Corazón de Dixie

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Corazón de Dixie: Mexicanos in the U.S. South since 1910.

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Introduction

A dark-skinned man, his face under the shadow of a brimmed hat, leans back against a corrugated metal wall (fig. 1). A beer advertisement marks the place as a bar. In the distance, two still darker figures walk along an unpaved street in a commercial district. It is November 1949 at the close of the cotton picking season in Marked Tree, Arkansas. The setting is the black side of town; the man in the foreground is Mexican. A Mexican Foreign Service officer, Rubén Gaxiola, took this photo in the fall of 1949. He had it printed and added a caption: “Goldcrest Beer 51—Café-bar. Corrugated metal construction. At the side of this establishment there is a sign that says, ‘Garzias Mexicanas Servesa.’ In this place, blacks and also Mexicans are served.” Then the bureaucrat placed the photo in an envelope with nine other images documenting Mexicans’ racial position in Marked Tree and mailed it off to Mexico City, where another bureaucrat would review them and consider banning Mexican workers from Marked Tree’s cotton fields.

Why was this Mexican man picking cotton in Arkansas in 1949 when so many poor white and black people still lived there? What did he hope to achieve in Arkansas, and what were his experiences while there? Why did he willingly associate himself with a group, African Americans, that had been systematically subjected to violence and deprived of social, economic, and political power? What was a Mexican bureaucrat doing in Marked Tree, and why did he and other elite officials care about the racial position of this poor Mexican laborer in the first place?

These are new questions in the histories of the United States and Mexico. When Latino migration to the U.S. South became visible seemingly out of nowhere in the 1990s, the newness of this “Nuevo” South went unquestioned. Journalists asked, “Will fajitas replace Moon Pie?” as though Mexican food had no history in the region; anti-immigrant activists decried the coming of “Georgifornia,” as though Georgia itself had not relied on Mexican and Mexican American laborers for more than forty years. Extrapolating from individual case studies, some social scientists wondered whether anti-black prejudices born in Latin America would doom attempts at political coalition building while others pointed to possibilities for cooperation.
Figure 1: “Goldcrest Beer 51—Café-bar. Corrugated metal construction. At the side of this establishment there is a sign that says, ‘Garzias Mexicanas Serves.’ In this place, blacks and also Mexicans are served.” Attachments to letter from Consul Rubén Gaxiola, Memphis, to Ministry of Foreign Relations, Mexico City, November 19, 1949, TM-26-32, Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, Mexico City.
teachers discussed Jim Crow as a matter of only black and white, and Latino elementary school students responded, "Which water fountain would I be able to drink from?"\(^6\) Observers, activists, scholars, and educators could reasonably argue that the Latino influx would remake southern race relations entirely or would reinforce old regional patterns in the form of "Juan Crow."\(^7\) It seemed there was little precedent available to discern patterns or possibilities from an examination of the past.

Yet as the photograph from the bar in Marked Tree, Arkansas, shows, immigrants from Mexico and Americans of Mexican descent have been migrating to the U.S. South in significant numbers for decades—in fact, as far back as the early twentieth century.\(^8\) This book recovers and recounts their histories. It reveals the myriad different ways that earlier migrants defined and pursued progress while living between a transnational Latin America and a South imagined as black-and-white. And it shows us how white and black southerners recruited or reacted to Latin American newcomers in light of changing ideas about their own lives in the region and world. In so doing, the pages that follow reveal Mexicanos’ strategies and responses to shifting U.S., southern, and Mexican circumstances, giving sharper perspective to observers and activists in the Latino present by revealing narratives, possibilities, and disjunctions from the past.

At the same time, these stories about particular people in a particular place deepen understandings of race, class, citizenship, and national belonging throughout greater Mexico and the United States. Beginning their lives in Mexico or South Texas, migrants came to the U.S. South with diverse aspirations depending on where and when they had come of age. In the South, they encountered a distinct kind of borderland, a place where for much of the twentieth century, white elites successfully resisted the liberal promises of U.S. federal power so they could exert near-total control over African American laborers having no claim on the state.\(^9\) Local southern subcultures defined by race and class developed layered ideologies and practices toward black and white, but their stance toward brown and foreign remained more ambiguous in advance of Mexicanos’ actual arrival.\(^10\) In the interactions that ensued, all parties revealed essential dimensions of their beliefs, investments, and ambitions. This book therefore argues that to more completely understand even supposedly provincial spaces in U.S. and Mexican history, scholars must look beyond national borders, for the deeds of seemingly marginal actors can illuminate more clearly the main characters and plotlines that have long preoccupied historians. U.S. and Mexican citizens, African American second-class citizens, bureaucrats, capitalists, and activists made the Mexican
American history of the U.S. South in ways seldom predictable. Their stories over the course of a turbulent century offer new ways of understanding the changing regimes of race, class, and citizenship that shaped the lives of ordinary citizens and aliens in both countries.

