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

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Abstract:
Gaxiola mailed the picture, along with nine others, to Mexico's Ministry of Foreign Relations in Mexico City where another bureaucrat would consider banning Mexican workers from Marked Tree since they were being treating akin to African-Americans. [...]opens Julie Weise's Corazón de Dixie, an impressive social history of Mexican immigrants and Mexican-Americans in the U.S. South. [...]Mexicans who settled in New Orleans enacted a Europeanized version of "Mexicanness"-one that, in Weise's words, allowed them to "assimilate into White New Orleans geographically, culturally, economically, socially, and religiously."

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Full text:
Corazón de Dixie: Mexicanos in the U.S. South since 1910 Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2015.
"I n this place, blacks and also Mexicans are served." Rubén Gaxiola, a Mexican Foreign Service officer, attached the note to a picture of a man standing outside of Goldcrest Beer 51-Café bar in Marked Tree, Arkansas. It was the end of the cotton-picking season in November 1949, and Gaxiola was in town to document the treatment of Mexican citizens who were working in Arkansas as part of the Bracero program, a U.S.-Mexico initiative started during World War II that allowed Mexican men to work for a limited time in a multitude of jobs across the United States. Gaxiola mailed the picture, along with nine others, to Mexico's Ministry of Foreign Relations in Mexico City where another bureaucrat would consider banning Mexican workers from Marked Tree since they were being treating akin to African-Americans.
Thus opens Julie Weise's Corazón de Dixie, an impressive social history of Mexican immigrants and Mexican-Americans in the U.S. South. Focusing on Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, Georgia, and North Carolina, Weise traces the history of Mexicans in the U.S. from the early twentieth century through the beginning of the twenty-first century Contrary to the belief that Latin@s are "new" arrivals to the U.S. South, Weise recovers and recounts the many experiences of middle- and working-class Mexican immigrants and MexicanAmericans in the region, going back decades. At the center of the book is the story of how Mexicans constructed their own meanings of progress, and the way in which the formation of race and social class intersected with issues of labor and political power. In each state, social and political negotiation with dominant white society produces a different outcome-some Mexicans gain entry into white society while others are cast as a racial "other." Such outcomes are largely shaped by Mexicans' own decisions as well as the political, economic, and social climate that existed in particular localities at particular moments in twentieth-century history. In focusing on the experiences of Mexicans, Weise also pays important attention to receiving communities- that is, how white and black southerners reacted to the growing presence of Mexicans. Overall, Weise's book is an accessible but thorough history that will be of interest to both general audiences and specialists interested in the U.S. South, labor, immigrant communities, and Latin@ history.
Corazón de Dixie begins in 1910, when the upheavals associated with the Mexican Revolution led Mexicans with resources to migrate to cities like New Orleans in search of stability. Some planned to return home when the violence subsidized, but many others intended to make a new life in a new country. The relatively elite class background of these immigrants was crucial to this wave of migration, as was the idea, then prevalent in Mexico, that race was related to culture. (In contrast, a blood-based racial system, known colloquially as the "one drop rule," was dominant in the U.S. in the early twentieth century. That system held that one black ancestor or one drop of "black blood" categorized a person as "black.") Consequently, Mexicans who settled in

New Orleans enacted a Europeanized version of "Mexicanness"-one that, in Weise's words, allowed them to "assimilate into White New Orleans geographically, culturally, economically, socially, and religiously." The trajectory of Mexicans in the city differed drastically from that of Mexicans in the Southwest, who, for example, were never understood as being similar to European immigrants and thus experienced numerous instances of racialized violence.

In the mid-twentieth century, Mexicans benefited from an activist consulate that advocated on their behalf. In Jim Crow Mississippi, Mexicans worked as sharecroppers and when local governments wanted to send children of Mexican parents to segregated all-black schools, many Mexicans mobilized against segregation and appealed to the Mexican government itself. The Mexican consulate stepped in and spoke with Mississippi's governor who, in turn, communicated with local officials. Eventually, U.S. officials acquiesced to Mexico's demands, allowing Mexican children to attend white schools. By the 1950s, Mexicans living in Mississippi were understood as white, but Mexico's consulate stepped in again, this time to protect the labor rights of braceros working in Arkansas. In the case of Marked Tree, the Mexican consulate intervened and Mexicans were eventually granted access to white social spaces. Though Mexicans never achieved economic equality, the economic importance of a Mexican labor force was the leverage the Mexican government had in influencing U.S. policies around racial segregation.

One of the tensions in Weise's book is how AfricanAmericans of various class standings responded to the presence of Mexicans. Weise argues there is little evidence of black resentment toward Mexicans as the latter joined the agricultural workforce. Instead, many African-Americans saw their diminishing numbers in agriculture as evidence of their own social progress. At times, Mexicans chose to socialize with AfricanAmericans and frequent black businesses, even during Jim Crow. However, at the same time Mexicanos also fought to be on the white side of the color line.

In the early 1970s, southern planters, still determined to secure a "compliant" labor force, hired enganchadores (labor recruiters) to entice Mexican farmworkers with employment offers in states like Georgia. Thus, starting in the 1980s and growing exponentially in the 1990s, the settlement of another large southern Latin@ community began. The arrival of a seasonal workforce during this period allowed Georgia growers to cultivate more agricultural products at a lower cost, and despite the arduous work, Weise shows that Mexicans often saw an opportunity for improved economic well-being in the fields of the U.S. South. Some were able to achieve this dream, though many others barely survived.

In the book's final chapter, Weise examines Charlotte's "exurbs"-the largely rural areas beyond the developed suburbs where large numbers of urban commuters reside. Mexicans moved to the exurbs in search of middle-class dreams, like buying a house or trailer or, at the very least, being able to buy consumer goods of their choice. In recent decades, middle-class white southerners, have increasingly resented having Mexicans as neighbors. Whites in these areas couch their arguments in color-blind racisms, depicting themselves as tax-paying citizens with the right to certain entitlements. Simultaneously, many of these whites have suggested that Mexicans are violating a tacit agreement about the kinds of places that are "suitable" for Mexicans to reside, such as more traditionally workingclass neighborhoods.

Corazón de Dixie expands public understanding of Mexicans in the U.S. South, demonstrating how Mexicans responded to working conditions, mobilized for their racial and social acceptance, but frequently left an oppressive system of exclusion intact. The stories in this history are vital as activists, both black and brown, continue to fight for a more equitable U.S. South. Q]

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