Corazón de Dixie

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

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Acknowledgments

“Dear Martie,” wrote my grandmother Beverly in 1945. She was visiting Tijuana with a friend and sent this photo (fig. 37) as a postcard to my grandfather Martin, then her boyfriend, who was stationed on an army base in Las Vegas. “Well here we are in dear old Mexico, what a crazy time we are having. So sorry you can’t be with us. It’s so different down here.”

Grandma, of course, was right: both then and now, a lot was “so different” across borders of space, race, and power in the Mexico-U.S. borderlands. In 1945, Grandma Bev was just a year out of Roosevelt High School, where she had attended class in Los Angeles’s heavily Mexican Boyle Heights neighborhood. But within a decade, she would be living in a white working-class suburb in the San Fernando Valley, where my dad’s elementary school class pictures show that for the first several years, nearly all of his classmates were white. Immigrants and Americans of European descent and those of Mexican descent were well on the road to “difference” in my hometown of Los Angeles and across the Southwest, in matters of housing, education, and indeed the two groups’ locations in the cultural and spatial geographies of race.

My desire to understand why and how this came to be has motivated my learning and scholarship in U.S. and Latin American history, ultimately piquing my interest in a region, the U.S. South, whose racial regimes have sometimes functioned differently. Grandma Bev’s postcard thus highlights the most important blessings that have graced my career and this book: the love and rootedness of family and friends; the unimaginably good education I have received thanks to the social mobility that my families enjoyed on the white side of “difference”; and the generosity of colleagues, mentors, and students, most from the other side of the borderlands’ color line, who have trusted my interest in immigrants’ rights and Mexican American history, supported me and my work, and generously educated me with their perspectives and life experiences. I offer this book to my family, teachers, mentors, colleagues, and students as just one piece of my effort to make good on the investments and trust they have placed in me.

When I left Los Angeles for my freshman year of college, I had a mediocre grasp of the Spanish language, the beginnings of an elite education, and little knowledge of Latin America or the Latino communities that had thrived all around me throughout my youth. Mentors in immigrants’ rights, social services, and academia helped me grow beyond that younger self. Thank you for trusting and investing in me, Sandra Serrano Sewell, Juan Hernández, Omar de la Torre, and Yvonne Mariajimenez. As an undergraduate student, I was fortunate to join Yale’s Ethnicity, Race, and Migration program and to benefit from the stimulation and support of Alicia Schmidt Camacho.
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A particular joy of border-crossing work is that I have gotten to know scholars in many different academic subfields within U.S. and Latin American history, global migration studies, and the social sciences. I particularly value the opportunity that the Chicano/Latino studies community has given me to grow, write, teach, and act within its fold. Forty years ago when young scholars first proposed to study the histories of Mexicans in the United States, they were forced to matriculate into Latin American history programs because the field of U.S. history did not see a place for them. No sooner did Chicano Studies find a small bit of solid ground in a white-dominated academy than it created a place for me, a white woman, in its ranks. Because I am often asked, it is worth stating publicly that despite the competitiveness of academia, I have never once felt identity politics used against me. I have tried my best to reciprocate by respecting this field’s role as not only an intellectual project but also one of the few spaces in the academy where people of color can seek mentorship and camaraderie. I have sometimes fallen short in my attempts to navigate these waters, yet my colleagues in Chicano/Latino Studies have been generous and forgiving. I thank them all for their passionate and expansive approach to this work, for creating this academic field, and for opening a space for me within it.

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My year as a Weatherhead Fellow at the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe, New Mexico, slowed me down in the most wonderful way, enabling me to read widely, rethink my arguments, and rewrite chapters with a depth difficult to muster amid the bustle of my usual academic and personal life. I could not have asked for a more pleasant and supportive scholarly community than the one I enjoyed there, including Rebecca Allahyari, James Brooks, Margaret Bruchac, Kitty King Corbett, Craig Janes, John Martin, Jennifer McCarty, Teresa McCarty, Nancy Marie Mithlo, Malena Mörling, Franklin Peters, Kelsey Potdevin, Nicole Taylor, Wossen Argaw Tegegn, and Aimee Villarreal.

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Even more obviously, the credit for oral history research does not accrue to a solitary historian. Gustavo Arévalo, Geraldine Davidson, and Richard Enriquez helped me make key contacts for my interviews. And dozens of people, white, black, Mexican, and Latino, were willing to share their lives with me on tape and let me scan their photos and personal papers. Many of the most important stories in this book would have been impossible to recount if not for their generosity. Some of their memories, like living as a black man under segregation or risking one’s life to cross the border, were extremely painful to revisit. I will be sharing this book with them and only hope they conclude that their time with me was well spent.

The decade of research compiled in Corazón de Dixie enters the world through the diligence of Chuck Grench and the amazing staff at the University of North Carolina Press, whose good reputation among authors turns out to be well deserved. Chuck insisted I prioritize quality over speed and then waited patiently each time I took his advice. He and the rest of the staff, particularly Mary Cavinness, Heidi Perov, and Iza Wojciechowska, have walked this first-time author through the publication process with great care and attention.
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And so, in more ways than one, the story of this book’s creation comes back to Grandma, indeed, to all four of my grandparents, Bev and Marty Weise and Lil and Joe Liebross, for the historical opportunities of which they took advantage but also for those they defied. Ignoring the individualism of American society, my extended families—now including the Bugattis, Copanses, Gorneys, Liebrosses, Maddises, Mendelsons, Tillipmans, and Weises—have remained close. I was wise enough to pick in-laws with a similar ethos: the Coopers, Gersons, Klines, and Rosenbaums. These large families have supported my academic lifestyle in a flurry of airport pickups; Fedexed cookies; eat-and-run lunches (“Joe! She has to go back to reading her books!”); visits to Mexico City, New Haven, Santa Fe, and Eugene; and amusing e-mail strings that helped me feel connected no matter where I happened to be.

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