

CARROLL C. ARNOLD DISTINGUISHED LECTURE 2019

Mobility, Containment,  
and the  
Racialized Spatio-Temporalities  
of  
Survival

LISA A. FLORES

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO BOULDER







ON OCTOBER 8, 1994, the Administrative Committee of the National Communication Association established the Carroll C. Arnold Distinguished Lecture. The Arnold Lecture is given in plenary session each year at the annual convention of the Association and features the most accomplished researchers in the field. The topic of the lecture changes annually so as to capture the wide range of research being conducted in the field and to demonstrate the relevance of that work to society at large.

The purpose of the Arnold Lecture is to inspire not by words but by intellectual deeds. Its goal is to make the members of the Association better informed by having one of its best professionals think aloud in their presence. Over the years, the Arnold Lecture will serve as a scholarly stimulus for new ideas and new ways of approaching those ideas. The inaugural Lecture was given on November 17, 1995.

The Arnold Lecturer is chosen each year by the First Vice President. When choosing the Arnold Lecturer, the First Vice President is charged to select a long-standing member of NCA, a scholar of undisputed merit who has already been recognized as such, a person whose recent research is as vital and suggestive as their earlier work, and a researcher whose work meets or exceeds the scholarly standards of the academy generally.

The Lecture has been named for Carroll C. Arnold, the late Professor Emeritus of Pennsylvania State University. Trained under Professor A. Craig Baird at the University of Iowa, Arnold was the coauthor (with John Wilson) of *Public Speaking as a Liberal Art*, author of *Criticism of Oral Rhetoric* (among other works), and co-editor of *The Handbook of Rhetorical and Communication Theory*. Although primarily trained as a humanist, Arnold was nonetheless one of the most active participants in the New Orleans Conference of 1968 which helped put social scientific research in communication on solid footing. Thereafter, Arnold edited *Communication Monographs* because of a fascination with empirical questions. As one of the three founders of the journal *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Arnold also helped move the field toward increased dialogue with the humanities in general. For these reasons and more, Arnold was dubbed "The Teacher of the Field" upon retirement from Penn State in 1977. Dr. Arnold died in January of 1997.

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## LISA A. FLORES

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She has published in *Text and Performance Quarterly*, *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, and the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. An advocate of disciplinary service, Flores is Past President of the Western States Communication Association, and an active member of both the Rhetoric Society of America and the National Communication Association. Currently, Flores is the book review editor for the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* and the forum editor for *Women's Studies in Communication*.



# Mobility, Containment, and the Racialized Spatio-Temporalities of Survival

*Following is a transcript of the 2019 Carroll C. Arnold Distinguished Lecture as delivered.*

**ON JUNE 11, 2013**, 11-year-old Sebastian De La Cruz sang the national anthem at game 3 of the NBA Finals. Performing in full mariachi gear, El Charro de Oro, or the boy with the golden voice, opened the game that would be won by the San Antonio Spurs. By many accounts, his performance was amazing, “fantastic,”<sup>i</sup> or “spectacular.”<sup>ii</sup> Still, despite his talent, De La Cruz faced immediate backlash, with a torrent of racist comments on social media decrying the abomination. This one, in particular, drew my scholarly attention. The young De La Cruz is reduced to the easy slur—“wetback.”<sup>iii</sup>






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Less than a year later, just outside of an Arizona immigration detention center, immigration advocates gathered to support a 14-day hunger strike that demanded “Not One More Deportation.” As they sat, prayed, and meditated, a car pulled up, and a man lowered the window, shouted racial epithets, and then threw a wrapped burrito at the advocates.<sup>iv</sup> It said, “Learn English Wetback. Go back to Mexico.” In that same month, Texas Senate hopeful, Chris Mapp, told the editorial board of the *Dallas Morning News* that Texas ranchers should be allowed to shoot on sight any “wetbacks” on their land.<sup>v</sup> Despite the criticism he received, Mapp initially refused to apologize, claiming that use of the term is as “normal as breathing air in South Texas.”<sup>vi</sup> A year prior, Alaska congressman Don Young invoked the term during a radio interview. Young did apologize after his reference to the “wetbacks” that worked on his father’s ranch. In that apology, he explained that it was “a term that was commonly used during my days growing up on a farm...I know this term is not used in the same way nowadays and I meant no disrespect.”<sup>vii</sup>

### Candidate Wants Right to Shoot ‘Wetbacks’

February 24, 2014 at 6:30 pm EDT By Taegan Goddard — [Leave a Comment](#)

Texas U.S. Senate candidate Chris Mapp (R) told the [Dallas Morning News](#) that ranchers should be allowed to shoot on sight anyone illegally crossing the border on to their land and referred to such people as “wetbacks.”

Mapp later defended his remarks to the [San Antonio Express-News](#) saying that use of the racial slur is as “normal as breathing air in South Texas.”

