side immigrant and black co-workers and were prone to the same work slowdowns owing to swings in production cycles. During boom years Mexicans enjoyed full-time employment, enabling them to participate in the prosperity of the period. When industrial production shut down, as during the 1927 recession, Mexican factory workers faced layoffs and bouts of unemployment. Without work, thousands left the Midwest, though itinerant employment was commonplace. The Mexican proletarians of the North adjusted to their new environs and embraced the style of work of the different labor sectors.

The Acculturation of Young Mexican American Women

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This essay discusses the forces of Americanization and the extent to which they influenced a generation of Mexican American women coming of age during the 1920s and 1930s. The adoption of new cultural forms, however, did not take place in a vacuum. The political and economic environment surrounding Mexican immigrants and their children would color their responses to mainstream U.S. society. The Spanish-speaking population in the United States soared between 1910 and 1930 as over one million Mexicanos migrated northward. Pushed by the economic and political chaos generated by the Mexican Revolution and lured by jobs in U.S. agribusiness and industry, they settled into existing barrios and forged new communities both in the Southwest and the Midwest, in small towns and cities. For example, in 1900 only 3,000 to 5,000 Mexicans lived in Los Angeles, but by 1930 approximately 150,000 persons of Mexican birth or heritage had settled into the city's expanding barrios. On a national level, by 1930 Mexicans, outnumbered only by Anglos and blacks, formed the "third largest 'racial' group."

Pioneering social scientists, particularly Manuel Gamio, Paul Taylor, and Emory Bogardus, examined the lives of these Mexican immigrants, but their materials on women are sprinkled here and there and at times are hidden in unpublished field notes. To set the context, I will look at education, employment, and media as agents of Americanization and assess the ways in which Mexican American women incorporated their messages. Drawing on social science fieldwork and oral interviews, I will discuss also the sources of conflict between adolescent women and their parents as well as the contradictions between the promise of the American dream and the reality of restricted mobility and ethnic prejudice.

This study relies extensively on oral history. The memories of thirteen women serve as the basis for my reconstruction of adolescent aspirations and experiences.

Education and employment were the most significant agents of Americanization. Educators generally relied on an immersion method in teaching the English language to their Mexican pupils. Even on the playground, students were en-
joined from conversing in their native Spanish. Admonishments such as “Don’t speak that ugly language, you are an American now,” not only reflected a strong belief in Anglo conformity but denigrated the self-esteem of Mexican American children and dampened their enthusiasm for education. Ruby Estrada remembered that corporal punishment was a popular method for teaching English. “The teacher was mean and the kids got mean.” At times children internalized these lessons, as Mary Luna reflected: “It was rough because I didn’t know English. The teacher wouldn’t let us talk Spanish. How can you talk to anybody? If you can’t talk Spanish and you can’t talk English, what are you going to do? . . . It wasn’t until maybe the fourth or fifth grade that I started catching up. And all along that time I just felt I was stupid.”

Students also became familiar with U.S. history and holidays (e.g., Thanksgiving). In recounting her childhood, Rosa Guerrero elaborated on how, in her own mind, she reconciled the history lessons at school with her own heritage. “The school system would teach everything about American history, the colonists and all of that,” she explained. “Then I would do a comparison in my mind of where my grandparents came from, what they did, and wonder how I was to be evolved and educated.”

Schools, in some instances, raised expectations. Imbued with the American dream, young women (and men) believed that hard work would bring material rewards and social acceptance. . . . Some teenage women aspired to college while others planned careers as secretaries. “I want to study science or be a stenographer,” one Colorado adolescent informed Paul Taylor. “I thinned beets this spring, but I believe it is the last time. The girls who don’t go to school will continue to top beets the rest of their lives.”

Courses in typing and shorthand were popular among Mexican American women, even though few southwestern businesses hired Spanish-surnamed office workers. In 1930, only 2.6 percent of all Mexican women wage earners held clerical jobs. . . . Skin color . . . played a role in obtaining office work. As one typing teacher pointed out to young Julia Luna, “Who’s going to hire you. You’re so dark.”