American Migrations in Myth and History

To derive meaning from this longer history of the South’s Latinization, one must be able to see the region’s invisible Mexican American history at all. The photograph of a Mexican immigrant in 1940s Arkansas might seem surprising in light of these migrants’ near-total absence from extant written histories. Yet key features of southern, western, and Mexican history suggest that Mexican migration to the U.S. South, while perhaps not inevitable, was also not entirely unpredictable. On the one hand, popular understandings of the postbellum South suggest that there, racially oppressed black laborers performed agricultural work because they had no other choice. Having not received their promised “40 acres and a mule” after emancipation from slavery, African Americans became stuck in sharecropping arrangements that rarely afforded them enough profit to acquire their own land, tools, and seeds. From the demise of Reconstruction through World War II, discrimination and subpar segregated educational systems excluded them from most urban jobs, and in any case, farmers in cahoots with local authorities routinely used violence to keep blacks at work in the fields.11 They were able do so because by the early twentieth century, the reigning ideology of white supremacy insisted in a quasi-biological fashion that black people had inherited irredeemable inferiority in their very blood.12 In this context, there would seem to be no need for white southern planters to recruit Mexican laborers from Texas and points south. Indeed, some have argued that the South’s longtime dependence on agriculture rather than innovation fostered its isolation from global forces throughout most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.13

But history is driven by more than simple economics. In this case, it was driven also by culture and ideas—particularly ideas about race and labor. Since Emancipation, southern planters scorned their African American workers for alleged noncooperation, seeking to replace them with immigrants from China, Italy, and beyond.14 A few southern planters briefly recruited Mexicans in 1904, but in that and other cases the early immigrant experiments were short-lived.15 Large-scale black out-migration in the 1910s–60s gave farmers immediate justification for their long-standing efforts to attract immigrants to the fields. An agricultural economy and paternalistic labor
systems had not isolated the South from the world surrounding; rather, they had spawned a specific set of global interests on the part of powerful white southerners.\textsuperscript{16} Unlike the South’s, the Southwest’s borderlands are well known to popular and academic observers. After all, the United States wrested the region from Mexico in the U.S.-Mexican War of 1846–48. A trickle of Mexican immigrants arrived to the new U.S. Southwest in subsequent decades, but the inflow of white newcomers was far stronger.\textsuperscript{17} But in the 1910s, rapid economic change and then revolution shook the Mexican countryside, displacing millions and wreaking havoc on livelihoods just as a wartime economy prompted U.S. farmers and other employers to actively recruit labor in Mexico.\textsuperscript{18} From 1913 to a peak in 1924, annual Mexican immigration to the United States increased tenfold.\textsuperscript{19} As federal legislators moved to restrict European and Asian immigration, labor-hungry business interests ensured that Mexican immigration would continue unhindered. Notwithstanding the anti-immigrant sentiment and deportations of the Depression era, Mexican immigrants became a staple of agricultural labor throughout the Southwest by the 1940s, and their position as such became even more entrenched during the bracero “guest worker” program of 1942–64.

As Mexicans crossed and recrossed the border and journeied to locations across the United States, they brought with them distinct outlooks and experiences with race, class, and citizenship. That is, they saw themselves and others in particular terms of biological or quasi-biological inheritance, economic and cultural status, and relationship to nation-states. The Mexican Revolution of 1910–17 ousted a development-focused dictatorship seen as “mother to foreigners and stepmother to Mexicans” and heralded a new era of working-class Mexican nationalism. Some emigrants drew on this politics to become active in U.S. labor movements while others called on Mexican consulates for help. In addition to class, the new government formulated new ideologies of race, eschewing the old regime’s focus on whitening through culture and instead celebrating Mexicans’ “mixed” genetic background—mixed, officially, between white and Indian but not Chinese or African. Still, popular conceptions of race in Mexico focused on cultural traits far more than biological inheritance, making racial identities seem more malleable than their U.S. counterparts.\textsuperscript{20}

As these postrevolutionary Mexicans crossed the border into the United States, they found that the U.S. Southwest was no haven of acceptance and mobility. In the early twentieth century, a typical Mexican immigrant family would arrive first to South Texas, where they confronted a Jim Crow system.
that had evolved specifically to oppress Mexicans alongside blacks. Labor recruiters might bring them to California or Arizona, where their children would attend inferior segregated schools. Mexicanos in the Southwest were also subject to harassment and violence, and they became the victims of lynching nearly as frequently as African Americans in the South.

