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

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Photographs of Hortensia Horcasitas (fig. 2) and Robert Canedo (fig. 3) seem typical of Mexican immigrant portraits from the U.S. Southwest in the first half of the twentieth century.¹ The Horcasitas photograph recalls countless others of the “Mexican generation,” Mexican immigrants of the 1910s and 1920s. This generation fled revolution and economic hardship in Mexico; once in the United States, they adapted Mexican culture and nationalism to their new environment, using it to buffer themselves from a society that increasingly saw them as racially and culturally suspect.² Canedo, too, came to the United States from Mexico as a young child during the 1920s. His portrait evokes the “Mexican American generation,” for whom service in World War II was an integral component of a new political strategy and in some cases an identity shift, emphasizing U.S. citizenship. That generation embraced Americanism in the hope that white America would, in turn, embrace Mexican Americans.³

These photos, however, were not taken in Los Angeles or San Antonio but rather in New Orleans, where they told a different story. For Horcasitas and her family, embracing Mexican national culture was not a means of protection against white society but rather a way to join it. In the Crescent City, as New Orleans was known, middle-class Mexican immigrants of the 1920s successfully engaged Mexico and shaped the image of “Mexicans” in ways that secured their place among European-style white immigrants. They acquired a different racialization from their counterparts elsewhere in the United States, who had come to be seen as a group distinct from and inferior to white people. In the Southwest, the limited success of the Mexican American generation’s politics caused their children to adopt a more radical stance in the 1960s. In New Orleans, by contrast, the “Mexican generation” already lived as white people during the 1920s.

To see a selection of original historical sources from this chapter, go to http://corazondedixie.org/chapter-1 (http://dx.doi.org/10.7264/N3FB517W).
Canedo first acquired his U.S. citizenship during World War II but had enjoyed most of its benefits for decades—benefits not enjoyed by those New Orleans citizens who were African American. Though his skin was dark and his mother was a poor widow raising a family on the proceeds of her sister’s boardinghouse, in 1930 young Robert attended kindergarten with white children; meanwhile, his Mexican immigrant counterparts in the Southwest faced school segregation, deportation, and racial violence. By the time he enlisted in the army, Canedo had already fallen in love with his future wife, a U.S.-born white woman named Hazel, to whom the photograph’s inscription was addressed. The couple’s children went on to live as white people in New Orleans, their Mexican heritage a curiosity rather than a determining factor of their life course. While the Southwest’s Mexican Americans hoped military portraits like this one would mark a turning point in their experiences

(left) Figure 2 Hortensia Horcasitas, New Orleans, Louisiana, ca. 1925. Courtesy of Carlos Zervigón and family.

(right) Figure 3 Robert Canedo, New Orleans, Louisiana, ca. 1945. Courtesy of Hazel Canedo and family.
of race, Canedo’s photograph simply projected the assured patriotism of any white soldier at war.

Between 1910 and World War II, nearly all of the roughly 2,000 Mexican immigrants who lived for a time in New Orleans—even those like Canedo, who hailed from working-class backgrounds and had darker skin—assimilated into white society. During those same years, pro-segregation white southern Democrats took hold of the city and imposed a binary racial system onto what had once been a multilayered social and racial landscape. The Supreme Court case named after New Orleans’s most famous Creole color line transgressor, Homer Plessy, ruled in 1896 that ancestry and biological race would determine who sat in which train car—who was black and who was white. Since Plessy had just one black great-grandparent, the decision marked the “one-drop” rule’s continuance into the twentieth century. Faced with an increasingly rigid Jim Crow system, a variety of in-between groups, such as Italians and the mixed-race French-Spanish group known as Creoles, pursued distinct strategies toward social mobility and status.

Yet racialization—the process of demarcating biological and quasi-biological categories of people, imbuing those categories with meaning, and assigning them to human beings—has never been the province of judges alone. Though biological, blood-based ideas of race were at their height in the United States in the interwar period, Horcasitas, Canedo, and thousands of other Mexican immigrants used culture to wedge their way into white New Orleans. They had learned this strategy in Mexico, where cultural ideas of race nearly always asserted themselves into biological ones. Though Horcasitas went on to marry a Cuban man and her descendants self-identified as Latin American throughout the twentieth century, this cultural identity was subsumed into a broad white racial category from the 1920s onward. The experiences of her family and countless others show that the South’s binary, blood-based racial system could not remain fully insulated from the more cultural forms of racial thought prevalent elsewhere in the world.

Mexican immigrants secured their white status in large part by ignoring the elements of Mexican nationalism that valorized their nation’s self-proclaimed identity of “mixed” biological inheritance. Thus, their stories also illuminate the powerful influence of U.S. white supremacy on other nations’ projects of self-definition, in this case Mexico’s.

Identifying sources to understand the lives of those who deliberately declined to identify as “Mexican” poses a challenge to historians. Nonetheless, Mexican sources, combined with a close analysis of original manuscript census pages and the family photographs and documents held by immigrants’
descendants, together begin to tell a story. They show how a group of middle-class Mexican immigrants like Horcasitas created a Europeanized version of *Mexicanidad*, perceptions of Mexicanness, that in turn allowed the Canedos and other poor Mexicans to quietly assimilate into white New Orleans geographically, culturally, economically, socially, and religiously. Like their counterparts in the Southwest, these working- and middle-class immigrants were considered “Mexican.” But “Mexican” in New Orleans quickly acquired a very different meaning than it had elsewhere.  

A sociologist wrote in 1949 that Latin American immigrants “are naturally associated with and identify themselves with the white rather than the colored element,” but there was nothing natural about Mexicans’ strategies for navigating New Orleans. Other immigrant and “in-between” groups made a variety of choices when confronted with the political dominance, and even the violence, of white supremacy during this period. That Mexican immigrants pursued assimilation into whiteness rather than antiracist politics, and achieved that assimilation by crafting a specific image of Mexican culture while remaining silent about biology, thus reveals as much about the history of Mexico as that of the U.S. color line.

**Gulf Coast Routes**

Though the first significant wave of Mexican migration to Jim Crow New Orleans began during the early twentieth century, the cultural, economic, and political history of the Gulf of Mexico gave this encounter deeper roots (see map 1). Like Latin America, Louisiana was first colonized by Spain and attracted a large population of Spanish emigrants from the eighteenth century forward. Even under French and later U.S. American rule in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Spanish-language culture thrived in New Orleans. In the nineteenth century, steamship connections through the Gulf of Mexico reinforced cultural and economic ties between Louisiana and Latin America, and New Orleans became a major center of Hispanophone journalism linking Spanish-speaking communities throughout the hemisphere. Culture, too, crossed the Gulf, as many of the Mexican musicians who first arrived for the 1884 World’s Fair remained in New Orleans and influenced its music scene. The city periodically became embroiled in Latin American political struggles, as exiles including Mexican liberals Valentín Gómez Farías and Benito Juárez lived there for periods of time. Meanwhile, U.S. soldiers departed from New Orleans for their military incursions into Latin America, including the U.S.-Mexican War, as did small groups of U.S. American men.
who set out for self-designed invasions of Latin America in expeditions that came to be known as filibusters.\textsuperscript{18}

The Mexican Revolution of 1910–17 created political and economic instability that affected the United States through immigration and the spillover of revolutionary politics. The majority of the era’s U.S.-bound migrants hailed from north-central Mexico, a hotbed of revolutionary activity and within close reach of the Mexico-U.S. border. These poor, rural emigrants journeyed mostly to Texas during the 1910s–20s, and from there, many continued on to all parts of the United States, from Arizona to Alaska, Michigan to California. Meanwhile, some Mexican revolutionaries like the Flores Magón brothers took refuge in U.S. cities like Los Angeles and San Antonio.\textsuperscript{19}

Linked to Mexico through the Gulf’s watery borderlands, New Orleans saw these same effects from the Mexican Revolution. Though larger numbers of Cubans and Hondurans later moved to New Orleans, in the 1910s–20s refugees from the Mexican Revolution constituted the city’s most numerically important group of Latin American immigrants, numbering at least 1,400 in

\textsuperscript{18} Mexican Nationalism and Assimilation in New Orleans
Revolutionary conflict also straddled the Gulf of Mexico, as Yucatán’s future socialist governor, Felipe Carrillo Puerto, retreated to New Orleans for a time. On the other side of the political spectrum, conservative leaders including Aureliano Urrutia and Francisco Carvajal plotted counterrevolution from New Orleans in 1914, arousing suspicion from U.S. authorities. The forces of reactionary Adolfo de la Huerta, while based in Veracruz, later used the Crescent City for refuge and supplies in 1923, spawning a migration of Mexican “soldiers of fortune, political plotters, and ammunition salesmen” to New Orleans.

Though migrant political leaders sought refuge in New Orleans for the same reasons as their counterparts in Los Angeles or El Paso, Mexican migrants to New Orleans had generally experienced the turbulent 1910s differently. Would-be emigrants from north-central Mexico walked or rode railroads to the Texas border, while those who lived near Mexico’s Gulf Coast ports boarded ships bound for U.S. Gulf Coast ports. Mexican consulate records suggest that Veracruz was by far the most common state of origin among New Orleans’s Mexican immigrants, with others hailing from coastal states Yucatán, Campeche, and Tabasco.

New Orleans–bound Gulf Coast migrants and their counterparts who journeyed from northern Mexico to the southwestern United States had overlapping yet different outlooks and reasons for migration, which in turn shaped the choices they made in the United States. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Mexico’s dictator Porfirio Díaz brought rapid capitalist development and social transformation to the country’s heartland as well as its Gulf Coast. Still, the coast’s tropical climates and proximity to shipping routes made the development of agriculture for export particularly dramatic there. Plantations in Veracruz grew coffee, tobacco, and sugar, while those in Yucatán produced the fibrous cactus known as henequen, which ultimately was used to fabricate rope. Economic expansion led to labor shortages, and some foreign-owned plantations notoriously used violence to keep workers on the job. Simple unemployment, then, would not have motivated emigration from the Gulf Coast.

