

# OPINION

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## New (Old) Language of Racism

Today's diatribe on immigrants



BY JOE FEAGIN AND JESSIE DANIELS

The new language of anti-Mexican racism is actually drawn on centuries-old images from the white racial framing of African Americans, now repurposed for other people with brown skin.

The current white diatribe targeting Mexican immigrants—revealed in polls, media commentaries, actions of Arizona legislators—is much like the invective used against African Americans during the civil rights era.

Where does this language come from? It's developed over centuries of real racial oppression, including slavery and Jim Crow, by whites that wanted to explain the social order in ways that rationalize the fact that black Americans

were consistently at the very bottom of society. Now, a similar strategy is being used against Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and other Latinos.

This white racist frame adapts to new groups by re-imposing old racist imagery and stereotypes, with some tweaking.

Today, Mexican immigrants work at some of the most dangerous, difficult and lowest-paying jobs in the country. And, not coincidentally, an anti-Mexican language has emerged to justify their low position in the social order. It's similar to the strategy of the old anti-black language rationalizing slavery, Jim Crow, and contemporary anti-black racism.

This old language of racism now circulates in new ways as it reverberates and spreads easily via the web. Just last year as concerns about the swine flu virus were widespread, rumors abounded on the Internet that swine flu might be a plot by Mexican immigrants to "reconquer" the U.S. by intentionally spreading the disease here. In the echo chamber of right-wing websites and cable news channels, such rumors often get

picked up by mainstream news outlets.

Linguistics scholar, Otto Santa Ana, examined language used by mainstream media editors and reporters about Mexican immigrants. He found numerous newspaper articles with comments like this: Public programs are "a lure to immigrants." The electorate has an appetite for "red meat of deportation." INS agents catch "a third of their quarry." We need to "fer-

Recently, an assistant director of the Texas Election Division jokingly suggested that local white election officials should "speak slowly and loudly, in broken English" to Latino voters in need of the language assistance required under the law. Such mocking is not new, for whites have for centuries mocked the accent and character of English spoken by African Americans.

Anthropologist Jane Hill has

dowed with gross sexual appetites, political corruption, laziness, disorders of language, and mental incapacity." This too is similar to the way whites have mocked black speakers of English, for centuries.

This new language of anti-Mexican racism matters. The way legislators, mainstream media, and everyday folks talk about the issue of immigration matters because it has real consequences for peoples' lives. If people are deemed "illegal," it becomes easier to enact laws threatening their existence. If Mexican immigrants are "dangerous," it becomes easier to deny them basic human rights.

There are many lessons we can learn from earlier civil rights struggle. One of the most important ones is that the right to respect through language is a crucial part of the struggle for equality and human dignity.

Jessie Daniels, PhD, a nationally recognized expert on white racism, is Associate professor of Urban Public Health at Hunter College of the City University of New York. Joe R. Feagin, a former president of the American Sociological Review, is the Ella C. McFadden Professor of Liberal Arts at Texas A & M University.

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ret out illegal immigrants."

Today, in Arizona and many other areas in the U.S., whites' use of the hostile metaphorical language of "burden," "disease," "invasion," and "flooding the country" conveys an overt or subliminal image of Latino immigrants as very threatening and dangerous.

pointed to the widespread use of mock Spanish by whites—made-up terms such as "no problemo," "el cheapo," "watcho your backo," "hasty banana," and "no way, Jose." These terms incorporate a negative framing of Mexicans and Mexican Americans. As Hill puts it, through the means of mock Spanish "people are en-

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## Small Banks and Small Businesses

An economic engine worth supporting

BY JUDGE GREG MATHIS

Small businesses drive this nation's economy and make up the majority of our workforce; when they struggle, so too does the rest of the nation.

With so many small businesses currently unable to receive the funds they need to hire new staff, it's no wonder the unemployment rate remains dismally low. Ben Bernanke, Federal Reserve chairman and one of the world's most respected financial voices, recently suggested that lenders need to increase loans to small business in an effort to decrease unemployment. Bernanke is right on target; let's hope lawmakers take this idea and run with it.

A small business is any business with less than 500 employees; that's more than 90 percent

of American businesses and an overwhelming majority of American jobs. Loans to small businesses dropped from \$700 billion

in 2008 to \$660 billion in 2010. Lending has decreased for several reasons, a key one being the new credit standards bank put into place after the financial market collapsed.

President Obama has proposed a \$30 billion fund that will encourage community banks to support small business. The money would come from the U.S. Treasury Department and would go to small, community banks that want to increase their small business lending. Treasury officials say that the fund won't cost taxpayers money in the long run, though we may pay for it in the first few years.

Knowing how important small businesses are to the economy, any responsibility placed on the taxpayers by the proposed fund would be a welcome one. Yes, we were outraged at having to bail

out big financial institutions and major auto manufacturers, but only because corporate greed and excess put those companies in fragile positions.

Additionally, many of us didn't immediately understand how bailing out multi-billion dollar corporations would affect our daily lives. The impact of small businesses, however, is felt more directly and their financial health is directly linked to ours.

The President hopes Congress will make a decision on the proposed fund soon; if they delay, small businesses will continue to struggle and the economy will remain at a standstill. While this support should have come sooner, it is not too late for lawmakers step in and assist the nation's small businesses.

Help speed up the process by contacting your elected officials and urge them to quickly pass this legislation; the economy depends on it.

Greg Mathis is a retired Michigan District Court judge and syndicated television judge.

