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Beginnings of the Nuevo South: Mexican Migration in 1970s and 1980s Mississippi

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BEGINNINGS OF THE NUEVO SOUTH: MEXICAN MIGRATION IN 1970s AND 1980s MISSISSIPPI

by

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ABSTRACT

Mexicans and Mexican Americans have been present in Mississippi since the early twentieth century with a large increase in the 1970s. The majority of the scholarship surrounding Mexican migration focuses on the 1990s leaving a historiographical gap concerning this earlier period of significant population growth. This thesis argues that Mexican migrants during the 1970s and 1980s were uniquely affected by Mississippi's racial climate due to their ambiguous status in a Black and white society, where they fit in neither category. The examination of tactics by businesses, like B.C. Rogers Poultry plant, show the impact recruitment had on migrants' living conditions and social relations. Migrants saw the chicken plants as a way to meet their need for jobs in the United States, but the workers and their families were deeply affected by the migration and settlement process.

This is a microhistory of families who migrated to Mississippi in the mid 1970s and 1980s. Migrant families' experiences offer insight into living standards, the complicated nature of transnational relationships, and the role of the Catholic church in community building. By using oral histories of migrants and recruiters, census records, and newspapers a fuller understanding will be gained from this under researched period. This study shows the goals and realities of recruitment, the shift in migration patterns from the 1970s to the 1990s, and ultimately add to the larger migrant pre-history of the better studied 1990s.

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CHAPTER I - Introduction

Irma Olivas Varela was one of the thousands of Mexican migrant laborers recruited in 1977, by the B.C. Rogers poultry processing factory, located in Morton Mississippi. This recruitment led to a significant increase in the Mexican population in the state of Mississippi during the 1970s and 1980s. Varela was told of new job openings in central Mississippi while migrating back and forth between El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. Making the hard decision to leave her seven children behind in the care of the older siblings and willing family members, Varela was part of the first significant wave of Mexican labor migrants into the state. Over the 1970s and 1980s, she traveled between Mexico and Mississippi for work. Eventually her children would join her.

In light of the state's consistently low Mexican population in decades prior, this spike is initially puzzling. This thesis seeks to advance the study of the experiences of Mexican migrant laborers in Mississippi. Through the examination of business recruitment tactics, familial and kinship networks of the Varelas, and efforts to create formal and informal communities this work argues that this understudied period created the pathways for the more well-known spike in Latino migration into the South after the 1990s, though it was ultimately distinct. Migration cannot be understood solely from a macro-economic perspective alone. It also requires understanding the roles of human agency, culture, and kinship.

Gaps within the Scholarship

Mexicans and Mexican Americans have been present in Mississippi since the early twentieth century. There was an increase in the Mexican population in the state of

Mississippi during the 1970s and 1980s. Quantitative data is unreliable but it shows a Mexican immigrant population that was present in 1970 and well established by 1980. Censuses from 1970 and 1980 contain similar information, but there are major discrepancies in the types of categorization and the level of detail asked from those filling out the data. This makes it impossible to conduct a perfect count. The 1970 census totals that the Mexican population in the state at the start of the decade is 734. This number is derived by adding the 149 "Persons of Spanish Language" who identified as "foreign born" to the 585 who identified as having "foreign or mixed parentage."[1] The 1980 census sees a significant increase in the Mexican/Mexican-American population with a total population of 13,898 under the category that explicitly says "Mexican." Over the course of ten years, the Mexican population increased by 1,793 percent.[2] This increase in numbers calls for further analysis. This exponential growth was higher than Mississippi's own 14 percent in the same period.[3] The drastic increase in the Mexican population in Mississippi during the specified time, the data leads to two hypotheses: 1) there was a massive number of people who migrated during this time either internationally or within the United States or 2) there was major undercounting in the 1970s census. Regardless of those possibilities, it's clear that the 1970s demands a finer grained study. What happened in the 1970s? What were migrants' experiences in that decade? What value does this source have? This massive explosion in the population reveals that there was a

[1] *1970 Census of Housing. Volume 1, Housing Characteristics for States, Cities, and Counties. Part 26, Mississippi.* Washington, D.C: U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Social and Economic Statistics Administration, Bureau of the Census 1972, 150. The "foreign or mixed parentage" is calculated among those identifying as "Persons of Spanish Language."

[2] Starting population at 734 ending at 13,898.

[3] Starting population at 2,216,850 ending population 2,520,638.

growing Mexican population during a time period that was not known for its surge in immigration in an area that was not known for Mexican immigration until the later portion of the 20th century. The story of Irma Varela and the scores of other migrants will help answer these questions.

Mexican Migration

Despite the growth of the Mexican American population in the 1970s in the South, the historiography on Mexican immigration has been dominated by an emphasis on the *Southwestern* United States. In the 19th century Mexico went through several tumultuous changes. Declaring their independence from Spain in 1810, Mexico went on to have a series of strong man dictators who had varying degrees of success in maintaining power. Mexico would soon go to war with their neighbors in the North, losing a considerable amount of territory in the Treaty of Hidalgo in 1848. In 1853, the United States purchased 30,000 square miles of land that stretched from El Paso, Texas to California forming the border the two countries share today.[4]

Scholars of the nineteenth century utilize the framework of borderlands to understand the region and its history as a contested space. In theory borders are arbitrary lines that work to create separation. However, these scholars show that borders are spaces of intense, interconnected relationships between groups of people. The border between the United States and Mexico is an area of critical migration. The Southwestern United

[4] *1810-2022: U.S Mexican Relations,* Council on Foreign Relations, https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-mexico-relations.

States and Northern Mexico were shaped by the "local history of culture, economic, migratory, cooperative, and conflictive [relationship]" of the border that exists today.[5]

Before 1848, movement and exchange were part of the culture in this region because it was all part of a singular nation—Mexico. Groups moved freely over the area. After 1848, when the US annexed Mexican territory, this movement did not stop—even though it was now crossing an international border. People in this region still moved between Mexico and United States due to the lax nature of enforcement. As the U.S. government began to implement stricter border enforcement, more and more migrants continued to move over the border but without documentation. Late in the nineteenth century, rural Mexicans faced hardships at the very moment that US companies increased demands for immigrant labor. In 1876, Porfirio Diaz took control of the government. Diaz's government saw economic progress but also led to great poverty in the rural states of the nation. Railroad companies in the U.S began to draw in workers from Mexico to supplement the labor shortage after the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.[6]

Even after the creation of the U.S.-Mexico border, traditions of movement persisted. Ciudad Juarez, Mexico is a prime example of this tradition of migration. The city is basically an extension of its sister city, El Paso, Texas that is arbitrarily cut in the middle by the U.S-Mexico border. The people of Juarez and El Paso move over the border consistently, whether it be for work, leisure, or family ties. With there being such

[5] John Mason Hart, "Migration and Capitalism: The Rise of the U.S.-Mexican Border" in Migrants and Migration in Modern North America: Cross-Border Lives, Labor markets, and Politics, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 2011, 333.

[6] Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004).

a rich tradition of migration, Juarez is the prime target for labor recruiters from all over the U.S.

Scholarship on 20th century Mexican migration views political instability and economics as the main factors in the migration experience. Around the turn of the century, Mexico saw political violence and chaos breakout throughout the country. The violence was widespread but was most intense in the northern region of Mexico. More chaos broke out resulting in the death of would be future leader Francisco Madero, another strong man taking power after a coup, and a civil war breaking out. The instability within Mexico spurred many Mexicans to travel North and into the United States to seek a reprieve from the widespread violence.[7] The Mexican Revolution was a key event in U.S.-Mexican relations. The instability and violence exacerbated "the era's interlocking cords of empire, capitalism, and white supremacy."[8] Their studies usually begin around the nineteenth and twentieth century with the initiation and chaos of the Mexican revolution and the displacement of numerous rural populations. As more Mexicans moved into the United States, they looked for work to be able to support themselves and their families. Migrants worked in agriculture which facilitated a massive expansion in agribusiness in the southwest. The shift in more people moving across the border led to immigration law and practices that were central in shaping the modern political economy of the Southwest.[9] These laws were based on commercial agriculture, migratory farm labor, and the exclusion of Mexican migrants and Mexican-Americans

[7] Kelly Lytle Hernandez, *Bad Mexicans: Race, Empire, and Revolution in the Borderlands* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2022), 11.

[8] Lytle Hernandez, *Bad Mexicans,* 11.

[9] Kelly Lytle Hernandez, "Mexican Immigration to the United States," *OAH Magazine of History* 23, no. 4, (October 2009): 26.

from the mainstream American society. It helped create a migratory, agriculturally-based labor class. This group quickly became a racialized, transnational workforce comprising of various legal status categories across the US-Mexico boundary.

In the 1940s, business owners saw a chance to contract this surge in labor by partnering up with the United States government to create a way to increase profits and supply labor to the southwest. The *Bracero* Program, which lasted from the 1940s until the 1960s, was a major contributing factor for luring Mexicans to migrate to the States.[10] It was a program where the U.S government offered contracts to Mexican laborers to travel to the U.S farms for work, focusing on the Southwest and Northwest.[11] Braceros became transnational actors. They "inhabited political and social borders between, beyond, and in relation to the nation" which shows how nation-states framed the program as a way to "modernize" its participants.[12] The explicit goal of the Bracero program was, as U.S and Mexican officials hoped, to transform rural northern Mexicans (who were deemed as "ready" for modernization due to their less indigenous appearance).[13] However, the U.S Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) practically enticed migrants to enter illegally by "offering bracero contracts to Mexican nationals apprehended for illegal entry into the United States."[14]

Scholars have more recently begun to examine Mexican migration outside the Southwest by tracing population shifts from the Southwest to other parts of the United

[10] Lytle Hernandez, "Mexican Immigration," 26.
[11] Lytle Hernandez, "Mexican Immigration", 26.
[12] Deborah Cohen, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 3.
[13] Cohen, *Braceros.*
[14] Lytle Hernandez, "Mexican Immigration", 27.

States. Most who study Mexican migration in the Southeast begin their research around the 1990s. In an attempt avoid financial ruin, Mexico adopted neoliberal policies that led to privatization of communal lands, elimination of state services, and cuts to real wages.[15] These policies resulted in the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement in the mid-1990s, which opened up markets along the U.S- Mexican border. It allowed for closer economic ties with the United states leading to higher rates of economic growth, but non-border cities could not compete with this growing global competition causing poverty to increase.[16] This globalization also affected workers in Mexico. Neoliberal policies caused disruption to rural life in Mexico, through the privatization of communal lands and the lack of job opportunities. Rural populations were encouraged by large companies to leave agricultural work and travel for wage labor in manufacturing.[17] In this sense, scholars point towards neo-liberal economics and politics as overarching forces spurring labor migration leading to a shift in the ways of life in people who do and do not migrate.[18]

[15] Elizabeth Fitting, *The Struggle for Maize: Campesinos, Workers, and Transgenic Corn in the Mexican Countryside,* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 20; Matthew Casey and Rebecca Tuuri, "Poultry and Pedagogy in Mississippi and Mexico: Bridging African American and Latin American History in the College Classroom," *The History Teacher* 51, no. 4 (2018): 643.

[16] Jorge Durand, Douglas S Massey, and Emilio A. Parrado, "The New Era of Mexican Migration to the United States," *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 2 (September 1999): 520.

[17] Fitting, *The Struggle for Maize,* 11.

