

Bridging the Gulf: A Critical Note on Borderlands Scholarship and the Southeastern United States in the New Millennium

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Introduction

In 1537, the Spanish Crown awarded Hernando de Soto the right to explore and colonize "Florida," a region that encompassed the present-day Southeastern United States from Key West to the Mississippi River. The conquistador subsequently embarked on a bloody cross-country conquest of present-day North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, and Arkansas. De Soto's premature death in 1542 served as an early harbinger of the difficulties Spain would face in establishing Hispanic culture and society in this region, which eventually would pass from Spanish and British ownership to the growing domain of the United States. As historian David J. Weber has explained, the dynamics of Mexican/Hispanic-Anglo relations after 1800 took decidedly different turns on each side of the Mississippi River, particularly as

Americans whetted their territorial appetites for lands in Texas and California (Weber 1992:335-360). In the young nation's new states between Louisiana and Florida, Spanish grandees mingled and intermarried with Anglo-Americans, who considered them to be model citizens. The recognizable influence of Hispanic culture and society seeped into the rustic streets of New Orleans' French Quarter, where a gallant statue of General Andrew Jackson in the main plaza reminded all that the Spanish and English conquerors had been vanquished.

Increasingly, nineteenth-century *norteamericanos* turned their attention to the West, driven by Manifest Destiny and compelled by racist notions of Mexican inferiority. A legal framing of the border region, provided by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, foreshadowed the geographic area that would dominate the attention of bor-

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derlands scholars in the twentieth century. During the late nineteenth century, as Hispanic identity in the Southeast became nearly indistinguishable from that of the region's Anglo-American elite, the contentious drama of Anglo-Mexican interaction in the border region provided scholars with a more diverse cast of characters from which to draw their conclusions. The relevance of the Spanish Southeast waned even further as North American scholars concerned with both the colonial and modern border region tended to emphasize the interactions of natives, Spaniards, Mexicans, and Americans in the Gran Chichimeca. The works of Herbert Eugene Bolton, for example, dealt primarily with the Hispanic Southwest and Northern Mexico. Perhaps this has something to do with the allure of the American West, and its role in "nation-building" in the United States. Moreover, Mexican scholars had little reason to be concerned with the fate of Hispanic culture in the Southeastern United States, as Mexico had broken its ties from its colonial master and charted its own destiny.

During most of the twentieth century, borderlands scholarship maintained an almost exclusively territorial focus on the U.S.-Mexico border region, centered around the six Mexican and four American states that flank the border. However, near the end of the century, growing interest in interdisciplinary studies and post-modernism provided alternative visions of the borderlands. Important theoretical scholarship during the 1980s and 1990s challenged the territorial definition of the U.S.-Mexican borderlands, and it suggested that the concept of a border region applied as much to human relationships as it did to a single geographic region.¹ The long-recognized presence of Mexican enclaves in other parts of the United States, including Chicago, further called into question the traditional territorial definition of the borderlands.

As the new millennium begins, the dynamics of the global economy and labor market have geographically broadened the U.S.-Mexican borderlands into the Southeastern United States. While Latin American scholars have principally focused their en-

¹Kathleen Staudt and David Spener (1998: 3-33) provide a concise discussion of the evolution of borderlands scholarship at the end of the twentieth century. Within the field, proponents of a focus on the territorial border region have amply debated this issue with scholars who have emphasized social borderlands in human relations (Heyman 1994: 43-66). Josiah Heyman argues that the territorial perspective is essential to defining the U.S.-Mexican border relationship.

ergies in that region on the Cuban presence in South Florida, substantial immigrant streams of Mexicans into the interior states of the Southeastern United States—including Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina—offer scholars a new horizon of opportunities to enrich previous scholarship on the traditional border region.²