The revolution’s trajectory in the Gulf fomented some but not all of the political and economic disruptions that motivated north-central Mexicans to emigrate. Yucatán’s poor and isolated plantation laborers did not seize the revolutionary moment to rebel themselves, nor did displaced rural dwellers in Veracruz. Still, the towns and cities of Veracruz were centers of labor radicalism in the early years of the twentieth century. From coffee bean sorters to textile factory laborers, the state’s urban workers—many recent transplants
from rural areas—initiated strikes and riots in 1906–7. When revolutionary leader Venustiano Carranza installed a sympathetic governor there in 1914, it was apparently with instructions to make major concessions to the working-class agenda. The following year, a revolutionary governor arrived in Yucatán as well. Though neither these leaders nor subsequent socialist governors succeeded in upending the Gulf Coast’s stratified economic order, their arrival initiated more than a decade of negotiation with peasant groups over land reform. In the case of Veracruz, continued labor unrest during and after the revolutionary years secured greater rights and protections for urban workers. Thus, while north-central Mexicans undoubtedly experienced more and earlier violence and economic disruption during the revolution, the Gulf Coast’s laboring classes also underwent rapid economic change in the early twentieth century—change with which many eventually voiced their dissatisfaction.

That Veracruz produced fewer out-migrants as compared with north-central Mexico thus attests to the critical role of railroad transportation and labor recruitment—beyond simply economic supply and demand—in jump-starting more than a century of Mexican emigration. During World War I, U.S. labor recruiters focused their efforts at the Texas border. Governors, mayors, and local authorities in northern Mexico were instructed to spread the word about job opportunities, though many refused to do so, believing they needed the labor at home. Mexican workers who did hear about recruitment efforts during and after World War I walked days to reach the border or paid the train fare of around $13 to arrive there; then, enganchadores, recruiters, paid to transport them to work sites throughout the United States. State government officials in Veracruz also received requests for laborers, such as one in 1918 seeking men to work in the United States and outlining a specific procedure for contracting them. Yet like their counterparts in northern Mexico, local officials in rapidly developing Veracruz were not eager to part with their workforce. “There is not anyone here that wants to abandon their land to go to a foreign country,” wrote the mayor of Veracruz highlands village Xoxocotla in response to the 1918 request for laborers, “but if the situation does arise, care will be taken to follow your instructions.” Meanwhile, New Orleans–based Mexican import/export agent J. de la Torre saw that employers in the U.S. South, too, were hungry for Mexican labor and tried to start contracting them via ship from Veracruz to New Orleans. His requests that the Mexican government exempt him from the usual contract requirements and subsidize laborers’ train fare to the Mexican port city fell on unsympathetic ears, and the plan went nowhere. In the end, then, the
serious labor recruitment efforts that helped jump-start emigration in north-central Mexico in the interwar years did not reach the Gulf Coast.

Without the impetus and subsidy of organized labor recruitment, Veracruzanos and other Gulf Coast residents who did board New Orleans–bound ships bore the entire cost of migration and readjustment themselves and thus were more likely to be middle and upper class. Still, they hailed from villages, towns, and cities and from a range of economic positions. The Enseñat family, for example, ran a successful business in Yucatán’s capital, Mérida. There, they manufactured and serviced machines that crushed and processed Yucatán’s most important crop, henequen.36 Family lore recalls a bullet hitting a windmill in the Enseñats’ backyard in 1916, signifying the revolution’s threat to the family’s economic status and safety. Originally from Cuba, father Francisco Enseñat moved his family via ship to New Orleans that year, where he purchased a car for the family and enrolled his children in Catholic schools. Leaving his wife and children in New Orleans, he continued to commute between the Crescent City and the family home and business in Mérida.37 Like the Enseñats, many of these upper- and middle-class migrants feared rather than supported the revolution, making New Orleans a stronghold of conservative sentiment during the 1910s.38

Immigrants to New Orleans from the Gulf Coast’s rural areas had more to gain than lose from the revolution, yet many still left because of the upheavals it caused. Immigrant Peter Nieto was raised in a rural area near Jalapa, Veracruz, where he managed birth and death records for his town. The feeling of lawlessness in the aftermath of the revolution prompted him to take a banana boat to New Orleans in 1924. Within a year he had found work as a watchmaker and married Laura, a woman of Cajun descent from Cutoff, Louisiana.39 Another immigrant, a farmer’s son, recalled growing up in rural Veracruz. When his father died, the immigrant’s mother, like many other rural women in her time, moved the family to the port of Veracruz.40 But when the city’s labor market failed to yield economic stability, she and her children boarded a boat bound for New Orleans.41 These rural emigrants, then, emerged from a milieu of political and economic flux.

Though Mexican consulate records suggest that the vast majority of New Orleans’s Mexican immigrants hailed from the Gulf Coast, census records show that a few families found their way to New Orleans through the more traditional route of passage, from northern Mexico to Texas. For example, the Mexican Hernández, Flores, and Trentes families each had one child in Texas before moving on to New Orleans.42 Mary and Jesús Reséndez were Tejanos who brought their family to New Orleans, where Jesús found work
driving a truck.43 Francisco Cervantes hailed from Parras, in the border state of Coahuila. A trained machinist, Cervantes crossed the border to San Antonio in 1911 but could not find work in his profession. Indeed, Cervantes’s arrival in Texas coincided with an upswing in anti-Mexican violence and Jim Crow practices that affected middle- and working-class Mexicans alike.44 As Mexican agricultural laborers tried to escape Texas for California and the Midwest, Cervantes heard of an opportunity in New Orleans. Now on the white side of the color line, he did find work as a machinist there. He married Raquel Ramos, a Parras-born woman of upper-middle-class background who had been sent to New Orleans to attend Catholic school.45 The family settled into a rental home near Clay Square, where their neighbors were almost all Louisiana-born white families whose heads of household practiced skilled trades.46

Yet those who came through Texas were the exception, as most Mexicans of all social classes arrived in New Orleans on ship decks, in a context of international trade rather than violent racial threat. Some paid at least $50—a steep sum for poor Mexicans—to ride as proper passengers on a United Fruit Company or Mexican American Fruit Corporation steamship.47 Men with less means who traveled without families could earn their passage by working menial jobs aboard ships, while others were skilled crew members who might disappear into the city as their vessels sailed on to the next port.

In addition to sailors from around the world, Mexican arrivals shared decks with agricultural goods and import/export businessmen; these businessmen aggressively promoted the idea that trade with Mexico and Latin America was key to their city’s future. Though few ships sailed under Mexico’s flag, in 1928 and 1929 more Honduran ships docked at New Orleans than did ships from any foreign country, and most of these, as well as several European and U.S. American lines, connected New Orleans to ports along Mexico’s Gulf Coast.48 New Orleans businessmen rejoiced as the United States normalized relations with Mexico’s postrevolutionary regime, expecting to see a million dollars of monthly trade between Mexico and New Orleans;49 “Mexico’s Trade Belongs to City” proclaimed a headline in the Times-Picayune.50 In the following years, New Orleans accurately declared itself the “gateway to the Americas,” to the chagrin of globally ambitious coastal cities like Miami and Galveston who vied for the same title.51 Recognizing the need to keep maritime traffic flowing through New Orleans rather than its competitor ports, Louisiana’s governor hired a Mexican man to represent the state at trade-related events in Latin America in the late 1920s.52 With so much public discussion of Latin America’s importance to New Orleans’s future, it is
perhaps no surprise that the city’s correspondent from San Antonio’s La Prensa noted that even New Orleans’s major newspaper, the Times-Picayune, “has always shown evenhandedness towards Mexico” at a time when papers elsewhere usually did not. Although an economic courtship with Mexico was no guarantee of “evenhandedness” for actual Mexican people, the prominence of trade-related dialogue about the country created an international frame into which such immigrants could insert themselves from the moment of their shipboard arrival.

Attempts to encourage trade with Latin America meant Mexicans’ arrival experiences in New Orleans bore little resemblance to those of their counterparts who left Mexico via its northern borderlands. Historians have observed that the U.S.-Mexico land border, and movement across it, was ill policed and even ill demarcated when the Mexican Revolution began. By the early 1920s, the experience of crossing the border became an increasingly humiliating one for Mexicans and indeed a foundational moment for their racialization as a distinct and undesirable group. In El Paso, for example, public health inspectors forced border-crossing Mexicans to strip naked, then searched their scalps for lice and sprayed them with a mixture of soap, kerosene, and water—all because they believed Mexicans were genetically predisposed to carrying disease.

In contrast, New Orleans elites’ emphasis on promoting Latin American trade gave Mexicans a more welcoming arrival there in the 1910s–20s. As their steamships neared the port, migrants could see the city’s low-profile skyline across the waterfront. They first docked near the new three-building immigration station in Algiers, across the Mississippi River from New Orleans, for immigration and public health inspectors to come on board. Health inspections took place in crowded conditions on deck and, unlike examinations at the southwestern border, were cursory at best. When public health officials tried to implement more thorough screenings in 1910, New Orleans’s immigration commissioner discouraged them, saying, “Commerce and trade relations between the port of New Orleans and Central and South America needs stimulating and encouraging.” The city’s elites wanted the port to welcome, not deter, newcomers, and they successfully pressured federal agencies to fall in line. As boats carrying Mexican migrants continued into the maze of wharves, warehouses, and train tracks that comprised the city’s vast international port, inspectors checked passports and distributed six-month visitor permits to those who declared their intention to stay temporarily. Fewer than one in a hundred were barred entry.

