race was understood within a Black–White context. In Kansas, White parents and civic organizations saw Mexican children as neither Black nor White, but they were visible enough as mestizos that they pressured school officials to establish separate classrooms or separate schools in many school districts across the state. Mexican children were so distinguishable to White parents in Kansas that they demanded immediate separation. In the Southwest, school authorities were more familiar with Mexicans. They also did not recognize them as White citizens but were at times cautious not to segregate them exclusively on race. They instead used language and culture as pretexts to keep them apart from White children. We will incorporate multiple voices and cases to understand what various groups in the nation believed the Mexican-origin population deserved in American schools and communities.

We are mindful of Gonzalez’s variants about Mexican consul activities in Mexican labor disputes. Our focus, however, is on how Mexican consuls were addressing Mexican community complaints about unequal education and segregated schools—indeed, how some Mexican communities received assistance from Mexican consuls and others did not. In the Hispano homeland (southern Colorado), for example, we will demonstrate how Mexican Americans challenged segregated education without the assistance of Mexican consuls. As US citizens who were deeply rooted in

America, Hispanos used novel arguments to challenge the segregation of their children. In the rest of our book, we will show how Mexican consuls challenged the ways school officials were creating physical divisions between Mexican and White children, how they confronted those in power who were excluding Mexican children from public schools,³⁶ and how they challenged local officials who were turning a blind eye to business practices that were refusing to serve Mexicans in restaurants, barbershops, theaters, hotels, and other public places.³⁷

The Racialization of the Mexican Population

The Mexican consul also provides insight into the issue of how Mexicans were seen in terms of race in the United States. Mexican consuls were cognizant that Mexicans were legally White according to American laws and treaties,³⁸ and saw how inconsequential that racial classification was in the United States. Some scholars, in fact, believed the White category given to Mexicans was disingenuous. Economics professor Glenn E. Hoover at Mills College in California, for example, observed in the 1920s that “all natives of Mexico are listed as white in our official census and immigration reports, a practice which also is followed by the various states of the Union.” Professor Hoover, however, also made clear that “there is a tacit but universal understanding among government officials that the biological characteristics of the Mexican people shall be assumed to be what they are not in fact.” In other words, Hoover pointed out that even though Mexicans were listed as White in official census records, government officials knew that “the population south of the Rio Grande is predominantly Indian.”³⁹

Indeed, Mexicans were not seen as White in America. In 1911, for example, Mexicans in Garden City, Kansas, were banned from all public places. Mexicans came together in the community and wrote a letter to the Mexican consul to explain the severity of their segregation. They were so segregated in Garden City, the group described, that “no quieren que nos aserquemos a ellos” (they don’t want us to get near them).⁴⁰ In 1920, Mexicans in Lyons, Kansas, filed a complaint with the Mexican consul, explaining how they numbered approximately 150 in the community and describing how they were told by White residents they would not be served in their establishments because they were “GENTE DE COLOR.”⁴¹ In the same year in the town of Salina, Kansas, Mexicans made similar complaints. It was not clear why the chief of police responded to the Mexican consul rather than the town mayor, the official who would be in a position to

respond to the complaint. Nevertheless, the chief of police acknowledged that Mexicans were in fact barred from restaurants and barbershops and explained how some African American businesses were serving Mexicans. He also offered some solutions to the complaint. For example, rather than challenging Jim Crow conditions for Mexicans in the community, the chief of police asked the Mexican consul to send a Mexican barber to Salina. He believed the service was needed and was certain the business would thrive in the community.⁴² Written communication between the Mexican consul and the Salina chief of police verified that Jim Crow targeted Mexicans, African Americans were serving Mexicans, and Mexicans were encouraged to open businesses of their own.⁴³