[18] Fitting, *The Struggle for Maize.*

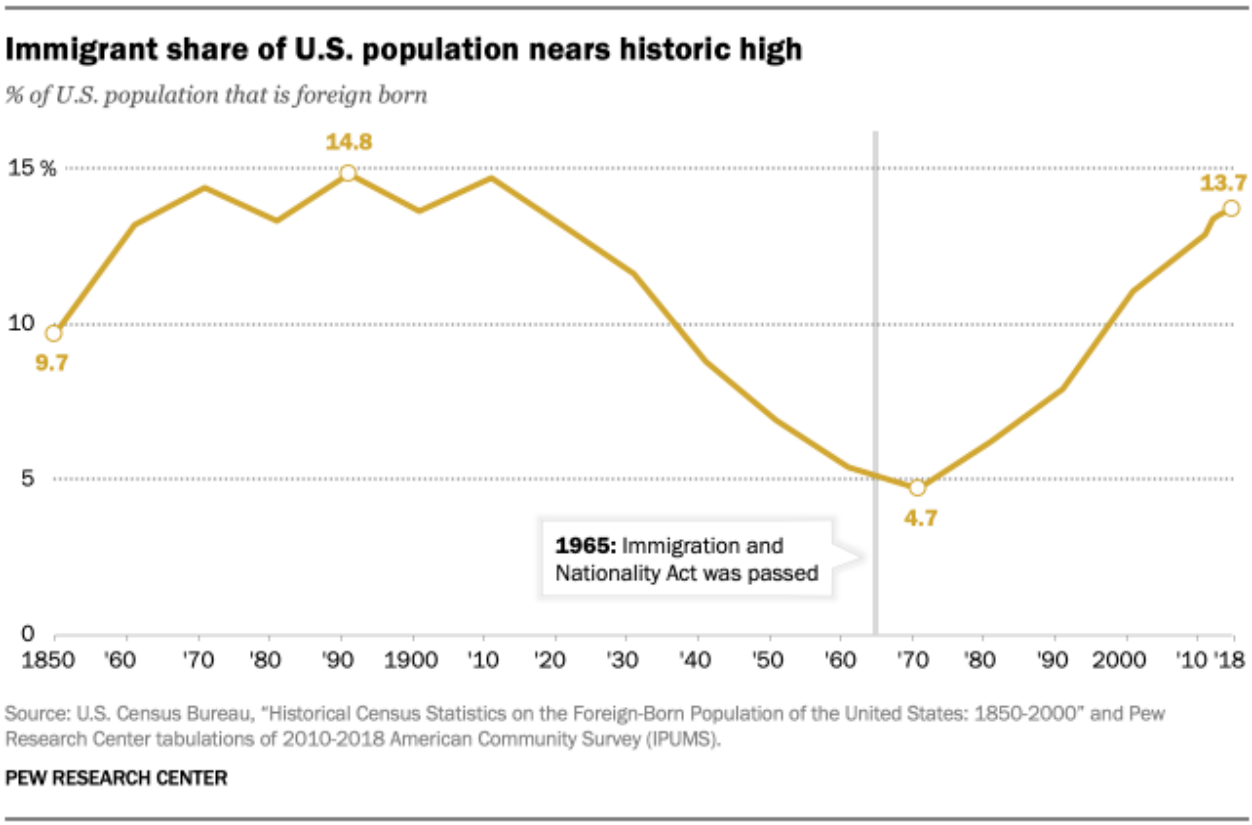

Figure 1: Changes in Immigration from 1850-2018

Image depicts the change in Immigration from 1850-2018.[19]

Like earlier studies, 1990s migration has been studied in terms of large-scale economics and politics. Bridget Hayden stresses that "one important factor shaping change in migration destinations, however, is economic change in various sectors of the US economy," especially in regards to the growing poultry industry in Mississippi.[20] During the twentieth century the southeastern United States saw an increase in industrialized factories and food processing plants, specifically the poultry industry. As

[19] "Immigrant Share of U.S. population nears Historic High," Pew Research Center, August 19, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/08/20/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/ft_2020-08-20_immigrants_01/.

[20] Bridget Hayden, "If Anyone Hears This: Confronting Discourses of Immigration in South Mississippi: If Anyone Hears This," *City & society* 27, no. 3 (2015): 297.

American consumption of chicken increased so did the number of factories needed to process the meat which meant more labor was needed.

The demographics of this labor forced changed too. Anthropological studies around the poultry industry in the South illuminate the Latina/o laborers experiences in plants in Central Mississippi.[21] These works usually focus on the late 1990s and the early 2000s and how Latina/o labor impacted the economic status of their communities. Chicken plants began to spring up throughout the South during the 1940s. The primary work force in these factories began as white women during World War II. As the need for workers grew, women entered the workforce and began working in poultry factories throughout the country. The workforce transition shifted to a primarily African American demographic during the 1970s. Black people viewed factory work as a new economic opportunity.[22] However, during the 1990s, as Black workers organized to protest better wages and working conditions, factory owners "declared a labor shortage and went searching for a new class of workers to bring into the plants."[23] The growing factory labor sector enticed Mexican laborers to migrate the South through recruitment efforts along the Mexican borders in hopes of finding economic success in the budding industry. Scholars describe this transition as "ethnic succession" where, in the case of Mississippi

[21] Angela Stuesse, *Scratching out a Living: Latinos, Race, Work in the Deep South,* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

[22] Angela Stuesse and Axel Herrera, "Loud &Proud: 'Las Polleras de Mississippi' Part 2," May 14, 2021, in *Nuestro South*, produced by Axel Herrera, Julie Weise, and Erik Valera, podcast, 2:00, https://nuestrosouthpodcast.buzzsprout.com/293819/8501435-loud-proud-las-polleras-de-mississippi-part-2.

[23] Struesse and Herrera, "Loud &Proud," 6:34.

poultry factories, Hispanics became the dominate workforce replacing the previous majority of Black female workers.[24]

There are only a small number of studies that explore the Southeast before the 1990s. It is only briefly mentioned in Angela Stuesse's *Scratching Out a Living*: *Latinos, Race, and Work in the Deep South*. Stuesse has a brief discussion about the B.C Rogers poultry plant which was founded in 1932. The plant was the second-oldest in the country until it went out of business in the 2000s.[25] The 1970s make a brief appearance during the discussion about the chicken plants' first attempts at recruiting Latina/o workers from El Paso and other border cities. The section ends with one sentence: "B.C Rogers had trouble retaining the migrant workers it recruited in the 1970s and stopped after a few years."[26] This early recruitment phase is only used to give historical context to the more expanded recruitment efforts that occurred in the 1990s and 2000s. This thesis builds on that history.

The few authors who address Mexican migration in the United States South have framed their experiences around implicit comparisons to African-Americans. Studies that look at pre-1990s migration examine how migrant workers travelled throughout the South, specifically Mississippi, for seasonal work as sharecroppers and farm laborers.[27] Julie Weise explains: "Mississippi might have become significant destination for Mexicano families to settle in the 1930s-60s" which was a similar period of "large-scale

[24] Kathleen C. Schwartzman, *The Chicken Trail: Following Workers, Migrants, and Corporations Across the Americas* (New York: Cornell University Press), 2.

[25] Stuesse, *Scratching Out a Living*, 72.

[26] Stuesse, *Scratching Out a Living*, 73.

[27] Julie Weise, *Corazon de Dixie: Mexicanos in the U.S South since 1910 (*Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

African American out-migration."[28] As African Americans were leaving the agricultural sector, Mexicans were being called in to fill the labor gap. This also coincides with the Jim Crow period and intense racial segregation within the state. During this time of seasonal labor in Mississippi, migrants were able to create stable, but often times temporary, "forged communities" for a few years between 1925 and the beginning of the Great Depression.[29] They had families and lives in Mississippi that did not simply disappear after the Great Depression, although their numbers were greatly reduced.

Scholars have used the idea of race to understand the ambiguity of Mexican laborers' status in comparison to Black communities and Black labor forces. The question of racial categorization in the South has never been straight forward. As they suffered mistreatment from white property owners and managers, "Mexicanos recognized the echo of African Americans' oppression in their own treatment in Mississippi, and this increased their feelings of humiliation and exploitation."[30] However, due to the ambiguity of Mexicans' racial status, they used whatever limited time and power during their work season to "claw their way to the white side of the color line."[31] In short, there is evidence that immigrants faced similar racism as Black Mississippians, but also that Mexicans sought to claim whiteness and put distance between themselves and African Americans.

Journalists also erase the 1970s since many utilize the 1990s as a starting point to discuss the nature of immigration and citizenship in the South. There was a surge of articles about the Latino communities in Mississippi after a series of massive immigration

[28] Weise, *Corazón de Dixie*, 55.
[29] Weise, *Corazón de Dixie,* 64.
[30] Weise, *Corazón de Dixie,* 61.
[31] Weise, *Corazón de Dixie,* 64.

raids throughout central portion of the state in 2019. These raids continue to have devastating effects for the Latino community in the state. They shed light on the origin of Latino labor in Mississippi. One journalist briefly mentions how "B. C. Rogers began hiring Latino immigrants to work in its plants in the late seventies, but few of those early hires stuck around."[32] They use 1970s recruitment as a way to show how business owners saw Mexicans as a new labor market that could be tapped into and felt emboldened to lure struggling families to the South for little pay. B.C Rogers, now Koch, showed up time and time again in these articles due to how impactful it was to the economy in Morton, Mississippi and Scott County in general; noting how "as early as 1977" the plant "organized efforts to recruit Hispanics from the Texas Border."[33]This thesis will address this gap by examining how large companies, labor recruiters, and migrants themselves created a community whose legacies shaped the lager wave of 1990 migrants. But this migration was ultimately different from the later waves.

Methodologies

Early migration scholarship used concepts of push and pull factors to explain human movement. It was previously argued that outside forces, such as economic and political factors, were the main motivations for migration. This idea operates under the assumption that people make the decision to migrate due solely to outside influences. The Push and Pull theory was applied to many examples of migration over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, this theory fails to convey the more nuanced motivations that are influenced by kinship ties or migration networks rather than

[32] Charles Bethea, "After ICE Came to Morton Mississippi," *The New Yorker*, October 31, 2019.
[33] Richard Fausset "After ICE Raids, a Reckoning in Mississippi's Chicken Country," *The New York Times*, December 28, 2019.

only economics or political environments. Scholars, like Jose Moya, critique the Push and Pull theory because of its coincidental nature. He explains how "push and pull conditions have concurred in countless areas and countries of the world from time immemorial to the present" but there are numerous examples of these conditions not leading to mass migration.[34]

A more useful framework for my particular research is looking at migration through a Macro-Micro lens. This concept takes into account the "interaction between macrostructural forces and microsocial networks" and how they shape patterns of emigration and adaption.[35] By examining migration in this manner, the relationships between structures and individuals are more apparent. Looking beyond traditional definitions of national borders as natural cutoff areas of study allows for a deeper exploration into the relationships that go beyond those frames of reference.[36] For example, Atlantic history utilizes some of these ideas and applies them to transoceanic movement.[37] Scholars like Lara Putnam acknowledge the benefits of using larger data sources but emphasize that for certain subject matters, a narrower scope of research is the best mode of action:

> Macrolevel data can be crucial for determining fruitful axes of comparison. But for tracking the movement of people, goods, money, or ideas in order to form a considered judgment about the unit of study and spatial frame of

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[34] Moya, *Cousins and Strangers: Spanish Immigrants in Buenos Aires, 1850-1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 13.

[35] Moya, *Cousins and Strangers*, 4: Jose Moya's work utilizes the macro-micro framework to study Spanish migration to Buenos Aires, Argentina. His work is an excellent example of how macrostructural forces and individual experiences have drastic impacts on the motivational factors behind the decision to migrate.

[36] Lara Putnam, "To Study the Fragments/Whole: Microhistory and the Atlantic World," *Journal of Social History* 39, no. 3 (January 2006)

[37] Putnam, "To Study the Fragments/Whole": Putnam describes how she applies microhistory to her field of study, Atlantic history. Her usage of microhistory offers a clear a concise explanation of the application of this particular historical method.

> reference that make sense for a particular research topic, microlevel examination is almost always necessary.[38]

The sole use of macro-level analysis prevents a deeper understanding of smaller groups or individual experiences. The combination of both macro and micro analysis allows for "a more accurate picture of large-scale trends" while at the same time gaining a "unique window into the way in which myriad intimate encounters, patterned in common ways, create collective change."[39] It gives underresearched and underrepresented groups, who are often left out of nationalist historical narratives, an opportunity to have their histories included and to allow for a richer view of their lives and experiences.

