

# BORDERS AND BODIES: The El Paso Quarantine and Mexican Women's Resistance

Eve Galanis

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*In January of 1917, hundreds of female Mexican domestic workers rioted against quarantine protocols implemented by the El Paso government, to combat the spread of typhus louse. This analysis addresses how the quarantine policy negatively affected Mexican women and why they responded with violence. Using intersectional theory, this historical inquiry draws connections between public health policy and hierarchical features of power. Inspecting the way race, class and gender interplay with power, measures the impact the policy had on female Mexican domestic workers. The results found Mexican working-class women were most negatively affected by the quarantine policy and most vulnerable to abuse by American officials. Examining the El Paso Bath Riots reveals the way U.S. public health and border policy can function to control the mobility of Latin American people.*

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In 1917, hundreds of female Mexican domestic workers resisted and rioted the United States quarantine policy to combat a typhus outbreak on the U.S.-Mexico border. This largely forgotten incident should be reconsidered using intersectional theory, which allows for a greater understanding of public health actions and their negative impact on marginalized peoples. According to Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, intersectionality is “the idea that multiple oppressions reinforce each other to create new categories of suffering.” By applying intersectional theory as a form of critical inquiry to the “bath riots,” it enables to understand the “life and behavior rooted in the experiences and struggles of disenfranchised people.”<sup>1</sup>

On Sunday January 28, 1917, the quarantine was enacted. Due to the typhus outbreak, Mexican workers entering from Juárez into El Paso were required to go through physical inspection. If suspected of having lice, people were forced to strip and take a monitored shower containing soap, water, and kerosene. Their clothing and baggage were sent through steam and cyanide gas treatments. Afterwards, they received a ticket, certifying their inspection to border officials.<sup>2</sup>

The policy was protested immediately after it was implemented. At 8 a.m., Carmelita Torres, a seventeen-year-old domestic worker, was crossing the Santa Fe International Bridge when her streetcar was stopped. Border inspectors told the commuters to get off the streetcar to go through the quarantine baths, but Torres refused. After she vocalized her dissent, she gathered thirty other passengers, all women, to protest. They got off the streetcar, marched to the Mexican side of the

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<sup>1</sup> Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 36.

<sup>2</sup> C. C. Pierce, “Combating Typhus Fever on the Mexican Border,” *Public Health Reports* (1896-1970) 32, no. 12 (1917): 426-29.

bridge and refused to submit to American restrictions. They stopped the other incoming streetcars and mobilized domestic workers to take a stand against the action, demanding the order of forced bathing be abolished. The women laid down on the tracks, preventing cars from being moved. They also took motor controllers from the conductors and hid them in their stockings once officers arrived to make arrests.

As the crowd grew to upwards of five-hundred people, mostly women, they became incensed, throwing rocks and empty bottles at military and police officers.<sup>3</sup> Additional troops were sent to the border, including General Murguía's "Death Troop" Calvary of the Carranza army. José Maria Sanchez, a laborer, possibly misunderstanding the protest, shouted, "Death to Carranza, Viva Villa!" He was immediately shot four times by a Carranza soldier and killed. Eventually, the 'Death Troops' were able to disperse the crowd and arrest Torres for inciting the riot.<sup>4</sup> While Torres nearly disappeared into historical obscurity, her story of resistance reveals the complexity of power behind the quarantine policy.

According to the CDC, public health is "the science of protecting and improving the health of people and their communities."<sup>5</sup> However, there are times in American history when public health was used as a tool to dominate and control populations. During the first two decades of the twentieth century in El Paso, a series of public health policies were enacted congruently with the closing of the city's Mexican border, which shifted the culture of the region permanently. The questions are how did these policies affect labor-class Mexican women and why did they respond to the regulations with resistance?

Over the last century, the gradual militarization of the region can be traced back to policies such as the El Paso quarantine and Mexican resistance, which includes the bath riots. These measures reveal the U.S. has a pattern of using health crises to assert control over Latinx bodies. By applying intersectional theory to early twentieth century El Paso history, it is possible to understand why Mexican women resisted the quarantine. Using an intersectional frame of analysis includes investigating context-specific dynamics, which are based on converging or diverging identities.<sup>6</sup> This essay will analyze the diverse ways race, class, and gender interplay with autonomy and mobility at the El Paso border and will scrutinize the actions taken by the state to exert power over Mexican women. By examining policies, such as the quarantine and the Immigration Act, as well as the actions and consequences of Mayor Tom Lea and their impact on Mexican working-class women, it is evident the quarantine was designed to dominate and control rather than protect. Drawing connections to past events such as the jail holocaust and harassment of women on the streetcar provides context that illuminates *why* the women felt compelled to protest their conditions. The quarantine was designed to directly rob Mexican people of their autonomy, deter border crossings and impose psychological terror on migrant workers. Mexican women domestic workers unified in immediate direct action against the policies and practices they perceived were designed to oppress them. Although unsuccessful, their struggle and resistance illuminate the truth behind those policies and the beginning of a century-long, modern-day militarization at the border.

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<sup>3</sup> "Mex. Rioters Attack U.S. Troops," *El Paso Herald*, January 29, 1917, accessed February 7, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> "Auburn-haired Amazon at Santa Fe Bridge Leads Feminine Outbreak," *El Paso Morning Times*, January 29, 1917, accessed March 14, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> "What is Public Health?" *CDC Foundation*, last modified 2019, accessed March 24, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall, "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no.4 (Summer 2013): 785, accessed October 12, 2018.