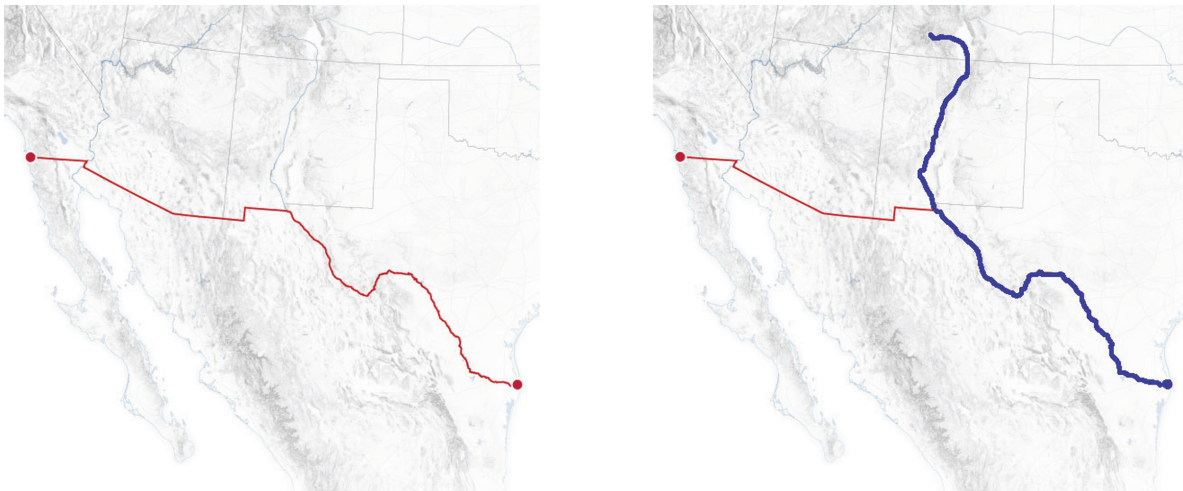
Normal, common, even un/intentional. A descriptive category and a decisive threat. The term “wetback” has been and continues to be a racial and racist term that narrates race through nation. It’s a curious and elastic term. The term “wetback” originated as a means to capture the common practice across parts of Texas/Mexico border that entail crossing the Rio Grande in order to enter. That crossing, at points, requires swimming, and thus getting wet.

It is difficult to identify the moment in which the term was born, but it most likely dates back to 1926, just after the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924 and the 1925 institution of the Border Patrol. Along with its twin, “illegal alien,” the term entered into U.S. public and political discourse just as the national fears associated with the so-called “hordes” of undesirable European and Asian immigrants were quelled through restrictive national legislation that shifted border anxiety from the sea borders to the land borders, most notably the United States/Mexico border.

Though rare in public and political discourse at the time, it did make the occasional appearance. For example, in 1926, the *Saturday Evening Post* included an article titled “Wet and Other Mexicans,” which reported that “A Mexican who enters the U.S. illegally has come to be known as a wet Mexican.”<sup>viii</sup> In 1929, economist Glenn Hoover, writing in *Foreign Affairs*, commented rather matter-of-factly on undocumented Mexican entry: “the peon walks or swims across [the border]...and is welcomed by his countrymen as a ‘wet back.’”<sup>ix</sup>

Despite these occasional references, the term did not widely circulate until the late 1940s and early 1950s, when the nation rather suddenly paid heightened attention to the so-named “wetback problem.” It was in that time, according to Juan Garcia, that “seemingly overnight, the public was flooded with a mass of articles and feature stories concerning undocumented workers.”<sup>x</sup> In confirmation of that argument, Atcheson L. Hench noted that by the late 1940s and early 1950s, the term was listed in various dictionaries.<sup>xi</sup> By 1956, Pacific Coast Pictures released the film, “Wetbacks.” Starring Lloyd Bridges, Nancy Gates, and Barton MacLane, the film traced the plight of two U.S. citizens, Jim (Bridges) and Sally (Gates), who were stranded in a Mexican village and became embroiled in an exploitative operation smuggling Mexicans into the United States. The smuggled “wetbacks” in the film emerge as the victims of ruthless, Mexican smugglers.

Today the term remains somewhat common, still easily invoked as a quick slur. On Urban Dictionary, you can buy a mug featuring both the term and its urban dictionary definition.<sup>xii</sup> That definition, like several others, elides the literal significance of the term and its original reference to entering the United States along the Texas/Mexico border by crossing the Rio Grande. Much of the rest of the United States/Mexico border is not water, but desert or urban area. This is the border, and this is the Rio Grande. So, there is something curiously elastic in definitions that expand the term so that it becomes, as in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), “A Mexican living in the U.S., especially one who is an illegal immigrant, so named from the practice of swimming the Rio Grande to reach the U.S.”<sup>xiii</sup> Any Mexican? Regardless of residency? Hmm. The OED does signal the early, but now mostly forgotten, reference to the crossing of the Rio Grande. And these two dictionary definitions are not uncommon. All of the online dictionaries that I checked participated in some expanded definition of the term, sometimes referencing the origin but then equating the term with undocumented Mexican, or perhaps Central American, entry.



I pause on this term “wetback” for what it tells us about the intersections of rhetoric and race. My interest lies largely in my investment in a project I have named as racial rhetorical criticism.<sup>xiv</sup> A central task of racial rhetorical criticism, at least for me, is the development of theories that account for the rhetoric of race. That is, if we argue, as many of us tend to, both in Communication and across other disciplines, that race is a social construct or a discursive materialization, then we, in Communication, should lead the theoretical conversations around race. In my efforts, I center the term “wetback” and advance an argument for racial recognition.

I’ll spend most of my time on the national conversations at play during the “wetback era,” or the years 1944-1954. If these were the formative years during which wetback became a part of the national conversation, then it seems to me that this is where we start. During this time, the discourse around the wetback problem was, at its core, a national debate about the place of Mexican workers within the United States. Historically, within the United States, “immigrant” has referred, at least in public parlance, to a presumed-permanent move; thus, the idea of immigrant has been laden with an intentional permanent relocation, a movement not just across space, from there to here, but a movement into a new—chosen—identity, a temporal move from past to future. The definitional parameters established by “wetback” preclude such movement. Instead, what occurred discursively was a different movement, a chaotic and immense movement that could exist only outside of national belonging, in part because the frenetic movement of wetbacks was a racialized movement embedded in the racially laden logic of the border. To understand this time, we need a bit of historical context.