The emphasis on restoring agency back into migrant narratives has become a common theme within newer works. Scholars push back on the idea of immigrants lacking agency and just being players within world systems. There is an underlying "tension between individual agency and larger historical forces" where migrants can seem at the mercy of events greater than themselves but macro-micro frameworks emphasize how migrants' own private lives are just as significant in migratory justifications.[40]

The focus in migration studies has turned to portraying immigrants as "active participants" allowing for migrants to have more agency in the narrative and how migration is the product of "thousands of personal decisions."[41] By using both quantitative and qualitative research, scholars have been able to uncover how

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[38] Putnam, "To Study the Fragments/Whole", 621

[39] Lara Putnam, *The Company They Kept: Migrants and the Politics of Gender in Caribbean Costa Rica, 1870-1960,(*Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 10.

[40] Moya, *Cousins and Strangers,* 5.

[41] Moya, *Cousins and Strangers*, 5.

"immigration patterns themselves were an important explanatory variable" during the decision for migrants to leave their country of origin and what happened once they arrived at their new destination.[42] By studying migration quantitatively, patterns begin to emerge concerning emigration, how people adapted, and "interaction between macrostructural forces and microsocial networks."[43]

Migration networks are most associated with chain migration, the concept that describes how immigrant groups tend to migrate to areas already associated with others who had previously migrated from their region.[44] It is a concept that helps visualize the ties that connect migrants over space. However, scholars have pushed back against the reliance of the chain migration explanation. For example, Jose Moya argues that due to chain migration's emphasis on place of origin, it disregards the importance of socio-economic statuses and gender.[45] Migration networks do not just occur in a vacuum, they are heavily influenced by individuals and larger social and historical events. Despite chain migrations faults, it does acknowledge the link between communities and familial units and how they influence where migrants decide to journey.

In terms of migration studies, more recent scholarship focuses on questioning the "homocentric" nature of immigration.[46] Immigration experiences differ between individuals. Scholars have noted the difference that gender contributes to the decision of who can and cannot migrate.[47] Women's migration is highly controlled resulting in more

[42] Moya, *Cousins and Strangers,* 4.
[43] Moya, *Cousins and Strangers,* 4.
[44] Moya, *Cousins and Strangers*, 395.
[45] Moya, *Cousins and Strangers,* 395.
[46] Moya, *Cousins and Strangers,* 5.
[47] Deborah Boehm, *Intimate Migrations*, (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 16.

"men are concentrated in the United States" while women and children remain in their home countries.[48] The regulation of migration through gender allows for scholars to understand the nuanced relationship that gender roles play in migration journeys.

Scholars have noted the significance of kinship and family groups and their role in the migration process.[49] What happens is that as more people from particular kinship groups migrate to an area and more follow suit a community grows resulting in even more migration; which is also the basic concept of chain migration. If that individual thrives in their new environment, it influences others from their same social circle to take the same risk and migrate.[50] Kinship migration is affected not only by the national origin of migrants but their age and gender as well. Women and children's experience in the migration process is typically highly regulated by patriarchal structures.[51] However, when women do migrate, gender roles become fluid and ever-changing when needed.[52]

This concept of kinship networks is incredibly interdisciplinary, being used by historians and anthropologists. Since the mid twentieth century, scholars have adopted a wider variety of interdisciplinary methods in their research utilizing the more nuanced frameworks as previously discussed. Previously scholars did not find any value in comparing micro-events to the larger scale occurrences, believing that no new information could be gained from any comparison of the two. But interdisciplinary scholars began to opt for a more holistic approach and actively embraced macro-micro

[48] Boehm, *Intimate Migrations*, 16.
[49] Moya, *Cousins and Strangers.*
[50] Moya, *Cousins and Strangers.*
[51] Boehm, *Intimate Migrations*, 16.
[52] Boehm, *Intimate Migrations*, 16.

analysis by shifting from the "public, political sphere of human action" in favor of the more "private daily life."[53]

This work utilizes oral histories to understand the personal experiences of those involved in both migration and recruitment. Oral histories have become imperative in studying marginalized groups.[54] Scholars argue that these types of methodologies can be used to bring collective narratives from communities of color into a larger academic and cultural conversation.[55] This keeps in line with returning agency to those left out of historical narratives. Oral history bridges the gap between marginalized groups and the academy, allowing scholars to make visible hidden stories.[56] Migration oral histories offer a unique perspective into a concept that is often examined through large-scale, statistical trends. This work seeks to expand on migrant stories through the voices of migrants themselves.

Ethnographic anthropologists use family migration networks to study the individual life stories within collective family histories.[57] It attempts to give agency back to migrants by having them be the ones to tell their own stories within the overall "world-system."[58] Earlier anthropological/ethnographic scholarship focused on "meaning and purpose of migration to migrants," those who are left behind, and how migration impacts

[53] Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, "Anthropology and Ethnohistorians," in The Houses of History: A critical reader in twentieth-century history and theory (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 200.

[54] T. Barnett and Chon A. Noriega, eds, *Oral Histories in Communities of Color* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013).

[55] Barnett and Noriega, *Oral Histories in Communities of Color.*

[56] *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonies,* The Latina Feminist Group (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001),

[57] Karen Fog-Olwig's *Caribbean Journeys: An Ethnography of Migration and Home in Three Family Networks* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

[58] Fog-Olwig, *Caribbean Journeys,* 6.

the new society, the maintenance of relationships in the country of origin, and "patterns of adaption."[59] Works, like Karen Fog-Olwig's *Caribbean Journeys: An Ethnography of migration and home in Three Family Networks,* use a framework that operates more on how migrants view themselves instead of their country of origin or new country's ideologies.[60] Fog-Olwig's incorporation of "new anthropological approaches that examine kinship and place as social constructions that are shaped and given meaning in the course of everyday social life" offer an excellent basis for how kinship networks should be studied.[61] Migrants lives need to be understood in a certain way that incorporates their personal relationships and how those relationships influence their feelings of attachment to their homelands and where they decide to settle.[62] Rather than studying migrant lives in the "public arena," it is more beneficial to look within the private lives of individuals and the significance of family migration networks.[63]

Migration networks consist of a "diversity of experiences" and are inherently unique.[64] Scholars' focus on this field of research helps "[reconstruct] networks of relations in order to understand how meanings are forged and how power is distributed."[65] Family plays a significant role in migration networks. The closer the family ties are the more obligation and sense of duty an individual feels to adapt to their new surroundings.[66] These familial relationships also inform the migrants idea of what

[59] Fog-Olwig, *Caribbean Journeys*, 8.
[60] Fog-Olwig, *Caribbean Journeys,* 6.
[61] Fog-Olwig, *Caribbean Journeys,* 7.
[62] Fog-Olwig, *Caribbean Journeys,* 6.
[63] Fog-Olwig, *Caribbean Journeys,* 7.
[64] Jose Moya, *Cousins and Strangers*, 406.
[65] Francesca Trivellato, "Microstoria/Microhistoire/Microhistory," *French politics, culture and society* 33, no. 1 (2015): 123.
[66] Fog-Olwig, *Caribbean Journeys,* 12.

the area they are immigrating to will be like and if those expectations are not met then familial ties suffer.[67] Social and familial networks of migration provide insight to just how unique the migratory experience is. However, studying migration and minority groups from a micro-lens leads to issues when finding sources.

Sources pertaining to the initial Hispanic ministry in Mississippi is difficult to uncover. There is a lack of access to sources that could show the official timeline of these Spanish Masses. Due to diocesan archival policies, I was unable to access baptismal records of the diocesan members. This would have been incredibly useful in my research. Baptismal records would have allowed me to trace and connect kinship networks by seeing first-hand what names appeared on the documents and to examine if names repeated. These documents would have shown the on the ground growth of these networks that go beyond census records. Unfortunately, when gathering sources pertaining to Hispanic ministry in the area, the diocesan archives were not allowing the public to view their materials. Another problem was their policy concerning bishops' and priests' papers. Unless the materials were over 50 years old, the boxes remain unprocessed so researching Bishop Houck's, bishop during the 1970s and 1980s, papers was not an option.

Other church documents, like church bulletins, seem to not have been preserved. The church itself did not publish a bulletin for its Spanish Masses but members of the communities were the ones who took the lead in their creation and distribution. Church bulletins are an excellent source for seeing the day-to-day happenings in the community, to see what programs were taking place, and who was involved. Despite not having these

[67] Fog-Olwig, *Caribbean Journeys,* 12.

sources, the oral histories and newspaper articles gathered show how Latinos created their own Spanish Masses and community on through their own words. Utilization of oral histories from Hispanics in central Mississippi allows for a deeper understanding of building Latino communities using their first-hand experiences. Their accounts provide a view into how religious traditions help sustain cultural practices.

This study employs oral histories, archival research, and a macro-micro approach to explore the realities of Mexican migrants' experience through the recruitment process, what their lives were like once they arrived in Mississippi, and how their ambiguous racial status affected their interactions with Mississippians around them. By taking a macro-micro view of Mexican migration, it allows for a deeper understanding of how kinship networks develop. By focusing on a specific family, it offers a view into the nuanced experiences of migration based on age and gender within a family unit. This study will show that the 1970s migration of Mexican laborers differed from the more studied post-1990s migration and trace how early labor recruitment set the stage for the large influx that would occur later.

Structure of the Study

Through the oral histories of the Varela family, this thesis argues that Mexicans in Mississippi built their own communities and through recruitment tactics by businesses these migrants created the mold for higher rates of migration in the 1990s. Oral histories from both migrants and those involved in recruitment of laborers offers detailed insight to the nuances of migration. For some it was an extremely positive experience for others, even within the same kinship group, they revealed the amount of emotional labor that went into adjusting to a new environment.

Chapter one shows how interactions between large companies and individual migrants shaped the early migration system. It begins with the history of B.C. Rogers chicken factory. Founded in the 1930s, this factory grew to become one of the most profitable chicken plant in the United States. During the 1970s, the company began to sustain a loss of workers which led its leadership to turn to recruit Latino workers from out of state, starting with Cubans from Miami then switching to Mexican workers from the U.S.-Mexican border. B.C. Rogers was the first poultry plant in the state to start recruiting migrant workers, but it would not be the last.[68]

The next chapter will delve into the emotional labor of both laboring and non-laboring migrants. For the Varela family, migration was an incredibly disruptive event. Some of the children went to Mississippi with their mother while some stayed in Mexico for a couple more years. The act of migration altered familial gender roles and determined who did and did not work outside of the home as a wage earner. Migration experiences also vary within age groups. Mexican children migrating to Mississippi had to deal with a school system that was ill-prepared to handle non-English speaking children and a newly de-segregated society. Legal status was ever present on the minds of migrants, legislation in the 1980s opened up citizenship for millions of migrants and brought together the growing population of Latinos in the state.

The third and final chapter argues that organizations, like the Catholic Church, acted as a community builder for Mexicans arriving into Mississippi. The church brought together Latinos beyond just Mexican labor migrants. It blurred the lines between

[68] B.C. Rogers would become the blueprint for other poultry factories in the state. The surrounding chicken plants took note from the Morton company and also began recruiting Latino workers, which would become industry standard.

nationality, class, and gender. For Mexicans and other Latinos informal and formal communities were places of information exchange. They provided the emotional support that seemed unattainable in an unfamiliar environment.

CHAPTER II – Company Networks and Recruitment

"Then We Started Bringing---On Their Own They Started Coming"

During an interview with Tito Echiburu, who played a major role in the recruitment of Mexican laborers, I asked him how Mexican workers came to work in the BC Rogers poultry company where he worked as a recruiter. At first, Echiburu was hesitant to answer. He chose his words carefully but responded "then we started bringing--- on their own they started coming from Texas."[69] He stopped himself mid answer and redirected the conversation. His response shows the fraught nature of labor migration where companies exert control and heavily recruit. However, migrants also play a role in those outcomes and have a heavy hand in shaping things too.