And so, just as white southerners have sought alternative sources of workers since the nineteenth century, so have Mexican immigrants sought alternative places to work since the 1910s. Scholars have begun to document their journeys to the Northwest and Midwest during that decade and afterward. As this book will show, the two quests—of Mexicanos, for new routes to social and economic mobility, and of white southerners, for a new class of laborers they hoped would be more pliant—joined each other time and again throughout the twentieth century.

New Histories of the “Viejo” New South

What Mexicanos found in the South and what southerners found in Mexicans fulfilled some of those mutual expectations but upended others. The following pages trace their encounters in five times and places: 1910s–30s New Orleans, the Mississippi Delta during the same period, the Arkansas Delta during the 1940s–60s, rural southern Georgia from the 1960s to the early 2000s, and Charlotte’s exurbs since 1990. Texas and Florida appear here as stops on migrants’ journeys but not subjects of primary research in their own right. Texas’s embrace of slavery, the Confederacy, King Cotton, and Jim Crow surely make it a southern as well as a southwestern state; Florida’s multiethnic heritage also does not remove it from the region. Still, this study does not dwell in Texas and Florida because it focuses on times and places where southerners and Mexicans encountered each other for the first time in local memory.

The narrative interrogates these encounters with two overarching questions in mind. First, what specific aspirations led Mexicans and Mexican Americans to work and struggle for rights in the U.S. South, and how did they leverage the power within their grasp—locally, nationally, and internationally, within families, communities, or distant bureaucracies—to pursue their goals? And second, how did white and African American southerners in different economic positions respond to the newcomers, in turn revealing their own strategies for advancement?

The answers to these questions changed over time and place, and this book tries to show how. It draws inspiration from those works of migration history,
cultural studies, and anthropology that have helped illuminate how places of
origin, transit, and destination shaped migrants’ worldviews, identities, and
politics—and did so differentially, depending on qualities such as gender, age,
social class, and physical appearance.26 Traditional historical sources such as
newspapers, church records, census reports, and government documents are
used here in new ways to interpret the experiences and perspectives of long-
deceased migrants—even, in many cases, those who were marginal, poor,
and illiterate. In particular, the archives of migrants’ countries of origin, in
this case Mexico, prove critical to the narration of life histories lived across
international borders. I also use nontraditional forms of evidence, includ-
ning oral history interviews and migrants’ photo albums, to comprehend the
imaginative lives that migrants led outside the surveillance of local, national,
or international institutions.27 Accordingly, Corazón de Dixie traces a century
of developments in Mexicano migrants’ expectations and beliefs about race,
class, citizenship, and progress; migrants’ relationships to two national states;
and the changing politics of segregation, white supremacy, and political lib-
eralism and conservatism in the U.S. South. African Americans’ perspectives
on Mexicano newcomers are clearest after World War II, the moment when
living witnesses’ memories can fill gaps in the written sources. Priests and
religious institutions sometimes appear as critical actors, though a full consid-
eration of the theological and practical attitudes of Christian denominations
toward Mexicano newcomers is beyond the scope of this book.28

These sources show that Mexicans’ reasons for migration to the South and
the results of their struggles once there were determined in incredibly fragile,
contingent, and—for most of the twentieth century—local ways. There was
no timeless “Mexican perspective” on the South’s cotton-picking jobs, or
African Americans, or political structures. Rather, there were a myriad of
perspectives shaped in particular Mexican migration routes, individual south-
ern communities, and specific moments in the histories of the Mexican and
U.S. states. While works on U.S. immigration and ethnicity have well placed
their subjects in the changing contours of U.S. history and explored trans-
national dynamics in locally and temporally bounded case studies, Corazón
de Dixie is among the first to think seriously about how changes in Mexican
national culture and state power shaped Mexican immigrants in generation-
ally and regionally distinct ways across the twentieth century. It shows how
migrants’ ideas about race, gender, rights, material well-being, and the role of
the state in their lives shifted over the course of the twentieth century and into
the twenty-first, placing the present in relief against an unfolding past. The
focus on the South’s Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans rather than