Many young Mexican women never attended high school but took industrial or service-sector jobs directly after the completion of the eighth grade. . . . Family obligations and economic necessity propelled Mexican women into the labor force. One government study appearing in . . . 1931 . . . revealed that in Los Angeles over 35 percent of the Mexican families surveyed had wage-earning children. By 1930, approximately one-quarter of Mexican and Mexican American female wage earners in the Southwest obtained employment as industrial workers. In California, they labored principally in canneries and garment firms. Like many female factory workers in the United States, most Mexican operatives were young, unmarried daughters whose wage labor was essential to the economic survival of their families. As members of a “family wage economy,” they relinquished all or part of their wages to their elders. . . .

At times working for wages gave women a feeling of independence. . . . Some young women went a step further and used their earnings to leave the family home. Facing family disapproval, even ostracism, they defied parental authority by sharing an apartment with female friends. Conversely, kin networks, particularly in canneries and packing houses, reinforced a sense of family. Working alongside fe-
male kin, adolescents found employment less than liberating. At the same time, the work environment did give women an opportunity to develop friendships with other Spanish-surnamed operatives and occasionally with their ethnic immigrant peers. They began to discuss with one another their problems and concerns, finding common ground both as factory workers and as second-generation ethnic women. Teenagers chatted about fads, fashions, and celebrities.

Along with outside employment, the media also influenced the acculturation of Mexican women. Movie and romance magazines enabled adolescents (and older women as well) to experience vicariously the middle-class and affluent life-styles heralded in these publications and thus could nurture a desire for consumer goods. Radios, motion pictures, and Madison Avenue advertising had a profound impact on America's cultural landscape. . . . The Mexican community was not immune to this orchestration of desire, and there appeared a propensity toward consumerism among second-generation women. . . . As members of a "consumer wage economy," daughters also worked in order to purchase items for their families' comfort, such as furniture, draperies, and area rugs. Other teenagers had more modest goals. After giving most of her wages to her mother, Rosa Guerrero reserved a portion to buy peanut butter and shampoo. "Shampoo to me was a luxury. I had to buy shampoo so I wouldn't have to wash my hair with the dirty old Oxydol. I used to wash my hair with the soap for the clothes."

. . . Movies, both Mexican and American, provided a popular form of entertainment for barrio residents. It was not uncommon on Saturday mornings to see children and young adults combing the streets for bottles, so that they could afford the price of admission—ten cents for the afternoon matinee. Preteens would frequently come home and act out what they had seen on the screen. "I was going to be Clara Bow," remembered Adele Hernández Milligan. Another woman recounted that she had definitely been "star struck" as a youngster and attempted to fulfill her fantasy in junior high by "acting in plays galore." The handful of Latina actresses appearing in Hollywood films, such as Dolores Del Rio and Lupe Velez, also whetted these aspirations. Older "star-struck" adolescents enjoyed afternoon outings to Hollywood, filled with the hope of being discovered as they strolled along Hollywood and Vine with their friends.

The influential Spanish-language newspaper La Opinión encouraged these fantasies, in part, by publishing gossipy stories about movie stars . . . as well as up-to-the-minute reports on the private lives and careers of Latino celebrities. It also carried reviews of Spanish-language films, concerts, and plays. . . . Furthermore, the Los Angeles–based newspaper directly capitalized on the dreams of youth by sponsoring a contest with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. "Day by day we see how a young man or woman, winner of some contest, becomes famous overnight," reminded La Opinión as it publicized its efforts to offer its readers a similar chance. Touted as "the unique opportunity for all young men and women who aspire to movie stardom," this promotion held out the promise of a screen test to one lucky contestant . . .

Although enjoying the creature comforts afforded by life in the United States, Mexican immigrants retained their cultural traditions, and parents developed strategies to counteract the alarming acculturation of their young. Required to speak only English at school, Mexican youngsters were then instructed to speak only
Spanish at home. Even when they permitted the use of English, parents took steps to ensure the retention of Spanish among their children. ... Proximity to Mexico also played an important role in maintaining cultural ties. Growing up in El Paso, Texas, Guerrero crossed the border into Ciudad Juárez every weekend with her family in order to attend traditional recreational events, such as the bull fights. Her family, moreover, made yearly treks to visit relatives in central Mexico. Those who lived substantial distances from the border resisted assimilation by building ethnic pride through nostalgic stories of life in Mexico. ...

In bolstering cultural consciousness, parents found help through youth-oriented community organizations. Church, service, and political clubs reinforced ethnic awareness. Examples included the "Logia Juventud Latina" of the Alianza Hispano Americana; the Mexican American Movement, initially sponsored by the YMCA; and the youth division of El Congreso de Pueblos Que Hablan Español. ...