In 1917, the same year the U.S. entered WWI, there were a series of drastic shifts in El Paso. Thousands of troops were sent to the border after the interception of the Zimmerman Telegram. Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1917 that restricted access of migrants and immigrants coming into the United States from Mexico, especially those in lower social and economic classes.<sup>7</sup> The El Paso police department deployed “purity squads” to round up and arrest sex workers under the guise of public health.<sup>8</sup> 1917 was also the same year the U.S. Public Health service passed the typhus quarantine policy and opened delousing stations.

This intersectional historical analysis will draw connections between public health policy and the hierarchical features of power. Inspecting the way race, class and gender interplay with power, measures the impact on Mexican women. This research does not go against prior historiography, but rather reinforces it. Intersectional theory threads together the policies and their consequential resistance; arguing Mexican working-class women were the most negatively affected and most vulnerable to abuse by American officials.

### Scholarly Debate

While El Paso public health policy may not be mainstream to American historical memory, historiography reveals the long-lasting effects on North American society over the last century. Additionally, research regarding immigration and public health in other ports of entry illustrates discrimination was not limited to the southern border. Overall, historians have documented instances where the U.S. had ulterior motives behind enacting certain public health policies. Analyzing context and policy design of the quarantine regulations, criminalization of sex work and immigration reform reveals the actions were not necessarily made to protect the public. Instead, historians found the federal, state and local government working in tandem, using public health as a means to dominate and control marginalized populations, particularly Mexican women.

In an intersectional analysis of immigration and disability studies, “From Fictive Ability to National Identity: Disability, Medical Inspection, and Public Health Regulations on Ellis Island,” Roxana Galusca asserts that, in the early twentieth century, Ellis Island represented an institutionalized notion of an ideal nation, excluding disabled or diseased bodies.<sup>9</sup> Officials regularly prohibited individuals with physical or cognitive impairments from citizenship and entry into the U.S. Their actions were reinforced by the perception of disability as pollution and corruption of the nation-state. By applying intersectional theory to health and immigration, Galusca breaks down the normative concepts of health and ability, which she describes as invisible markers for fueling gender and racial inequality. While Galusca briefly touches upon the regulations observed in El Paso, her primary focus of analysis is centered on Ellis Island. Regardless, her framework of analysis serves as an accurate model for applying intersectional theory to health and immigration policy at U.S. ports of entry in a broader context.

Focusing on El Paso, Ann Gabbert explores the transformation of culture in El Paso during the Progressive Era in her article, “Prostitution and Moral Reform in

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<sup>7</sup> U.S. Congress, House, *An Act to Regulate the Immigration of Aliens to, and the Residence of Aliens in, the United States*, H.R. 10384, 64th Cong., 2nd sess., introduced in House February 5, 1917.

<sup>8</sup> Ann R. Gabbert, “Prostitution and Moral Reform in the Borderlands: El Paso, 1890-1920,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 12, no. 4 (2003): 575-604, accessed February 7, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Roxana Galusca, “From Fictive Ability to National Identity: Disability, Medical Inspection, and Public Health Regulations on Ellis Island,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 72 (Spring 2009): 137-163, accessed April 18, 2019.

the Borderlands: El Paso, 1890-1920.”<sup>10</sup> She focuses on El Paso’s ‘red-light’ district and its vice zones, investigating how national rhetoric influenced the criminalization of sex work under the guise of a public health crisis. Gabbert states that prior to 1890, El Paso functioned in a different cultural space and had a more “lawless” nature. Over the next two decades, the culture, attitudes, and laws of the city shifted to a more conservative space that regulated sex workers’ mobility. She found that the police-assembled “purity squads” targeted Mexican sex workers by limiting their ability to rent hotels and apartments, frequent establishments, and walk about the city. While Gabbert’s research illustrates a facet of power and marginalization of working-class Mexican women, she does not draw connections to other examples of militarization of public health in El Paso such as the quarantine, which was occurring simultaneously.

The most well-known chronological history of the United States quarantine policy in El Paso and the consequential bath riots is David Dorado Romo’s *Ringside Seat to a Revolution: An Underground Cultural History of El Paso and Juárez*.<sup>11</sup> This monograph explores the hidden history of El Paso and even draws explicit connections from the El Paso delousing to Nazi Germany. Romo explores a variety of topics connected to policy and resistance, revealing all the layers of the conflict in a linear fashion. His historical contributions are a foundation for understanding the quarantine and its negative effects on the El Paso community. While he addresses the conflict between class, race, and ethnicity, he does not address gender and other intersecting identities such as LGBT people and those with disabilities in his analysis.

From a medical history perspective, Alexandra Minna Stern has written in great length about El Paso’s quarantine policy and the medicalization of power. In her essay, “Buildings, Boundaries and Blood: Medicalization and Nation-Building on the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1910-1930,” she provides analysis of health and border policy and the infrastructure and facilities used to implement and execute eugenic medical science.<sup>12</sup> Stern asserts that infrastructure can be a form of domination, citing the social impact of the gradual militarization of the border.