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Latinos as a whole enables this nuanced analysis. Yet because the research provisionally accepts the national boundary of “Mexican” as its subject of analysis, it offers explorations but not definitive conclusions about the ways that migrants from distinct places in Mexico experienced the U.S. South differently. New scholarship, I hope, will build on this book’s foundation to probe those distinctions more deeply, complementing and challenging the findings I have offered here.29

Not only was there no consistent and unchanging “Mexican reaction” to the U.S. South; there also was no unchanging southern “white perspective” or “black perspective” on the newcomers’ arrival. Rather, location, occupation, political ideology, and particularly economic status structured differing black and white reactions over time. This insight builds on several emergent strands in southern history. Scholars have begun to dismantle the truism that “the South’s” monolithic white residents have been singularly responsible for the nation’s racial woes.30 Others have probed southern African Americans’ perspectives on Mexicans and Mexican Americans, focusing on Texas prior to 1990 and various southern locations thereafter.31 This latter research has shown, yet again, that the study of “in-between” groups such as Chinese or Native Americans can reveal the complex interests at stake in the South’s racial systems.32

Engaged with these research strands, Corazón de Dixie shows that there was no easy, predictable continuity of whites’ racial exclusion or inclusion of Mexicans, nor of African Americans’ competition or solidarity with them. Rather, local actors engaged selectively with the regional and national politics of race, class, and citizenship to create a variety of outcomes throughout the twentieth century. In every case, white and African American southerners in different economic positions offered Mexicans complex combinations of acceptance and rejection, oppression and opportunity. Their attitudes and actions changed, in turn, as Mexicanos pursued their goals in ways that complemented, accepted, or resisted the local status quo. Only later, at the turn of the twenty-first century, did the national politics of immigration overpower local interests to definitively push Mexican and other Latino immigrants outside the boundaries of whiteness and Americanness—a turn some immigrants openly resisted, with limited effect on the legal and social politics of exclusion.

Attempts to critically examine the composition of racial groups inevitably run up against the restrictions of language, particularly over a hundred-year period. Southern observers often used the term “Mexican” to denote not only Mexican nationals but also U.S. citizens of Mexican descent; this language accurately represented the latter’s inability to access the benefits of their U.S. cit-
izenship. Yet legal nationality mattered in varied and sometimes critical ways throughout the century. So this book uses the term “Mexicans” to refer to Mexican nationals, “Mexican Americans” to refer to U.S. citizens of Mexican descent, “Tejanos” to refer to Mexican Americans born in Texas, and “Mexicanos” to refer to Mexicans and Mexican Americans simultaneously. When referring to census data, that agency’s category, “Hispanic,” is used. The term “U.S. American” denotes U.S. citizens of any racial identity, acknowledging that the Americas extend far beyond the borders of the United States. Along with “white,” “black,” and “African American,” these terms convey significant though not comprehensive aspects of historical actors’ identities and legal positions even as those markers remained in flux.

**Into the Heart of Dixie**

This story begins in the 1910s with a transformative surge in two of the twentieth-century Americas’ most important human migrations: Mexicans to the United States and African Americans out of the U.S. South. While the story of Mexican migration to Texas during this time is well known, New Orleans was also a migration destination for thousands of Gulf Coast Mexicans who arrived by ship. These immigrants are the subjects of Chapter 1. They arrived into a city that was in many respects Caribbean more than southern—a place where race was not as simple as black and white. Yet they also came at the height of the Jim Crow system regionally and nationally, a time when that system was beginning to have its way with the city of New Orleans. There, Mexican immigrants chose to identify themselves as “Mexican” while deliberately shaping the meaning of that category. Together with the Mexican consul, they succeeded in presenting Mexico as a Europeanized land whose citizens could integrate unproblematically into white New Orleans. And integrate into white New Orleans they did. New Orleans is the only place historians have yet documented where Mexicans’ path to white assimilation unfolded with relative ease in the interwar period.

