Corazón de Dixie

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Conclusion

“For the first time,” wrote a journalist in 1999, “significant numbers of people are moving into the South who don’t care if the Confederate flag flies over the South Carolina capitol or if Robert E. Lee’s picture adorns the flood wall in Richmond.”1 Images of the South’s immigrants waving Mexican and American flags in their attempts to gain greater rights (fig. 36) reinforced the claims of journalists, politicians, employers, and social scientists that Latinos’ arrival en masse to the region marked a new moment of cultural hybridity and globalization in a region that had once been synonymous with isolation, provinciality, and a binary racial system.

This book has challenged that understanding, revealing new dimensions of U.S., southern, and transnational Mexican history since 1910. Most important, it has recovered and analyzed the beliefs and investments at the heart of Mexicanos’ journeys to the U.S. South and the choices they made there within transborder landscapes of pressure, constraint, opportunity, and power. The stories of the South’s Mexicanos in New Orleans and the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas have helped prove that Jim Crow, really a national phenomenon, was always malleable under economic and political pressure. The South's underdevelopment and harsh segregation through the 1960s did not imply isolation and racial oppression in uniform ways for Robert Canedo, Rafael Landrove, Arkansas’s braceros, and their fellow Mexicanos during the era of legal segregation. Indeed, stories of Georgia’s agricultural areas and Charlotte’s sprawling exurbs since 1965 have shown that the South’s integration with national economic trends and political ideologies over the second half of the twentieth century opened new avenues for discrimination even as it foreclosed others. At the turn of the twenty-first century, local white officials in the region’s metropolitan areas could not try to ban Mexicanos from white schools or restaurants as in the Mississippi and Arkansas Deltas of the interwar years. But legislators could now borrow model legislation from national organizations to exclude Mexicanos from civic and economic life in entire states. Viewed through the lens of the South’s working-class immigrant newcomers from 1910 through the early twenty-first century, it also becomes clear that economic, social, and political aspects of globalization have unfolded in profoundly uneven ways across the U.S.-Mexico border. While capital, culture, and information flowed more freely than ever before in
the early twenty-first century, the U.S. South’s Mexicanos found that political power within their grasp was bounded by national borders more than at any time in the previous century.

Like other studies of “in-between” racial groups, these stories of the South’s Mexicanos in New Orleans, Mississippi, and Arkansas during the Jim Crow period have better illuminated segregation’s underlying investments, helping U.S. Americans understand exactly how today’s still-entrenched racial identities and inequalities came to be. If white elites fomented racial antagonism in the late nineteenth century to ensure that poor white and black laborers did not make common cause, by the interwar period anti-black violence and discrimination most prominently underwrote blacks’ labor exploitation. African Americans’ alienation from the “American” part of that identity—their inability to use courts and ballots to enforce their rights—curtailed already-limited mobility and opportunity, thwarting efforts to escape or improve jobs in agriculture. But the South’s Mexican citizens often had greater access to political rights despite their poverty, and both they and Tejanos had social and familial networks spread across the borderlands. Violent tactics that worked well enough to keep a large black labor force on hand did not suffice with Mexicanos, who appealed to faraway family members and Mexican consuls for support. The Jim Crow system that white elites had constructed now

Figure 36 Immigrants’ rights vigil in Marshall Park, Charlotte, May 1, 2006. Photo by Rosario Machicao, courtesy of La Noticia, Charlotte.
hindered their access to the laborers they desired. So in interwar Mississippi and midcentury Arkansas, these elites pushed their communities to modify the terms of segregation by admitting Mexicans to white schools and businesses. In urban 1910s–30s New Orleans, Mexican immigrants’ embodiment of their country’s growing economic power gave them a favored racial status from the start, no matter how many “drops” of black or Indian blood they may have had. Thus, the twenty-first-century Nashville elementary school teacher whose Latino student asked, “Which water fountain would I be able to drink from?” could answer: usually the black one at first but eventually the white one. And all can learn from these stories of the South’s Mexicanos that even in its most rigid hours, Jim Crow was partially optional for white elites, who could use their power to bend it to their own economic needs.