While DeSoto's dream to explore and settle the interior of North America ended in tragedy and failure, the demand for Mexican labor in the construction, services, and agricultural sectors has created new cultural, political, and social borderlands in the Southeast. Several factors have triggered this demographic transformation. First, the Southern United States, much like Northern Mexico, has served as a low-cost production site

for Northern American corporations, especially since the 1970s. While many car and consumer-sector manufacturers headed south to the Mexican border to participate in the maquiladora program after its implementation in 1965, others took advantage of the offers from Southern state governments to bring their factories to the Southeast, which promised abundant natural resources, cheap labor, and union-free factories.³ In effect, the lure of relatively cheap labor in the South attracted not only American businesses from the North and Northeast but foreign corporations as well. Sony, for example, set up a videotape factory in Dothan, Alabama.⁴ As one drives between Atlanta and Birmingham, Alabama, a sign in English and Japanese near the town of Lincoln, Alabama, reads "Alabama Welcomes

²In summarizing the growth of *Latinos* in the Southeast, as reflected by the 2000 U.S. Census, journalist Georgia Pabst (2001) noted: "While most Hispanics live in traditionally *Latino*-rich states like California, Texas, New York, and Florida, there has been significant growth in the Midwest and Southeast... In North Carolina, the *Latino* population jumped a stunning 393% between 1990 and 2000; in Georgia, it was 299%." In a similar article, David Westphal (2001) noted the significant jump in Georgia's *Latino* population during the 1990s. In 1990, *Latinos* represented just 1.7 percent of the population, but by the 2000 census they had grown to 5.3% of the reported population. Unofficial estimates have placed the actual *Latino* population at around 10% or 11% (Dr. Doug Bachtel, University of Georgia College of Family and Consumer Sciences). The 1990 census registered 108,922 *Latinos* in Georgia while the 2000 census counted 435,000. For more demographics on *Latinos* in Georgia, see The Georgia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce website, www.accessatlanta.com/community/groups/ahcc/Statistics.html.

³Joel Garreau discusses the efforts of Southern states to promote industrialization in the region in *The Nine Nations of North America* (New York: Avon Books, 1981), 128-136.

⁴Richard J. Barnet and John Cavanagh recount the transformation of Dothan, Alabama into a Southern maquiladora town in *Global Dreams: Imperial Corporations and the New World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 321-325.

Honda to Lincoln.” The transfer of not only American but also Asian (and European) corporations to the region illustrates the many ways in which the Southern United States and Northern Mexico have shared similar patterns of development and modernization during the last 40 years. Ultimately, this has also had an effect on the movement of labor within North America. As the new millennium begins, two labor streams—one moving from the interior of Mexico to the U.S.-Mexico border region and a more recent stream moving from Mexico towards the Southeastern United States—have been linked together as Southern industries, reluctant to move their operations out of the United States, have turned to Mexican labor in order for their businesses to remain in their traditional communities.

Not surprisingly, one sector that has attracted Mexican labor in the Southeast is the textile industry. During the early twentieth century, many textile manufacturers moved to the South to take advantage of cheaper labor costs (similar to the move many clothing

companies would make to Mexico under the maquiladora program). Dalton, Georgia, offers perhaps the best, and most drastic, case study for the transformation of a rural Southern town by an influx of Mexican workers. In the 1980s, the national carpet industry, which largely centered around Dalton, increasingly turned basic carpet production processes over to Mexican laborers, who had originally migrated to Georgia to work in the poultry and construction industries. During the 1980s and 1990s, reliance on Mexican labor in Dalton increased.⁵ This raised new issues related to bilingual education in the public schools. Since the South has traditionally been one of the weakest regions in terms of education, this new influx of *Latinos* offers intriguing opportunities to compare the topic of bilingual education in the Southeastern and Southwestern United States. Furthermore, sociologists and demographers might profitably explore how Mexicans are able to find these new opportunities in the rural South and then establish networks of transpor-

⁵ The story of the growth of Mexican labor in Dalton is chronicled in James D. Engstrom's "Industry and Immigration in Dalton, Georgia," in *Latino Workers in the Contemporary South*, Arthur D. Murphy, Colleen Blanchard, and Jennifer A. Hill, eds. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 44-56. This work represents the first book-length collection of studies on Latinos in the contemporary U.S. South. *Latinos* comprise 22% of the population in Whitfield County, where Gainesville is located.

tation and communication back to Mexico. Notably, bus service to Mexico has penetrated communities in rural Georgia. These networks should provide clues to the nature of the quiet flood of Mexicans arriving in the Southeast.