## THE WETBACK ERA

Let me take you to two critical “wetback” moments, both occurring while the nation was already debating the problems of undocumented Mexican migration. The first, the “El Paso Incident,” occurred in October 1948. Even as the constituents across the country were decrying the presence of undocumented Mexicans within the nation, U.S. border agents did something unusual, something directly at odds with the worries about increased numbers of Mexicans. On October 13, 1948, U.S. border agents in El Paso, Texas opened the gates. The Los Angeles Spanish language newspaper, *La Opinion*, reported that for five days, men who had already gathered at the border, “waded [across] the shallow river in sight of the Border Patrol, which received them with formality, herded them into temporary enclosures and immediately paroled them to...cotton growers, who trucked [them]...at once to the fields.”<sup>xv</sup> In affront to the Mexican government, the U.S. Border Patrol flaunted their disregard for established agreements that both nations would do everything possible to reduce undocumented Mexican migration. Some 7,000 to 8,000 men entered.<sup>xvi</sup>

A few years later, a similar event occurred. This time, on January 15, 1954, in the “Incident of 1954,” the U.S. Departments of Labor, State, and Justice collaborated on and issued a press release stating that U.S. employment contracts would be given to Mexicans crossing the border. Despite extreme measures taken by the Mexican government to prevent an exodus, some 12,000 men gathered at the border, particularly in Mexicali, near San Diego.

On January 22, U.S. officials opened the gates. Reports of the event describe it as chaotic, if not sadly absurd. Mexican officers allegedly grabbed hold of men, pulling on them and beating them, trying to stop them from crossing. In contrast, U.S. border agents helped Mexican men “legalize” their crossing, instructing them, once in the United States, to step a toe over the border back into Mexico, thus fulfilling requirements that they return and reenter legally. One widely circulated image depicts a man being pulled by one arm back in to Mexico and the other in to the United States.



Within a few days, as Mexican officials realized they could not prevent the mass departure, they moved to a new strategy and announced that they would no longer try to deter individuals from leaving.<sup>xvii</sup> In response, the United States announced a new interim program to regulate entry. By January 27, U.S. immigration officials and police formed a human chain to try to stop Mexicans from entering.<sup>xviii</sup>

Both of these open border moments occurred in the midst of the “wetback era.” Though several thousand undocumented Mexican migrants were invited in to the United States in October 1948 and January 1954, those open invitations stood in opposition to claims that the United States faced a crisis, or at least a problem: “the problem created by the presence in the United States and the continued entry of hundreds of thousands of farm workers who have streamed illegally across the Mexican border.”<sup>xix</sup> Spurred by fears that Mexican workers were no longer confined to the agricultural fields of the Southwest, but were now spilling over into industrial centers across the country, headlines proclaimed the entry of “swarms”<sup>xx</sup> of “wetbacks”<sup>xxi</sup> into the United States and predicted dire results for the nation should the “flood”<sup>xxii</sup> continue. The “problem” was so great that by mid-1954, just a few months after the 1954 Incident, the United States embarked on a highly publicized deportation campaign, notoriously named “Operation Wetback.”

Wetback, I suggest, constructs race as an anxious collapse of temporality and spatiality, mobility and containment, effecting what I name racial recognition. As I will elaborate below, racial recognition is a discursive mode of rhetorical racialization. I’ll argue that we—everyday citizens—are asked, even expected, to know race when we see it, and in that knowing, to contain its ever-frightful excessive mobility. That recognition is the rhetorical means through which race itself survives.



## RACIAL RECOGNITION

We are now at least decades, but perhaps a century, deep in conversations, both popular and scholarly, that name race as a cultural, social, or discursive construct. We might trace cultural or social theories of race to 1897 and W.E.B. DuBois' essay, "The Conservation of Races." There, he wrote: "What, then, is a race? It is a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions, and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life."<sup>xxiii</sup> With his emphasis on common language, traditions, and histories, and his framing of a vast family, Du Bois challenged prevalent theories that named race through phenotype and biology.

While scientific theories continued to hold for some time, in the wake of World War II and racial genocide, they came into question again. There, we might consider the work of Gunnar Myrdal, Robert E. Park, or even the Chicago School more broadly. Advancing both subtle and direct questions on the primacy of biological or scientific theories of race as natural and inherent, these theorists put in place the early building blocks upon which much contemporary race theory now rests. Today, as we in this room know, social construction theories of race reign.

Now I detour—all too briefly—through this early history, as it is in many ways this history that animates my interest in racial recognition. I'm puzzled by social, political, public, and scholarly fixation with race. If we all agree that race is socially constructed, then why do we remain so intent on seeing it and knowing it? Is it the persistent slipperiness, yet oddly rigid nature of race that compels so much investment in naming it? For all that social construction theories have mostly displaced biological and scientific ones, we—everyday citizens—remain attached to some concept of race as "real."

It is, at least in part, the alleged "realness" of race that prompts such often benevolent questions as, "Where are you from?" or "What are you?" It is the "realness" of race that fosters suspicion, if not antagonism, toward so-called scholarship kids or diversity hires. That same "realness" motivates and perpetuates police brutality against Blacks, stand your ground laws, and restrictive immigration laws. Or, as Nadine Ehlers argues, there is a language of "crisis" prevalent in the varied, yet consistent, narratives of race.<sup>xxiv</sup> And crisis, she reminds us, is figured through jeopardy, risk, even loss. The crisis of race, Ehlers explains, is one of racial truth—or the absence of racial truth. It is a crisis of ontology. For despite widely proclaimed theories of race as cultural, social, constructed, or discursive, the truth of whiteness remains premised upon the truth, the realness, of blackness. The superiority of whiteness—that superiority that says "they must be here on scholarship," or "she must be a diversity hire or diversity choice"—is guaranteed only if it is set against the assumed inferiority of blackness. It is the need for ontological security, Ehlers writes, that installed one-drop and anti-miscegenation laws.<sup>xxv</sup> If blackness could not cross in to whiteness, then whiteness remained intact, pure. But, of course, such laws could not and did not contain the slipperiness, the evasiveness of race. Its movement into whiteness, much like migrant movement into the nation, permeates, even pollutes. In doing so, it threatens the ontological security of whiteness, thus prompting even greater crisis.