For this reason, southern distinctiveness, the much-debated notion that the South was somehow “different” from the rest of the nation, looks different from the perspectives of Mexicanos. The recruitment of Mexicanos in the 1910s–20s, the deportations of the 1930s, and the bracero contract worker program of the 1940s–60s may have been national policies, but their implementation, meaning, and implications for the formation of racial boundaries were importantly local. Anglos adapted segregation practices to oppress Mexicanos in Texas and the Southwest. But in the southern locations considered here, where Mexicanos were newcomers, racial ideas about them were less entrenched. In those places, Mexicanos ultimately moved in more expansive racial space than they could have in the Southwest or even the Midwest. For a bracero in Arkansas, this might mean the right to eat in a whites-only restaurant he could not afford anyway, all the while being leered at by white patrons. But for a poor Mexican American child in New Orleans or the Mississippi Delta, it meant far superior education in white schools, vastly improved life chances, and the ability to rise into a middle class whose privilege was bolstered by its exclusion of African Americans. For these Mexicanos and their families, the South’s exceptionalism in the first half of the twentieth century was the comparative racial mobility they found there.

This trend looks even clearer in hindsight, from the perspectives of Mexicanos who lived in the South later in the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. In the years when formal segregation became dismantled just as neoliberal economic models gained power in the United States and Mexico, Georgia’s white church volunteers and agricultural employers worked to smooth social relations for the Mexicanos who had come to sustain the local agricultural economy. Their efforts built on long-standing intracommunity relationships among white farmers, church leaders, and local politicians and
depended little on Atlanta, let alone Washington, D.C. Yet by the 1990s, these local voices competed with national conversations, begun in the West, which insisted on the unfitness of Mexicanos for American citizenship.

Only in the twenty-first century did the supposedly globalizing forces of technology and mobility allow national identity, national citizenship, and national law to create entrenched fault lines excluding Mexicans in the U.S. South. For years, the terms of Mexicanos’ inclusion or exclusion had been negotiated locally in southern communities. Now, they were determined on the terrain of the U.S. nation and state: in national debates, blogs, news coverage, talk radio, and marches. Once, small groups of white growers had convinced their neighbors to embrace Mexicans in the name of white post–civil rights conservatism; now, a national Republican Party staked its claim on an enforcement-only approach to immigration, and local Georgia Republicans begrudgingly followed suit. Once, Mexican immigrants had drawn on the power of foreign bureaucrats and racial ideologies to wedge their way into the white side of the color line; now, they bought homes alongside white middle-class exurbanites but were classified as “illegals” by the relentless voices on those neighbors’ television sets. Once, Arkansas farmers had created local ordinances banning anti-Mexican discrimination in white public spaces, to ensure their continued access to Mexican labor; now, southern suburban and exurban officials borrowed language from municipalities around the country to craft local ordinances that sought to drive Mexicanos out of town. Even undocumented Mexicanos’ most sympathetic spokespeople, college-bound students raised in the United States, lost debates framed by white taxpayer entitlement and became excluded from many of the South’s public colleges and universities.3 The long view of Mexicanos’ experiences in the South shows that for them, the South’s integration into the nation resulted in greater, not lesser, exclusion and subjugation.

This marginalization resulted not only from the importation of anti-Mexican ideas from the West but also from the globalization of Mexico. Observers of the recent past have pointed to the Mexican government’s seemingly redoubled efforts to serve their emigrant populations in the United States.4 But when viewed over a century from the perspectives of the U.S. South’s Mexicans, who relied disproportionately on trans-state power since they lacked access to an ethnic middle class or labor organizing, recent efforts have been less powerful than their midcentury predecessors. The less-globalized Mexico more effectively rallied to its emigrants’ cause. From 1910 through the 1950s, the strength of the nation-state system and the widespread belief in its modernist promises of sovereignty, authority, and legitimacy

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fomented a more balanced two-way exchange of racial ideas and politics between Mexico and the U.S. South. Mexicans’ beliefs in these modernist promises, and in the Mexican state’s ability to make good on them, gave form to the demands they placed on local southern communities. These promises created expectations of economic and physical mobility, self-determination, and political rights that went unfilled first in Mexico and then in the U.S. South.