Once the ships reached their docks, Mexican crew members may have
unloaded bananas or performed final shipboard duties while migrants who could afford passenger fare disembarked into the city’s downtown. To the right down Chartres Street, the Cabildo building reigned over Jackson Square, evoking for Mexicans the Spanish colonial architecture in the zócalos, town squares, of their home country’s state capitals. Italians, Filipinos, and African Americans mingled among Creoles on the French Quarter streets and narrow alleys of their shared neighborhood. Walking onward or boarding a streetcar through New Orleans’s dense neighborhoods, Mexicans encountered Irish, German, and Chinese immigrants scattered among white and black residents, their homes often boasting the distinctive Creole iron balustrades that evoked Caribbean architecture. This was hardly a dusty border station like the ones that admitted or excluded Mexicans at El Paso’s Santa Fe or Stanton Street bridges, nor was it Los Angeles’s railroad depot, which delivered newcomers to a decaying downtown plaza peopled almost exclusively by recently arrived Mexican, Italian, and Eastern European low-wage laborers.

The revolution’s final years and ultimate triumph brought Mexicans to New Orleans at a quickened pace. The majority of those present in 1920 had arrived since 1917, suggesting that many considered themselves refugees from the new regime. Their numbers were small but not insignificant: by 1920, the federal census listed 1,242 Mexican-born whites living in New Orleans, slightly more than were living in Chicago that year. It is likely that an additional 10 percent lived there as well, classified by census workers as Negro or mulatto. As these new arrivals adjusted to New Orleans, they would quickly learn to navigate a geography not just physical but, increasingly over the 1910s–20s, racial as well.

**Crossing into White New Orleans**

Beginning with their maritime border crossings, Mexicans’ trajectories in New Orleans were different from their counterparts elsewhere in the United States. In the early years following the revolution, most of the New Orleans Mexican immigrants entered middle-class professions; this reflected their more educated and financially secure origins as well as the relative fluidity of their racial position in the city. The highest number of Mexican immigrant men who arrived by 1920 performed white-collar jobs: they were import/export managers, doctors, teachers, clerks, artists, and musicians, or they worked as ship captains and in other maritime occupations (see table 1). Many of these professionals considered themselves temporary refugees from the revolution, “without power, waiting to return on a moment’s notice to our
country," in the words of one upper-class man. Conversely, a sizable minority—about a third of Mexican men—entered blue-collar jobs of various skill levels: they were carpenters, shoemakers, cooks, busboys, or, like Francisco Cervantes, machinists. In contrast, Spanish-surnamed men in Santa Barbara, California, that same year counted just 10 percent of their ranks in white-collar professions, and Mexican immigrants who naturalized in Los Angeles were about a quarter white collar during the 1920s–30s. In both California cities, the vast majority of Mexican men worked as laborers. White perceptions of Mexicans as uniformly working class helped solidify their racialization as a distinct group in the Southwest. In New Orleans, by contrast, Mexicans did not coalesce in any one employment category and thus did not experience the same brand of racialization in the early years of their arrival.

The Catholic Church, however, did attempt to transplant some southwestern understandings of Mexican identity to New Orleans. When Archbishop John Shaw was transferred to New Orleans from San Antonio, he quickly assumed that New Orleans’s Mexican arrivals would be just like those he had served in his previous post. New Orleans’s Catholic leadership had resisted racial segregation for decades longer than their counterparts elsewhere in the United States, but in the late 1910s Shaw was instrumental in ejecting African Americans from their traditional mixed parishes and sending them instead to newly formed black parishes, usually in run-down buildings on small side streets. For Mexicans, he invited the Oblates of Mary Immacu-

**Table 1** Occupations of Mexicano men age sixteen and over (as percentage of all Mexicano men over age sixteen) in New Orleans, 1920 and 1930

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1920</th>
<th>1930</th>
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<tr>
<td>White collar total</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>32%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional/student</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical/sales</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Artist/musician</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maritime</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue collar total</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semiskilled</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unskilled</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not employed/unknown</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: 1920 and 1930 manuscript census analysis. See Appendix for methodology.*
late, whose work with Mexicans he had admired in San Antonio, to New Orleans, asking them to found a Spanish-speaking parish. Unlike blacks’ parishes, Mexicans’ parish would be housed in one of New Orleans’s finest buildings: the Old Mortuary Chapel on Rampart Street, a large classical revival–style building with expansive arches. The church was renamed Our Lady of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico, and in the 1920s, priests held both Spanish and English masses and delivered sermons in both languages. Shaw believed Mexicans belonged in their own parish, yet his choice of a stately building on a central thoroughfare likely reflected his perception that newly arrived Mexicans were mostly high-class refugees from their country’s dangerously radical revolution.

As happened so often in the history of Mexico, paths blazed by emigrants with financial resources were soon trod by those who were poorer. By the 1920s, revolutionary violence had quieted, and many of New Orleans’s middle-class refugees returned home while more working-class Mexicans began arriving, largely but not exclusively from the Gulf Coast. While the number of Mexicans in New Orleans was about the same in 1930 as a decade before, 1930 manuscript census pages show that over half of Mexican immigrant men in New Orleans that year occupied blue-collar positions, as middle-class refugees returned home and more working-class immigrants arrived (see table 1). The fastest growth was in the ranks of unskilled labor: by 1930, more than a quarter of Mexicano men in New Orleans were performing unskilled common labor just like their counterparts in the Southwest, and over half worked in blue-collar jobs of all skill levels. For example, Jesús Elizondo arrived in New Orleans in 1928 and found work at a dredging company. In 1930, he lived in a boardinghouse on Bancroft Drive with eleven other recently arrived single Mexican dredge workers, all ages twenty-four through thirty-seven, as well as Italian and black single boarders. Even those who had arrived prior to 1920 reflected this new, more working-class balance of occupations since middle-class emigrants of the revolution years were more likely to have returned home. Shipyard laborer Vicente González, for example, arrived during the revolution but did not follow the self-proclaimed “refugees” home when it ended. By 1930, then, outsiders could well have perceived that most Mexicans worked blue-collar jobs—a stigma that could have branded the entire group as racially inferior.

Changes in women’s migration and labor patterns also signaled the increasingly working-class character of New Orleans’s Mexican population over the course of the 1920s, as more single Mexican women came to work in the city. Women comprised 42 percent of New Orleans’s adult Mexicanos
immigrants in 1920 and 49 percent in 1930, a gender balance similar to that among Mexican immigrants in the United States as a whole in those years. Just one in six New Orleans Mexicana immigrants counted in the 1920 census were single working women, but by 1930 that share had doubled. Those who immigrated after 1920 had an even higher percentage of single blue-collar working women than their counterparts who had arrived prior to 1920 and remained to be counted on the 1930 census. These women worked as housekeepers, laundresses, seamstresses, or waitresses (see table 2). Mexican widow Analeta Cruz, for example, did not know how to read and write and so supported her Louisiana-born son and niece by working as a housekeeper in a private home. Never-married Ethel Sastre, age forty-two, lived as a roomer in a boardinghouse of native-born white people. She worked as a seamstress—in Spanish, *sastre*—suggesting that the census enumerator might have misconstrued her profession for her last name. Again, Mexican immigrants’ increasing deviation from the white middle-class norm could—and did, in other U.S. locations—shape the racial ideas that white Americans held about them by the early years of the Depression.

Yet even as changing immigration patterns lowered the occupational statuses of the Mexican community as a whole, individual Mexican immigrants did not experience downward mobility as their counterparts in Los Angeles did during this time. On the contrary, some were edging their way up. Laborer Manuel Villa and musician Florencio Ramos both listed the same pro-

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**Table 2. Occupations of Mexicana women age sixteen and over (as percentage of all Mexicana women over age sixteen) in New Orleans, 1920 and 1930**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>1920</th>
<th>1930</th>
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<tr>
<td>White collar total</td>
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<td>13%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional/student</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clerical/sales</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blue collar total</td>
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<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skilled blue collar</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semiskilled blue collar</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unskilled blue collar</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not employed/unknown</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: 1920 and 1930 manuscript census analysis. See Appendix for methodology.*
fession in 1920 and 1930, but others experienced upward mobility. Miguely Henriquez, for example, migrated to the United States as a teenager before the Mexican Revolution and in 1920 was working as a laborer in New Orleans and living with his white Louisiana-born wife. By 1930, he had left blue-collar life to become the proprietor of a store. León and Margarita Rodríguez immigrated during the later years of the revolution, and he quickly found work as a salesman; by 1930, he had become the captain of a steamship. While it is likely that at least some Mexican immigrants experienced employment discrimination, long-standing immigrants as a whole were upwardly mobile. In all, by 1930 New Orleans’s Mexican immigrant population was more white collar than its southwestern and midwestern counterparts yet sufficiently blue collar that, under the right circumstances, white New Orleanians could have started to see them as a distinct, inferior racial group just as white Californians, Texans, and Chicagoans had done by this time.