It is in this argument of racial ontological crisis that I think about racial recognition. I'm motivated here by Ehlers, who continues her argument by invoking Judith Butler, performativity, and the persistent reiteration of race: "Race is a *practice*—an ongoing discursive process of *racing* individuals that must be *maintained* in order to survive.



The categories accepted as natural and inevitable must consistently and seamlessly be reiterated in discourse...be called upon, called forth if you will, for without possessing ontological grounding, the 'truths' of racial categorization and demarcation exist only in the retelling."<sup>xxvi</sup> The claim is profound, and it is not one that I have heard made by rhetorical or Communication scholars of race; the truths of racial categorization and demarcation—demanded by the ontological insecurity of race—exist only in the retelling. The implication for me is this: If race, even as social construction or discursive materialization, is in persistent ontological crisis—if “we” need to know that it exists and yet are confronted with endless instances that call such existence into question—then we need a resolution to that crisis. We need ontological security. The retelling of race in language produces the seeing of race as real.

Now, proof of race is supposed to lie in its phenotypic evidence, or in what Matthew Guterl names “racial sightlines.”<sup>xxvii</sup> We learn to rely on the physical body—and phenotype—as evidence of the existence of race and racial difference. Cheree Carlson captures this argument in her astute phrase, “you know it when you see it.”<sup>xxviii</sup> She is arguing that the truth of race lies in its phenotypic evidence. This optic assumption is, of course, widespread, commonplace.

Still, despite the seemingly inescapable force of the body as the carrier of race, its capacity to speak racial truth is limited. Its reliability as evidence that racial categories exist and can be seen, known, marked, and regulated is as tenuous as it is certain. For as much as phenotypic signs and signals prove race, so, too, does race remain slippery, its ontological security threatened by the unruliness of the body. White and non-white mix, quite literally. Each such mixture fuels the crisis; each such mixture activates the need to see and to know, or to recognize.

Recognition is widely theorized. From those in philosophy to psychology, law to political science, scholars are invested in questions of recognition. I turn to feminist and queer theorists who advance theories of recognition premised on intersubjectivity, mutuality, and likeness. In brief, this work suggests that we recognize each other when we see aspects of ourselves reflected in the other. In that reflection, we feel a sense of connection—a mutuality, or a sense that we share experiences, feelings, and ways of being. Mutuality, then, is a way of thinking likeness. If we believe that we have shared histories or experiences, beliefs or cultural practices, we are like each other. We recognize each other in and through that likeness; it is that feeling of instant connection with individuals we do not know. For feminist and queer theories, this recognition hinges on such identity categories as gender, race, or sexuality. We are like each other in our shared gender identity or our shared queer politic. For the most part, however, this work theorizes recognition at the individual level. But, while recognition certainly happens interpersonally, it also happens rhetorically, among publics, in and through our discourse.

My theory of racial recognition suggests that shared vocabularies, common languages, and retold stories also prompt recognition. The constant circulation of the term “wetback” produces the seeing and knowing of wetbacks. Here is where we need race scholars to help us think with theories of recognition. Folks like Matthew Frye Jacobson and Nadine Ehlers think race and recognition, even if indirectly. For Jacobson and Ehlers, recognizing race—what they might name “seeing it”—is almost a social compulsion, born partly in the ontological insecurity of race. Despite their dramatically different projects, both Jacobson and Ehlers argue that the elusiveness or arbitrariness of race—the willful resistance of bodies to abide by rigid social categories—is deeply unsettling, particularly within whiteness. Jacobson, for example, notes the “seemingly natural but finally unstable logic of race,”<sup>xxix</sup> while Ehlers argues that “America ... desperately requires the body to speak ‘the truth’ [of race]...and is destabilized by the possibility that the body will ‘fail’ to articulate this ‘truth.’”<sup>xxx</sup> This instability perpetuates the insistent discursive reiteration of race, which is also the rhetorical bounding and fixing of race.

The constant but impossible attempt to fix prompts racial recognition, for the desire to know racial truths manifests in the need to be able to see such truths. Jacobson details the seeing and knowing of racial truths through his argument that race is both a perceptual and a conceptual category, a seeing from and a seeing as. The seeing of phenotypic “racial” differences, he argues, is not just a seeing of a marked body but of presumed real differences in character, heritage, even essence signaled by that marked body. His argument is worth quoting at length:

“The visible markers [presumed racial phenotypes] may then be interpreted as outer signs of an essential, immutable, inner moral-intellectual character; and that character, in its turn—attested to by physical ‘difference’—is summoned up to explain the social value attached...in the first place. The circuit is ineluctable. Race is social value become perception.”<sup>xxxii</sup>

In ways that align with Jacobson, Ehlers hints toward a notion of racial recognition: “It is discursive power that ‘makes’ race perceptible, because it teaches or instructs people to read by it.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> The reading, she notes, happens along what she names the “fictive loci” of race: color and blood, or what I think of as skin and character.<sup>xxxiii</sup> For Ehlers, color and blood function as racial codes that circulate metaphorically, across discourse, to “consume virtually all meaning pertaining to race and, simultaneously, to fashion *all* racial meaning.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> Blood and color, again skin and character, collapse into each other, and in that collapse, they produce racial knowledge and racial truth.