The quickly consolidating agro-industrial sector has also played a role in creating new U.S.-Mexican "border landscapes" in the rural South. During the 1990s, the consolidation of the key U.S. poultry—and meat—processing corporations brought a demand for cheap labor. As a result, the social and physical landscape of rural Southern towns, most prominently Gainesville, Georgia, has changed. The growing presence of Mexican-owned businesses within proximity to the poultry plants, as well as new soccer complexes, funded entirely by the owners of the plants in order to provide their mostly Mexican workers with a form of recreation they prefer, offer exciting research opportunities for cultural geographers.⁶

The growth and internationalization of non-border cities, including Houston, New Orleans, Miami, and Atlanta, has also played an important role in opening links to immigration from Latin American countries like Mexico. In the case of Atlanta, its bid to host the Olympic Games had a profound effect on the growth of the local Mexican population. In the months leading up to the 1996 Olympics, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service informed the Mexican Consulate in Atlanta that it would not deport or apprehend undocumented workers until the games ended.⁷ Ironically, this plea for Mexican workers inadvertently accelerated the internationalization of Atlanta. In the years that have followed the Olympic Games, Mexicans have viewed the Atlanta region as an attractive place to live and work. Accordingly, scholars may want to reconsider the meaning of hinterlands cities in the border region. For example, in John House's excellent study of the Rio Grande River,

⁶R. Greig Guthy probes the emergence of *Latinos*, primarily Mexicans, in Gainesville, Georgia, one of the state's leading processors of poultry, in "Mexican Places in Southern Spaces: Life in and Around the North Georgia Poultry Industry," in Murphy, *et al.*, *Latino Workers in the Contemporary South*, 57-67. Victor Zúñiga and Rubén Hernández León examine the genesis of migration to Dalton from Mexico within the context of the global economy in "A New Destination for an Old Migration: Origins, Trajectories, and Labor Market Incorporation of *Latinos* in Dalton, Georgia," in Murphy, *et al.*, 126-136.

⁷The then-acting Mexican Consul General in Atlanta, Teodoro Maos, recounted this anecdote for a video on *Latinos* in Georgia, "The New Georgians," produced by Steve Bell, University of Georgia Communications, for the "*Latinos* for a Stronger Georgia" Conference, July 30-31, 2001, Athens, Georgia. Maos

Frontier on the Rio Grande (Oxford, 1980), he examines the influence of two large cities—Monterrey and San Antonio—that lie inland from the border. As telecommunications, air travel, and land transportation increase and become more accessible, the hinterland of U.S.-Mexican interaction will have to be expanded. The gulf between Mexico and the Southeastern United States will have to be bridged. Just as Jorge Bustamante pioneered the study of immigration to the traditional border region, other demographers might profit by searching for patterns in the points of origin of those immigrating to the Southeast. Why do they go there rather than to California or Texas? Furthermore, how has the cultural landscape of Atlanta changed as a result of Mexican immigration? The strict language laws Southern states and town councils have enacted to restrict Mexican entry into the economy, for example, have created fierce civic battles over the use of language on billboards.

These new border regions raise other questions. What role does distance from Mexico play in the accultura-

tion, return rate, and family migration patterns of immigrants to the Southeast? Furthermore, Mexican migration to the Southeast is not the exclusive domain of seasonal or unskilled workers. Although jobs in poultry-processing plants, carpet factories, and on farms lured most immigrants, the region has also attracted middle-class Mexicans and *Latinos*. Many are involved in secondary migration, having moved to the region from California or the Northeast, drawn by the lower costs and the lifestyle and living environment, not to mention perceived opportunities for economic advancement. Sociologists might profit from examining the value structure of upwardly mobile Mexicans, who have moved to the region for reasons very similar to those of the Anglo-Americans drawn there.