New Orleans did not follow the trajectories of those other places in the 1910s–30s. Mexican immigrants’ memories, residential concentration in white neighborhoods, and ability to choose white marriage partners all demonstrate that rather than becoming identified as a distinct racial group, Mexicans quickly came to occupy a spot within the white racial category in New Orleans. When a sociologist interviewed Mexican immigrants in New Orleans in the late 1940s, several interviewees who had been there since the 1920s reported that they had never faced discrimination in the Crescent City. “There was too much discrimination in Texas is another reason why I wanted to get away from there,” said one interviewee. “I thought New Orleans would be better. I have not found any discrimination in New Orleans so far. See, if I was in Texas I would not be able to be a Mason,” he added. Mexicans also did not file any discrimination-related protests to the local Mexican consulate despite the fact that Mexican immigrants regularly complained of discrimination to consuls elsewhere in the United States, including in nearby Mississippi. Finally, interviews conducted in the 2000s with widows and descendants of New Orleans’s Mexican immigrants revealed that stories of discrimination, if they existed, had not been passed down in family memory. Some noted that the first time they had felt different from other white New Orleanians was in the late 1960s, when the Chicano Movement elsewhere drew attention to the concept of Mexican ethnicity, or in the twenty-first century, when anti-Latino sentiments followed Latino immigrants to the city after Hurricane Katrina. Of course, memories collected seventy years after the fact or passed down intergenerationally do not necessarily capture migrants’ historical experiences with precision.
In this case, however, both residential and marriage patterns suggest that these historical memories do reflect the majority of Mexicans’ actual experiences in interwar New Orleans. In this period, the Southwest’s urban Mexicans tended to live in distinct enclaves that were heavily but not exclusively Mexican, while those in Chicago spread out through the west side of town. In those places, Mexicans shared their neighborhoods with Italians, Poles, Japanese, Jews, and sometimes a few African Americans. Indeed, in every other case of interwar Mexican settlement that historians have studied to date, residential segregation contributed importantly to emerging ideas that Mexicans comprised a distinct and inferior race. In New Orleans, by contrast, a notable concentration of Mexicanos lived in the French Quarter alongside Creole and immigrant neighbors, but larger numbers spread throughout the entire city, including the Garden District and Uptown neighborhoods associated with the Anglophone elite (see map 2). In both 1920 and 1930, a typical Mexican immigrant household contained the only Latin Americans on the block, and no block was majority Mexican or Latin American. New Orleans had no barrio.

Segregation as a whole looked different in this and other cramped southern port cities, such as Charleston, that came of age in antebellum times.
Mexican Nationalism and Assimilation in New Orleans

These centers of the Old South were less segregated in the 1920s than Chicago or rapidly growing Los Angeles; their comparative integration was the legacy of a time when servitude demanded proximity, and racial inequality required no forcible reminder in order to persist. Yet New Orleans’s residential segregation increased through the 1920s, and the Louisiana legislature legalized it in 1924. Mexicans thus arrived in New Orleans exactly as its new, segregated order was taking shape.

An examination of Mexicanos’ neighbors in 1920 and 1930 reflects this changing order and shows that overall, they did not experience the nonwhite spatial categorization that their peers in the Southwest and Chicago did during these years. Characteristic of the city’s mixed composition in 1920, 54 percent of Mexican immigrants lived in neighborhoods that included both native-born white and black residents that year, while 45 percent lived among native-born whites but not native-born blacks. By 1930, however, the city was more segregated. Though the Mexicanos present that year were more working class than a decade before, now just 36 percent lived in mixed neighborhoods while 59 percent shared their streets with native-born white but not native-born black neighbors. In both years, fewer than 3 percent of Mexicanos lived in all-black neighborhoods. Observers in the early 1930s also noted that “the Spanish, French, and Latin-Americans have their national clubs, but their homes are to be found in various residential sections.” Mexicanos thus experienced increasing inclusion in white New Orleans at exactly the moment that blacks were increasingly excluded.

Mexicanos who had immigrant neighbors also had distinct experiences and opportunities as compared with their counterparts elsewhere. In Los Angeles and Chicago, Mexicans lived among immigrant groups, like Italians and Eastern Europeans, that fell somewhere between black and white. Not so in New Orleans. In 1920 and 1930, more than half of Mexicanos lived in neighborhoods that included at least some Italians or Eastern Europeans, but an equal or larger number shared their blocks with Northern and Western Europeans, those considered whiter in the logic of the time. August Pradillo, for example, had a few Italian and French neighbors on his all-white block in the Bayou St. John neighborhood, while Mexican Ralph Gutiérrez and German Frederick Swartz and their families were the only two foreign households on their all-white block in Uptown. This distribution roughly mirrored the slightly larger number of Northern and Western Europeans in the city as compared with Italians, yet it still suggests that Mexican immigrants did not experience the same spatial segregation as their peers elsewhere. Unlike their counterparts in Los Angeles and Chicago, Mexicanos
in New Orleans were spread throughout the city as a whole, more likely to live among native-born whites and Northern and Western Europeans than to be relegated to the neighborhoods of Italians and Eastern Europeans, let alone blacks. Residential segregation with “undesirable” immigrant groups, a critical marker of Mexicans’ nonwhiteness during the interwar period in every other case that historians have probed, was absent for New Orleans’s Mexicanos.

Mexicanos, particularly Mexican men, also freely crossed into white New Orleans in their search for marriage partners—a significant fact in the context of the era’s scientific racism and antimiscegenation laws and attitudes. Since the nineteenth century, Mexican women in the Southwest had been considered eligible marriage partners while Mexican men were more likely to be seen as a racial threat. These gender-specific racial ideas persisted, and in interwar Los Angeles, 33 percent of Mexican immigrant women married white men while only 16 percent of Mexican immigrant men married white women. Men in New Orleans had the opposite experience. By the time the Mexican population was more settled there in 1930, 41 percent of Mexican and Mexican American men had U.S.-born white wives (see table 3). Even working-class men classified as “Mexican” race on the census, like ice cream peddler Gerino Morantes, married white women and started families with them. The statistic has particular significance in the context of the Jim Crow South, where trumped-up fears of black male sexuality led to countless lynchings, structuring the entire system of segregation.

A comparatively smaller share of New Orleans’s Mexican and Mexican American women—17 percent in 1930—were married to U.S.-born white men.

**Table 3 Marriage partners of Mexicano men (as percentage of married Mexicano men) in New Orleans, 1920 and 1930**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1920</th>
<th>1930</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mexican*</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.-born white</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.-born Negro/mulatto</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish/Latin American</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European immigrants (not Spanish)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Mexican refers to both individuals listed as Mexican-race and Mexican nationals listed as white or Negro. See Appendix for more information on these determinations.

Source: 1920 and 1930 manuscript census analysis. See Appendix for methodology.
That year, 6 percent of Mexicana women were married to European immigrant men from countries including Ireland, France, and Poland, and 12 percent were married to immigrants from Spain or Latin American countries including Peru, Honduras, and Guatemala. Mexican men's higher rates of marriage to non-Mexicans in this period reflect the fact that they were more likely to come to the city alone and find marriage partners there, while adult women were more likely to arrive married. In fact, many marriages between Mexican women and non-Mexican men had begun in Mexico, presumably when those men had lived there as immigrants or businessmen. Leonor Sánchez, for example, came to the United States with her Spanish-born husband, Joaquín, and the couple’s four young children, all Mexican born, in 1917. They then had five more children once in New Orleans. Another Mexican woman, Ernestine Bowling, arrived in 1928 along with her Louisiana-born husband Benjamin, a salesman, as well as the couple’s three Mexican-born children. Families like the Bowlings solidified Mexicans’ image as an “international” element in a port city that fancied itself a gateway to Latin American trade, rather than as a denigrated, working-class, nonwhite immigrant group.

Indeed, while “Mexican” came to be seen elsewhere as not just a national origin but a distinct racial group, the racial identity of “Mexican,” bureaucratically enshrined for the first and last time in its own category on the 1930 census, did not cohere in New Orleans. The Census Bureau gathered its data through hired surveyors, known as enumerators, who went house to house during a two-week period in April, recording information about the “usual”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 4</th>
<th>Marriage partners of Mexicana women (as percentage of married Mexicana women) in New Orleans, 1920 and 1930</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican*</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.-born white</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish/Latin American</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S.-born Negro/mulatto</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European immigrants (not Spanish)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Mexican refers to both individuals listed as Mexican-race and Mexican nationals listed as white or Negro. See Appendix for more information on these determinations.
residents of a household and asking at-home family members for details about those who happened to be out. In their instructions for racial categorization, enumerators across the country were told, “Practically all Mexican laborers are of a racial mixture difficult to classify, though usually well recognized in the localities where they are found. In order to obtain separate figures for this racial group, it has been decided that all persons born in Mexico, or having parents born in Mexico, who are not definitely white, Negro, Indian, Chinese, or Japanese, should be returned as Mexican (‘Mex’).” Like most understandings of Mexicans’ racial identities at the time, this bureaucratic definition of “Mexican” conflated social and cultural markers with biological ones. It equated “Mexican” with laborer, a racial identity scientifically imprecise yet “well recognized” by enumerators who understood the contours of their own communities. In western cities like Los Angeles, a Mexican was “well recognized” indeed: he was a Spanish-speaking foreigner in a specific part of town who occupied the lowest rung on the economic ladder; the exact tone of his skin or color of his eyes was less material. There, just 5 percent of Mexicans received the “white” racial categorization, and nearly all others were labeled “Mexican” on the 1930 census.