The subjects of Chapter 2 traversed a longer path to both the South and the white status they decided to pursue there. They emerged from the more prototypical milieu of interwar Mexican migration: north-central Mexicans who fled their country’s bloody revolution or were recruited to Texas in the years that followed it. In Texas, they encountered violence of a different sort: racial violence designed, in large part, to keep an increasingly important labor force “in its place” both physically and economically. By the 1920s, rapid employment growth throughout the United States offered these immigrants...
and their families an escape to faraway points, from the citrus groves of California to the auto factories of Michigan and indeed the cotton plantations of Mississippi. Thirty-five thousands of Mexicans and Mexican Americans initially traveled to Mississippi in seasonal work crews; they were met with widespread violence and abuse that convinced many never to return. But a significant minority of Mexicanos found ways to defend their families while finding opportunity in “the most Southern place on Earth.” They pursued social mobility as sharecroppers and sought integration into the white side of the color line. When their children were expelled from the white school because of their race, these immigrants fought back; they won by drawing on the transborder power of the newly established postrevolutionary Mexican state. Although the Depression decimated any economic progress they made in their early years in Mississippi, the racial gains remained in place, and by the 1950s a “Mexican” in the Mississippi Delta was someone with brown skin and a Spanish surname who was nonetheless considered “white.”

During and after World War II, the U.S. and Mexican economies once again expanded, as did federal bureaucracies, and liberal ideas increased once-marginalized peoples’ expectations of citizenship. During those years, white southern farmers finally won a decades-long battle to enlist the U.S. government in recruiting labor from Mexico. From the perspective of both states, this modernist vision allowed for control over who crossed the international boundary line. Thirty-seven Chapter 3’s subjects, the Tejanos and more than 300,000 bracero contract workers who worked in Arkansas between 1939 and 1964, frustrated white farmers’ seemingly strategic use of the U.S. federal government by successfully enlisting the Mexican federal government to help them win greater rights. Thousands of Mexicans struck and protested on farms and appealed to the Mexican consulate for political support. An activist consul helped them recover wages, improve working conditions, and secure the right to enter white establishments. Yet braceros still existed on the margins of Arkansas Delta society, and although they were stereotyped with positive adjectives, they earned low wages and certainly were not considered equal to the area’s white people. All would eventually leave the area.

Many of the Mexicans and Mexican Americans who left Arkansas returned to Texas or moved on to Florida, where large-scale agriculture rapidly expanded in the immediate postwar years. They remained in Texas or Florida during winters and journeyed north through the Atlantic South during summers, eventually settling in its rural areas. Although the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas had hosted relatively large and highly visible Mexican populations in the past, the 1970s in Georgia and beyond was the first time
these migrations spread throughout the U.S. South as a whole. Over the coming three decades, millions of Mexicanos would come through the region as migrant workers or put down roots there. Those Mexicanos, the subjects of Chapter 4, came to hold privileged positions in the white southern imagination between 1965 and 2004, years of globalization, shrinking federal states, and conservative or neoliberal ideologies in both places. Focusing on rural Georgia’s agricultural communities, the chapter shows that conservative white people now articulated racial ideas in seemingly cultural more than biological terms. Mexican and Mexican American migrants’ cultural traits, it was supposed, included hard work, morality, and assimilability—the opposite of blacks’ racial descriptors in this period. Yet the benefits Mexicans gained from being on the receiving end of these stereotypes were limited. Hailing from a crisis-era Mexico, they had more partial expectations of citizenship and less ability to leverage the power of the Mexican state than their predecessors had. The foreign-born among them were largely undocumented, as the 1965 Immigration Act imposed numerical restrictions on Latin American immigration for the first time. Georgia’s Mexicans and Mexican Americans appealed to conservative white patrons at work and church rather than to the Mexican or U.S. federal governments. They neither sought nor received full political and labor rights in southern Georgia. The prize was social acceptance in white communities and some freedom from racial harassment; the cost was a meaningful ability to challenge authorities or labor conditions.