In Stern’s book, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America*, she approaches the topics surrounding eugenics in the United States more broadly, including the El Paso border.<sup>13</sup> Stern examines the history of practices such as forced sterilization and racial hygiene, in describing such measures as scientific racism. For example, in March 1916, the U.S. Public Health Service implemented the practice of branding people’s arms in permanent ink with the word “admitted” after being physically examined and bathed at the Laredo border. She also cites Mexican health services had quarantine and fumigation plants in the border cities of Ciudad Juárez, Nuevo Laredo and Piedras Negras, as early as the 1890s. While Stern provides an in-depth analysis of white supremacy in science and health, she does not draw connections from public health to gender and class. Furthermore, there is a notable inaccuracy in Stern’s research: she states Carmelita Torres was forty-seven years old, however, according to the *El Paso Morning Times*, published the day after

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<sup>10</sup> Gabbert, 2003, 575-604.

<sup>11</sup> David Dorado Romo, *Ringside Seat to a Revolution: An Underground Cultural History of El Paso and Juárez: 1893-1923* (El Paso: Cinco Puntos Press, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Alexandra Minna Stern, “Buildings, Boundaries and Blood: Medicalization and Nation-Building on the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1910-1930,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 79, no. 1 (1999): 41-81, accessed February 5, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley: University of California, 2005).

the riots, Torres was said to be seventeen.<sup>14</sup> With that said, newspaper media documenting the riots must be examined.

**“Auburn-Haired Amazon ... Leads Feminine Outbreak”**

The only evidence of the bath riots is what was documented in newspapers at the time. The newspapers used in compiling evidence were the *El Paso Herald*, *El Paso Morning Times*, *New York Times*, and local papers around the country such as Wisconsin’s *La Crosse Tribune*. There are no photos of Torres, and her story seemingly ends with her arrest. The newspaper articles themselves have a U.S. bias and do not speak in favor of the women. However, there is much to be interpreted about the riot based on the information provided. For example, the *El Paso Herald* published on January 29<sup>th</sup> reveals vital information regarding motivations of the women to protest. Juárez officials cited rumors of sexual violence and fears of Mexican women being burned to death: “Stories that Mexican women were burned to death in the gasoline baths, that American soldiers had photographed the women when they were stripped for their baths and that outrages had been committed on the women by American soldiers were said to have been circulated among the ignorant class in Juárez.”<sup>15</sup> This accusation of violence exposes the catalyst to the protests as well as the genuine fear reverberating among the women.

The reports of the bath riots in newspaper publications were all unfavorable towards the women’s efforts. There was sexist, hyperbolic language, which painted the women as violent and hysterical. *El Paso Morning Times*, for instance, reported the women as crazed: “Composed largely of young girls, the mob seemed bent on destroying anything that came from the American side ... one of the streetcar motormen ... emerged from the mob with half a dozen women clinging to him, endeavoring to drag him down.”<sup>16</sup> Comparing the women to a swarm of bees and calling the rocks and empty bottles “missiles,” the American media was fixed in its message that the women were not valid in their protests. Publications geographically further away from the protest were less accurate and more dramatic. Additionally, there were conflicting accounts, even within the same articles. Some articles stated there were no reported deaths. Others, like *New York Times*, acknowledged that shots were fired. It quoted Carranza officers and government inspectors who claimed no one was hurt. However, in the same article, it confirmed the detailed story of José Maria Sanchez getting killed, despite what officials claimed.<sup>17</sup>

A newspaper decides which wire reports to use, and the *La Crosse Tribune*, a local newspaper in Wisconsin, decided to go with a story that framed the riot to be explicitly anti-American and pro-Pancho Villa. The writers made little mention of the quarantine policy, nor did they mention why the women were protesting it. Instead, they claimed the women were Villa supporters and were protesting America: “The women tearing his clothing and scratching his face and shouting, ‘Kill the gringo! Viva Villa! Death to the Americans!’”<sup>18</sup> The article claimed the riot resulted from General Pershing’s withdrawal from Mexico, which was forced by the Carranzista government. Lastly, the article mentioned the quarantine protocol included giving Mexican migrants baths but critically failed to mention that they included kerosene.

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<sup>14</sup> “Auburn-haired Amazon at Santa Fe Bridge Leads Feminine Outbreak,” *El Paso Morning Times*, January 29, 1917.

<sup>15</sup> Mex. Rioters Attack U.S. Troops,” *El Paso Herald*, January 29, 1917.

<sup>16</sup> “Auburn-haired Amazon at Santa Fe Bridge Leads Feminine Outbreak”

<sup>17</sup> “Quarantine Riot in Juarez,” *New York Times*, January 29, 1917, accessed April 30, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> “Mexicans Angered at American Quarantine Rules, Riot on Bridge,” *La Crosse Tribune*, January 29, 1917, accessed February 18, 2019.

The La Crosse, Wisconsin 1910 Census shows no evidence of Latin American residents.<sup>19</sup> The negative reports circulating about El Paso at the time could have incited fear in individuals who had no actual experience interacting with Mexican people. What is most essential in this report of misinformation, however, is its further illumination of Mexican women's position in the United States. Not only were they one of the most vulnerable populations, but their actions were also painted to be more violent than they were.

There were no women of color working at these newspapers to correct the writers. They had no representation for their perspective and no chance to defend their actions and voice their feelings and experiences of oppressive treatment by the U.S. government. Gathering information on the bath riots from newspaper publications proves to be problematic. While these articles are some of the only surviving information about the events that transpired, they are marred with bias and conflicting narratives, muddying the truth in a way that has proved to be seriously detrimental to the public perception of Mexican women. However, reading between the lines and observing the text from an intersectional perspective allows one to see the women's fears of being sexually assaulted and burned alive. Ultimately, those in the positions of power to construct the narrative used it to further the women's marginalization by depicting the protest as unwarranted and futile.

