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“Look, an Illegal Alien!”: the rhetorics of migrant “Illegality” and the racialization of Mexicanness

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Review of **Deportable and Disposable: Public Rhetoric and the Making of the “Illegal” Immigrant**, by Lisa A. Flores, University Park, PA, Penn State University Press, 2020, ix-219 pp., \$29.95 (softcover), \$109.95 (hardcover).

ABSTRACT

There is a sociopolitical and juridical regime that I have designated in terms of “the legal production of Mexican/migrant ‘illegality,’” which is never separable from a larger discursive formation of migrant “illegality,” which has always also been constitutive to the (re-)racialization of “Mexican”-ness in the United States. As a scholar of rhetoric, Lisa Flores amplifies and illuminates these multiple dimensions of the rhetoricity of race, national identity, and citizenship. By examining this succession over the first half of the twentieth century of “moments of rhetorical crisis” surrounding the mass-mediated and highly politicized spectacles that produced “Mexicans” as “problem,” Flores critically demonstrates how U.S. public discourse has named “Mexicans” and called upon the public to see “Mexicans” — variously, as “illegal aliens,” “zootsuiters,” braceros, and “wetbacks” — such that the law and law enforcement, politics and policing, as well as mass-mediated public discourse have been indispensable for the ensnaring of “Mexicanness” within deportability and disposability and confining “Mexicans,” both migrants and U.S.-born ostensible citizens, within a regime of racial subordination.

KEYWORDS

Illegality

Understanding “race as a rhetorical effect ... the rhetoricity of race,” Lisa Flores tells us, is the ultimate project of her book, *Deportable and Disposable: Public Rhetoric and the Making of the “Illegal” Immigrant* (159). “Discourse,” she contends, “brings about the effect of race” (11). This proposition, however, is in no sense reducible to an exclusive analytical focus on rhetoric nor a simplistic claim about discursivity alone. Instead, investigating a succession of particular historical conjunctures across the first half of the twentieth century and focusing on the material practices of migrant labor recruitment, border patrol, immigration law enforcement, policing, and extra-state racial violence in the United States, Flores demonstrates that race not only “must be named” but rather “must be named and named and named” (155).

Flores is specifically interested in the racialization of “Mexicanness” as a particular constellation of racial embodiment, cross-border mobility, illegalized migranhood,

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foreignness, deportability, subordinate class status, and disposability, and thus, the peculiar co-constitution of “Mexicanness” as a racialized synonym for the figure of the “illegal alien” and the rendering of illegalized migration as ubiquitously and presumptively co-terminous with “Mexicanness”. These concerns have long been central to a large part of my own scholarship. As a scholar of rhetoric, Flores brings to this area of study a sensitivity to the ways that immigration raids, deportation campaigns, border violence, racial profiling by police, and veritable acts of racist terror by white mobs must all be recognized to be acts of racial “seeing and sensing” (13), and thus, racial naming. In other words, this panoply of material and practical acts of border policing and law enforcement are shown to thus be deeply embroiled in a larger and enduring process of rhetorical race-making that sutures the “Mexicanness” of illegalized and deportable migrants from Mexico to the more generalized disposability of both Mexican migrants and U.S.-born/U.S.-raised ostensible U.S. citizens of Mexican ancestry. Flores characterizes these conjunctures as a fusion of “the body logics of race” with “the mobility logics of borders” (13) and examines the specificity and distinctive intensity of such intersections in the historical productions of racialized “Mexicanness”.

Flores’ distinctive contribution to our understanding of these processes is precisely her emphasis on the constitutive and performative nature of discourse (16), whereby the repetitive acts of naming the intersection of “Mexicanness”, on the one hand, and migrant “illegality”, deportability, and disposability, on the other, serve to train the general public (which is to say, more precisely, a general *white* public) to see and sense race. Such acts, in their rhetorical excess, are tantamount to “a racial project premised in and on the making of Mexican ‘illegality’” — a racial performative compelling politicians, law- and policy-makers, immigration and border enforcement agents, the police, the mass media, and the general (white) citizenry to see “Mexicans” simultaneously in their alienness and their racialized otherness, “naming Mexicans into a racial category all their own — ‘illegal’ alien” (45).