In Morton, Mississippi, the B.C. Rogers processing plant became one of the biggest and most economically successful plants in the nation.[70] Bennie Clyde Rogers began the chicken farm in 1932, but when he saw the opportunity to get an in with the growing need for powdered eggs for soldiers during World War II began to expand his operation.[71] By 1949, B.C. Rogers had become a slaughtering factory, that raised, killed, and processed chickens for mass consumption and it became so successful that the family basically owned Morton, Mississippi.[72] They directly owned the local bank, car dealerships, a construction company, a farm, livestock, and the poultry plant.[73] To sustain this rapid growth, the plant needed to tap into new sources of labor. They invested in

[69] Tito Echiburu, interview by Isabel Loya, April 10, 2022, in Morton, Mississippi
[70] "Industry: Chicken Fat," *TIME.*
[71] Stuesse, *Scratching out a Living*, 35.
[72] Stuesse, *Scratching out a Living*, 35.
[73] Echiburu Interview

hiring recruiters, built residences for workers to live, and spent a substantial amount of money to attract laborers.

Since World War II, the demographics of labor sources has changed dramatically. Poultry plants, like B.C. Rogers, shifted from using white women, African Americans, Cuban immigrants then eventually to Mexico as their labor source. The company began recruiting Mexican migrants to come to the South and fill the labor gap that began to take place in the 1970s. This chapter will trace the origins of recruitment, the racism behind the decision of who to recruit, and the experiences of Mexican laborers. I argue that this wave of Mexican migration is distinctly different from later, more well-documented, waves in terms of how they were recruited and the interpersonal kinship networks that played a role into where they migrated. Recruiters saw an opportunity to bring in "cheaper" labor while migrants found agency in building new lives in the South.

Mississippi Poultry and Shifting Labor Sources

Chicken is one of the most consumed meats in the United States.[74] What began as a meal enjoyed on special occasions and holidays transitioned into an everyday product by the mid-twentieth century. Americans' demand changed the poultry industry from locally sourced to a vertically integrated multi-billion-dollar industry.[75] A large number of processing facilities found their home in the Southern United States in places like Mississippi, Alabama, and North Carolina due to their large acres of land and proximity to interstate highways that meet shipping needs. This industry is profitable for those at

[74] USDA, "Per Capita Consumption of Poultry and Livestock, 1965 to Forecast 2022, in Pounds", December 2021, accessed September 16, 2022, https://www.nationalchickencouncil.org/about-the-industry/statistics/per-capita-consumption-of-poultry-and-livestock-1965-to-estimated-2012-in-pounds/

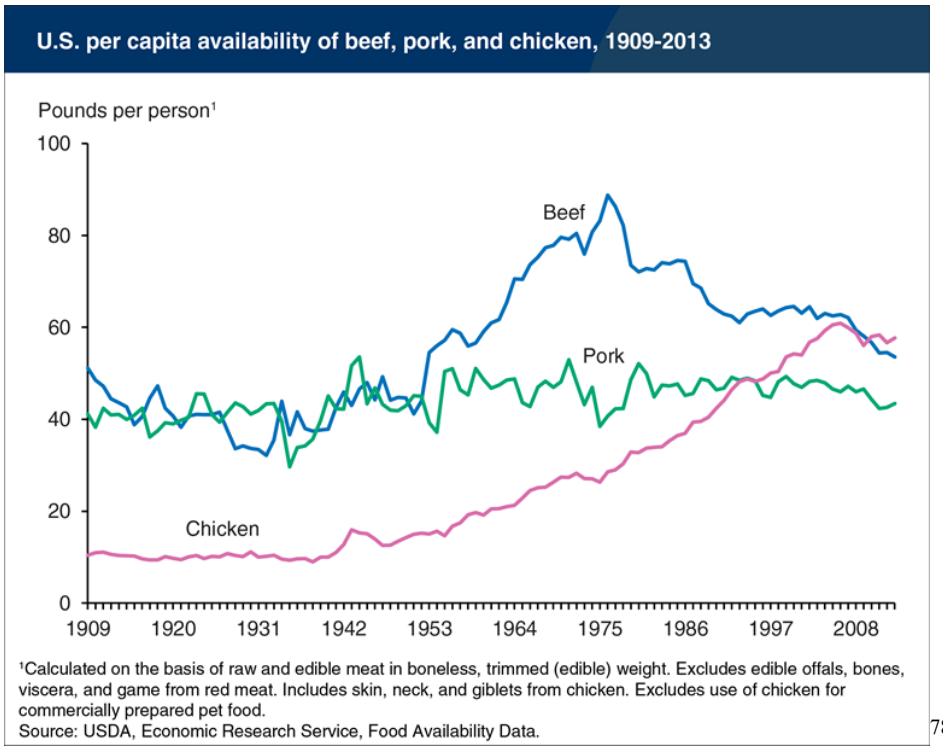
[75] National Chicken Council, "U.S Chicken Industry History", https://www.nationalchickencouncil.org/about-the-industry/history/

the top, but workers who do the labor to produce the chicken must deal with low wages, poor working conditions, abusive management, and exploitation.[76] Despite the rampant poor treatment of its employees, the factory was seen as a chance for a new business sector for women and people of color. As a result, the labor force in the newly budding food processing industry introduced new modes of economic opportunity during the twentieth century, for people who had previously been denied.

The poultry industry in the United States saw significant growth during World War II. Previously, chicken farming had typically been a small operation by local farmers who sold live chickens or pre-plucked slaughtered chickens.[77] Public demand for this protein caused the industry to boom. Throughout the United States, industrialized food processing plants became more regulated and able to produce a larger supply of their product (see figure 1.1).

[76] Stuesse, *Scratching Out a Living*, 6.

[77] *Poultry Inspection: The Basis for a Risk-Assessment Approach*. National Research Council. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press,1987, Chapter 2.



[78]

Figure 2: Growth in Beef, Pork, and Chicken Consumption in the United States from 1909-2013

Chart depicts the growth in beef, pork, and chicken consumption in the United States from 1909-2013.

In Mississippi, chicken plants were usually co-ops attached to larger, more established national companies.[79] However, due to the technological advancements that took place post-World War II in the food industry, individual plants were able to be extremely successful. As one company boasted in the 1970s, technological advancements and other changes in Mississippi's agricultural sector allowed for industries, like poultry, to grow rapidly.[80] The poultry industry's economic impact was "so profound…that

[78] USDA, "U.S Per Capita Availability of Beef, Pork, and Chicken, 1909-2013,"accessed September 16, 2022 https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/chart-gallery/gallery/chart-detail/?chartId=78715. This chart shows the rate of beef, pork, and chicken consumption per capita in the United States from 1909 to 2008.

[79] "Industry: Chicken Fat," *TIME* online, September 06, 1963, https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,870490,00.html

[80] MDAH, Series 897: Films and Videotapes, https://da.mdah.ms.gov/series/mdac/series897

population centers have doubled and tripled in size."[81] This population growth can be seen in rural towns, like Morton, Mississippi, where the chicken industry has had major impacts on the town's economy and its population.

During World War II, the labor force of the factories in Mississippi consisted of mostly white women. [82] As in other sectors of the US economy, white women began to flood into the chicken plants as men went off to the war. The factory was seen as a means to economic security and improvement. It was not until the 1960s that the ability to work in this environment was extended to people of color.

The Civil Rights Movement opened up new possibilities for black workers in new industries. No longer forced to find work almost solely as agricultural laborers, African Americans flocked to industrialized work, including the chicken industry, to find financial success in a new sector. As black worker numbers increased, white women left the factory due to racist prejudices. As factories began to integrate their work force, public outrage grew by local white people. At a factory in Scott County, a cross was burned in front of the property after the hiring of two Black men.[83]

During the 1970s and 1980s, black workers, who now dominated the workforce, began to demand more rights and improvements of the working conditions in the factories.[84] In 1979, black women working at Sanderson Farm's chicken processing plant in Laurel, Mississippi went on strike for several months. Workers protested against how they were denied their designated breaktime, their grueling work conditions, the

[81] MDAH, Series 897

[82] Stuesse, Angela and Axel Herrera, "Loud & Proud: 'Las Polleras de Mississippi' Part 2," Produced by Axel Herrera, Julie Weise, and Erik Valera. *Nuestro South*. May 14, 2021. Podcast.

[83] Stuesse, *Scratching Out a Living*, 60.

[84] Stuesse, Angela and Axel Herrera, "Loud &Proud".

unsanitary workspaces, and low pay.[85] Successful instances of worker resistance, like in Laurel, allowed black workers to be more selective about where they worked and what conditions they dealt with. However, workers lost fights too, and as tensions grew between white plant owners and their employees, employers began to turn their sights on labor outside of the state.

In the mid 1970s, B.C. Rogers poultry factory was suffering a labor shortage. This was consistent with the state of industry during the decade. Laborers were leaving the difficult and low-paying poultry industry in an attempt to find less dangerous and higher paying work. As the seventies progressed "industrial capacity plummeted, unemployment rose to its (then) postwar high, foreign competition eroded market position,[and] rising interest rates" all contributed in industrialized companies taking financial hits.[86] Despite advancements in technology and rapid growth in the food production industries, the 1970s was seen as a time of "economic pessimism."[87] With international events, such as the end of the Vietnam War and the oil embargo of 1973, businesses began to scramble to stop the increase in unemployment that was looming on the horizon. John Rogers, son of B.C. Rogers and now the company's owner, also felt this stress. The chicken plant was running 24 hours a day with three shifts. However, the company was struggling to fill the time slot of its third, late night shift. According to his financial advisor, Tito Echiburu, "we got four or five thousand employees and we were running three shift, 24 hours, 24

[85] David Moberg, "Puttin' Down Ol' Massa: Laurel, Mississippi, 1979," Facing South, Southern Exposure, reuploaded July 21, 2022, accessed September 17, 2022 https://www.facingsouth.org/2022/07/david-moberg-sanderson-chicken-workers-strike-mississippi-1979

[86] Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 73

[87] Albert E. Schwenk, "Compensation in the 1970s", *Compensation and Working Conditions*, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2001. https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/cwc/compensation-in-the-1970s.pdf

hours, and we didn't have enough workers. You know, third shift didn't have enough workers."[88]

The question of why B.C. Rogers followed the pattern of ethnic succession, where industries would switch between different ethnic workforces based on the company's ability to exploit them for profits, came up in Echiburu's interview time and time again.[89] Often times he would skirt around the answer chalking it up to him not being sure, people just showing up, and intervention from the company. However, there are inherently racial elements to the switch in the workforce.

One way that companies responded to Black mobilization was to invoke racist stereotypes about African Americans' unwillingness to work. The racially prejudiced idea that Black people are unwilling to work is ever present in the motivation in hiring Hispanic workers.[90] Echiburu expressed how people in the company and in the community of Morton perceived Black workers: "*Lo dicen que los morenos no quieren trabajar duro… los morenos entran y están dos o tres días y se van*" ["They say that Black people do not want to work hard… Black people enter the factory and stay for two or three days then they leave."][91] White Mississippians view the use of migrant labor as a solution to "African Americans' presumed disinterest in work and success."[92] There is a

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[88] Echiburu Interview

[89] Schwartzman, *The Chicken Trail*, 2. The growing Mexican labor force in the South was and still is discussed in the framework of the "Global Dilemma" and the "American Dilemma." Kathleen Schwartzman describes the Global Dilemma as the phenomena where rural and countryside occupants in developing nations are pushed out by the ever-growing international trade system, and the "American Dilemma" which describes how economic transformation in the United States leads to the creation of undesirable jobs that is often exported internationally.