The Southeast also offers a set of cultural interactions distinct from those existing along the territorial U.S.-Mexican border. Despite the growing influence of globalizing forces within North America, distinctive cultural practices persist throughout the continent. The South contains a unique

noted: "[The] INS contacted me and said, 'From here for public relations purposes until the end of the Olympics, we're not going to be doing any enforcement.' And I said, 'You know, I [have] read the papers also [and know about the shortage of workers in the construction sector].' And they said, 'Well if you could spread the word [to Mexican workers], [that] they are welcome and they are not going to be persecuted, followed, or taken, we'd appreciate it.' And the grapevine worked!"

regional culture, far different from that of the Western United States. African-Americans make up a greater portion of the population. Furthermore, the largely rural orientation of the South, its historical dependence on agriculture, and its efforts to secede from the United States in the 1860s have left a unique stamp on the culture and values of its residents. Scholars might employ a comparative approach in examining social structures of power and cultural interactions between Mexicans and Americans in the two border regions. They might also investigate how Mexicans have adapted to the new setting, its power structures, and its cultural variants.⁸ The South has long been notorious as a region of Anglo prejudice towards African-Americans. With the influx of Mexicans to the region, however, racists have redirected some of their hatred of African-Americans toward Mexicans, who, they believe, threaten their economic opportunities. The disadvantaged position of rural poor white and black Southerners, along with the influx of Mexicans, has created strange sentimental alliances.

Finally, my experience teaching borderlands and Latin American courses in the Southeast has also opened another window to new approaches in borderlands research—specifically as it applies to interactions between Americans from the Southeast and Mexico. During the sixteenth century, Mexico's beaches served as the first zone of encounter between Europeans and the country's indigenous peoples. These encounters involved much more than a simple physical transition from water to land. Indeed, the early interactions of Hernán Cortés and the Aztecs near Veracruz were fraught with elements of cultural exchange and misunderstanding. In 1519, having mistaken Cortés for Quetzalcóatl, Moctezuma II sent representatives bearing gifts to show his respect for the long-awaited “god.” The role of Veracruz as a site for foreign entry to Mexico during the national period subsequently revealed the role of the Mexican port as a political borderland. Over four centuries after Cortés's encounter near Veracruz, President Luis Echeverría and a team of computer technicians artfully

⁸ Deborah A. Duchon and Arthur Murphy examine the impact of Southern political culture on the emerging *Latino* populations in the South in “Introduction: From Patronos and Caciques to Good Old Boys,” in Murphy, *et al.*, *Latino Workers in the Contemporary South*, 1-9. For a discussion of the interaction of *Latino* and Southern culture, see “Hospitality and Hostility: Latin Immigrants in Southern Georgia,” in Murphy, *et al.*, 68-81.

designed Isla Cancún in an attempt to lure North Americans to spend money in Mexico.

As I taught my courses on Latin America at universities in the South-eastern United States, I noted that more students had first experienced Mexico by visiting Cancún than by crossing the U.S.-Mexican border into Nogales or Tijuana. They had difficulty imagining what the territorial U.S.-Mexican border looked like, but no problem deconstructing the commercial landscape of Cancún in an effort to identify contrived and more authentic Mexican culture. Much as Miami reoriented the gaze of Venezuelans, Brazilians, and even Argentines toward the commercial wonders of the United States, the planned beach resorts of Mexico have brought American residents who live outside of the border region into contact with Mexico in unique, and highly sheltered, bor-

der settings. The willingness of the Mexican government to allow construction of American hotels and restaurants, in spite of a constitutional ban on foreign ownership of land near the Mexican coast, has transformed these beach communities into cultural borderlands.⁹ Today airplanes loaded primarily with students and vacationers make the short trip across the Gulf of Mexico from Atlanta (the worldwide hub for Delta Airlines) to Cancún. There the interactions of those Americans with Mexicans are in many ways similar to the tourist-related interactions that occur on the U.S.-Mexican border.