Building across this scholarship, I define racial recognition as the compulsive seeing and finding of likeness in discourse that resists reducing likeness to mutuality. That is, rather than presume that likeness entails an intersubjective claim of mutual connection between two individuals, racial recognition thinks of likeness as likeness to a circulating discourse, here thought of as a racial category. This likeness is not likeness in terms of mutuality or sameness between individuals in an interaction, but sameness between individuals presumed to share certain characteristics, or what Jacobson might name as the collapse between the perceptual and conceptual. A theory of recognizing race in and on individuals as well as of seeing individuals as instantiations of presumed racial essences, racial recognition accounts for the two key modes through which race has historically been understood—phenotype and character, color and blood. It turns on the collapse between the seeing and knowing. It is in the collapse between the perceptual and conceptual, between skin and blood, that we see race. Racial recognition thus suggests that the very premise that one can “see” race grounds the promise that race “exists” to be seen. It is a move that fixes and locates bodies on a racial scale—this one is Mexican, that one is White.

If collapse is one mode through which race is recognized, excess is another. I think of excess here as the affective register of race. Racial recognition entails not just a seeing of race, but an experiencing of it, a felt response to its existence. If collapse accounts for the falling together of skin and blood, perceptual and conceptual, then excess names the flow of race from the body—its animation beyond itself, a kind of bodily transgression. The excess of race, what Weheliye might name its “fleshy surplus,” is that which refuses to be fixed and contained.<sup>xxxv</sup> Out of control, the excess of race is the threat of race; it is that quality of race that belies the rigidity of racial categories.

Race, then, is both seen and felt. Moving between modes of collapse and excess, racial recognition theorizes the discursive seeing and the sensing of race, attending to discursive reiterations of raced bodies in motion, raced bodies contained. It captures the static mobility of race—its presumed manifestation in fixed and bounded categories and its persistent escape from those categories. The constant circulation of narratives or vocabularies produce racial sight lines and prompt the perceptual/conceptual collapse. In other words, if wetbacks populate the discourse, that discourse makes race.



## THE WETBACK PROBLEM

In the early 1950s, “wetback” populated the discourse. Wetbacks were everywhere. They were in headlines and politics. For example, American Consul in Mexico Culver E. Gidden invoked the term in his report to the Department of State, commenting on “the actual number of wetbacks.”<sup>xxxvi</sup> So, too, Mexican advocate Secretary of Labor James P. Mitchell, in his letter to the American Federation of Labor, wrote of the “wetback problem.”<sup>xxxvii</sup> And, of course, as I mentioned earlier, in 1954, the nation embarked on “Operation Wetback.” The language was pervasive.



Most often, when the term was used, it was accompanied with a definition or explanation. Sometimes, the definition was simple: “illegal entrants.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> Elsewhere there was more elaboration: “Mexican nationals...pour *unlawfully* across the border. The illegals, or ‘wetbacks’—a name derived from their fording of the Rio Grande river—comprise 400,000 of our one million migratory laborers.”<sup>xxxix</sup> Together, these varied reiterations, definitions, and explanations prompt the perceptual/conceptual collapse.

In part, the term itself, wetback, condenses body and movement, the body that crosses illegally. In the literal equation of entry and criminality, color and blood, skin and heritage, collapse. The term is not just a label or a slur or an epithet. It produces a category of being. One becomes a wetback criminal threat. The collapse is a mode of containment, of fixing race.

The term also references the body. One is a wetback. It also signals criminal/illegal movement into the United States; one is also a wetback. And every single reference to the term, then or now, names wetbacks as part of a national problem: “Aside from the fact that it is a monstrous example of publicly countenanced law-breaking, the traffic inflicts incalculable economic and social damage on the United States.”<sup>xl</sup> In one word, race maps with nation, movement, and criminality.



But, of course, the making of race that happens through wetback is not just about criminality and entry. It is also about reproducing undocumented Mexicans as the nation's labor source, adding another layer to the making of race. For it was, of course, this labor that prompted those open border events. Wetbacks were not just criminals—a frame that marshalled a particular agency—they were also passive, childish, docile ... exploitable. In the words of one journalist, "they do not argue, do not agitate, do not complain."<sup>xli</sup> "Hungry and pathetic,"<sup>xlii</sup> wetbacks would work for wages that Americans would not consider accepting: "The Mexican wetback is the hardest-working farm laborer in the world. After all, the only thing he wants is to work"<sup>xliii</sup>; "The Mexican national may be paid fifty cents an hour, with a shack to live in; the wetback will work for twenty to thirty cents an hour and live in the brush. An American family, regardless of living standards, cannot survive on fifty cents an hour.... And, anyway, Americans won't do stoop labor; they aspire to something higher."<sup>xliv</sup>

These varied depictions of "wetback" labor align with what Ehlers names blood—again, what I think of as character. But oddly, and in another moment of collapse, this docility is not just about character, it is also about color—or the physical body. This is a docility read on the body. In one report, a journalist noted that, when faced with arrests, Mexicans would shrug and smile, offering a resigned "mala suerte."<sup>xlv</sup> This cheerful compliance with arrest was described endlessly: "Sí, Señor Inspector...you remind me last year the desert and the track cannot lie."<sup>xlvi</sup> Docility was not just a character trait, it was an embodied way of being that is seen on the body. The docile wetback body speaks its race, and in doing so, it offers proof of alien-ness, its inferiority.

At the same time, the docility of race is a docility that acts. That action, however, is not the intentional action of the agential subject, but the threatening action of race—that excessiveness that leaks and flows, unrestrained and polluting, always frighteningly mobile. If collapse makes race through the ways that the perceptual becomes the conceptual, or in the merger of color and blood, skin and character, excess makes race in the ways it figures race as out of control, everywhere—the body almost escaping itself. It is that uncontrolled bodily danger that threatens always to contaminate.