Interestingly, only two of the thirteen women mentioned Catholicism as an important early influence. The Catholic church played more of a social role; it organized youth clubs and dances, and it was the place for baptisms, marriages, and funerals. For others, Protestant churches offered a similar sense of community. Establishing small niches in Mexican barrios, Protestant missionaries envisioned themselves as the harbingers of salvation and Americanization. ... Whether gathering for a Baptist picnic or a Catholic dance, teenagers seemed more attracted to the social rather than the spiritual side of their religion. ... Blending new behavior with traditional ideals, young women also had to balance family expectations with their own need for individual expression.

Within families, young women, perhaps more than their brothers, were expected to uphold certain standards. ... Parents often assumed what they perceived as their unquestionable prerogative to regulate the actions and attitudes of their adolescent daughters. Teenagers did not always acquiesce in the boundaries set down for them by their elders. Intergenerational tension flared along several fronts.

Generally, the first area of disagreement between a teenager and her family would be over her personal appearance. During the 1920s, a woman's decision "to bob or not bob" her hair assumed classic proportions in Mexican families. ... Differing opinions over fashions often caused ill feelings. One Mexican American woman recalled that when she was a young girl, her mother dressed her "like a nun" and she could wear "no makeup, no cream, no nothing" on her face. Swimsuits, bloomers, and short skirts also became sources of controversy. ...

Once again, bearing the banner of glamour and consumption, La Opinion featured sketches of the latest flapper fashions as well as cosmetic ads from both Latino and Anglo manufacturers. The most elaborate layouts were those of Max Factor. Using celebrity testimonials, one advertisement encouraged women to "FOLLOW THE STARS" and purchase "Max Factor's Society Make-up." Factor, through an exclusive arrangement with La Opinión, went even further in courting the Mexican market by answering beauty questions from readers in a special column—"Secretos de Belleza" (Beauty Secrets).

The use of cosmetics, however, cannot be blamed entirely on Madison Avenue ad campaigns. The innumerable barrio beauty pageants—sponsored by mutualistas, patriotic societies, churches, the Mexican Chamber of Commerce, newspa
pers, and even progressive labor unions—encouraged young women to accentuate their physical attributes. Carefully chaperoned, many teenagers did participate in community contests from La Reina de Cinco de Mayo to Orange Queen. They modeled evening gowns, rode on parade floats, and sold raffle tickets.

The commercialization of personal grooming made additional inroads into the Mexican community with the appearance of barrio beauty parlors. Working as a beautician conferred a certain degree of status, “a nice, clean job,” in comparison to factory or domestic work. As one woman related: “I always wanted to be a beauty operator. I loved makeup; I loved to dress up and fix up. I used to set my sisters’ hair. . . . Neighborhood beauty shops reinforced women’s networks and became places where they could relax, exchange chisme (gossip), and enjoy the company of other women.

The most serious point of contention between an adolescent daughter and her parents, however, regarded her behavior toward young men. In both cities and rural towns, girls had to be closely chaperoned by a family member every time they attended a movie, a dance, or even church-related events.

Women in cities had a distinct advantage over their rural peers in that they could venture miles from their neighborhood into the anonymity of dance halls, amusement parks, and other forms of commercialized leisure. With carnival rides and the Cinderella Ballroom, the Nu-Pike amusement park of Long Beach proved a popular hangout for Mexican youth in Los Angeles. It was more difficult to abide by traditional norms when excitement loomed just on the other side of the streetcar line.

Some women openly rebelled. They moved out of their family homes and into apartments. Considering themselves free-wheeling single women, they could go out with men unsupervised, as was the practice among their Anglo peers. “This terrible freedom in the United States,” one Mexicana lamented. “I do not have to worry because I have no daughters, but the poor señoritas with many girls, they worry.” Those Mexican American adolescents who did not wish to defy their parents openly would “sneak out” of the house in order to meet with their dates or to attend dances with female friends. A more subtle form of rebellion was early marriage. By marrying at fifteen or sixteen, these women sought to escape parental supervision; yet many of these child brides exchanged one form of supervision for another, in addition to taking on the responsibilities of child rearing.

