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The Politics of Pardoning: Immigrant Amnesty and the (Re)formation of Nation in the United States

In the United States immigrant amnesty is associated with core democratic ideals. It is framed as a “pardon of offenses” that connotes liberty, as in those who receive amnesty may go free or are given access to new freedom. Yet the pardon offered to mostly Mexican and Latin American undocumented immigrants in the amnesty program of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) was paired with escalated *defenses*: IRCA combined amnesty, border militarization, and punitive immigration law. It was created to remedy the illegal immigration crisis by decreasing the number of illegal entries and extending legal rights to illegal aliens. But in the spirit of Reaganomics, it was also designed to inexpensively retain immigrant labor. I focus on the rhetoric of enfranchisement surrounding IRCA’s amnesty program in order to show how it legitimated the racialized gendered exploitation of immigrant labor in this instance of nation (re)forming.