In language deeply embedded with the scripts of blackness, wetback bodies were figured as threat, largely through how their bodies and ways of being moved. Consider this extended commentary by a South Texas citizen in a letter to the Texas Goodwill Commission: "How about being in a drug store and three Mexicans entered reaking [sic] with filth and odor so bad it was nauseating, and the three enjoying their appearance while clean people were at tables partaking food. How about being on a bus and having lice drop down in your lap from off a dirty Mexican standing in the aisle beside you."<sup>xlvii</sup> Mexican-ness exceeds the body; it is so great a filth that it reeks and drops. The docility of the wetback, a docility that embeds wetback with a childish, almost infantile, acquiescence to authority is also its threat, for it is an active, naturally—even, perhaps, biologically—agential docility that exceeds itself, falling onto the hapless White bodies. Again, this kind of commentary was typical. Mexicans were associated with a leaky, excessive dirtiness:

"They ["wetbacks"] are herded together in insanitary [sic] hovels and shanties."<sup>xlviii</sup>

"I have seen, with my own eyes, people living in these shacks and sheds, getting their own water to drink, and cook with, out of irrigation ditches, no type of sanitary facilities, bathing or toilet facilities of any kind in sight; living in shacks I wouldn't put a horse into."<sup>xlix</sup>

But the excess of race was not just about the wetback body. It was also in the movement of the wetback body. Because of course, the "wetback problem" was a problem of movement: "Wherever they go, wetbacks depress standards of wages and working conditions."<sup>1</sup> In emphases of arrests and deportations as well as in the tides of wetbacks that flooded the nation and the hordes that swarmed in, wetbacks were perpetually problematic either because they moved or because they failed to move.

These excesses of mobility make race through both time and space, effecting another collapse; time and space are imbricated with each other, producing particular racialized spatio-temporalities. Border crossing is a movement across space, from there to here. But the movement is not just spatial. It is also temporal. The spatio-temporal question is whether the “there” is racialized as like here or not like here. There, Raka Shome and Radha Hegde remind us, is rarely a neutral space; instead, it is the location of “difference.”<sup>li</sup> The there of difference is temporal and spatial. Migrants from “traditional” countries, from primitive and backward countries, are temporally and spatially different.<sup>liii</sup> In the discourse surrounding the wetback problem, the spatio-temporalities of “wetback” were manifest in the chaos and intensities of their movement.

## Two Every Minute Across the Border

**Mexican “wetbacks” continue to invade the U. S. in an unending—and uncontrolled—stream.**

By **GLADWIN HILL**

**EL CENTRO, Calif.**—It was the dawn of a new day just about a week since, as it may have temporarily, uneasy inactivity. But down here on the Mexican border the dawn of such new days, every day a week, brings the renewal of an unending stream of Mexican laborers to cross a never-ending stream of the United States.

Down is when the “wetbacks”—the Mexican border-poppers who sneak into the United States at a constant rate of a million or more a year—daily resume their border invasions from the south. Since Mexico and the United States have so far been unable to agree on a new migrant labor policy for this year, permitting the least inspection of Mexican workers under controlled conditions, the “wetback” problem in 1934 will, if anything, be worse.

Some of the “wetbacks” come about, across scrubby desert wastes. Others slip away on freight trains, in box cars, “in the rick” and even in garbage cans loaded with coal and in empty tank cars—down which, on occasion, they are extracted, dead, in northern fields. **1000** others, who have received up to \$100 to pay a professional smuggler, travel northward in automobiles and even in San Diego taxis, to Los Angeles, the San Joaquin Valley and the periphery of San Francisco.

Even, stepping from the steaming smog of the coast of California, is when the Border Patrol of the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service daily resumes its unending efforts to catch and deport the “wetbacks.”

The control, which probably will receive an unprecedented amount of public attention during the current session of Congress, is so one-sided it is a wonder the Border Patrol has not found in the least long time.

**MEXICAN** have an entering the United States without legal sanction has 1,000 miles of border to choose from— from Brownsville, Tex., to San Diego, Calif. For the first 300 miles the line follows the shifting course of the Rio Grande River northward to El Paso, Tex. In some seasons and some places its waters flow deep and irrevocably, forcing the invaders to swim for it (then their name of “wetbacks”). Along much of the Rio Grande and several settlements like El Paso in Texas, Douglas, Nogales and Yuma in Arizona and Colton in California, the border is fenced and there are gates whose customs and immigration inspectors are permitted. But anyone can go a short way out of town and go over or around the fence, and the rest of the border is wide open.

GLADWIN HILL of The Times Los Angeles Bureau covers a vast territory which includes the “wetback” country south of the Rio Grande.

The Border Patrol has fewer than 1,000 officers to police the 1,600 miles. If the whole force were lined up along the border at once, it still would form no kind of a cordon. In addition, international relations prevent their using weapons in any kind of force against them.

They know these efforts are bound to wage it one of a “defense in depth,” extending northward all the way to San Francisco. Nevertheless, as mentioned over the most sensitive segments of the border, but most of the work of apprehending illegal aliens is done well “behind”—on foot and horseback, in jumps and pistol cases, with an array of tactics from roadblocks to aerial reconnaissance. In fact, the patrol, in collaboration with other law enforcement agencies, extends its activities all the way to the Canadian border and the Mexican seaboard. The back streets of Chicago hotels, the steel mills of western Pennsylvania—any place where possible employment may be found within the rights of the “wetbacks.”

**B**UT their main concentrations are in the industrial centers. Their number in industry amounts to such as high as 100,000 at a time in California and the lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas. The total of these caught tells only part of the story, because for every one of these one or more are presumed to go undetected, a majority probably gravitate back to Mexico after a term of work, but others by the thousands try to make their illegal entry permanent.