Mexicans called on their home state to make good on its promises and support their efforts to claim rights. Sometimes the request of a Mexican official to a local southern one, as in the case of the white schools of Gunnison, Mississippi, could elicit change. More significantly, when the Mexican government controlled the flow of Mexican labor to specific parts of the United States during the late 1940s and early 1950s, it had real power in its dealings with Arkansas’s agricultural bosses and local authorities. Most scholars have dismissed the Mexican government’s midcentury claim to hold meaningful power over the fates of its workers in the United States. But the heretofore unexplored case of Arkansas proves that for a brief but important period, braceros placed their faith in the Mexican government and used its ideologies and political power to shift their racial—and sometimes economic—position within a southern subregion. This power waned by the late 1950s as undocumented migration from Mexico to the United States increased, unchecked by the control of a weakened Mexican state.

Ruptures in Mexican economic and political life from the 1960s onward increased social inequality and reduced the government’s ability to fulfill its populist nationalist promises, undermining individuals’ belief in the meaning and value of Mexican citizenship. Emigrants more uniformly mistrusted government officials, and years of austerity meant that those officials had declining resources to invest in emigrant protection. Even as they opened new consulates, processed identity documents, and called emigrants “heroes,” Mexican government officials were no longer active or effective political advocates for their compatriots’ improved status as a whole.

The simple fact of Mexicans’ and other Latinos’ presence in the U.S. South may have seemed to herald a new global era since 1990, but from the perspectives of the South’s Mexicanos, it has not. While technology enabled their social, cultural, and economic lives to take place in increasingly transnational spaces over the course of the twentieth century, globalization went hand in hand with neoliberalism and the declining usefulness of their Mexican citizenship. In the U.S. South, urban and suburban Mexicanos of all ages, and Mexican youth in rural and exurban areas, have organized and marched
since 2005 to claim their rights. Together with their counterparts throughout the United States, they have won modest yet encouraging changes, as in 2012 when they pushed President Barack Obama to take executive action that spared many undocumented immigrant youths from deportation if they arrived in the country as children. Their movements have engaged primarily with the U.S. federal and state policies that sought to exclude them, such as Georgia’s ban on undocumented students at the state’s selective public universities. Yet when an activist student asked Mexico’s Atlanta consul to sign a petition protesting the ban, he was told that representatives of the Mexican government “could not intervene in U.S. politics”—a far cry from the actions of Mexican consulates in New Orleans and Memphis decades before.8 Facing profound exclusion in the United States, Mexicans could no longer look for political support to the country where they did hold citizenship. Borders constricted their struggles for rights in the U.S. South more tightly in the early twenty-first century than at any point during the twentieth.

New Orleans’s Margarita Rodríguez, Mississippi’s Manuel Solís, Arkansas’s José Aldama, Georgia’s Anselma Gómez, greater Charlotte’s Edith H., and millions of other Mexicanos moved through the U.S. South since 1910 with hope or despair but always an eye on the possible. They looked westward to Texas and California, northward to the Midwest, and southward to Mexico as they created and adapted their life strategies. Throughout this vista, they saw points of power, weakness, oppression, and opportunity in communities, churches, schools, work sites, and governments. World War II GI Robert Canedo’s single mother found economic stability in 1920s New Orleans while Rafael and Martha Landrove laid roots in Mississippi, hoping they could find greater social mobility than in Texas. Both achieved the cultural and material progress they sought through partial or complete integration with white communities. Bracero José Luís Landa did not actively choose Arkansas as his work site in 1948, but once there, he was determined to be paid as promised and housed like a modern man, not in a shack “once inhabited by blacks.” He correctly perceived that withholding his labor and appealing to the Mexican consulate could help him prevail. Departing Mexico in the 1980s, landless Teodora Marín took her family on the migrant circuit to arrest their downward economic spiral; when she eventually settled in southern Georgia, she tolerated difficult labor conditions and whites’ standoffishness because it was better than being bullied in Texas or hungry in Guerrero. Angelica C. urged her husband to cross the border with her in 2000 because she dreamed of a consumer lifestyle that her family could not afford with their earnings in Mexico, and she insisted on keeping her family together even through its

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pursuit of dollars. Once in exurban Union County, North Carolina, she con-
tented herself with her family’s increased spending power and did not venture
to immigrants’ rights marches in nearby Charlotte. Material well-being, which
meant different things at different times, in some way motivated all of these
migrants. Their cultural and political aspirations fluctuated through time, as
ideas about what it meant to live a good life shifted repeatedly in Mexico, the
United States, and the world.