During this same period, both Mexican and southern elites cultivated global ambitions: Mexicans to pursue economic development through free trade, and southerners to situate the region’s major cities as key nodes in the global economy. Urban areas grew in both countries as free trade agreements displaced Mexican farmers while rapid service-driven growth in the South accelerated the spatial and political creep of metropolitan communities into formerly rural territory. Members of all social classes in both countries were drawn into an increasingly ubiquitous consumer consciousness. Both pushed and pulled by the globalization of cultures and economies, Mexican migrants flocked to construction and low-wage service jobs in metropolitan centers like Atlanta, Nashville, and Charlotte, and immigrants from throughout Latin America quickly followed them. Those who moved to greater Charlotte between 1990 and 2012 are the subjects of Chapter 5. As women joined male migrants there, they moved to suburbs and exurbs to raise families, taking advantage of these places’ better-funded schools, cheaper housing, and proximity to peripheral work sites in construction, poultry, and light manufacturing. They embraced a consumerist version of the middle-class
ideal that had emerged unevenly in Mexican culture as in so many others by the 1990s. They hoped that long hours of low-wage work would allow their comparatively smaller families to make economic progress through education, eventually acquiring disposable income, family vacations, and an ability to become middle-class consumers, if not necessarily citizens with political rights. Even as many achieved their modest economic goals, they suffered increased persecution at the end of the twenty-first century’s first decade.

When Latinos first arrived to Charlotte, they were met by a welcoming climate in the name of business friendliness. Soon, however, they came to transgress racial boundaries not by protesting or striking but rather by simply living. As women joined men and families rooted themselves in the exurbs, they unwittingly entered bastions of unchecked conservative white populism. There, white home owners in pursuit of durable middle-class status resented Mexican and other Latino immigrants not because of job competition but rather because immigrants had joined them as consumers of public services such as schools, roads, and parks. This historically new role for the South’s Mexican immigrants violated white middle-class sensibilities about taxes and racial entitlement. In response, these white citizens mounted the region’s first large-scale anti-immigrant movement targeted at working-class Latinos. But unlike the previous four case studies, this struggle was not waged within the confines of one community, city, or agricultural subregion. Rather, Greater Charlotte’s anti-immigrant activists worked in conjunction with an Internet-based community of like-minded leaders, most themselves suburbanites and exurbanites, throughout the United States. Meanwhile, media coverage of immigrants’ rights activism elsewhere in the country inspired small groups of exurban Mexican and Mexican American youths to protest, mostly in high schools. But few exurban immigrants had sufficient transportation to participate in the burgeoning immigrants’ rights movement of Charlotte’s downtown and inner suburbs. From the perspective of Mexican American history, the South had joined the nation as its migrant experiences and immigration politics followed the familiar contours that had emerged in western metropolitan areas and spread throughout the country over the previous two decades.

In 2011, Alabama’s governor signed HB56 into law; the anti-immigrant bill was hailed as the toughest in the country. In legislative debate, primary cosponsor state representative Micky Hammon boasted, “This [bill] attacks every aspect of an illegal immigrant’s life. They will not stay in Alabama.” To many observers, Hammon’s exclusionary rhetoric fit perfectly into generalized ideas about race politics in the U.S. South. It easily reinforced the
popular narrative emphasizing the region’s “exceptionally” poor track record in matters of race.46

But this interpretation is faulty. *Corazón de Dixie* shows that from the perspective of Mexican American history, there is no regional continuity of racial exclusion in the U.S. South. There is no continuity of expectation on the part of Mexicans, nor of reaction on the part of white and African American southerners. Rather, Mexicanos engaged in intensely local struggles to determine their place in racial and social hierarchies. They created flows of ideas and power, in which Mexican immigrants and the Mexican government at times played decisive roles in determining outcomes and in which southern communities nearly always emerged as more receptive to Mexicans than western ones. The emergence in the early 2000s of an apparently unified anti-immigrant conservative South was not that at all. After all, Hammon hailed from the state’s largest metropolitan area, not a rural backwater, and he openly acknowledged that he modeled his bill on similar legislation in Arizona.47 Furthermore, his bill was met with resistance from Alabama’s conservative rural areas and Christian religious leaders. Rather than regional exceptionalism, the anti-immigrant tide devastated the South’s immigrant communities due to the region’s integration into national trends of spatial segregation in exurban areas, as well as the neoliberal trajectory that inspired Mexican immigrants to seek consumer goods over civic rights and neutralized their government’s once-politicized emigration bureaucracy. The assault helped politicize these immigrants’ children, though, and many forsook their parents’ cautious attitudes to lead the South’s newest movement for civil and human rights.

When narratives of region and nation structure not only our answers but also our questions, they limit our ability to comprehend the complex dynamics of history. To challenge our assumptions, then, let us follow little-remembered Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants into the heart of Dixie—a place not exceptional or isolated but rather a corazón pulsing through veins both local and global.