The typical “wetback” can be described only as a Mexican and a man occasionally there are women “wetbacks”. He may be an illiterate peasant from Chihuahua, Coahuila, with his straw hat, serape and machete, one of Pancho Villa’s followers. He may be a relatively sophisticated semi-educational worker from Mexico City who has traveled up to a thousand miles to get to the border. He is generally amiable and without a brand. It takes more than ordinary initiative to make a grubstake, get to the border and face the Border Patrol’s guards, all for the purpose of working harder at lower wages than most United States citizens will accept.

**S**URE, it is technically illegal; the “wetback” may wind up in jail, if caught especially. For as much as two years. But the chances are that, if caught, he will just be shipped back across the border. Every Mexican knows that hundreds of thousands of his compatriots have preceded him on the route and that even he is in the United States an employer can hire him with impunity (unless granted leave, it must be proved that the employer knowingly harbored an illegal alien, which is difficult). Under these circumstances, (Continued on Page 41)



**CROSSING THE RIVER**—Looking east on the American side, Mexican “wetbacks” made across the river at a quiet and shallow spot near El Paso, Tex.



**JOHN'S END**—After making a two-day trip without food or water, John was washed tonight, illegal returns are stacked up in Los Angeles.

New York Times, 1934

In language reminiscent of contemporary public conversations, Mexican movement into the United States was figured through nature metaphors, typically water metaphors. They were the familiar “tides” and “floods” that “pour” into the United States. There were also animal metaphors. Like associations with dirtiness, these metaphors described the immensity and naturalness of the problem.

“To try and stop them is like trying to stop birds from migrating.”<sup>liii</sup>

“Like ants... They’re swarming over the desert like ants.”<sup>liv</sup>

These metaphors cast a particular kind of movement that was animalistic in body and in character:

“[Mexican immigrants] swarmed to the border by the tens of faceless thousands. They milled briefly amid slinking dogs and neon-lighted stench of Mexicali and then streamed, furtively and endlessly across the border into California.”<sup>lv</sup>

“Mexican laborers are now being loaded like work animals onto trucks.”<sup>lvi</sup>

The metaphoric frames were not unique to this time or even to Mexican migration. They were and are the terministic screens through which undesirable migration is imagined. The familiarity is significant. The ways migrants are imagined as moving into the nation—both literally and figuratively—circulates around their recognizability.<sup>lvii</sup> Simply put, migrants come to belong when they can be seen and recognized as like other national bodies. To be seen and recognized, a body must be fixed—like “us.” But there is a paradox: recognition demands a body static enough to be read and fixed into an identity position; yet migrants, by definition, are mobile and dislocated, unseeable and unrecognizable.

Racial recognition makes them recognizable. The familiarity, or recognizability, of the two main sets of metaphors around Mexican movement—nature and animal—enables the seeing and knowing of them. Both sets of metaphors have rhetorical force, perhaps even archetypal force, from our daily experiences and sets of knowledge. We know, or at least we think we know, the immensity of a flood or a tide. It is body of water whose size cannot be easily measured, whose movement is only partly predictable or containable. Excessive by definition, and outside of human control. This first sense of familiarity is potent. A flood is see-able and know-able in its opposition to humanity. It is joined by the second sense of familiarity, reiteration. These frames were already in place; the sense-making of this moment was, then, quick and easy, almost instantaneous.

Imagined thus, Mexicans could be immediately seen—recognized—in their difference, if not as their difference. The animalistic movement of wetbacks—the furtive slinking that is necessary for undocumented entry and natural to the movement of dogs, birds, and ants—maps onto Mexican bodies. Wetbacks were noticeable in their movement, even as the threat that they carried was their ability to sneak in, unnoticed.

Still, for all that “wetbacks” were narrated through a frenzied, uncontrollable movement, they were also named as easily and quickly managed. As discourse drew attention to the crossings, it also recounted the stoppages. Set against reports of floods and streams were endless accounts of arrests and deportations.<sup>lviii</sup> This careful accounting of Mexican bodies both reinforced the immensity and magnitude of wetback movement and refused the force of nature that constituted the discourse. Readers were assured that even floods and swarms could be controlled, made inferior, contained. Again, it is racial recognition that makes this containment possible.

The tension between the spatio-temporalities of movement and containment secured the moral order of superiority that is fundamental to the rhetorical making of race. Animal metaphors and nature metaphors juxtaposed against the hierarchical superiority of humanity and civilization make possible the awesome fear of the uncontrollable and the triumph of human against the seemingly impossible. It is here, finally, in the intersections of “wetback” as a term of the body, with wetback as a body that moves animalistically and naturally, that the discourse of the wetback problem produces race as real.

In February of 2014, when the silent protestors outside of a detention center in Phoenix, Arizona were assaulted for their commitments to justice by the callous actions of a passerby and his stereotypic burrito, they stood a mere two and half hours’ drive from the United States/Mexico border. Though certainly some of the detainees may have been from out of state, it is also quite likely that the majority either had been living in Phoenix or the surrounding area, or had crossed into the United States not by wading across the Rio Grande but by trekking through the Sonoran Desert at a cross point in eastern Arizona. That corridor is one of the most dangerous points for undocumented entry.



The terrain is simply not meant for most life. Yet, it has become one of the two most common entry points for undocumented crossing. The other location, in West Texas, has a similar terrain. Both sites are littered with the remains—the refuse—of those who did not survive the crossing.



In 2018 alone, the Pima County, Arizona medical examiners recovered the remains of 127 bodies in the southern Arizona desert, all presumed to be migrants.<sup>lix</sup> In 2017, they recovered 128 bodies.<sup>lx</sup> They believe that the bodies they found represent about half of the total number of dead bodies.<sup>lxi</sup> Over the past 20 years, a staggering number of deaths have occurred in the Arizona desert. Total crossings are down, but the number of deaths is constant or rising, at least in the Arizona and Texas desert regions.