Adapting their lives to the U.S. South, Mexicanos often made choices
about race: to work in the fields alongside African Americans, fight for ad-
mission to the white school, socialize in the black barbershop, live in the
white exurb, or attend a rally with the black preacher. In each case, Mexicanos
made these choices in a larger context and in pursuit of broader aspirations:
higher wages, social mobility, community, power. In no case did Mexico’s
official racial ideologies, anti-black though they were, inspire Mexicanos to
adopt the U.S. version of white supremacy as their own. Mexicanos wanted
progress however defined, and over time they used different racial strategies
to get it. In every case they declined to make proclamations about their own
racial inheritance, and in many cases they worked, lived, and socialized among
African Americans even while pursuing public recognition as white. The long
view of their experiences suggests that, had African American cotton workers
been in a position to offer a potentially victorious strategy for cross-racial
organizing in the 1930s–60s, Mexicanos might well have joined up. Mexicanos
in the South were connected through family and community networks to the
Southwest and the Midwest, and their racial choices suggest that historians
of Mexican America must never presume that a public embrace of Caucasian
status necessarily implied a private embrace of a white or anti-black racial
identity.9 Reading twenty-first-century survey research on anti-black attitudes
among the South’s Latino immigrants alongside its recent political history of
black–brown political coalitions also suggests the converse is true: animosi-
ties in shared neighborhoods or labor markets have not precluded blacks and
Latinos from forging powerful alliances in the public sphere.

What are today’s southern Mexicanos and their allies to learn from this
journey through the Corazón de Dixie, the Mexican transnational U.S. South?
As southerners of all backgrounds choose how they will engage with the
region’s future struggles over race and rights, they face a global landscape dif-
ferent from that of their predecessors yet a set of choices that resonates with
the past. Latin American home-country governments, once a key source of
power for the region’s immigrants, are unlikely to assert meaningful political
influence on the fates of their co-nationals abroad. As the Charlotte example

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shows, in the immediate future Mexicanos’ most promising political path involves some combination of alliance with other Latinos, with white liberal elites, and with African Americans. Indeed, it was just such a coalition that defeated an English-only ordinance in a Nashville special election in early 2009. Central Nashville residents and particularly African Americans turned out in high numbers to defeat the measure; by contrast, a journalist noted, “the farther voters lived from downtown, the more likely they were to support English-only.”10 This national strategy for coalition politics has the potential to combat an anti-immigrant movement national in scope and ambition, one that, as I write in 2015, has the power to pass state-level anti-immigrant legislation on the strength of white suburban and exurban conservative votes and against the protests of urban liberals or rural pro-immigrant conservatives who may advocate a more accommodating path.

Yet today’s liberal coalition politics are surely not permanent. Time and again, changes across the hemisphere have required the South’s Mexicanos to craft new strategies and alliances for achieving their aims. None of these were permanent, and the twenty-first century will be no different. This neo-liberal era will necessitate new strategies that work between and beyond the U.S. and Mexican states, with labor movements, employers, or international organizations. Today’s Mexican and U.S. American youths, including those living undocumented in the U.S. South, have already begun to imagine a new relationship between identity and citizenship that may open new space for Mexicanos’ claims on both sides of the border.

However new their presence may feel and however excluded they may be from legal citizenship or social equality, the South’s Mexicanos have a traceable history in this region where people, culture, and politics have long crossed international borders. Mexicanos’ future choices and strategies will join a longer legacy as they shape these histories of the post–Civil War United States, postrevolutionary Mexico, and the cross-border struggle over the meaning of race and the claiming of rights.