Methods

We used historical methods to understand the schooling experiences of Mexicans in Colorado, Kansas, Louisiana, Texas, and Arkansas, relying on primary and secondary sources. We traveled to and accessed Mexican consul records from the Archivo Histórico Genaro Estrada, Acervo Histórico Diplomático, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores in Mexico City. These data were digitally photographed and organized according to file number, date, theme, and name of complaint. After analyzing files to identify themes and relevant geographical areas, we also traveled to and accessed material from libraries in Kansas, Louisiana, Texas, and Colorado. We also photographed, organized, and analyzed public records such as school board minutes from the following school districts: Kansas City, Hutchinson, Salina, Lyons, and Emporia, Kansas; Alexandria, Louisiana; Mission, Texas; and Alamosa, Colorado. We collected additional information in these communities from local libraries, museums, state archives, and newspapers. Finally, secondary sources, including books, journal articles, dissertations, master's theses, online sources, and other material, enriched our study. We compared archival information with other primary sources and contrasted that data with secondary sources to substantiate claims.

Book Outline

We include revised versions of previously published works. Chapter 1, "*Francisco Maestas et al. v. George H. Shone et al.*: Mexican American Resistance to Segregation in the Hispano Homeland, 1912–1914," was

published in the *Journal of Latinos and Education* (2017). Chapter 2, “Porque tenían sangre de ‘NEGROS’: The Exclusion of Mexican Children from a Louisiana School, 1915–1916” appeared in the *Association of Mexican American Educators Journal* (2017). Chapter 3, “‘In These Towns, Mexicans Are Classified as Negroes’: The Politics of Unofficial Segregation in the Kansas Public Schools, 1915–1935,” was part of the Centennial Issue in the *American Educational Research Journal* (2017). Finally, chapter 5 “‘Legally White, Socially ‘Mexican’: Mexican Americans and the Politics of De Jure and De Facto Segregation in the American Southwest” was published in *Harvard Educational Review* (2012).⁴⁴

We bring these articles together because it allows us to tell a wider, longer, and deeper narrative about the Mexican American experience across time, space, and location in American schools and society. It provides a more coherent, complicated, and connected story than individual articles can tell on their own. Moreover, our data let us cover a time frame that spanned from 1912 to 1953. We begin at a time when large numbers of people were fleeing Mexico because of the Mexican Revolution of 1910. It was a period when Mexicans were seeking refuge, when Americans were recruiting them for their labor, and when they simply wanted to improve their lives in the United States. We conclude in 1953, the year before *Brown v. Board of Education* was decided. Our goal is to capture the schooling experiences of Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and Hispanos during the pre-*Brown* era, a time when racial segregation for African Americans was legal in a number of states in America. During this time the Mexican-origin population used novel strategies to contest social and school segregation. In their quest for racial justice and equal education, some had the support of the Mexican government. Others did not. They took it upon themselves, organized, and challenged those in power. They challenged school segregation and Jim Crow, wanted simple justice, wanted to live with dignity, and displayed agency across space, time, and location in the United States.

In our first chapter, *Francisco Maestas et al. v. George H. Shone et al.* (1914), we provide an account about one of the earliest known Mexican American challenges to school segregation in the United States. Unidentified for over a century, the lawsuit took place in southern Colorado, a region of the nation where Mexican Americans (i.e., Hispanos/as) have deep historical roots. This case was unique because the racial background and linguistic needs of Mexican American children were contested. First, plaintiffs argued that Mexican American children were racially distinct

and used the Colorado Constitution to challenge segregation in their community because the state prohibited public schools from classifying and distinguishing children based on color and race. Defendants—school board members and the superintendent—countered that Mexican American children were Caucasian and claimed that they were no different from other White children in the school district. Second, school district officials maintained that non-English-speaking Mexican American children were being served in a separate “Mexican” school in order to serve their linguistic needs. To the extent that many Mexican American children were English speaking, the district court judge ruled in favor of Francisco Maestas on the grounds that school board members and the superintendent could not prevent English-speaking Mexican American children from attending schools of their choice and schools that were closer to their homes. This early case illustrates how in the Hispano homeland, where Mexicans had deep roots, the social techniques used by those in power focused on language and a fluid racialization of the students, based on the needs of those who wanted to segregate the students.