Conceptualizing these peripheral ocean-land points of contact between the two nations as "borderlands" acknowledges that the current U.S.-Mexican border is not the exclusive locale for transitional tourist interactions between Americans and Mexi-

⁹The controversy around the construction of these resorts is not unlike the controversies surrounding the establishment of maquiladoras (the purpose of both is to generate jobs on Mexico's peripheries through interactions with foreign capital). The constitutional aspect of foreign ownership or even privileged foreign operation of properties in the state-constructed beach resorts offers an intriguing opportunity for political scientists and historians to explore the priorities of the Mexican state and to offer new insights into the legacy of the Constitution written in the wake of the bloody Mexican Revolution. Article 27, sec. 1, of the 1917 Mexican Constitution states: "Solo los mexicanos por nacimiento o por naturalización y las sociedades mexicanas tienen derecho para adquirir dominio de las tierras, aguas, y sus accesiones... El estado podrá conceder el mismo derecho a los extranjeros... [Sin embargo], en una faja de cien kilómetros a lo largo de las fronteras y de cincuenta en las playas, por ningún motivo podrán los extranjeros adquirir el dominio directo sobre tierras y aguas (emphasis added)." Even if American corporations do not own land on the shores of Cancún, the pervasive presence of American hotels and restaurants have literally transformed it into a *de facto* American landscape.

An examination of the state-engineered resort towns, as well as others like Acapulco, offers fresh new perspectives on the shared U.S.-Mexican experience. What perceptions do Americans form of Mexico and Mexicans as a result of their constructed experiences in places like Cancún? Are there structural similarities in the design and function of the cultural landscape of territorial border cities (Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez, among others) and the beach resort towns? For example, is the "border" beach town intentionally sheltered from the traditional beach town itself, in a way that sets it apart from the more integrated tourist landscapes of the territorial border towns?

Furthermore, to what degree does employment in the spas, hotels, and restaurants of the resort towns—the maquiladoras of leisure on the Mexican coast—influence the attitudes of workers toward Americans? What is the nature of interaction between the American tourists and Mexicans in the resort town? What is the aggregate environmental toll on Mexican territory of these jet-setting border crossers? How is fresh water being allocated to accommodate the needs of resi-

dents, while allowing to flourish the blue sea of swimming pools and green fields of groomed golf courses? All of these are questions that have not been answered within the framework of methodologies employed by borderlands scholars, including historians, sociologists, and cultural geographers. A conceptualization of the periphery and its encounters with the United States deserves greater attention in both countries, particularly as Americans who have traveled to Mexican resorts return to their hometowns to find themselves increasingly in contact with growing numbers of Mexicans.

Ultimately, increased interaction between Mexicans in the American South and Americans in the peripheral beach resort towns of Mexico should widen the focus of Mexican and American borderlands scholars. More importantly, the growing Mexican presence in the interior of the Southeastern United States foreshadows exciting possibilities in U.S.-Mexico border studies.¹⁰ As the presence of Mexicans increased during the late 1990s, scholars in the Southeastern United States chronicled the phenomenon as it unfolded. At least two conferences have occurred

¹⁰ See Murphy, *et al.*, *Latino Workers in the Contemporary South*, for the proceedings of one of the initial conferences on *Latinos* in the region.

in the Southeast on the topic of *Latinos* in the contemporary South, touching on issues including immigration, culture, economics, education, religion, and social services in the new cultural borderlands. It will also be important for Mexican scholars to interpret the expansion of the border region in order to provide deeper per-

spective on this new phenomenon. Looking at these other "border" gateways offers exciting new perspectives into U.S.-Mexican relations, as well as insight into the relationships and perceptions that peoples from the two countries develop towards one another across the continent.

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