In New Orleans, by contrast, cultural, class, and spatial characteristics were of no help for enumerators trying to “recognize” who was or was not racially Mexican, since Mexicans were not concentrated in any particular industry or neighborhood or in the working class. In New Orleans, more than four in every ten Mexican-born individuals were categorized as white in 1930, 3 percent were categorized as Negro, and just over half were logged as Mexican. How did New Orleans’s census enumerators decide who was Mexican and who was white? One clue lies in the selections of those enumerators who were charged with surveying multiple Mexican families. These enumerators were themselves white, and most were women. While some categorized all Mexican-born people as “Mexican,” many assigned different categories not only to different households of Mexican-born individuals but even to different members of a household, thus defying the period’s basic logic of race as biologically inherited. Their choices reveal that no social, economic, or geographic characteristics determined someone’s assignment to the Mexican racial category. Census worker Louise Jung, for example, coded one Mexican man married to white women as Mexican, another man in the same situation as white. She returned a Mexican laborer as Mexican and a Mexican prisoner as white. Another enumerator, Karl Gille, coded a Mexican-born man married to a white woman as Mexican, another man in the same situation as white. The couple’s children, however, were listed...
as Mexican, suggesting that they had darker skin than both of their parents. Indeed, with the Mexican racial category not at all “well recognized” in New Orleans, census enumerators likely relied on visual cues in inconsistent ways, attempting to apply biological criteria to a racial category that the census itself admitted eluded biology. The category “Mexican,” generated for national use, had little social and cultural meaning for the enumerators who tried to apply its bureaucratic definition in the Crescent City.

Even the sole recorded observation of Mexicans’ discrimination in New Orleans demonstrates that white New Orleaneans did not see “Mexican” as a distinct racial group. When a sociologist writing in 1949 claimed that New Orleans’s Latin Americans did not experience discrimination, he added a footnote: “In extremely rare cases some Anglos tend to shy away from those Latins who, because of Indian (?) ancestry, are somewhat dark. . . . The Anglos think they recognize the Latin as a member of the Negro race and tend to treat him categorically according to their conception of the ‘stereotyped negro.’”¹⁰⁸ Like census enumerators, the offending white New Orleaneans in the sociologist’s example placed Latin American immigrants into the area’s traditional racial categories rather than imagining that they occupied their own. Though marriage, residential, and occupational patterns show that Mexicans were not segregated or discriminated against systematically, it is difficult to know how many Mexicans—perhaps on an errand away from their white spouse or neighborhood—were perceived as black and treated accordingly in stores, streetcars, or other public spaces.

While white New Orleaneans recognized “Mexican” as a national identity rather than a race, it is more difficult to determine how African Americans considered them. Black newspapers including the nationally distributed Chicago Defender and the local Louisiana Weekly had their eye on Mexicans’ desegregation efforts in Texas and elsewhere, but neither acknowledged the Mexican presence in New Orleans.¹⁰⁹ The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) official magazine, The Crisis, lauded Mexican–black labor solidarity, including nearby in a 1913 rural Louisiana timber workers’ strike.¹¹⁰ But the magazine did not devote regular coverage to Mexicans and thus had little effect on black New Orleaneans’ views of the subject. Records of African Americans’ personal lives show that many did interact with Mexicans. Both black painter Blair Legendre and Pullman porter Joseph Ducoing married Mexican women, and countless others shared streets with Mexican families in racially mixed neighborhoods.¹¹¹ Yet these scant clues leave unanswered the question of whether most African Ameri-
cans understood, resented, or simply did not know that the city’s Mexicans managed to defy strict racial categorization just as Afro-descended people of varying skin tones and identities became bound by it. By 1930, “Mexican” was mostly, if not entirely, a national identity within the white category rather than a racial identity unto itself in New Orleans. Though lower in the racial hierarchy than the Anglo-Saxon upper class, Mexicans were classed among white ethnics and immigrants rather than as a distinct racial group. They lived among native-born whites and European immigrants; Mexican men married white women almost as often as they married Mexican women. While a small handful joined African American households and communities, the vast majority integrated themselves into white New Orleans. Even once working-class migrants replaced middle-class refugees, the community continued to elude racial categorization as a distinct group.

**Up the Road, across the Racial Line**

Yet if Mexicans had, over the course of the 1910s–20s, acquired degraded racial connotations in congressional debates, academic discourse, and popular culture in all of their significant migration destinations, would New Orleans continue to be an exception? In the interwar period, systematic racial oppression plagued Mexicanos not only in their major western population centers but even in places where their numbers were few. From Michigan to Kansas in the rural Midwest, preexisting negative ideas about Mexicans prompted varying degrees of racial discrimination from the late 1910s onward. In the urban Midwest, Mexicans lived in mixed neighborhoods but were often excluded from dance halls and relegated to the worst jobs in industrial plants. Though Anglo-Mexican divides were not structured into society as thoroughly in the Midwest as in the Southwest, they nonetheless affected Mexicans’ lives, politics, and identities from the earliest moments of their arrival at these new destinations.

Furthermore, concerned Mexicans in New Orleans did not have to look as far as the Midwest for examples of small Mexican communities that experienced harsh treatment based on race; such communities lived just up the road in Louisiana. Within 100 miles of New Orleans lay sugar-producing areas of the state where planters recruited Mexican workers exclusively for low-wage agricultural work otherwise performed by black laborers. In these places, Mexicans were definitively not considered to be white. These rural racial
experiences pointed to the potential precariousness of Mexicans’ seemingly easily assimilation into white New Orleans and did not escape the notice of the city’s Mexican community leaders.

As in the Midwest, rural Louisianans had formed ideas about Mexicans prior to their actual arrival in town. Most white sugar industry managers and planters read about them in their widely circulated trade publication, the *Louisiana Planter and Sugar Manufacturer*. There, frequent accounts of Mexico’s sugar industry described Mexican workers as having distinct and innate racial characteristics. One author described Mexicans as “childlike Indians or mixed breeds who have no more notion of a white man’s method of working than they have wireless telegraphy. They can pick their food, and so to speak, their houses off the wild jungle trees.” These Mexicans, characterized as racially Indian and climatically prone to backwardness, received significantly more negative portrayals than even Southern Europeans in the publication.

Even so, sugar planters had tried to recruit thousands of Mexicans to rural Louisiana as early as 1905. Such schemes faded during the years of Mexico’s revolution, only to return shortly afterward. In 1918, Louisiana’s sugar industry embarked on a concerted lobbying effort to bring 50,000 Mexicans to rice and sugar parishes in rural Louisiana at federal government expense. The discussion among sugar plantation owners and managers employed racial descriptions that distinguished among Mexicans from different regions. A sugar impresario who had worked in Mexico claimed that workers could be found in southern Mexico who were “a very desirable class of laborers and excellent substitutes for the ordinary Louisiana field laborers.” Such workers, he assured his audience, “are not of the banditti type found in Northern Mexico, but quiet and good workers.” When the U.S. federal government proved unwilling to help subsidize the cost of southern Mexicans’ transport to Louisiana, sugar industry advocates despaired. Since the cost would not be subsidized, lamented the *Louisiana Planter and Sugar Manufacturer*, “it means that the cheapest Mexican labor is labor from Northern Mexico and that the cost of bringing laborers from the peaceful districts of southern Mexico will be too great to bring the very desirable Mexicans from there and compel the Louisiana sugar men to rely upon the reputed shiftless greasers of Chihuahua and her sister states, always the birthplace of riot and revolution.” These contrasting depictions of Mexican workers shared an assumption that all of the workers in question bore inherent racial traits unfit for assimilation into white Louisiana. Census enumerators in rural Louisiana held similar racial assumptions: in Sabine Parish, every one of 1,906 Mexican-
born people enumerated in 1930 was classified as racially Mexican. In rural Louisiana, unlike New Orleans, the Mexican racial category quickly became “well recognized.” And that race was definitely not white. Indeed, Mexicans in at least one rural Louisiana town, Westlake, socialized with African Americans in their leisure time.

Several thousand Mexicans did arrive to work in the state’s sugar and lumber industries in the 1910s, though their numbers fell well short of planters’ hopes. Mexicans at Bogalusa’s Great Southern Lumber Company were “very satisfied” with their working conditions and “unbeatable wages” in 1918 according to Texas’s Spanish-language press, but soon thereafter the workers experienced their subjugated racial status in the form of violence. In 1923, more than sixty Mexican workers employed by the company lodged a complaint with the New Orleans Mexican consulate alleging that not only were their wages lower than those promised by the contractors who had recruited them in Texas, but “if they attempt to quit and see other places of employment they are brought back to the quarters by guards and placed in confinement.” Planter thus attempted to use on Mexicans the same violent labor controls that had long confined blacks in the lowest rungs of southern agricultural labor. Mexican consulate officials, called to respond in this and other cases of violence and discrimination in rural Louisiana, could not take for granted Mexicans’ more advantageous position in New Orleans. In a national and even local context of Mexicans’ systematic racialization and exclusion, New Orleans’s Mexican leaders would have to keep the question of their compatriots’ racial image foremost in their minds.