During the same time period (1915), Mexican Americans had a much different experience in the deep South, where their history and societal positioning was markedly different. In chapter 2, “Porque tenían sangre de ‘NEGROS,’ 1915–1916” we examine the exclusion of Mexican children from a White Louisiana public school. About the same time the *Maestas* case was decided, a school board trustee in the town of Cheneyville threw Mexican children out of the White school because he believed they were racially mixed and had “negro blood.” Although school officials did not see Mexican children as Black or White, their mestizo appearance became a racial marker to exclude them from a White school. Given this time and location—where legal segregation was understood in Black-and-White terms—Mexicans posed a dilemma because they did not fit into the South’s binary racial system. This chapter extends the conversation about the treatment and racialization of Mexicans in public schools outside the Southwest by highlighting the complexities of race and segregation in the deep South, and how Whites struggled to identify the appropriate tools of social control for the Mexicans who did not fit within the racial binary that was deeply ingrained in their society. Placing these two chapters together allows us to illustrate how Mexicans were raced in Louisiana and Colorado and why the Mexican government became involved in one location and not in the other.

As we move to chapter 3, “In These Towns Mexicans Are Classified as Negroes, 1915–1935,” we explain why a critical mass of Mexicans

settled outside of the Southwest, what drew them to Kansas, and how their experiences were different from those in Louisiana and Colorado. We examine why Mexicans were not treated as Black or White. We tell a story that shows how a triracial school system in Kansas City was established by 1925. We note that Kansas was the state that gave rise to *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. Even though Mexicans were not referenced in Kansas's school segregation laws, they were seen and treated as a racially distinct group. White parents and civic organizations pushed school officials to establish separate facilities for Mexican children. In the Kansas City, Kansas, school system, a triracial school system was created. There was legal separation between African American and White children, and Mexican youth were unofficially placed in separate classrooms, school annexes, and some attended a separate Mexican school in the city. We maintain in this chapter that the contradictory and enigmatic responses to school segregation from high-ranking United States and Mexican government officials pointed to a degree of uncertainty about whether Mexican children could be segregated. That ambiguity, however, did not prevent local school officials from segregating Mexican children.

Chapter 4, "Diplomatic Relations to School Segregation and Jim Crow" is heavily based on archival sources from the Archivo Histórico Genaro Estrada in Mexico City. This chapter examines communication between Mexican consuls, Mexican Ambassadors, educational professionals, and high-ranking American government officials. We show how Mexican government officials learned that Mexican children were unwanted in White schools, how Jim Crow laws were unofficially aimed at Mexican communities, and how Mexicans were not perceived as "immigrants" but regarded as a group similar to African Americans. This chapter provides vignettes, evocative descriptions, and other accounts that reveal how Mexican and American government officials discussed, and responded to, school segregation and Jim Crow in the United States.

Chapter 5, "Legally White, Socially 'Mexican,' 1930–1947," brings multiple lawsuits together to show how the history of Mexican American school segregation is complex, often misunderstood, and unresolved. The literature suggests that Mexican Americans experienced de facto segregation because it was local custom and never sanctioned at the state level in the United States. However, the same literature suggests that Mexicans experienced de jure segregation because school officials implemented various policies intended to segregate Mexican Americans. We show in this chapter that although Mexicans were legally categorized as "White,"

we show the complexity of that category and how Mexicans were treated as socially “colored” in their schools and communities.

As we juxtapose Max Handman’s assertion that there were “no social techniques” in place to control Mexicans—or partly colored races—against Gunnar Myrdal’s findings that conditions for Mexicans were similar to those of African Americans, there seemed to be serious discrepancies about what life was like for Mexicans in their schools and communities during the pre-*Brown* era. While important historical studies have recently been written and have advanced our understanding about the Mexican, Mexican American, and Hispano/a quest for equal education, more needs to be known about their struggles in different regions of the nation, in different time periods, and the influence of Mexican consuls.