[90] Stuesse, *Scratching Out a Living*, 111

[91] Echiburu Interview. The original Spanish was kept to maintain the integrity of the interview with the translated portion is in brackets and is used to assist readers who are unfamiliar with Spanish. Also, the description of race was changed slightly to make sense in English

[92] Stuesse, *Scratching Out a Living*, 111

lack of acknowledgement of the harsh working conditions and little pay that Black people received while working in the chicken plants. The experiences of Black laborers prompted, as described earlier, labor movements amongst these communities in the South. White people in the state disregarded institutionalized discrimination of African Americans in industry as a result of their "cultural problems" and not the creation of a system that exploits their labor all while disregarding its value.[93] Immigrant labor was viewed as more reliable in comparison. For white Mississippians, Hispanics occupied a whitened but not quite white status. They remained on the fringe being wanted for their labor but not for their non-whiteness.

Poultry companies viewed Mexicans as willing to do the work that other workers would not. Their perceived "better" work ethic, in comparison to racist stereotypes about African Americans, allowed for Mexicans to secure a place in the white dominated society and "may be seen as an initial step towards whitening.[94] Latinos themselves found great pride in being associated with "hard-work." The idea that Hispanics were made to work create dangerous precedents and leaves migrants exposed to dangerous racial discourse that their nature is to work hard, doing the unsavory work that white Americans did not want to do. Echiburu expressed similar sentiments:

> I don't know if its related to blacks, whites, but Hispanics do the work. They do the work, I don't know why. Maybe it's because they have the need, maybe because it's easier for them to work in a plant than working in Mexico in a more difficult job or maybe it's because they don't make enough money. But the Hispanics have been able to fill that gap. That is why they come and they stay, you see that is the difference. And that is why they want more workers because the Hispanics are filling that void, that is the answer.[95]

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[93] Stuesse, *Scratching Out a Living*, 111
[94] Stuesse, Scratching Out a Living, 111
[95] Echiburu Interview

It is crucial to acknowledge that migrants' work habits were created out of necessity and not from "an inherent desire to toil."[96] They needed to work to support themselves and their families in a foreign land. These migrant laborers were vulnerable to exploitation. They did not have the safety net of unions or even a support system with a voice in the community. There was no establishment built to help them avoid exploitative business practices. Mexican migrants remained in this ambiguous state of not quite white and not quite black.

For Black workers, resentment towards began to grow for these newcomers who worked for companies, like B.C. Rogers, began to grow. Black workers also pushed back on the claim that Black people did not want to work.[97] There was a fear among some Black workers that the introduction of migrant workers in the poultry industry created an environment of competition.[98] The idea of African Americans not wanting to work was used to explain why there were vacancies in B.C. Rogers. There was "enough work" but it was believed that there were not enough people who were willing to do the kind of work necessary in the chicken plant.[99] Scholars have found that the quick expansion of food processing industries actually created more low-wage jobs, leaving room for both Hispanics and African Americans.[100] But despite these findings, there was still resentment among Black workers. They felt that with the increase of Latino workers came the decline in working conditions, wages, and "a sense of dignity" within the work

[96] Stuesse, *Scratching Out a Living*, 111
[97] Stuesse, *Scratching Out a Living*, 81
[98] Stuesse, *Scratching Out a Living*, 111
[99] Echiburu Interview
[100] Stuesse, *Scratching Out a Living*, 114

itself.[101] Migrants were perceived as raising expectations for the amount of work done. But, as previously stated, these workers lacked security. Undocumented workers' vulnerable status made them more appealing to companies with high quotas to fill. However, this shift to Mexican immigrant laborers was not inevitable.

Beginnings of Recruitment

As more and more Black workers left the poultry industry, the company needed a solution, and it needed one fast. The demand for a more streamline work force to keep up with rising product demand caused B.C. Rogers to turn to a new type of laborer. Although Mexican immigrants would eventually fill many of the positions at B.C. Rogers, it was not the first solution the company sought for their labor problems. The story of labor recruitment into Mississippi began with an immigrant from Chile.

Tito Echiburu was the chief financial officer for B.C. Rogers during the majority of the company's existence and witnessed the transition of the workforce.[102] He first came to Mississippi in 1961 from Chile to play for the Mississippi State University (MSU) tennis team. It was at MSU that Echiburu met John Rogers, son, of Bennie Clyde Rogers. After moving back and forth from Chile during the 1960s, Echiburu and his family decided to settle in Morton, Mississippi to work at B.C. Rogers, where John Rogers had taken over as owner. They were most likely the first Hispanic family to live permanently in Morton in 1973.[103] However, due to Echiburu's networks and education at the top university in the area, he was able to secure an executive position at the chicken plant. Due to Echiburu's eliete connections and ethnicity, he also became a key figure at

[101] Stuesse, *Scratching Out a Living*, 114
[102] Echiburu Interview
[103] Echiburu Interview

B.C Rogers when the company decided to move away from hiring local workers in favor of a new, more profitable, for the company, labor source:

> We were, they were coming from Texas some Hispanic workers but there weren't enough to take…the job we needed to be filled. So, one day, John Rogers, we had an office right beside each other, one Monday morning he said he had seen a program on educational TV were there was a lot of unemployment in Miami.[104]

This television program became the catalyst for the introduction of a significant number of Hispanic workers in Morton, Mississippi. John Rogers saw an opportunity to bring in a new set of workers who were more reliant on the plant and the town itself laying the foundation for recruitment tactics that would be used later on to bring in other groups of Latino workers.

Echiburu was put in charge of traveling to Miami to bring in new workers. Since he was also Hispanic, the company felt that he would be the most equipped to go down to Miami and establish an office there.[105] After setting up a partnership with "a company in Miami" and placing an advertisement in the *Miami Herald,* workers began to respond.[106] He stayed there for a few weeks until they had enough workers signed up to fill a Greyhound bus, totaling around forty seats of Cuban men ready to make the journey to Morton. This initiative lasted around two years with new workers coming in week after week.[107] However, the allure of economic opportunity quickly faded for newly arrived migrants.

Just as quickly as male Cuban workers arrived in Mississippi, they returned to Florida. The majority of the Cubans traveling to Morton, were "from another

[104] Echiburu Interview
[105] Echiburu Interview
[106] Echiburu Interview
[107] Echiburu Interview

environment."[108] It is important to note that Cubans arriving to the state at this time were from urban areas and were of middle -class status. They were not used to rural Mississippi culture and the racism that followed them. After the Cuban Revolution, hundreds of thousands of Cubans fled the island for the United States. Between 1965-1973, diplomatic negotiations between the U.S government and Cuban government created an "airbridge between Varadero [Cuba] and Miami [Florida, USA] from December 1, 1965 to April 6, 1973."[109] These flights became known as "Freedom Flights" and became one of the most prolonged and largest "refugee resettlement initiative in U.S history."[110] Miami became a hub for Cuban migrants due to its long, historical ties with the Cuban-American community. During the 1970s, almost 38,00 Cubans settled in the United States.[111]

[108] Echiburu Interview

[109] Jorge Duany, "Cuban Migration: A Postrevoultion Exodus Ebbs and Flows" *Migration Policy Institute*, July 6, 2017. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/cuban-migration-postrevolution-exodus-ebbs-and-flows

[110] Duany, "Cuban Migration"

[111] Duany, "Cuban Migration"

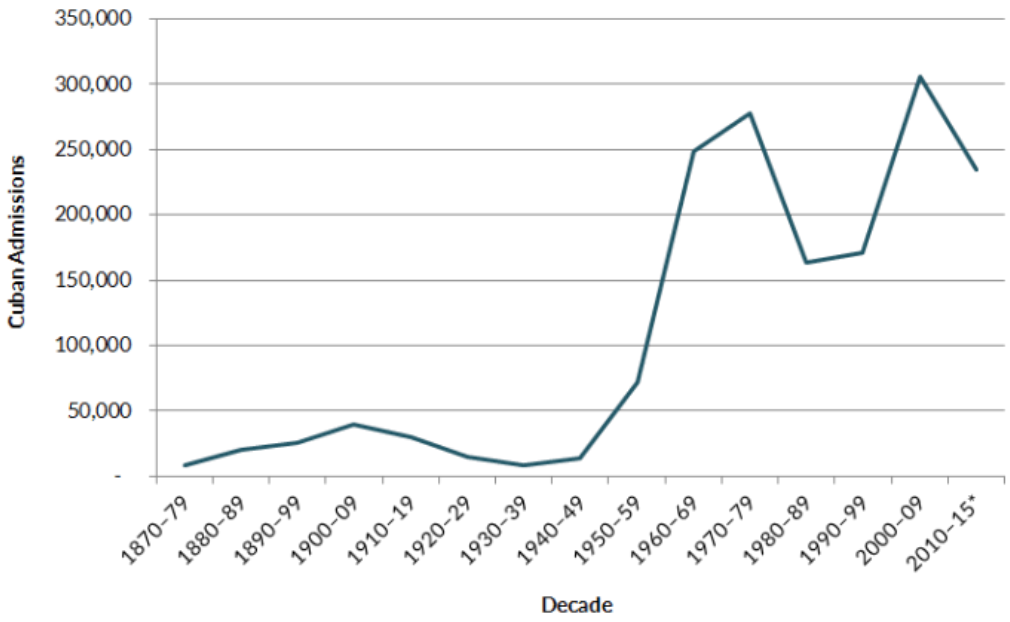

Figure 3: Cuban Admissions into the United States

Data for current decade are partial and reflect the most recent information available.

Sources: For 1893–1932, U.S. Commissioner General of Immigration, *Annual Report* (Washington, DC: U.S. Commissioner General of Immigration, various years); for 1932–2015, U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* (Washington, DC: DHS Office of Immigration Statistics, various years), **available online**.[112]

On the surface, Cubans appeared to be like any other group of labor migrants, however they were in a unique situation. The U.S government classified them as refugees which automatically gave them access to "legal permanent residence and… federal safety-net benefits."[113] This status took of the pressure off of Cubans in securing permanent status as residents but it did not solve the issues of employment.

As B.C. Rogers attracted more and more Cubans to Mississippi, a problem arose. There was a rapid rate of turnover of workers. Arriving laborers found themselves at the

[112] Duany, "Cuban Migration"
[113] Duany, "Cuban Migration"

mercy of the factory. Housing consisted of "anything [they] could rent" from trailers to rundown houses.[114] A big shock came in the form of just how different the culture in Mississippi was from Miami or even Cuba. Echiburu described how "they [Cubans] came from another environment. They didn't come from the country. They came from cities in Cuba and another government style the way—the way they were raised was totally different."[115] These Cubans during the early 1970s were not from rural towns on the island but instead came from cities and higher status families. Cubans settling in the United States at this time, were leaving to escape political violence. They were land and business owners whose property had been nationalized by the Cuban government. The intense, grueling work of the chicken factory was something completely foreign to them.

The culture of small-town Mississippi was also something new for Cuban workers. Morton was a predominately white town with Southern Baptist beliefs dictating what was and was not socially acceptable. At the time "if you had a beer in your hand…you were taken to jail."[116] Surround by rural, country landscapes, urban Cubans found it difficult to adjust. There was quick turnover in workers; when forty-five would come, twenty of them would leave the next week.[117]

The people of Morton became uneasy with the influx of "foreigners." Echiburu detailed the issues the company faced in dealing with the townsfolk and the new workers:

> When I was in charge, bringing from Cuba, I mean Miami, they all had papers, I mean 99% because they were Cuban--we started a program, today for example, six months later the raids from immigration they all

[114] Echiburu Interview
[115] Echiburu Interview
[116] Echiburu Interview
[117] Echiburu Interview

> came just like they did 2 or 3 years ago.[118] They [Immigration officials] came took [sic] a lot of them [workers] all of them were legal…because the people in town called them [Immigration] saying 'we got all foreigners over here. I am sure they are illegal.' They didn't know that Cubans have the papers. So, yes [Immigration] came with helicopters—same thing! But they had the papers so we didn't have any problems. But just to make sure, to be on the safe side, I got with Immigration Department, and I went to Atlanta and then we got a connection with them via computer so anybody that was hired we would do that.[119]

The town was actively prejudiced against the new workers but still relied on their labor. B.C. Rogers continued to recruit Cuban workers over the next two years. However, the extreme rate of replacement of labor proved to be unsustainable. The company set its sights on a new labor market across the border.