### The Jail Holocaust

A year before the quarantine was implemented, the county jail already had a delousing process put in place. Prisoners were given gasoline baths to kill lice, but on March 5, 1916, things went horribly awry. A match was lit near the baths, and the prison erupted in flames. Sixteen men were killed, and nineteen were injured, many of whom were not expected to survive. According to the *El Paso Herald*, H. Cross, a prisoner known for his drug addiction, was allegedly the man who struck the match. However, this could not be confirmed, as his location at the time of the incident did not corroborate with the site of the explosion; he was nowhere near the gas baths. Ernesto Molina, the youngest prisoner in the jail at seventeen, was within a few feet of the explosion but jumped out of a window to escape the flames. Because of the placement of the gasoline baths, prisoners had to pass through the flames to get out; however, because of the novel construction of the jail, many were trapped inside. Ocario Soto, arrested for vagrancy, was pulled out of the fire, but his body was so severely burned that it left a charred outline on the pavement.<sup>20</sup>

The domestic workers migrating from Juárez to El Paso had surely heard of these grisly events leading up to the quarantine restrictions set upon them. Fears of being burned alive by American officials were not out of the realm of possibility, and the events at the county jail confirmed these fears. The *New York Times* article reported on the riot and made validations to this claim. The article confirmed the riot was due to resistance of the quarantine and made explicit connections between the

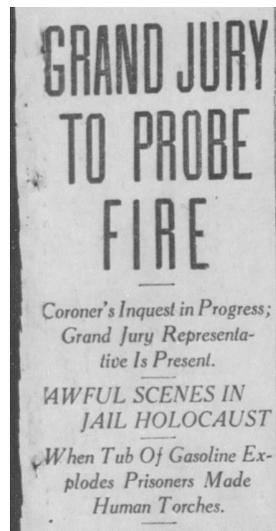


Figure 1: *El Paso Herald*, March 7, 1916.

<sup>19</sup> Enumeration District 97, La Crosse County, La Crosse Ward 1-20, Wisconsin, Wisconsin Census of Population, *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910*, (National Archives Microfilm Publication T624, roll 1,178); Record Groups of the Bureau of the Census, accessed February 20, 2019.

<sup>20</sup> "Grand Jury to Probe Fire," *El Paso Herald*, March 7, 1916, accessed April 8, 2019.

protests and the jail holocaust. It also corroborated the claims of women being photographed while stripped by American soldiers.<sup>21</sup>

With regards to the sexual assault allegations, the only way of validating this information was discovered by historian David Dorado Romo, who uncovered confidential letters sent by El Paso Public Health Service authorities to their supervisors in Washington D.C., admitting they heard the rumors of women being photographed and the images being displayed in a local saloon. Based on this correspondence, there was an investigation launched. “It has been reported that pictures of nude women are displayed in a saloon in El Paso, with the inscription below that they were taken at the Service disinfecting plant. A detective how investigating this report and if possible, legal proceedings will be brought against dive keeper.”<sup>22</sup> The alleged images never surfaced, however, nor was there a conclusion of the investigation. Therefore, it cannot be stated to be definitively true. Further research is required to locate this correspondence and find if there was a conclusion to the inquiry.

What the investigation does reveal, however, is the women had valid fears and anxieties about going through the quarantine. They realized their vulnerability and the robbery of their autonomy. Whether or not American health officials and military *did* violate the women, the fact is, they *could have*. The power that was granted to them by the government made the conditions possible for women to be sexually abused in the quarantine facilities. These allegations, coupled with the events of the jail holocaust, were likely the core explanation for the women’s revolt at the Santa Fe Bridge.

### **Power Behind the Policy**

An understanding of the negative impact that United States policy had on Mexican women leading to their resistance requires a close examination of the policies themselves. This includes the Immigration Act of 1917 and the El Paso Typhus Quarantine Public Health Report, written by Senior Surgeon of the United State Public Health Service, C.C. Pierce. By analyzing the language and protocol within the documents, it is apparent labor-class migrants, disabled, LGBT, and illiterate individuals were discriminated against and targeted for inhumane treatment at the border.

The Immigration Act of 1917, drafted on February 5, 1917, was designed to regulate the flow of immigrants into the United States. While there had been immigration policy implemented in the past, the magnitude of this policy was unprecedented. The first sentence of the document makes clear it would use the term “alien” to define any person not native-born or naturalized in the U.S. By using the term “alien,” it makes space for dehumanization and an ‘othering,’ a common tactic for fearmongering.<sup>23</sup>

In the second section, Congress decided there would be a head tax placed on all individuals entering the United States. Anyone over the age of sixteen entering the country had to pay eight dollars upon entry. Further, the document guidelines defined specific populations of people that would be excluded from entry into the U.S., which included the following groups: “All idiots, imbeciles, feeble-minded persons ... paupers; professional beggars, vagrants ... as being mentally or physically defective, such physical defect being of a nature with may affect the ability of such alien to earn

<sup>21</sup> “Quarantine Riot in Juarez,” *New York Times*, January 29, 1917.

