Corazon De Dixie: Mexicanos in the US South since 1910

by Julie M. Weise

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REVIEWED BY CHRISTINA D. ABREU

Julie M. Weise's *Corazon de Dixie* offers a much-needed history of Mexican migration to the US South in the twentieth century. In contrast to experiences in Texas and the Southwest, Mexicanos in the South "encountered a distinct kind of borderland" shaped by layers of local, national, and transnational understandings of race, class, and citizenship. Weise shows that the South was not monolithic in its response to these new migrants; rather, white and African-American southerners reacted to the Mexicano presence differently across time and place. The Mexicano perspective, too, changed according to local experiences as well as shifts in the influence of Mexican state power. She examines five cases: New Orleans in the 1910s–1930s, the Mississippi Delta during the same period, the Arkansas Delta during the 1940s–1960s, and, more recently, rural South Georgia from the 1960s, and the Charlotte exurbs of the past two decades. These cases demonstrate that Mexicanos in the South faced "complex combinations of acceptance and rejection, oppression and opportunity."

Weise draws on traditional historical sources (newspapers, census records), but incorporates oral histories and migrants' personal photo albums as well to document how Mexicano migrants negotiated race and place within these specific local communities. She uses the latter forms of evidence (especially in the chapters on Georgia and Charlotte) to build an impressive archive that recovers Mexicanos' own constructions of their daily lives and labor in these new contexts. In the chapter on Georgia, family photo albums show Mexicanos laboring in fields and enjoying times of leisure as families; they also capture moments of interaction with their white bosses and

church leaders, revealing that personal and positive relationships did develop between the two. Oral history interviews with undocumented Mexican women in Charlotte offer a window into motivations for migration, first to the United States and then from the city to the exurbs. Once in the exurbs in the mid 2000s, their white neighbors saw them as competition for public resources and began to focus a sustained attack on "illegal" immigrants.

Readers of this journal will find the chapter on Mexicanos in Georgia of particular interest and significance. Weise argues that migrants in rural south Georgia sought upward social and economic mobility not through unionization or by making claims to the Mexican government —as they had done in Florida and during the years of the Bracero Program—but through relationships forged with farm employers and white church leaders. "A fragile peace around immigration issues settled over southern Georgia" through the end of the 1990s, she argues. Rare were instances of violence or open hostility to Mexicanos in farming communities like Tifton and Vidalia. Influential growers and church people in these towns were animated by a worldview towards Mexicano laborers that emphasized charity and uplift across racial and national boundaries. This pro-immigrant conservatism stood in contrast to anti-immigrant sentiments that emerged from the suburbs and coalesced into legislation making headlines in Atlanta and on the national stage. Weise finds that Mexicano migrants acknowledged the challenges of farm labor and some of the exploitative conditions they faced in the fields, but their letters, family photo albums, and oral histories indicate that they reciprocated these relationships, using them to build a communal life for themselves away from the farm. This "new phase of paternalism" also allowed whites to minimize contact with blacks and direct attention away from the region's history of segregation. Anti-immigrant legislation, most notably HB87, disrupted this "fragile peace" as advocacy groups, young Mexicanos, and other Latinos organized protests, while many others left to find work elsewhere.

The remaining cases reveal that the experiences of Mexicanos in the US South were distinct from their experiences elsewhere. In New Orleans, for example, Mexicanos in the 1910s–30s used a Europeanized version of Mexican culture to insinuate themselves into the white racial category. Mexicanos in the Mississippi Delta in the 1910s–30s achieved acceptance as white by calling on the Mexican government, which "relied on the persuasion of stateness—the respect Mexico could command from local authorities, if not necessarily federal ones, by virtue of being its own sovereign nation-state." In the Arkansas Delta between 1939 and 1964, white elites afforded

Mexicanos nominal access to white public spaces, thereby diffusing the complaints of the Mexican consulate while ensuring that laborers recruited to the area would receive low wages.

Corazon de Dixie joins a borderlands historiography that has expanded beyond the US Southwest to include the Midwest and Northwest as well. The bold terrain charted here points to the need for additional studies on African-American and Mexicano interactions and the promises and challenges of cross-racial collaboration. Scholars of migration history, Latino/a history, and southern history have a great deal to learn from Weise both in terms of the stories she recovers and the innovative methodology she uses. *Corazon de Dixie* is a must read.

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