Mexican Recruitment

In 1977, B.C. Rogers began recruiting laborers from El Paso, Texas.[120] As the company shifted away from Cuban workers, they began to travel to places in the southwest along the U.S-Mexico border to find people willing to move to small town Mississippi. B.C. Rogers was vital in recruiting Mexicans into the central region of the state. The number of Mexican laborers in Morton began to increase during the mid to late 1970s, as word spread amongst communities in Texas and Mexico. However, migration at this time was different from that in the 1990s due to the continuous migration to and from Mexico. In the case of the Varela family, constant migration back and forth over the border became a norm, especially when their mother, Irma Olivas Varela, was recruited to work for B.C. Rogers.

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[118] Echiburu is referring to the Immigration raids that occurred throughout the state of Mississippi in 2019 where hundreds of workers were targeted by ICE officers and deported.

[119] Echiburu Interview

[120] Stuesse, *Scratching Out a Living*, 73

The Varela family consisted of seven children ranging from ages four to eighteen. They lived in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, with all seven children crammed into a three-bedroom shotgun house. Their father was absent for most of their lives leaving their mother, Irma, to support the family financially. She grew up in Juarez, but after she became the sole provider for her children, she took a job at the Old El Paso canning factory in El Paso, Texas. Irma would work during the day and cross back over the border at night even though she did not have documentation to do so. Their story is typical for families in Juarez.

Figure 4: Map of the Border Between El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juarez

Image depicts map of the border between El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juarez.[121]

[121] Suzanne Goldenberg, "How El Paso is Beating the Worst Draught in a Generation," The Guardian, El Paso, Texas, June 27, 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2011/jun/27/water-conservation-el-paso-texas

Ciudad Juarez and El Paso have been the home of a rich tradition of migration. From their inception, the two cities have been intrinsically tied together due to the fact that they are basically one city (See image). People have moved back and forth between the two spaces long before the establishment of a border and continued this movement long after. The two cities form the largest land port between the United States and Mexico leading to a constant exchange of goods, ideas, and people.[122] As the twentieth century progressed, U.S. companies began to set up *maquiladoras*, factories set up on the Mexican side of the border that were created for the purpose of taking advantage of cheaper Mexican wages.[123] The hardening of the border only slowed down the movement between the two cities but did not stop it. Varela was one of many who used this tradition of migration to her benefit.

During her time working at factories in El Paso, Varela encountered a group of recruiters from Morton who came to seek new workers for B.C. Rogers. Varela, along with her friend Berta who also worked in El Paso, agreed to leave Texas in favor of finding work in Mississippi. The company's recruitment, at this time, followed the same pattern previously was used to bring in Cubans. Recruiters bussed in groups of migrants and housed them close to the factory to ensure that workers would be tied to the factory.

Varela's third oldest daughter, Maribel Melo, recalled years later how recruiters were "picking up busses full of women to get to the chicken factory here in Morton."[124] This revelation brings up a slew of new questions of what was the cause of women being

[122] Gerald Horne, *Black and Brown: African Americans and the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1920* (New York: New York University Press, 2005)

[123] Cowie, *Stayin' Alive*, 55

[124] Maribel Melo, Personal Interview by Isabel Loya, April 10, 2022, in Bolton, Mississippi

the migrants coming from Mexico. It is unclear as to why there was such a large number of women being recruited by the factory during this early period. It could be a number of reasons, such as: single women were seen as less threatening, they could be paid less than their already low paid male counter parts, or it was just a coincidental because of the factories B.C. Rogers was recruiting from. Whatever the reason, it does not change that many women were part of the new wave of Mexican workers during the late 1970s.

This influx of women is a big change from previous recruitment of Cubans. The majority of the Cuban workers coming over were single men who migrated without their family.[125] Recruitment that occurred in the early 1990s took on similar traits as to the initial Cuban migration. During the 1990s, B.C. Rogers attracted young men. Echiburu's brother-in-law, Luis Cartagena, was in charge of bringing in workers from South Texas.[126] He noted how out of the seven hundred laborers who agreed to travel to Mississippi were mostly men who had left their families for financial opportunity.[127] The addition of a gendered aspect to Hispanic migration into Mississippi calls for more consideration of how migrants navigated their way through this time period of cultural adjustment.

Irma Varela joined the bus full of women to travel to Mississippi. While most women traveled by themselves, Varela had come to the South with a friend she had made working in the canning factory in El Paso.[128] The two women were bused to Morton, where they lived in the company owned trailer park together.[129] However, Varela did not

[125] Echiburu Interview
[126] Stuesse, *Scratching Out a Living*, 77
[127] Stuesse, *Scratching Out a Living*, 77
[128] Melo Interview
[129] Melo Interview

remain in Morton consistently. She would often travel back and forth from Morton to Juarez. Melo described how her mother visited them in Juarez then return to Mississippi to work for three to four months.[130] This pattern continued for three years until it became too much for Varela. Having to leave her children behind in the care of other family members took a great emotional toll. Not only did Varela have to deal with adjusting to a new culture but she had to do so while also worrying about her children hundreds of miles away. She made the decision to pack up a station wagon and pay a friend to drive her and her youngest three children back to Mississippi.[131]

This new wave of laborers constantly migrated back and forth from their homes in Mexico or on the border to Mississippi. Nevertheless, this is not a surprising revelation because Varela had already partaken in this constant behavior of migration. As stated earlier, migration was deeply ingrained in the culture of Juarez and Varela was no stranger to it. However, her arrival and that of other migrants signaled the beginning of a shift in the workforce that would continue on and increase in later decades.

Conclusion

B.C. Rogers became the mold for recruitment tactics across Mississippi. Other chicken factories quickly followed suit and began to bring in Mexican laborers.[132] Efforts made by poultry companies to fill their perceived labor gaps changed the racial makeup of Mississippi. The introduction of Latino migrants, first with Cubans then progressing to Mexicans, created tensions within the

[130] Melo Interview
[131] Melo Interview
[132] Echiburu Interview; Factories like PECO, Tyson, Sanderson Farms, and other major companies were described as participating in Mexican labor recruitment

community of Morton, among both its white and Black residents. Mexican migrants found themselves having to adjust to Mississippi culture and a number of them found the shock too much causing them to return to their homes shortly after their arrival.[133] However, some did stay, laying down roots and bringing over their families.

As recruitment progressed through the 1970s and 1980s, B.C. Rogers and other poultry companies began to find it too expensive and difficult to find laborers themselves. In the 1990s, companies would hire *contratistas*, contracting companies, who would be hired out by poultry factories to bring in workers for them.[134] *Contratistas* used highly exploitative tactics to bring in migrants. As news of job opportunities spread through word of mouth, migrants began to create kinship-based migration networks. These networks allowed for whole families to migrate to Mississippi; if one brother came to work in a factory then his siblings would soon follow his lead.[135] Once migrants arrived through *contratistas,* they had to solve the issue of actually being able to work because they could not until they had papers. The agencies would sell fake papers to people, which usually consisted of stolen social security numbers, and hire out workers to various chicken plants throughout the state.[136] Migrants would work under fake names and hope that they would not be discovered leading to deportation from the state.

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[133] Echiburu Interview

[134] Echiburu Interview. Contracting companies and recruiters were not unique just to the 1990s. During the 1910s-1930s, Mexican migrant farmworkers were recruited by *enganchadores*, who sought out labor along the Texas-Mexico border to send to the South to work alongside sharecroppers. Julie Wiese *Corazon de Dixie: Mexicanos in the U.S South Since 1910* goes more into depth on the early migration of Mexicans into Mississippi through agricultural labor.

[135] Fog-Olwig, *Caribbean Journeys*

[136] Echiburu Interview

Echiburu recalls one instance where a woman was working under a fake name when the owner of the identity reported her resulting in her arrest and deportation.[137] Companies knew that migrants coming to Mississippi were willing to take the risk of deportation for a chance to earn a living.

These patterns of migration were forged during the 1970s and 1980s through the efforts of poultry plants, like B.C. Rogers to draw in cheaper labor and the laborers themselves looking for financial stability. This initial migration laid the ground work to the influx of migration that would occur in the 1990s and 2000s. The lives of migrants were deeply affected by their movement and work. The next chapter will delve into the emotional and physical labor that went into working in the plant and living in a new culture through the perspectives of both laboring and non-laboring migrants.

[137] Echiburu Interview

CHAPTER III - Transnational Motherhood, Reproductive Labor, and Immigrant Childhoods

After years of moving back and forth from Mississippi to Juarez, Irma Varela decided she could not take it anymore and made the choice to bring her three youngest children with her back to Morton. She returned to Juarez, packed up the children she was taking, and piled into a station wagon that she paid someone to drive for her since she did not know how to drive. Once the family arrived in Mississippi, they moved into the trailer park of B.C. Rogers, which, as previously discussed, was in less than stellar condition. The children had to quickly adjust to their new environment. They had to learn English at the local summer school and find ways to pass the time while their mother was away at work.[138] For each of the children this time represented something different. For the two youngest, it was a time of great excitement and they look back on it fondly as "exciting" and "good memories."[139] For the oldest of the three, it was a time of bittersweet difficulties. She recalls that when she was around ten years old and just settling into their home in Morton her family had a set routine:

> I was the oldest at that point… about 10. And she would get up really early, she went to work at 6 am, so around 5 am we would walk her to the end of the street. She would say you lock the door and she would cook for us, breakfast, lunch, and dinner, so by the time she left, she left all that already cooked. And she would allow us to bring dirt in the house so we won't go outside.[140]

At this point in the interview she became choked up by emotions. Each of the children remember how difficult this time had been for their mother but also the relief they felt

[138] Varela-Quintero
[139] Varela-Quintero Interview; Varela Interview
[140] Melo Interview

with being reunited with her once again. But this quote also reveals the distribution of labor in the family and it became even more pronounced when the rest of the siblings joined their family in Mississippi.

Labor migration does not only affect the laborer but the non-laboring migrants as well. All are affected by the emotional toll that migration creates. Whether migrant families are transnational, split by borders, or together, the "construct[ion] of family, domestic spaces, and residences are indeed shifting as a result of migration."[141] The creation and sustaining of kinship and families play a huge role in the emotional labor of immigration. The concept of "home" is reflected in the lives of Mexican migrants with it being "imbued with contradictions, ambiguity" but more importantly its interconnectedness with migrants' lives.[142] The examination of the familial and private lives of labor migrants, provides a window into the emotional impact of transnational movement.

The non-laboring family members provide the support system for laboring members. They take care of the home, the children, and all other responsibilities outside of work. Migration reveals how gender and age are crucial in the varied experiences that children have because "young people of all ages are central actors within migration processes and display agency."[143] Children experience their new culture by interacting with spaces outside of the home. In particular, Mexican children migrants' exposure to Mississippi's recently integrated school system gave them first-hand knowledge of how

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[141] Deborah Boehm, *Intimate Migrations: Gender, Family, and Illegality Among Transnational Mexicans* (New York: New York university Press, 2012), 47

[142] Boehm, *Intimate Migrations*

[143] Boehm, *Intimate Migrations,* 115

to adjust and acclimate to southern culture. They had to deal with their education being neglected by school officials and community members assisting them in learning language skills. Home life also plays a key role in how migrants had to preform emotional labor. Their "reproductive labor," as in housework, child-rearing, and emotional support, was determined by their gender and age.[144] The female family members were burdened with outside labor, maintaining the home, and caring for younger siblings. They were the ones responsible for maintaining cultural and familial values of the family.[145] Irma Varela went from challenges of transnational motherhood to the challenges of working full time with dependent children. By examining the experiences of not only life working in the chicken plants, but by including the experiences of children of migrants, from all ages, allows for a greater sense of just how Mexicans fit into Mississippi.