The third option sometimes involved quite a bit of creativity on the part of young women as they sought to circumvent traditional chaperonage. . . . The practice of “going out with the girls,” though not accepted until the 1940s, was fairly common. Several Mexican American women, often related, would escort one another to an event (such as a dance), socialize with the men in attendance, and then walk home together. . . . Daughters negotiated their activities with their parents. Older siblings and extended kin appeared in the background as either chaperones or accomplices. Although unwed teenage mothers were not unknown in the Los Angeles barrios, families expected adolescent women to conform to strict standards of behavior. As can be expected, many teenage women knew little about sex other than what they picked up from friends, romance magazines, and the local theater.

The image of loose sexual mores as distinctly American probably reinforced parents’ fears as they watched their daughters apply cosmetics and adopt the apparel advertised in fashion magazines. In other words, “If she dresses like a
flapper, will she then act like one?" Seeds of suspicion reaffirmed the penchant for traditional supervision. . . .

However, . . . the impact of Americanization was most keenly felt at the level of personal aspiration. "We felt if we worked hard, proved ourselves, we could become professional people," asserted Rose Escheverria Mulligan. Braced with such idealism, Mexican Americans faced prejudice, segregation, and economic segmentation. Though they considered themselves Americans, others perceived them as less than desirable foreigners. During the late 1920s, the Saturday Evening Post, exemplifying the nativist spirit of the times, featured inflammatory characterizations of Mexicans in the United States. For instance, one article portrayed Mexicano immigrants as an "illiterate, diseased, pauperized" people who bear children "with the reckless prodigality of rabbits." Racism was not limited to rhetoric; between 1931 and 1934, an estimated one-third of the Mexican population in the United States (over 500,000 people) were either deported or repatriated to Mexico, even though many were native U.S. citizens. Mexicans were the only immigrants targeted for removal. Proximity to the Mexican border, the physical distinctiveness of mestizos, and easily identifiable barrios influenced immigration and social welfare officials to focus their efforts solely on the Mexican people, people whom they viewed as foreign usurpers of American jobs and as unworthy burdens on relief rolls. From Los Angeles, California, to Gary, Indiana, Mexicans were either summarily deported by immigration agencies or persuaded to depart voluntarily by duplicitous social workers who greatly exaggerated the opportunities awaiting them south of the border. . . .

By 1935, the deportation and repatriation campaigns had diminished, but prejudice and segregation remained. . . . The proportion of Los Angeles-area municipalities with covenants prohibiting Mexicans and other minorities from purchasing residences in certain neighborhoods climbed from 20 percent in 1920 to 80 percent in 1946. Many restaurants, theaters, and public swimming pools discriminated against their Spanish-surnamed clientele. In southern California, for example, Mexicans could swim at the public plunges only one day out of the week just before they drained the pool. Small-town merchants frequently refused to admit Spanish-speaking people into their places of business. "White Trade Only" signs served as bitter reminders of their second-class citizenship. . . .

Considering these circumstances, it is no surprise that many teenagers developed a shining idealism as a type of psychological ballast. Some adolescents, such as the members of the Mexican American Movement, believed that education was the key to mobility, while others placed their faith in the application of Max Factor's bleaching cream. Whether they struggled to further their education or tried to lighten their skin color, Mexican Americans sought to protect themselves from the damaging effects of prejudice.

Despite economic and social stratification, many Mexicans believed that life in the United States offered hope and opportunity. . . . More common perhaps was the impact of material assimilation, the purchase of an automobile, a sewing machine, and other accoutrements of U.S. consumer society. The accumulation of these goods signaled the realization of (or the potential for realizing) the American dream. . . .

In this essay, I have attempted to reconstruct the world of adolescent women, taking into account the broader cultural, political, and economic environment. I
have given a sense of the contradictions in their lives: the lure of Hollywood and the threat of deportation. The discussion gives rise to an intriguing question. Can one equate the desire for material goods with the abandonment of Mexican values? I believe that the ideological impact of material acculturation has been overrated. For example, a young Mexican woman may have looked like a flapper as she boarded a streetcar on her way to work at a cannery; yet she went to work (at least in part) to help support her family, as part of her obligation as a daughter. The adoption of new cultural forms certainly frightened parents, but it did not of itself undermine Mexican identity. The experiences of Mexican American women coming of age between 1920 and 1950 reveal the blending of the old and the new, fashioning new expectations, making choices, and learning to live with those choices.

**FURTHER READING**