So why, then, do so many migrants cross at these two deadly points of entry? Because U.S. border regulation practices have intentionally funneled undocumented migrants to these two deadly sites. The idea is deterrence. And if we consider the decline in attempted entry, then perhaps the idea is a good one. But, as I think many of us in this room will agree, there is no stopping undocumented crossing. The living conditions of many, if not most, migrants, whether in Mexico or Central America, offer little other choice. And we, the United States, have responsibility for those living conditions. But even without those often-deadly living conditions, we, the United States, continue to play the economic politics that we engaged in in El Paso in 1947 and Mexicali in 1954. While we may not open the gates today, we continue to invite, if not demand, cheap, exploitable, undocumented entry.

In their recent anthology, *Migrant Deaths in the Arizona Desert: La Vida No Vale Nada (Life is worth nothing)*, editors Raquel Rubio-Goldsmith, Celestino Fernández, Jessie K. Finch, and Araceli Masterson-Algar, along with the various contributing authors, reflect upon the surging migrant deaths in the Arizona desert.<sup>lxii</sup> Across the disparate, yet united essays is this clear point: For Mexicans, for “wetbacks,” *la vida no vale nada*. The deaths are a mere blip on an overcrowded national agenda.

These deaths are a register of what it might mean to Communicate for Survival. Much of what I've shared with you from the 1950s and the discourse of the Wetback Problem is removed from our everyday lives. Though some of you here were familiar with Operation Wetback, that 1954 mass deportation drive, others of you were not. Or maybe you learned of it recently, when Donald Trump invoked it as a model worth emulating.<sup>lxiii</sup> The emphasis in the subhead is revealing: "Though the United States has since abandoned the racial epithets its operation names, its legacy continues." There is no doubt that "wetback" as a term does not have the public circulation it did during the "wetback decade" or era. But, as Sebastian De La Cruz would remind us, it also has not disappeared.

More importantly for me, however, are the rhetorical linkages between wetback, the hate—and violence—it encapsulates and spreads, and survival. It is the legacy of wetback that concerns me. Racial recognition is not just a means of explaining the rhetorical force of the term wetback. It is a theory of the rhetorical making of race. The migrants who cross or attempt to cross the massive Sonoran Desert are dying of thirst, desperate for water. Despite their desert trek, they are still, just, wetbacks, whose lives *no vale nada*. Epithets, such as wetback, make race in the ways they direct our perceptual and conceptual attention. Excessive and mobile, these epithets adapt to the moment, making race again and again, even in ways far removed from their original invocations.

The legacy of the term—or what I will rename as its survival—is testimony to, if not evidence of, the rhetorical making of race. I theorize racial recognition not to account for what was at play during the "wetback era." I do so because I am convinced that the rhetorical making of race is a persistent, insistent, and inescapable practice that we all participate in. Racial recognition is at play in every moment of overt racism. Each such moment makes and fixes race, containing its excesses in the perceptual/conceptual collapse. But it is also at play in virtually every public rhetorical or communicative moment, epithet or no epithet. We, everyday citizens, have been instructed into the epithets such that, regardless of our politics, we seek constantly to see and know race. Every such moment of seeing and knowing is a moment of collapse and excess. We contain the mobility, frightened by or repulsed by its spatio-temporal excess, holding it so that the ontological truth of race remains primary.

Just a few weeks ago, historian Nell Irvin Painter wrote a beautiful and profoundly sobering editorial for the *New York Times*. Titled "A Racist Attack Shows How Racism Evolves," the piece traced a horrific—and now all too familiar—incident of racism.<sup>lxiv</sup> Two young boys harassed and assaulted four young black girls. Using racial epithets casting similar if not greater hate than wetback and urinating on the girls, the two boys, of South Asian descent, used violence to contain race. Painter's point was this: participation in racism is (aspirational) participation in whiteness. Days after reading Painter's essay, I came across this headline, "Native American Girl Volleyball Players Called 'Savages' During Volleyball Tournament."<sup>lxv</sup> When I read both pieces, I was struck by the survival of race and racism. The move to invoke the slur, whatever the slur, is a rhetorical move to fix and locate, a move of recognition. Each invocation is an act of race making—whoever invokes does whiteness, remakes whiteness, whoever is invoked is remade, all at once, and all too quickly and easily.

### NATIVE AMERICAN GIRL VOLLEYBALL PLAYERS CALLED "SAVAGES" DURING VOLLEYBALL TOURNAMENT

BY LEVI RICKERT / CURRENTS / 26 OCT 2019

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But, here's the thing: If race is a construct—social, discursive, or performative (and here I do not mean to erase or minimize the critical theoretical nuances between these terms)—then it is already beyond such control. As the various theories that advance race through construction and/or discourse remind us, there are endless possibilities that promise ever (slightly) new, but still new, remakings. The very raced bodies also belie daily the truth of race. Every mixed-race child is testament to the failures of race. And, each new wave of undocumented Mexicans into this country is also testament to survival, both the survival of racism and the survival of Mexicans.

About 25 years ago, I went to a reading by Chicana poet Alicia Gaspar de Alba. The inscription she wrote to me in her book has stayed with me: "Survival is the ultimate resistance." As we continue our conversations about communication and survival, I ask that we all remember the dual sides of survival. In racial recognition, race survives, in its most caricaturish and violent way. But racial recognition is a rhetorical theory of race; as such, it is premised in a second possibility for survival. And that is resistance. For as much as all of us, but really many of you, will continue to participate in discourses of racial recognition, some of us will refuse to be contained. When we remain, we, too, survive. Thank you.





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