Giving Meaning to “Mexican”

Such leaders were few, as Mexican New Orleanians’ geographic and occupational dispersion left the community with little potential for organizational life. This distinguished them not only from their Mexican counterparts elsewhere but also from Caribbean immigrants to the Gulf port of Tampa, who rallied around both nationalism and labor politics in their predominant industry, cigar rolling. In New Orleans, no local labor union represented more than a handful of Mexicans, and the community never created Mexican Comisiones Honoríficas or other nationalist mutual aid societies, like their counterparts in the West, Midwest, and even nearby Shreveport, Louisiana, and the Mississippi Delta. Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Catholic church dedicated just for Mexicans, never drew the majority of Mexicans to its pews. Thus, other than Latin American student groups at local universi-
ties, the Mexican consulate provided the only formal structure for collective activity among Mexican immigrants, and the only avenue for Mexicans’ collective self-representation in the city.131 White neighbors and power holders assigned no clear racial meaning to the idea of “Mexican,” and most immigrants like Robert Canedo, the soldier whose portrait began this chapter (fig. 3), declined to fill the void in any vocal way. The charge of representing Mexico to New Orleans thus fell to a core group of middle-class families who actively maintained a Mexican cultural life—families like that of Hortensia Horcasitas, whose Mexican dance photograph also began this chapter (fig. 2). While consulates sought to influence Mexico’s image in locations throughout the United States, the New Orleans Mexican consulate was in the unique position of being the only visible representative of Mexicans in the city and even the region.132

In protecting their advantageous position in the Jim Crow South, consular officials and elite Mexican families could have pursued several different strategies. They could have emphasized the difference between themselves—whiter, Europeanized, and middle class—and poor Mexican laborers, protecting their own interests and racialization at the expense of others. Anglos in Texas had made such distinctions among Mexicans for decades, and white Louisianans likely would have accepted them, too. Prior to the advent of the “Mexican” racial category on the 1930 census, for example, a New Orleans enumerator in 1920 listed Mexican merchant Agustín Valles’s race as “white,” while recording his two Mexican servants, Rosa García and Teresa Vargas, as “Indian.”133 Reinforcing notions of intra-Mexican racial distinctions, such as those held by this census enumerator, might have proven a successful strategy for ensuring the continued privileges of middle-class Mexicans in New Orleans.

Mexican elites could also have followed the lead of New Orleans’s other racially questionable groups, whose strategies for negotiating Jim Crow varied widely. Italians, for example, freely formed families with blacks in the late nineteenth century, advocated labor unionism at a time when the movement flirted with interracialism, and paid the price for these transgressions when eleven Italians died at the hands of a white lynch mob in 1891.134 For its part, the mixed-race French-Spanish cultural group long known as “Creole” split along race lines in the wake of emancipation and Reconstruction. Creoles who considered themselves “white” created discourses of “purity of blood,” actively refuting allegations about their mixed racial ancestry and adopting an emphatically white racial identity that persisted into the late twentieth century.135 Those who identified differently or had darker skin now became
known as “Creoles of color.” Some tried to “pass” as white but others adopted an antiracist ideology inspired by the liberal and egalitarian ideals of the French Revolution; Supreme Court plaintiff Homer Plessy, who had just one black great-grandparent, emerged from this milieu. For him and many other Creoles of color, Jim Crow was not to be eluded but rather challenged.

White Creoles’ strategy to make outright claims about their nonblack racial inheritance had some recent precedent in the history of Mexico, as did the antiracist politics pursued by Creoles of color. In 1923, as the Mexican Revolution’s competing factions continued to vie for power, the Mexican embassy in Washington responded to the expulsion of Mexicans and blacks from Johnstown, Pennsylvania, by eugenically distinguishing the two groups. “The percentage of negroes is far lower in Mexico than in the United States, and there is no justification for Mayor Cauffield’s act in classifying them with negroes,” protested Charge d’Affairs Manuel Tellez. In this case, Mexican elites, like New Orleans’s emphatically white Creoles, claimed a form of “purity of blood” and explicitly distanced themselves from black ancestry. Conversely, from the 1890s onward, many prominent Mexican and Latin American intellectuals advocated direct resistance to Jim Crow. Mexico’s most well-known theorist of racial nationalism, José Vasconcelos, wrote deliberately against white supremacy and the discrimination he had witnessed as a student in Eagle Pass, a Texas border town. The postrevolutionary elite’s anti-imperialist outlook easily fostered a tradition of disdain for white supremacy even as bureaucrats facing off with the United States sometimes adopted its eugenic discourses.

But Mexican immigrants in interwar New Orleans chose neither of these paths, drawing instead on a different strain in Mexican cultural history. Though “Mexican” had not solidified as a distinct racial category in New Orleans, it certainly had in Mexican elite discourse by 1930. The ideology of mestizaje, which valorized white–Indian mixture as the foundation of Mexicanness, first emerged in colonial times and became modernized in the late nineteenth century during the reign of Porfirio Díaz, the conservative strongman the revolution overthrew. The progress-oriented positivist intellectuals that surrounded Díaz, known as the científicos, advanced the ideology of mestizaje to reconcile Mexico’s reality—that of a majority-Indian, caste-divided society—with the ideals of a modern, homogenous nation. They emphasized the potential of all Mexicans to whiten through eugenic means like race mixing and European immigration, as well as cultural means like education, hygiene, clothing, and cosmopolitanism. In this worldview, culture and class could enable mestizos to overcome biology.
physical features were valued inasmuch as they were believed to bring with them the benefits of economic progress and modernity, but for mestizos—particularly urban mestizos—the latter could be achieved without the former. By the late 1920s, the *raza cósmica* or “cosmic race” ideology fashioned itself as a new part of a “revolutionary” cultural program that celebrated race mixing and explicitly rejected U.S.-style white supremacy. Historians have since observed that mestizaje, too, was a eugenic ideal that celebrated white and Indian over black and Chinese blood. Depending on who invoked it, mestizaje could potentially be white supremacy’s mirror image rather than its subversion. Nonetheless, by 1930 the consolidating Mexican government’s official investment in mestizaje made it unfashionable and even impractical for Mexican elites in New Orleans to make or win a eugenic argument for whiteness. By their own accounts, they were not white.

Notwithstanding the admonitions of Mexican and Latin American intellectuals, both the political dominance of white supremacy in New Orleans and the international imbalance of power between Mexico and the United States mitigated against a potential strategy to challenge Jim Crow itself, as Creole plaintiff Homer Plessy had done. Mexican politicians in this period constantly struggled to balance opposition with accommodation in their relationship with the United States, given their northern neighbor’s repeated interventions in Mexican political and economic affairs. As a result, the New Orleans consulate and the Mexican Foreign Service in general often cooperated with white supremacy in matters affecting relations between the two countries. Taken together, a series of confusions and rulings on Mexico’s relationship to African Americans shows that Mexican bureaucrats were very willing to distinguish between white and black Americans in their day-to-day business. Whatever their theoretical ruminations on the desirability of race mixing and the injustices of Jim Crow, in practice the postrevolutionary government cooperated with white supremacy as a matter of survival.

In 1922, Mexican president Alvaro Obregón invited black Americans to settle in Mexico, but between the mid-1920s and the late 1930s Mexican policy changed repeatedly on this count. At various times, blacks were singled out, required to furnish bonds to prove that they would not be an economic burden on Mexico as a condition of entry, or denied admission to Mexico entirely. In the late 1920s, Mexican border agents refused African American boxer Harry Willis entry into Mexico to participate in a scheduled fight. When the director of the Tuskegee Institute asked the Mexican embassy in Washington for a policy clarification, the embassy indicated that in fact there was no prohibition on African American immigration to Mexico.
No Mexican government ever articulated a justification for having separate immigration policies for black and white U.S. Americans, but Marcus Garvey speculated that Mexico wanted to avoid its historical association as a haven for U.S. blacks, lest the U.S. government have additional pretexts for intervention. Whether or not Garvey’s speculation was accurate, by the 1930s Mexican bureaucrats dealing with the United States had developed at least a basic sensitivity to the politics of white supremacy and had established a precedent of willingness to comply with it.

Yet unlike the consulate’s racial arguments in the case of Mexicans’ and blacks’ expulsion from Johnstown, Pennsylvania, in 1923, in the early 1930s Mexican elites in New Orleans did not argue that their countrymen were genetically white or not black. They also did not put their compatriots at risk by openly decrying the Jim Crow system. Rather, they focused on Mexicans’ cultural compatibility with the white United States even as they remained silent about their biological bona fides. Mexican revolutionary nationalism contained a tension between a race-based celebration of mestizaje and the legacy of Porfirian positivism’s emphasis on whitening. The cultural program of Mexico’s New Orleans consulate demonstrates just one way in which intense contact with the United States long favored the dominance of the Porfrián legacy.

The social and racial identities and ideologies of Armando Amador, vice-consul and later consul at New Orleans from 1928 to 1932, exemplified his government’s conundrum. Amador was, for a time, the most prominent representative of Mexicanidad in New Orleans. A native of Zacatecas, Amador was well educated and multilingual; he worked as a journalist, novelist, and poet before, during, and after his time in the consular service. At the same time, his identity documents defined his race as “trigueño,” literally wheat-colored, or “moreno claro,” light-dark. Both mestizo and modern, Amador was the quintessential representative of the new Mexican nationalist ideal, but in Louisiana his racial descriptors might have earned him a spot in the black train car alongside another mixed-race intellectual, Homer Plessy.

In his representations of race in Mexico, Amador never attempted to assert that Mexicans were biologically European, but he also did not espouse the ideologies of mestizaje that by then had become the favored radical rhetoric of Mexico’s moderate “Sonoran Dynasty” leaders as they consolidated rule between 1920 and 1934. Hemmed in by an unequal international power dynamic, New Orleans’s self-identified upper-class Mexicans understood that they could not successfully challenge white supremacy. Yet, as representatives of a national program celebrating Indian bloodlines, and often adopting
mestizo identities themselves, they could not claim to be biologically white. Middle-class Mexican nationalists like young dancer Hortensia Horcasitas’s father, Andrés, and the Mexican consuls he befriended walked a careful line, remaining silent about mestizaje and race while drawing on Mexico’s positivist tradition of whitening through culture and class. They secured their place in white New Orleans not through claims about legal or biological race but rather through promises of international cooperation, the neutralization of the revolution’s political legacy, and the transformation of racial difference into folk culture.

To this end, Amador gave speeches throughout the state of Louisiana to educate its populace about Mexico and was also active in the city’s Latin American intellectual circles. As trading partners, objects of touristic fascination, and willing workers on both sides of the border, Mexicans in Amador’s portrayal carried with them a folk heritage but ultimately were committed to full cooperation with the United States as a whole and the Jim Crow landscape of New Orleans more specifically. In his representations of race in Mexico, Amador never asserted that Mexicans were biologically European nor that they were biologically mestizo.