<sup>22</sup> Romo, *Ringside Seat to a Revolution: An Underground Cultural History of El Paso and Juárez: 1893-1923*, 226.

<sup>23</sup> Meagan Flynn, “An ‘invasion of illegal aliens’: The oldest immigration fear-mongering metaphor in America,” *Washington Post*, November 2, 2018, accessed April 12, 2019.

a living ...”<sup>24</sup> The act also explicitly excludes admission for sex workers. Because of its vague definition of what was determined to be a “mental defect,” it also made it possible to exclude LGBT individuals.<sup>25</sup>

The Act implemented a literacy test at ports of entry, through which immigrants had to prove they were physically capable of reading in their native language. This immediately impacted southwestern economies that heavily relied on Mexican labor and soon after the passage, there was a waiver allowing exemption for Mexican agricultural work.<sup>26</sup> It is unclear if that exemption applied to domestic workers. What is certain, however, is that contractual labor was barred under the Act. Domestic workers hired for anything beyond temporary work in the U.S. would be doing so illegally. This certainly threatened the livelihood for women like Carmelita, who lived in



Figure 2: Angel Island Immigration Station, *National Archives and Records Administration*

Juárez and commuted daily to work for Anglo families in El Paso.

In the public health report published in March of 1917, entitled “Combating Typhus Fever on the Mexican Border” and written by Senior Surgeon of the U.S. Public Health Service C.C. Pierce, the theory and methods of the quarantine are outlined in detail. The protocol breakdown reveals explicit class discrimination.

Pierce began the report by stating the typhus outbreak was coming into the U.S. from Mexico. He cited their political instability as one of the root causes of the issue and distribution of the disease was concentrated among those in poverty. Considering Mexico was in a civil war, Pierce’s statement was not completely unfounded. The typhus infection is commonly found in refugee situations, war zones, and among homeless populations.<sup>27</sup> He stated that while there had been quarantine facilities in Mexico for some time, they believed it would be more effective to have facilities in the U.S., suggesting American control would do a better job containing the issue as compared to the Mexican government’s efforts. And he may have been right – Mexico was in a state of political upheaval and may not have been able to provide proper health treatment.

Discrimination is found as Pierce outlined quarantine protocol being implemented in the El Paso facility. He states, “All persons coming to El Paso from Mexico, considered as likely to be vermin infested, are sent through this plant for

<sup>24</sup> US Congress, the United States, 64th Cong., 2nd sess., 1917, Ch. 29.

<sup>25</sup> Tracy J. Davis, “Opening the Doors of Immigration: Sexual Orientation and Asylum in the United States”, Washington, D.C.: *Washington College of Law*, archived from the original on 22 August 2002, accessed April 9, 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Don M. Coerver, Pasztor, Suzanne B., and Buffington, Robert, *Mexico: An Encyclopedia of Contemporary Culture and History*, (Santa Barbara, California, 2004).

<sup>27</sup> “Pediculus Humanus Corporis,” Science Direct (2019): accessed April 9, 2019.

disinfection.”<sup>28</sup> How were those “likely” to have typhus louse determined? People were not inspected for lice until after they were sent into the plant, so it is implied that officials were making judgments about those who physically appeared to be of the working class, either by dress or ethnicity. Mexicans that were white were typically of higher social classes; those of indigenous and mestizo races tended to be of lower social and economic standing.<sup>29</sup>

After migrants were sent to the quarantine plant, they were separated by gender, forced to strip naked as their clothes and baggage were sent to steam and gas treatments, respectively. Once stripped, they were *then* physically inspected. If there was evidence of lice, men’s hair was shaved, and women were given a hair treatment mixture of kerosene and vinegar. All individuals passing through the plant were then ordered to take attendant-monitored showers, during which a mixture of liquid soap and kerosene sprayed from an elevated reservoir. The water was also controlled by attendants, which according to Pierce was because “The persons bathed do not understand modern plumbing and can not [sic] regulate the flow of hot and cold water ...”<sup>30</sup> In his perspective, he deemed them uncivilized and assumed they would not know how to control the pressure and temperature of the water, taking on authoritarian paternalistic approach.

After bathing, individuals then had to wait approximately a half an hour for their clothes and baggage to be treated. They stood around naked, waiting. No identification tags were attached to their belongings, so once their items were returned, they had to sift through a large pile to find their clothing. Once dressed, they were inspected once more and given unspecified vaccinations and a mandatory certificate, which confirmed they bathed and passed quarantine inspection. They presented this certificate upon entry into the country. Anyone of the labor class without a quarantine certification would not be allowed to enter.

This process was a dehumanizing event for all, and according to Alexandra Minna Stern, motivated illegal immigration to occur. People opted to cross by river or desert to avoid the risk of abuse at legal points of entry.<sup>31</sup> Further, considering gender in this policy, women at this time were never nude in public. To huddle them together in a group, in a sterile, foreign environment, being watched by male, American attendants was shameful. This policy also took an economic toll; going through this process daily slowed down the ability for domestic workers to get to their place of employment. Overall, this policy was extremely restrictive and targeted Mexican working-class individuals, limiting their economic mobility and attempted to psychologically deter them from entering the United States.