Transnational Motherhood

For Irma Varela and her children, their main motivation for migration and subsequent labor was to create a better life for themselves. However, these things do not come easy and the fact of the matter was, the labor did not stop once they returned home from a long, hard day of work. Having to work long hours, take care of seven children as a single mother, pay bills, and navigate a non-Spanish-speaking world, Varela experienced first-hand the emotional toll that comes with being a migrant worker.

[144] Luz Maria Gordillo, *Mexican Women and the Other Side of Immigration: Engendering Transnational Ties*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 14

[145] Vicki Ruiz, From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 53.

As discussed previously, Irma Varela travelled back and forth from Mississippi to Mexico every three to four months for a couple of years. During this time, she had seven children back in Ciudad Juarez that she left in the care of the oldest siblings and other family members. She, like so many other migrant women, are examples of "transnational motherhood."[146] This concept of transnational motherhood refers to the "ways in which people are anchored to multiple spaces and processes of mothering span geopolitical boundaries."[147] For mothers who are separated from their children across borders, how being the parent takes on a new meaning and expresses itself differently. They must wrestle with the "ongoing emotional care of, provision of financial support to, and communication with children from afar."[148] As these women become transnational actors, they undergo an incredible amount of stress, not only physically from moving back and forth between their sending and receiving communities, but emotionally as well. Scholars argue that by participating in the "politics of transnational mobility" Latina migrants go through "emotional and physical stress" while their families are separated across borders.[149] This stress is compounded by the fact that women who migrate also must adjust to a new environment while keeping ties with their previous one.

As their mother went back and forth from Mississippi, the responsibility of taking care of the family's physical well-being was left up to the two oldest sisters. Like other Mexican families with migratory members, the Varelas tapped into their own social

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[146] Gordillo, *Mexican Women and the Other Side of Immigration,* 137; Transnational Motherhood is briefly discussed in Gordillo works, but other scholars such as Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo and Ernestine Avila explore the concept further in their work "I'm Here, But I'm There."

[147] Laurie Cook Heffron, Karin Wachter, and Esmeralda J. Rubalcava Hernandez, "'Mi Corazón Se Partió En Dos': Transnational Motherhood at the Intersection of migration and Violence," International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 19, no. 20 (2022): 1.

[148] Heffron, et al., "'Mi Corazón Se Partió En Dos'", 1

[149] Gordillo, *Mexican Women and the Other Side of Immigration,* 137

networks and "developed familial systems of support as strategies to sustain their families."[150] In other words, they built their own groups who took on some of the responsibility thrust upon the children, grandmothers, aunts, or neighbors who takes care of children who are left behind. The two oldest sisters, Carmela and Juanita, were placed in charge of rearing the rest of their siblings.[151] They had to take care of all the domestic work while still attending school and providing for their family financially. Occasionally older family members, mainly other female family members, would provide support and assistance in caring for some of the domestic responsibilities.[152]

Being a transnational migrant is an entirely different experience for women compared to men. The migration process for mothers is automatically engendered from the moment they make the conscious choice to migrate due to the gendered responsibility of child-rearing, with women being the ones to stay home while the husband works outside wage-labor. As women cross the border for economic purposes it creates a transnational tie from the home that they are trying to create in the U.S. and to the home they left behind. For those that continuously cross back and forth, these ties produce a sort of "proxy-membership" in both communities.[153] They must leave to perform labor but return to care for their kin, both financially and physically, never fully settling into one space or the other.

These types of stressors play a major role in the experiences of transnational motherhood. By having mothers who are separated from their families, it leaves the

[150] Gordillo, *Mexican Women and the Other Side of Immigration,*34
[151] Jose Varela, Personal Interview by Isabel Loya, October 21, 2022, in Star, Mississippi
[152] Varela-Quintero Interview
[153] Gordillo, *Mexican Women and the Other Side of Immigration,* 23

responsibility of child-rearing on children themselves. Separation from their parents places some children, mostly the female members, into a care-giving role.[154] Women left behind in the sending community were charged with the task of performing "reproductive labor" which scholars define as the labor that goes into caring for family members through the maintenance of a household and other domestic tasks.[155] They must step in and help rear their siblings while also navigating a world without their parents. For children of all ages this separation can lead to negative outcomes, such as behavioral issues, anxieties, and strained relationships.[156] The stress of having their care-giver gone effects multiple aspects of a child's life from their behavior, to school life, and social life. One of the younger Varelas recalls when her mother would leave for months at a time how it was an extremely emotional time for her.[157] She remembers when her mother would visit she felt "weird" about her mother's return.[158] The daughter did not know whether or not to hug her mother because she did not know if she was going to leave again for an even longer period of time.[159] Instances like this reveal how those who do not migrate are intensely affected by the migration process.

The Challenges of Productive and Reproductive Labor

The process of migration is inherently a process of change. It is a change in physical location, culture, and in societal expectations. For men and women, migration poses a new set of challenges towards their established way of life. It raises questions of

[154] Heffron, et al., "'Mi Corazón Se Partió En Dos'", 2
[155] Gordillo, *Mexican Women and the Other Side of Immigration,* 14
[156] Heffron, et al., "'Mi Corazón Se Partió En Dos'", 2
[157] Varela-Quintero, Personal Interview by Isabel Loya, November 23, 2022, in Brandon, Mississippi
[158] Varela-Quintero Interview
[159] Varela-Quintero Interview

who performs certain tasks inside and outside of the home. Through migration, the "traditional working-class male-female division of labor thus became blurred" leading to women performing work that was both "reproductive and productive."[160] Reproductive labor is the labor that goes unseen such as housework, child-rearing, emotional support, and all the unpaid labor that is required to sustain other forms of wage-labor.[161] Women must take on the work of both domestic labor and wage-earning labor. For the Varela family specifically, migration shifted their perception of who does and does not work.

Traditionally the women of the family cared for the needs of children. Back in Juarez, the oldest female siblings of the Varela family became pseudo parents to their younger siblings, often making meals, washing clothes, getting them ready for school, etc. These efforts were recognized by the younger siblings, recalling how, in Mexico, "they [the older sisters] got the hardest because they had to clean up and she'd come checkup after them to see if it was done."[162] Women were often tasked with domestic labor while men earned wages. Men were the ones who traditionally left the household and held wage-earning jobs. The older sons of the Varela family went with their father to work in his upholstery shop to train to take on the trade.[163] However, transnational movement throws these roles into flux and change the relations between men and women.[164] When the Varela family reunited in Mississippi, these labor distinctions began to change and morph into a new way of life.

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[160] Gordillo, *Mexican Women and the Other Side of Immigration,* 35
[161] Gordillo, *Mexican Women and the Other Side of Immigration,* 14
[162] Varela-Quintero Interview
[163] Varela-Quintero Interview
[164] Boehm, *Intimate Migrations*, 42

Once in Mississippi, everyone contributed to the productive and reproductive labor. They had no other choice. With their mother and older siblings working outside of the home, the responsibility fell onto the rest of the family to support those working. However, age would only sometimes play a role in who could and could not work outside of the home. Some of the siblings began to work as early as they could to contribute to the family's financial stability:

> It was difficult and a lot of the times it was difficult emotionally and financially and as soon as we were old enough to start working we would go and work. I mean I remember I started working when I was 14 years old. I wasn't even legal to work yet or legal to drive yet. It was right before I turned 15. It was a restaurant called Pops. It's not there anymore. At the time it was called Pops, we were living in Flowood. At the time I could walk to work and so I started working so I could help her [Irma], so I could help myself so she wouldn't have to worry about giving us gas to go to school or clothes. We tried to buy ourselves a little clothes. We just tried to help and everybody was the same way. We would work and try to help out.[165]

Through the migration process, both men and women were expected to contribute towards domestic labor and venture outside of the home to earn wages. For the Varela family, having eight people under one roof was a catalyst for change in who contributed to housework. One of the daughters recalled how everyone pitched in to help whenever they had to and how the men of the family had to adjust to the new order of labor:

> Because there was so many of us and somebody was always coming and going and cooking and cleaning and my mom was working all the time and she would still try to cook for us and everything and she liked a tidy house so we all cleaned up after ourselves. If you came in and ate, you would try to wash your dishes or make up your bed or clean. If she was cleaning we would help her clean. She was a very tidy person and liked her house clean so we would all try to pitch in and help her clean and when she would go to work and tell us that when she got back she needed all this cleaned…we would all try and clean up and always fighting with

[165] Varela-Quintero Interview

> the boys. I remember fighting with my brothers because they wouldn't pick up after themselves and so you know I remember saying "Wash your dishes! You just left them in the sink!"[166]

The boys of the family experienced a learning curve as they took on domestic work.

The shifting attitudes of gender roles looked like in a family of seven with a single mother reflected the overall change found in immigrant Mexican families throughout the United States. Women had to take on new gender roles that led them out of the house but were still expected to care for the children and home. Children were also deeply affected by these changes brought on through migration and their experiences "serve as an example of the complexities" of migration and the uncertainties that come with it.[167] From as young as fourteen years old, some of the siblings began to enter the workforce all while balancing a new school system that was not prepared to accommodate English learning students.

Experiences in the Mississippi School System

Latino children in Mississippi were solidly the minority in their school systems during the 1970s and 1980s. The Varela children recall how they were the only Latino students when they first arrived in Jackson.[168] These children had to navigate the white and black segregated culture that had been ingrained into Mississippi education all while adjusting to a new environment and language. However, as schools in the state began to integrate, the inclusion of Mexican children added another layer of readjustment for schools themselves. Not only were they just settling into educating a more diverse student

[166] Varela-Quintero Interview
[167] Boehm, *Intimate Migrations*, 135
[168] Varela Interview

body but they had to grapple with English learning for migrant students. This dynamic not only leads to new questions over the experiences of Mexican students but also how the schools did or did not meet the new arrivals' needs.

Because schools act as "social 'spacings' that have a strong emotional and psychosocial dimension," they play an important role in the development of identity.[169] In other words, schools were spaces where newly arrived migrant children experienced a new culture and had to develop new emotional tools to prosper in this environment. Mexican children faced learning a new language in a school system that was unprepared to accommodate English learning all while emotionally supporting their laboring family members.

Mississippi schools operated on a "dual-school system" where children were segregated by race leading to "competing visions" of what white and black public schools should do for their students.[170] This form of segregation led to funding for schools being split, however unevenly, and thus resulting in the state government successfully creating "a mediocre school system for whites and an unbelievably impoverished school system for blacks."[171] In an attempt to maintain the dual system, the state sought to build up black schools through governmental funding as a way to stave off outcries for integration. However, resentment grew among whites as black schools improved and little changed in their own schools. As more and more people, black and white, pushed for integration the state government promised to integrate schools "with deliberate speed"; however,

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[169] Dympna Devine, "'Value'ing Children Differently? Migrant Children in Education," *Children &Society* 27, no.4 (2013): 286

[170] Charles Bolton, *The Hardest Deal*: *The Battle over School Integration in Mississippi, 1870-1980* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), xvii.

[171] Bolton, *The Hardest Deal,* 4

integration would not be widespread until twenty years after the ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* which also coincided with the introduction of Mexican children into the school system.[172]

The reality of a legally imposed integration grew, segregationists first argued for "freedom of choice" in deciding where their children attended school and then created private schools to accommodate white flight.[173] These private schools were often founded and funded by the Whites Citizens Council who resisted integration. By establishing private schools with selective admittance policies, wealthier whites were able to avoid integration compared to their public-school counterparts. As the twentieth century progressed, more and more legislation passed to ensure the maintenance of integrated schools. However, despite the progress made through legislation in the 1980s, Mississippi schools began to re-segregate themselves all over again through the creation of new school districts and majority white academies.[174] Mexican migrants began to attend public schools in the midst of this integration and re-segregation thus complicating things even further.

