

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Camille Guerin-Gonzales. *Mexican Workers and American Dreams: Immigration, Repatriation, and California Farm Labor, 1900-1939*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994. xi + 197 pp. \$42.00 (cloth) ISBN 0-8135-2047-9; \$16.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8135-2048-3.

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This is a work of scholarship that is long overdue in the on-going events of the border and border-land history. More importantly, it is the story of Mexican immigrants in pursuit of the elusive American dream, and of how they interpreted their experiences.

Camille Guerin-Gonzales' contribution to the historiography of this very volatile subject (immigration) is not only timely, but a well written and researched account of the lives and events of the Mexican immigrants' life from 1900 through 1939. Her work is as a continuation of scholars like Carey McWilliams, in his classic *North From Mexico*; Mark Reisler, *By The Sweat Of Their Brow*; and George I. Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American*.

Guerin-Gonzales' book is divided into three parts. Part I is the story of the Mexican immigrants' life in the California agricultural fields. Gonzales does a very commendable comparison of Japanese and Mexican field workers and how they "comprised a low-wage, migratory labor force who had little if any hope of ever realizing the American Dream or even of becoming American." She explains in great detail how this American Dream, with its myths, symbols, and ideas, informed and shaped the ways in which these immigrants understood their place in pursuit of this Dream. Mexican "Birds Of Passage" speaks directly to how, after 1917, Mexicans became represented as foreign sojourners. In other words, they would or could come into this country to work cheaply, but were not welcome to stay. Gonzales explores the reasons behind this policy, and for the most part finds that during the 1920s and 1930s "the United States developed and fostered a well-established racial ideology of Mexican immigrants that ranked these people according to how white they were."

Part II is a view of the "Racial Limitations of the

American Dream." In this section, Guerin-Gonzales argues the issues that surround whiteness and ethnic identity. It is the story of being Mexican in California. She looks at the difference in wages based on gender and specific tasks. Her analysis of the Great Depression and its effect on the Mexican immigrant population throughout the Southwest is very informative and interesting. What is truly fascinating is how she uses other areas of the Southwest to do her evaluations and comparisons. It is not often that scholars take the time to do comparative analyses of the same people in other parts of the country. Guerin-Gonzales does this superbly.

In Part III, Guerin-Gonzales brings it all home in "Dreaming America." After the "Repatriation" and the American exiles in Mexico, a new era for Mexican immigrants was about to begin. Starting with class war in the fields, Guerin-Gonzales documents and brings to the fore the problematic issues of the workers, growers, and New Deal Reformers right after the Great Depression. The impact of the New Deal on immigrant and migrant workers in the fields is given a thorough going-over by Guerin-Gonzales, especially in dealing with the rights of these workers.

This is one book that should be read by academicians as well as lay-people, especially those who purport or espouse to do something about the problems that are happening in the United States today in regards to our immigration policy for Mexican Americans in California and the Borderlands in general.

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