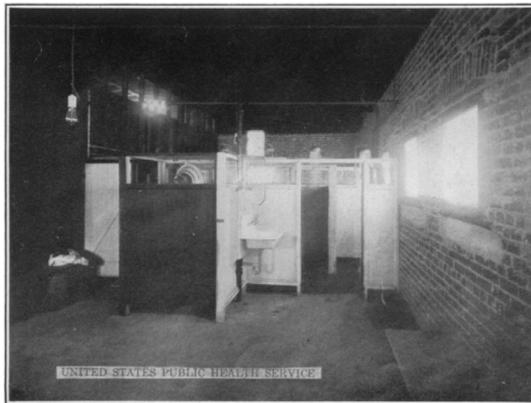


Figure 3: Women’s Bath Stalls at the El Paso Facility, *Public Health Reports*, C.C. Pierce, 1917.

<sup>28</sup> C.C. Pierce, *Public Health Reports (1896-1970)*, 426-429.

<sup>29</sup> Vilma Ortiz and Edward Telles, “Racial Identity and Racial Treatment of Mexican Americans,” *Race and Social Problems* 1, no. 4 (2012), accessed April 12, 2019.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> “The Bath Riots: Indignity Along the Mexican Border,” *National Public Radio*, January 28, 2006, accessed April 9, 2019.

Observing the United States Border Crossing data from Mexico to the U.S. provides a glimpse of the impact the quarantine had on mobility. Altogether, in 1917, 34,217 people passed through El Paso's legal points of entry, the majority being of Mexican descent. There were also a significant number of Chinese people crossing. The day before the riots, one-hundred seventy-two people crossed through, eighty-six of which were women. The day of the riots, only seven people crossed, none of which were women.<sup>32</sup> Clearly these small numbers were due to the border eventually closing for the day, but nevertheless it is curious that none of them were women.

### **Mayor Tom Lea: White Supremacist**

Tom Lea was the mayor of El Paso from 1915 to 1917, and though he was not in office for very long, he was a key person in implementing and executing the quarantine. Interpreting Tom Lea's actions and the consequences of his policies can provide additional context for understanding the bath riots.

Based on Tom Lea's policies, one would think he hated Mexicans. His contempt, however, was concentrated towards the Villistas, those of the "lower classes." Before he was the mayor, he was the attorney for Mexico's ex-president, Victoriano Huerta. According to his son, Tom Lea Jr., he also liked President Carranza because "he was a little more for law and order."<sup>33</sup> In a thirteen-hour interview conducted by Adair Margo, Tom Lea Jr. also revealed personal information about his father that hinted at a possible obsession with germs. Apparently, Lea was so fixated on cleanliness and fear of typhus, he wore silk underwear. Dr. W. C. Kluttz, the city's health officer and friend of Lea's, advised him that lice did not stick to silk.<sup>34</sup> While it may seem like an eccentricity on the surface, the notion of cleanliness and purity was connected to white supremacy, as is indicated by the eugenic scientists Lea aligned himself with. In fact, he was more extreme.

David Starr Jordan, the former Stanford University president and renowned eugenicist, believed in a master race through the breeding of whites. He called for forced sterilization and birth control for people of color, I.Q. tests and immigration reform to prevent the impurification of the Anglo race. Jordan was against American imperialism, he argued expansion caused miscegenation and defiled the "Saxon and Goth blood of the nation."<sup>35</sup> Jordan scheduled a meeting with Mayor Tom Lea in June of 1916 and while they had similar beliefs, Lea furiously canceled the meeting. Lea claimed Jordan's pacifism had no place in El Paso. "The citizens of El Paso may be vultures as Dr. Jordan claims. If it is a vulture who desires to uphold the honor of his country. Whatever the cost may be, thank God, I am one of the ancient and accepted order of vultures."<sup>36</sup>

Lea also vowed, with the help of military troops, to demolish hundreds of "germ-infested" Chihuahuita adobe homes and replace them with American brick

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<sup>32</sup> The National Archives and Records Administration; Washington D.C., *Manifests of Statistical Alien Arrivals at El Paso, Texas, May 1909 - October 1924*, Record Group Title: Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1787-2004.; Record Group Number: 85; Microfilm Roll Number: 24.

<sup>33</sup> Tom Lea Jr., "Interview no. 800," interview by Adair Margo, Institute of Oral History, May 1993, interview (tape 1 side B) and transcript (16-34), Special Collections Department, UT El Paso.

<sup>34</sup> Tom Lea Jr., "Interview no. 800," interview by Adair Margo, Institute of Oral History, May 1993, interview (tape 2 side B) and transcript (48-67), Special Collections Department, UT El Paso.

<sup>35</sup> Romo, *Ringside Seat to a Revolution: An Underground Cultural History of El Paso and Juárez: 1893-1923*, 231.