Rather than biologically inherited race, Amador discussed culture. Specifically, he emphasized the compatibility of Mexican culture with European culture, describing its indigenous elements as beautiful yet inevitably subordinate to European ones. For example, in 1929 at Tulane’s Latin American Center, Amador delivered a lecture in Spanish titled “The Renaissance of Mexican Art.” Amador’s speech praised the art of the Maya and the Nahua, yet claimed that the dominance of white men over the continent was “unavoidable” from the day Columbus landed in the Americas. “Nonetheless,” he said, “the artistic soul of the conquered race was not dead, but rather . . . little by little inserted itself into the new culture, wrapping itself in this new spirit, learning to think and to feel within the new philosophical and ethical norms.” The following year, he gave a speech on New Orleans radio, describing Mexico’s emergence from “two races possessing high standards of civilization.” He then went on to describe Mexico’s “floating gardens in which the Indians cultivate flowers unequalled for their color and aroma.” In both cases, Amador valued Indians’ contribution to Mexican culture while assuring listeners that their backward ways would not hinder the nation’s European-style modernization. In this sense, he reflected Mexican intellectual currents of the time that prized Indian cultures as the “raw material” for an emerging national aesthetic tradition that would ultimately be shaped by educated men.
In the same vein, Amador’s public accounts of Mexican history deliberately presented a moderate political image of the Mexican Revolution. The revolution’s perceived radicalism, a useful image within Mexico for a new regime seeking broad legitimacy, had prompted Anglos to react violently and repress Mexicans further in the Southwest. Revolution’s perceived radicalism, a useful image within Mexico for a new regime seeking broad legitimacy, had prompted Anglos to react violently and repress Mexicans further in the Southwest. Revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata’s demand for land redistribution from foreign and domestic wealthy landowners to peasant cooperatives threatened U.S. business interests and concerned white observers not only along the border but also in Louisiana. The *Louisiana Planter and Sugar Manufacturer*, for example, decried the “abuses and crimes” of the “so-called Zapatistas” who had filled “the indifferent Mexican peon” with “hatred of the gringoes and foreigners.” In a 1930 speech to a fraternity at Louisiana State University, Consul Amador combatted this image directly, asserting that Mexico had had just one “real” revolution—that of moderates Francisco Madero and Venustiano Carranza, not the more radical Zapata and Pancho Villa. Just as elites within Mexico began to mythologize Zapata and Villa as heroes of a revolution that in reality had defeated them, Amador’s account of the revolution to Louisianans minimized them. Once again, though Amador could not affirm Mexicans’ biological whiteness, he could neutralize the threat their difference posed in the minds of elite white southerners.

Most strikingly, Amador freely discussed the African influences in Mexican culture, in defiance of official mestizaje’s denial of Mexico’s African roots. While New Orleans’s racially suspect white Creoles had insisted that their bloodlines were pure and free of African influences, Amador made no such insistence, instead casting Mexico’s African heritage as an object of folk fascination. In 1930, he sponsored a gala event at the Jung Hotel, one of the city’s largest and priciest, in honor of Mexico’s Independence Day. He did so together with the Mexico Society of New Orleans, a group of white businessmen that promoted business ties with Mexico. The Mexican and U.S. flags hung from the walls, and the Mexican national anthem was met with a “warm and prolonged applause.” Democratic mayor T. Semmes Walmsley, a white conservative segregationist, was on the program and offered his personal greetings and congratulations, which were broadcast through the city on a popular radio station. For Walmsley, apparently, Mexicans and blacks fell into entirely different categories of appropriate social interaction.

And then, right in front of Walmsley and the city’s white business elites, young Mexican women performed a “typical” Mexican jarocho song and dance. Jarocho music was typical to Mexico’s Gulf Coast state of Veracruz, whose port provided New Orleans’s most significant entry into the country.
Even after its adoption as national “folk” by revolutionary dance artists in the 1920s and 1930s, Mexicans and American businessmen familiar with the country would have immediately identified jarocho as an African-influenced dance style in both aesthetics and lyrics.¹⁶² Like the U.S. South, Veracruz had a long history of African slavery. Though he usually described Mexico as being white and Indian, Amador did not fear admitting African influences even in front of a segregationist mayor; rather, he transformed these influences into folk culture. Amador could claim Mexicans’ place as politically, culturally, and historically European, without arguing that they qualified biologically. The strategy departed sharply from his own government’s insistence, seven years before in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, that “the percentage of negroes is far lower in Mexico than in the United States.”

Assimilating Mexicans

While the consulate’s nationalistic lectures and performances helped maintain a culturally upper-class and European image of Mexicans in New Orleans, they seemed to resonate little with most of the city’s working-class and middle-class Mexicans. Unlike those in Amador’s earlier post of Chicago, New Orleans’s Mexican immigrants hailed from the Gulf Coast, a region on the fringe of revolution-era struggles and the constellation of key power brokers that took charge in their wake.¹⁶³ They mostly bypassed Texas, where their northern Mexican counterparts founded Mexican mutual aid societies and invoked Mexican nationalism as a defense against racism.

Hundreds of Mexicans did reach out to the New Orleans consulate for assistance, but they did so for individual rather than communal matters. They sought legal assistance after arrest or in the deportation process, letters of recommendation for potential employers, and, after the Depression set in, help finding work or repatriating to Mexico.¹⁶⁴ Yet these appeals for Mexican government help did not beget a working-class Mexican nationalism nor did they foster the creation of a distinct Mexican community life. Ordinary Mexicans likely understood the whitening potential of mestizaje but knew little about their new nation’s ideology of the cosmic race, and while Mexico’s Gulf Coast had a more visible black population than the rest of the country, Afro-Mexicans lived mostly in distinct communities that newly arrived migrants may not have encountered and likely did not identify with.¹⁶⁵ With white New Orleans giving them little additional reason to consider themselves a distinct group, Mexicans likely felt a weak connection to the new government, its revolutionary promises, or even the reimagined Mexican nation it claimed
to represent. Indeed, at least some migrants selected New Orleans precisely because they had heard it lacked a distinct Mexican community. One man considered migration to both New York and New Orleans but, upon hearing that New York had a “Mexican colony,” chose New Orleans instead.\textsuperscript{166} This immigrant likely perceived that where Mexican immigrant communities became visible, a distinct and disparaged racial category followed them.

Indeed, the “Mexican” racial category became a particular target of hostility throughout the United States during the Depression. As white and Mexican elites celebrated Mexico’s independence at a fancy New Orleans hotel, thousands of Mexican workers around the country had already begun to lose their jobs and face deportation. Though the U.S. federal government encouraged the deportation of Mexican and other immigrants during this time, city and county-level officials provided critical assistance to immigration agents in an attempt to reduce public relief rolls and the burdens on charitable institutions.\textsuperscript{167} In Los Angeles, for example, a concerted deportation campaign targeted the city’s main plaza, ultimately deporting 300 people to Mexico, some U.S. citizens, and scaring thousands of others into initiating their own journeys to Mexico.\textsuperscript{168} Local officials and social workers also encouraged Mexicans to repatriate “voluntarily” and subsidized the cost of doing so; scholars have found that local officials in the Southwest were more likely to coerce immigrants into leaving while those in the Midwest and Northwest often refused to cooperate with repatriation efforts.\textsuperscript{169} Nationally, about 400,000 Mexicanos were deported or repatriated under pressure during the 1930s, including untold numbers of immigrants’ U.S. citizen children.\textsuperscript{170} Mexicans constituted 44 percent of all deportees from the United States in the early 1930s, the single largest national group, with European and Asian immigrants making up most of the remainder.\textsuperscript{171}

The Depression and deportation years did not play out as dramatically for Mexicans in New Orleans, but they did generate a measure of instability and uncertainty. Even a few months before the stock market crash of October 1929, New Orleans’s Mexicans found themselves on edge when rumors spread that those who did not take advantage of a new legal provision for naturalization would be deported.\textsuperscript{172} “Hard-working people who have lived here for years,” wrote a New Orleans–based correspondent for San Antonio’s \textit{La Prensa}, were hurriedly preparing trips to border cities where they could legalize their status under the new law.\textsuperscript{173} Though ultimately untrue, the rumors unsettled even the city’s long-standing Mexican residents.

Threats to Mexicans’ privileged status in New Orleans next arrived in the form of poor unemployed compatriots. As the Depression set in, rural
Louisiana planters fired their Mexican workers who in turn streamed into New Orleans, while “an army of laborers,” newly unemployed in Chicago, descended on the city to return to Mexico via steamship.\textsuperscript{174} Brothers Bernardo and Manuel Velasco Mendoza, natives of the western Mexican state of Colima, had first crossed the Mexico-U.S. border in April 1929 to join their cousin in Chicago.\textsuperscript{175} The Depression soon left them unemployed and penniless, and so they walked from Chicago to New Orleans and contacted the consulate, which secured them free passage back to Mexico on an American Petroleum ship.\textsuperscript{176} In other cases, U.S. immigration authorities used the port of New Orleans to carry out deportations of Mexicans they had apprehended in nearby states.\textsuperscript{177} The sudden appearance of so many indigent Mexicans threatened the upper-class image that Mexican bureaucrats and middle-class families had so carefully cultivated in the city.