In *Deportable and Disposable*, Flores traces four figurations of “Mexicans” that produce and consolidate the equation of “Mexicanness” with “illegality,” “illegal aliens,” “zootsuiters,” “braceros” and “wetbacks.” Each of these figures corresponds to a historically specific moment of racialization through a spectacle of crisis that evokes the more general notion of Mexican migration — and, therefore, of Mexicans — as a “problem.” Flores thus explores how each of these conjunctures operates as distinct but interconnected moments of a larger racial project. The particular force of these discursive formations is to repeatedly construct — and, importantly, instruct — the wider audience of these racial performatives to see “Mexicanness” through acts of naming in a manner akin to Frantz Fanon’s famous meditation on the rhetorical and performative power of the invocation “Look, a Negro!” to entrap the racially subordinated subject within Blackness, or Judith Butler’s analogous interrogation of the performativity of gender in the enunciation “Look, it’s a girl!” (153). These public rhetorical acts compel a kind of racial recognition, whereby the figures of migration, especially illegalized migration — or in the case of Mexican American zootsuiters, the figures of alleged delinquency, criminality, and violence — are sutured to a naming of “Mexicanness”. Through such persistent and pervasive iteration, the larger apparatus and regimes of border and immigration enforcement as well as policing and white mob violence command that “Mexicans” are seen and known (153) according to a racial script and a scopic history

that always contain but also exceed the Mexican subjects whom they name and frame. Importantly, these reciprocal entanglements of “the body logics of race” and “the mobility logics of borders” serve to enforce and reinforce the bodies of Mexicans as other in a way that is inextricable from their concomitant inscription as presumptive racial others and putative non-citizens.

In these ways, the discursivity and iterative quality of these racial projects implicate the state’s border and immigration regime, and the law and policing more generally, in an ongoing and open-ended work of disciplining both race and citizenship to uphold and re-fortify the sociopolitical order of white supremacy. Yet, as Flores reminds us, this persistent and repetitive work is necessary because of the intrinsic instability, incompleteness and ontological insecurity of race itself. Hence, this compulsive rhetorical work of naming and commanding that “Mexicanness” and “illegality” be seen, recognized, and known — and that they be so relentlessly seen and known together as inextricably conjoined — unrelentingly indicates Mexican lives, bodies, and labor as deportable and disposable. Thus, these racial performatives subject, subjugate, and discipline Mexican migrants and Mexican Americans alike, but also reanimate the equation of (U.S.) “Americanness” and citizenship with “whiteness”, and thereby subject and discipline us all within the normalizing and normative confines of white supremacy.

There is, then, a sociopolitical and juridical regime that, in my own work, I have designated in terms of “the legal production of Mexican/migrant ‘illegality’”, which is never separable from a larger discursive formation of migrant “illegality” which has always also been constitutive to the (re-)racialization of “Mexicanness” in the United States.¹ As a scholar of rhetoric, Lisa Flores amplifies and illuminates these multiple dimensions of the rhetoricity of race, national identity and citizenship. By examining this succession over the first half of the twentieth century of “moments of rhetorical crisis” (15) surrounding the mass-mediated and highly politicized spectacles that produced “Mexicans” as a “problem,” Flores critically demonstrates how U.S. public discourse has operated as a disciplinary and regulatory force. Through the heterogeneous and ambivalent iterations of naming “Mexicans” and by calling upon the public to see “Mexicans” — variously, as “illegal aliens,” “zootsuiters,” “braceros” and “wetbacks” — the law and law enforcement, politics and policing, as well as mass-mediated public discourse, have been indispensable for the ensnaring of “Mexicanness” within deportability and disposability and the enclosure and confinement of “Mexicans” both migrants and U.S.-born ostensible citizens, within a regime of racial subordination.

Note

1. Nicholas De Genova, “The Legal Production of Mexican/Migrant Illegality,” *Latino Studies* 2, no. 2 (2004): 160–185.