<sup>36</sup> "Remember Carrizal Says Mayor; Says Ordered Jordan to Beat It," *El Paso Herald*, July 6, 1916, accessed April 30, 2020.

buildings.<sup>37</sup> After Chihuahuaita snipers shot at the demolition squads, Lea advised the city's health inspectors to carry rifles and to "shoot to kill" if anyone fired at them from Juárez.<sup>38</sup> Under his Progressive-era policy, he also passed the first U.S. ordinance to outlaw cannabis, associating the drug with Mexican revolutionaries.<sup>39</sup> What confirms Tom Lea's association with germs and Mexicans, however, were his pleas to Washington for months, demanding a "quarantine camp" for Mexicans at the border.<sup>40</sup>

It was only when his friend, Dr. Kluttz, passed away from typhus fever that actions were set in motion. Lea did not hesitate to politicize Kluttz's death, calling him a martyr and leading a crusade against the disease. He claimed that had the federal government implemented the quarantine months ago, his death could have been avoided. Lastly, he mobilized the crowd around support for the quarantine: "May we as men and as citizens see that such a sacrifice was not in vain ..."<sup>41</sup> After he served as mayor, according to historian Shawn Lay, Tom Lea was part of the Ku Klux Klan, Frontier Klan No. 100 in 1920.<sup>42</sup>

### **"Nationality and Ladyhood"**

Years before the quarantine and the riots, an assault occurred in El Paso that launched a slew of op-eds, dominating the news cycle in the city for a little over a week. Observing the matter and the community's response provides a clearer idea of the position and perceptions of Mexican women in El Paso. On July 5, 1911, a woman going by the pseudonym "A Mexican Mother" published a letter to the editor about an altercation she had the day prior with soldiers on the Fort Bliss streetcar. According to her, she and her daughters were riding on the car during the evening of the Fourth of July. They were verbally harassed by soldiers riding the car, who were "... using abusive language, and even addressing some words showing off their poor knowledge of our language."<sup>43</sup> The women were rattled and felt unsafe as they were belligerently accosted.

The racially motivated scene ignited responses from citizens on both sides of the debate. The letters to the editor ran from July 8<sup>th</sup> until July 12<sup>th</sup> and the title of the column was "Nationality and Ladyhood." Some people wrote in support of the women, asserting that regardless of nationality and race, all women deserve respect and decency. One woman, presumably of Mexican decent named Marguerite Garcia, said the clothes and complexion of a woman should not determine whether she receives respect.<sup>44</sup>

However, there were voices in the community condemning the women, rather than the soldiers. One person, simply going by the pseudonym "An American," emphatically stated they didn't blame the soldiers for acting the way they did. The author claimed that a visit to the river on a Sunday at the spot where Mexican women go to swim would explain why the soldiers acted in a lecherous way. The author concluded by stating, "and if those people are such desirable citizens, why are they

<sup>37</sup> "The Problem of Chihuahuaita; Will We Clean Up Now or Take Chances?," *El Paso Herald*, November 30, 1915, accessed April 9, 2019.

<sup>38</sup> "City Inspectors To Carry Rifles," *El Paso Herald*, July 16, 1916, accessed April 9, 2019.

<sup>39</sup> "Marijuana Sale Now Prohibited," *El Paso Herald*, June 3, 1915, accessed April 9, 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Romo, *Ringside Seat to a Revolution: An Underground Cultural History of El Paso and Juárez: 1893-1923*, 231.

<sup>41</sup> "Dr. W.C. Kluttz, City Health Officer, Succumbs to Typhus," *El Paso Herald*, January 4, 1917, accessed April 9, 2019.

<sup>42</sup> Romo, *Ringside Seat to a Revolution: An Underground Cultural History of El Paso and Juárez: 1893-1923*, 231.

<sup>43</sup> "Letters to the Herald," *El Paso Herald*, July 5, 1911, accessed April 27, 2019.

<sup>44</sup> "Nationality and Ladyhood," *El Paso Herald*, July 12, 1911, accessed April 27, 2019.

arrested and watched so closely for shoplifting and other petty things.”<sup>45</sup> This op-ed reveals a lot about the negative attitudes towards Mexican women, suggesting they saw them as promiscuous and petty criminals.

Soldiers stationed at Fort Bliss responded to the incident, defending their position. One soldier, Private George W. Favors, claimed he had proof that exonerated the soldiers in question but provided no details beyond blaming a Chinese man that was also riding in the car that evening. He admitted there certainly were soldiers who drank far too much and could not control their actions, but the military had protocol put in place to address those individuals. He cites the real root of the problem in El Paso as the “ignorant classes,” chiding the culture of saloons and dives designed to tempt the soldiers into transgressions. “I beg to call on all to join in upholding the character of the feminine sex. But not condemn everyone for something that one man has done.”<sup>46</sup> Using the one bad apple argument, he urged people to view this incident as an isolated incident and not allow it to shape their perception of the military as a whole.

The *Herald* finally put the whole thing to rest with a published column entitled, “Unfounded Race Prejudice.” The editors of the paper seemingly took a side on the issue, asserting there was clearly prejudicial treatment of people of Mexican descent in the city. They recognized that Mexicans had been residing there long before Anglos had come along and therefore have every right to the city as they did. The editor said, “No finer types of true gentlemen and true ladies exist among those people we commonly call Mexicans.” They point out that racial antagonism should not exist and to cast judgment on a whole race of people is perpetuated by misinformation and intolerance. While this seemed to be a positive message, the article does have a classist slant. The editor clarifies, “There are social differences among white English-speaking persons, of the same nationality or of different nationalities; just so, there are social differences among Spanish speaking persons ...” The “Mexican Mother” certainly was in a higher social class, as revealed through her depictions of the incident and her access to an education. In the editor’s column disavowing racial bigotry, they do not condemn *all* judgment; those of lower economic classes were still subject to scrutiny in their eyes.<sup>47</sup>

The fact that the “Mexican Mother” was most likely of a higher economic and social class, compared to the protesters at the bridge, reveals harassment of Mexican women was not limited to wealth. They were considered second-class citizens, regardless of socio-economic status. Incidents like this could possibly reinforce the allegations of sexual abuse at the quarantine stations. This incident provides evidence of American military personnel, abusing their positions of authority to harass Mexican women.