Ultimately, though, the Depression years provide further evidence that in New Orleans, Mexicans were treated more like European immigrants than Mexicans elsewhere in the United States. They faced the prospect of deportation like all immigrants in those years, but evidence shows that they were not singled out among immigrant groups. Neither the Mexican consulate, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), the \textit{Times-Picayune}, nor Texas’s Spanish-language press reported on a deportation campaign targeted at New Orleans’s Mexicans, even though consuls, federal correspondence, and newspapers documented and reported widely on deportation campaigns elsewhere.\textsuperscript{178} For every Mexican immigrant who permanently departed Louisiana for any reason between July 1, 1929, and June 30, 1930, six were admitted to residence there. In comparison, the ratio for British immigrants was 1:3.\textsuperscript{179} The dispersed geography, economic diversity, and smaller numbers of Mexicans in New Orleans meant that no spaces or industries in the city were racialized as Mexican. Had a deportation campaign been mounted, it would have had no logical target.

Federal, not local, officials initiated the deportations that did take place in New Orleans, again suggesting that intense local animosity toward Mexicans was lacking there. While local prisons and charitable institutions did cooperate with requests from the Immigration Service to report aliens who had committed a crime or become a public charge, they did not go out of their way to do so and certainly did not instigate the deportation efforts as their counterparts in Los Angeles and other places had done.\textsuperscript{180} Federal immigration agents in New Orleans found that only “frequent visits” to those institutions would procure the desired knowledge of which immigrants were in their custody.\textsuperscript{181} These officials sought to exert some control over the
flow of humans through the city’s international port. They responded to shipping companies’ reports of no-shows who absconded into the port city rather than reboard their boats, and they “checked up” on visitors who had overstayed their visas to ensure that they departed the country. The Immigration Service maintained a searching squad to find these immigrants and also relied on the help of the New Orleans Police Department to apprehend their suspects. While these efforts did not explicitly target any one national group, official correspondence mentioned Chinese and European immigrants more often than Mexicans, even though “the vast majority of aliens entering here are those coming from Mexico, Cuba, Central America, and the West Indies Islands.”

Though immigration enforcement in New Orleans did not target Mexicans, it did produce Mexican deportees. The New Orleans Mexican consulate processed fifty deportations in 1930, though many of those affected had not been living in New Orleans when they were apprehended. Of those who had been living in New Orleans, most had arrived as shipping crew members. Gregorio López of Ameca, Jalisco, arrived on a Panamanian ship with permission to remain on land for sixty days. When he overstayed the visa, immigration agents apprehended and deported him to Veracruz. Agents were less successful in their pursuit of twenty-year-old Antonio Benavides, who hailed from the Mexican state of Puebla. Benavides worked on the ship Agua Prieta but deserted it while docked at New Orleans. U.S. Immigration agents attempted to track him down in 1931, but it appears that they did not succeed. He would arrive again in New Orleans port more than sixty times in the 1930s, performing a variety of shipboard duties from barber to general laborer as he sailed around the Gulf of Mexico. When the United Fruit Company ship Santa Marta left the docks at New Orleans two days after arriving from Havana in June 1936, a crew member was reported missing: Antonio Benavides had once again disappeared into New Orleans.

Mexicans in other parts of the United States were not only targeted for deportation but were also coerced by social service workers into initiating their own repatriations. But in New Orleans, Mexicans’ repatriations were more often voluntary, and social workers there did not actively encourage repatriation as their counterparts had elsewhere, particularly in Los Angeles. The Mexican consulate did record a single case of a social welfare agency requesting repatriation: in 1931, Catholic Charities sought help repatriating Nacario Hernández and his wife because she was under their charge due to mental illness. Yet such cases were rare. Indeed, the lack of funds within Catholic Charities to send the Hernándezes home suggests that Mexican repatriation

* Mexican Nationalism and Assimilation in New Orleans
was not a priority for local agencies in New Orleans. In Los Angeles, the efforts of charity workers to encourage their clients’ departure meant that three-quarters of Depression-era repatriation cases involved families with children, the group considered to be the greatest burden on welfare and charity rolls. By contrast, just six of the thirty-four repatriations the New Orleans consulate handled in 1930 involved women and children, and of these only three originated from the city of New Orleans. Because the vast majority of repatriates were men traveling alone, it is unlikely that their return to Mexico was encouraged by local social welfare workers.

Yet the consulate’s responses to Mexicans’ requests for repatriation assistance suggest the office was aware that a growing population of unemployed Mexicans could damage their nation’s image in New Orleans. When indigent Mexicans in the rural South asked for financial help repatriating, the consul responded that no funds were available, though he occasionally offered shipboard repatriation if the petitioner could come to New Orleans at his or her own expense. In one case, consulate officials suggested that penniless Mississippi Delta cotton worker Francisco Gomes work his way to the border “little by little” in order to return home. But when poor New Orleanean immigrants wrote for help returning home, they received it. New Orleans resident Alejandro Colar C., for example, sought repatriation when he became unemployed. The consul secured him free passage on a Pan-American Petroleum boat, and Colar returned to his home in Mexico via the port of Tampico. These different responses reflect consular workers’ perceptions that Mexicans’ privileged position in New Orleans needed constant fortification, as well as their indifference to rural Mexican compatriots who found themselves in a far more abject situation.

The Depression years created uncertainty and insecurity in the lives and racial position of New Orleans’s Mexicans but ultimately did not dislodge them from their place alongside European immigrants in the local white imagination. The concerted deportation and repatriation campaigns and open racial hostilities seen elsewhere never materialized. Rumors of New Orleans’s less punitive environment spread during the Depression years. “Are we going to Louisiana?” asked the singer in the narrative ballad or corrido “Los Enganchados” (The Contracted Ones). “We arrived at Laguna without any hope,” the stanza concluded. The corrido “Los Betabeleros” (The Beet Pickers) began with the same inquiry, “Are we going to Louisiana?” and concluded unhappily in the Midwest. Consular officials lamented that Mexicans flocked to New Orleans from other parts of the United States during the Depression, certain that they would find work even when “the situation is
completely adverse for them here, without any possibility of improving.”

In September 1930, Alfonso and Vicente Sánchez contacted the consulate for help. They were unemployed in New York and wanted to repatriate to Mexico but were afraid they would be racially harassed if they returned through Texas. Louisiana seemed like a safer option: could the consulate help them get back to Mexico by ship? A few weeks later, the brothers returned to cancel their request. There would be no need for repatriation to Mexico—they had found work in New Orleans.

And so, hostile deportation and repatriation campaigns, the defining experience that instigated the transition from the Mexican generation to the Mexican American one in the Southwest, passed New Orleans by. Mexican-ness in New Orleans would not be defined as a degraded racial stereotype, a burden on society, or a threat to white Americans. Rather, an elite, Europeanized Mexican culture dominated popular views of Mexicanness even as hundreds of darker and poorer Mexicans made their way in the city as laborers, peddlers, and longshoremen. For their part, these working-class Mexicans showed little interest in forging a communal Mexican identity. Quietly reaping the benefits of their elite compatriots’ cultural work, they assimilated into white New Orleans geographically, socially, and economically. When a Catholic archdiocese official visited Our Lady of Guadalupe, the parish designated for Mexicans, in 1934, he scribbled on a report, “The Spanish-speaking Catholic population of this city is around 7 to 8 thousands [sic]. Come to this chapel for confession or call in case of sickness only those who do not speak any other language than Spanish—about 1500.”

Our Lady of Guadalupe, an icon of Mexican religious cultural expression throughout the United States, attracted just a small minority of New Orleans’s Mexican immigrants. Most had the option to worship with white, English-speaking New Orleanians—and took it. The parish held its last Spanish mass in 1939, by which time visions of New Orleans’s Mexican immigrants following in the path of San Antonio were clearly expired. As Mexican Americans around the country enlisted in the U.S. army to prove their patriotism, the assimilation of Mexicans into white New Orleans was all but complete.

The story of Mexicans’ incorporation as white ethnics in New Orleans fundamentally departs from the regional and national stories of Mexicans’ racialization between 1910 and 1939. It is the first case historians have yet uncovered in which Mexicans’ experiences paralleled those of European immigrants much more closely than that of their Mexican counterparts elsewhere in the United States. Since the histories of Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans are still being written, scholars may yet find other similar
cases. In some ways, the New Orleans story was unique because of the southern regional obsession with the binary of black and white. Yet midwestern cities had similar binaries, and the imperative of imposing Jim Crow on this or any city of racial complexity could easily have led to a harsh othering of all groups considered potentially threatening to white supremacy. In the case of New Orleans’s Mexicanos, the opposite happened. The biological racism espoused in the *Plessy* decision proved not to fully structure the implementation of Jim Crow.

Local and international power holders shaped the terms of racial segregation in New Orleans, allowing Mexicans to enjoy the privileges of whiteness without having to prove their genetic bona fides. Local politicians and businessmen envisioned their port city as a gateway to Latin American trade opportunities and used the city’s Mexican immigrants as symbols of this Pan-American future. The Mexican consulate and the middle-class Mexican families who surrounded it emphasized Mexicans’ cultural compatibility with white New Orleans. And Mexican immigrants themselves seized the opportunity to assimilate with the city’s whites, thereby opening their own doors to social mobility. Segregation in New Orleans was harsh and real, but its biological underpinnings proved a pretense that served the needs of migrants and elites on both sides of the border.

Mexicans’ advantageous social position in New Orleans had ramifications beyond the Crescent City itself. The South had no significant Mexican American community east of Texas at this time; thus, New Orleans’s Mexico-oriented community served as the main touchstone of political power for the thousands of Mexicans scattered on plantations throughout the rural South during the 1920s and 1930s. Mexicans upriver in the Mississippi Delta faced considerable barriers in their own quest for social and racial mobility. When they needed political support, they turned to the Mexican consulate in New Orleans.