### A Century-Long Aftermath

While the typhus outbreak ended in 1918, the quarantine continued for decades. This fact alone could be used as evidence the policy had racially divisive intent. By 1920, border health officials had implemented the use of Zyklon B and later DDT in place of kerosene.<sup>48</sup> Accounts given by former braceros confirm officials were continuing the practice of spraying Mexican laborers into the late-1950s.<sup>49</sup> With this in mind, it

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<sup>45</sup> “Nationality and Ladyhood,” *El Paso Times*, July 12, 1911.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> “Unfounded Race Prejudice,” *El Paso Herald*, July 15, 1911, accessed April 27, 2019.

<sup>48</sup> “Fumigation on Border; Gas is Very Powerful,” *El Paso Herald*, August 20, 1920, accessed February 23, 2019.

<sup>49</sup> Romo, *Ringside Seat to a Revolution: An Underground Cultural History of El Paso and Juárez: 1893-1923*, 237.

is clear the practice of spraying laborers with chemicals had very little to do with typhus, and more to do with physically and psychologically controlling the flow of migrant workers.

While the decades-long practice confirms the women's protest was largely unsuccessful, there is much to interpret from their attempts. For one, the failure of their protest and the subsequent decades of the policy illuminates the power the United States possesses over Latin American bodies. The policy was not disputed again until scientists and researchers found the chemicals were extremely toxic.<sup>50</sup> Further, the century-long militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border reinforces the assertion of control of Latinx peoples.

In 1917, Mexico was amid a civil war, and the energy of this political uprising certainly influenced the women to mobilize and stand up for perceived injustices with swiftness. Unfortunately, that stamina did not carry into future decades. Transitioning



Figure 4: Migrant Worker Being Sprayed, Leonard Nadel. Courtesy *National Museum of American History*, 1956.

into the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century to today, Latin American leadership has been at the behest of United States interests, at risk of economic isolation or a CIA-led government coup if they resist.<sup>51</sup> Grassroots efforts continue, but they are certainly weakened by economic instability and violence. And while the U.S. government is no longer spraying noxious chemicals on Latin American labor-class people, one could argue the treatment of migrants at the border continues to be an exertion of physical and psychological power.

In the modern era, migrants seeking asylum in El Paso have experienced family separation, restriction of entry and imprisonment including open-air prisons under highway overpasses.<sup>52</sup> On Saturday August 3, 2019, a young white man opened fire in an El Paso Wal Mart, killing twenty-two people and injuring twenty-four. The gunman posted a diatribe on the 8chan message board specifying this was an attack on Mexican immigrants, in pursuit of a white ethno-state.<sup>53</sup> The national rhetoric has bolstered support of further militarizing the border and is stoking fear of labor-class Latin Americans seeking refuge, even triggering domestic terrorism. Furthermore, as witnessed in the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic, the United States government continues to mismanage public health crises. Leadership continues to exploit a health emergency to stoke racial animus and xenophobia.

There is no way to compare the events of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to what is occurring in current-day systems. But the failure of the bath riots and any other method of Mexican resistance over the years has facilitated the U.S. to exert dominance over labor-class migrants consistently over the course of the last century. Latin American

<sup>50</sup> "Toxicology of D.D.T.," *The British Medical Journal* 1, no. 4392 (March 10, 1945): 338, accessed April 12, 2019.

<sup>51</sup> Laura Moye, "The United States Intervention in Guatemala," *International Social Science Review* 73, no.1/2 (1998): 44-52, accessed April 12, 2019.

<sup>52</sup> Simon Romero, "Migrants Are Detained Under a Bridge in El Paso. What Happened," *New York Times*, March 29, 2019, accessed April 12, 2019.

<sup>53</sup> Chas Danner, "Everything We Know About the El Paso Wal Mart Massacre," *New York Magazine*, August 3, 2019, accessed August 20, 2019.

women and children continue to be vulnerable to sexual assault in government custody.<sup>54</sup> Migrant workers still face labor exploitation and racial bias. Lower-income people are more likely to face disease, with the least access to healthcare. While Carmelita Torres was unsuccessful in her attempt to thwart American policy, her resistance was not in vain.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the treatment of Mexican women in El Paso at the time, the political rhetoric behind the quarantine and the Immigration Act of 1917, the leadership of Tom Lea and tracing the incidents and resistance of the bath riots, it is clear Mexican women were a marginalized group. They had very little power to influence their treatment, and multiple attempts have been made over the last century to dominate the autonomy and mobility of the working-class. Not much has changed over the last century; border militarization and public health problems remain like a hydra: for every issue addressed, ten more arise. However, preserving the events of the bath riots in North American historical memory serves to ignite a re-examination of modern-day border policy. Applying intersectional theory to the analysis of this microhistory facilitates a broader understanding of policy and its impact on groups of people, over time. Intersectional history provides us context for present-day atrocities and emboldens us to revisit our power structures.

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<sup>54</sup> Richard Gonzales, "Sexual Assault Of Detained Migrant Children Reported In The Thousands Since 2015," *National Public Radio*, February 26, 2019, accessed April 12, 2019; "Sexual Abuse in Immigrant Detention, Raquel's Story," *ACLU*, last modified 2019, accessed April 12, 2019.

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