There are limited studies on the presence of Latino students in Mississippi but those that have been conducted show the effects of re-segregation. From 1986-2000, White students' exposure to Latinos declined by 0.2% in Jackson, Mississippi despite the rapid increase of Latinos in the population.[175] During this same time period there was an overall trend of white students becoming more and more isolated from Black and Latino

[172] Bolton, *The Hardest Deal,* 75.
[173] Bolton, *The Hardest Deal,* 116.
[174] Bolton, *Hardest Deal.*
[175] Erica Frankenberg and Chungmei Lee, "Race in American Public Schools: Rapidly Resegregating School Districts," Harvard Civil Rights Project, https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED468063 , 8.

students.[176] The districts that do have a high percentage of White exposure to Black and Latino students are usually majority Black or Latino in population. Therefore, the White student population is extremely low meaning that the schools are still highly segregated.[177]

Looking at the first wave of Mexican students in the Mississippi school system in the late 1970s and early 1980s allows for a deeper understanding of how they navigated through their new environment. Their presence brought about new challenges for central Mississippi schools. Mexican students' ambiguous racial status left them in a sort of limbo; schools did not know how to handle the challenges that came with not fitting into the state's rigid racial views leaving Mexican children to figure out how to cope by themselves.

The Varelas were no different. The school age children of the family had to adjust to a new way of schooling all while trying to navigate an English-speaking world. Because their mother, Irma, only spoke Spanish and was constantly working to provide for all seven of them, it was up to the children to take control of their own education without the concrete support of a parent. The Varelas' experience in the central Mississippi public school system reveal how educators were not prepared to handle the growing population of Latinos in the state.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Pearl Public School District (PPSD) had already gone through an integration. When faced with having to accept Hispanic students, for the first time, PPSD had to figure out how to accommodate its new students.

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[176] Frankenberg, "Race in American Public Schools," 16.
[177] Frankenberg, "Race in American Public Schools,"16

At this time, there were virtually no Hispanics in the area leading to the school conscripting high school students in Spanish classes to teach these children English.[178] Teachers developed ways in which students could practice their English and be exposed to American culture.[179] Joe Varela recalls how his teacher would give him extra worksheets and homework that allowed him to practice English and would encourage him to do his work with fun activities and pizza parties.[180] He credits his ability to learn English quickly with the extra effort put forth by his teacher.[181] For migrant children "schools [were] a key backdrop in the construction of migrant childhoods and identities."[182] Having teachers who made an effort in helping children learn English contributed to how they adjusted to American culture. When this support from educators was not provided, and migrant students are seemingly "valued differently" than their non-migrant counterparts, children began to feel passed over and forgotten.[183]

In 1981, PPSD split into two separate districts, Pearl Public Schools and Rankin County Schools, essentially splitting the school into two. The Varelas were caught up in this change. During 1979, the family moved back to Mexico for a short while after the massive flood of 1979.[184] They returned around 1980 and resumed attendance at PPSD until they were moved to the newly created school, Northwest Rankin. Melo described her time at Northwest as being "really lost" where the teachers failed to teach them

[178] Melo Interview
[179] Varela Interview
[180] Varela Interview
[181] Varela Interview
[182] Devine, "Value'ing Children Differently," 292
[183] Devine, "Value'ing Children Differently," 292
[184] Melo Interview; The Flood of 1979 was a massive flooding event that caused intense flooding throughout Jackson and the surrounding suburbs. Many residents had to evacuate their homes and over $1 billion in damages occurred; "NWS Jackson, MS 1979 Pearl River Flood" National Weather Service, https://www.weather.gov/jan/1979_04_17_easter_flood

anything.[185] They had lost the adult support system they had been cultivating at Pearl. The school did nothing to help its non-English speaking students, it was as if they just there.[186] Often times, students would simply have to write their name on a blank assignment, turn it in, and the teacher would pass them.[187] None of the teachers took the initiative to provide these students with the language tool necessary to succeed in the American school system. The lack of consistent support from teachers caused a sense of isolation amongst migrant children. They were essentially othered and left scrambling to navigate an even newer space with teachers who were not prepared to deal with non-English speaking children.

The issue of English language learning took different forms depending on the age of the children. For the youngest, English came a little quicker than their older counterparts. The youngest of the Varelas recalled how people other than teachers would take the initiative to help them learn English:

> It was actually a lot of people helping us to learn the language to get ahead in life…. Two high school students would come to my house one hour a week and they would spend time so I could learn English…It was two high school girls that would go to the house, they would volunteer… they would sit with me. They give me actual homework and we would watch *Sesame Street* to learn the English and it actually helped, to have fun they would take me to the skating rink or to experience to get around a more American people so I can learn the language. As I grew older you know I picked it up and everything…. They would come and teach my sisters too.[188]

[185] Melo Interview
[186] Melo Interview
[187] Melo Interview
[188] Varela Interview

It took the effort of the surrounding community to help migrant children adjust to Mississippi. The administration of the Northwest Rankin school district failed to create an environment that allowed for non-English speaking children to fully feel included. A notable theme that continuously came up in all of the interviews was that the Varelas did not feel rejected or discriminated against when they were younger, aside for the incidents that occurred at Northwest Rankin. They consistently answered the question of what were the people of Mississippi like with answers of "they were nice to us" or "people decided to help us out and support us."[189] More scholarship needs to be conducted on how White Mississippians viewed the new wave of Mexican migration. However, the Varelas conclude that because most Mississippians had not interacted with Mexicans before, they had no preconceived notions of discrimination against the new arrivals. They appeared as a non-threat. However, as more and more Latinos settled in the state, resentment grew among white people in the area.

Emotional Labor of Being Undocumented

Citizenship is a concept that looms large over migrants. Those who arrive in the United States without documentation have to deal with the emotional stress and fear of deportation. The United States, starting in the late 19th century, enacted laws concerning immigration that restrict who can and cannot be permitted into the country.[190] During the 1980s, the United States passed what was called "the most comprehensive reform of our immigration laws since 1952."[191] The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of

[189] Melo Interview; Varela Interview; Weissenberg Interview

[190] Ngai, *Impossible Subject*; the concept of illegality or alienage arose during the twentieth century.

[191] Ronald Reagan, "Statement on Signing the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986," Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, November 6, 1986,

1986 was signed into law by Ronald Reagan and, according to Ragean, sought to take a "major step toward meeting [a] challenge to [U.S.] sovereignty."[192] Legislators viewed the IRCA as a "humane approach to immigration reform."[193] However, stipulations within the legislation played into fears over the growing number of migrants in the United States.

This new legislation introduced new penalties and sanctions, both civil and criminal, on employers who hired undocumented immigrants without proper work authorization. An employer would now be required to check documents around the worker's identity and labor authorization status and note the information on an I-9 form.[194] Advocates began to grow uneasy about this new act. They feared that it would create a system where employers could actively discriminate against migrant workers "who were injured, organizing, or otherwise deemed 'undesirable,'" pushing people into unsafe, abuse-ridden work environments.

In an attempt to combat this type of employment discrimination, the law imposed fines for those proven to refuse hiring someone based on "an individual's national origin or… because of such individual's citizenship status."[195] However, the employer needs to show "discriminatory intent" which complicates the process because it is extremely difficult to prove that an employer "actively" violated this law leading to this section

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https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/statement-signing-immigration-reform-and-control-act-1986

[192] Reagan, "Statement on Signing the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986,"

[193] Robert Pear, Special to the New York Times, "The President Signs Landmark Bill on Immigration," *New York Times*, November 07, 1986, http://lynx.lib.usm.edu/newspapers/president-signs-landmark-bill-on-immigration/docview/426351844/se-2

[194] Stuesse, *Scratching Out a Living*, 172

[195] Reagan, "Statement on Signing the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986"

rarely being implemented.[196] The IRCA also recognized that employers were not trained to tell the difference between legitimate and fake documents, therefore they were only responsible for making sure the documents they examined appeared "genuine." [197] In short, if it looked real then they had to accept them on face-value.

While IRCA on the surface seemed like a benevolent act, it was a front for the criminalization of immigrants. The budget of border control was raised by 50 percent increasing the number of officers on the border and also resulting in the growing number of raids performed on workplaces.[198] Even before the IRCA, the Reagan administration began to claim the increase in migration as a "crisis" that need to be stopped for the protection of American freedoms.[199] The administration "weaponized Cold War foreign policy and border enforcement trends but also forged news tools of exclusion."[200] Reagan's administration began to use incarceration as a deterrence for migrants but in doing so it equated migrant status as adjacent to criminality.[201] The increase in immigration and the attempt to control it led to the U.S. Government to reframe attitudes towards migrants and refugees as an extension of Reagan's attempt to reassert "state sovereignty over migrant rights."[202] By hardening the border, immigration was more criminalized than ever before.[203]

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[196] Robert Pear, Special to the *New York Times*, "The President Signs Landmark Bill on Immigration"

[197] Stuesse, *Scratching Out a Living*, 172

[198] Kristina Shull, *Detention Empire: Reagan's War on Immigration and the Seeds of Resistance*, (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2022), 193.

[199] Shull, *Detention Empire,* 3.

[200] Shull, *Detention Empire,* 1.

[201] Shull, *Detention Empire,* 1. There was a push to criminalize immigration during the 1980s, which scholars have dubbed *crimmigration.* This concept describes how migrant detention became nearly indistinguishable from criminal detention.

[202] Shull, *Detention Empire,* 10.

[203] Shull, *Detention Empire,* 3.

While the IRCA did create a new criminalized view of migrants, it also led to the legalization of many undocumented immigrant who had been in the United States since 1982. It allowed them to receive lawful permanent residency and a pathway to citizenship. Nearly three million people received residency status through this legislation and were able to receive protection from deportation.[204] However, the inclusion of stipulations towards citizenship "through onerous residency, work, and English requirements" created a system that made migrants "earn" rights towards legalization.[205] Migrant advocates argued that employer provisions created a new sense of "illegality" in the workplace pushing workers underground and leaving them vulnerable.[206]

There is a great deal of contradiction in Reagan's attitudes and actions towards immigration. On the one hand, his administration pushed for the IRCA which, as stated before, granted legal status to millions of migrants, creating a migrant work program, and set out to create a "peaceful" U.S-Mexican border.[207] However, at the same time, Reagan also increased violent immigration enforcement, catered to growing nativism through the idealization of immigration quotas, and colluded with industries that hired illegal immigrants while vilifying said labor migrants.[208] The administration's attitude toward migrant workers played into the larger cultural backlash that was beginning to arise with migrant workers being viewed as competition to U.S. workers.[209] Migrants were seen as a threat to fair wages and unionization due to employers viewing them as easily

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[204] 1986: Immigration Reform and Control Act 1986, Library of Congress, https://guides.loc.gov/latinx-civil-rights/irca.

[205] Shull, *Detention Empire,* 193

[206] Stuesse, *Scratching Out a Living,* 172.

[207]Shull, *Detention Empire*, 7.

[208] Shull, *Detention Empire*, 7.

[209] Shull, *Detention Empire*, 7.

exploitable. As labor migrants made their way to Mississippi, they encountered the overarching role of the government in their lives.

The legal status of these migrants took a toll on all family members. Legal status determined how migrants went about their lives and their familial ties. The stress of being undocumented loomed large in migrants' imagination. In the Varela family, nearly all of the children were undocumented. They remembered being scared because of their lack of documents and questioning as to why their mother brought them here and if they were going to "suffer."[210] Being undocumented meant migrants had to traverse more carefully through life all while attempting to settle into a new environment. Legislation like the IRCA of 1986 had drastic impact on migrants and their families.

The Varela family recalled how important this piece of legislation was for themselves and their surrounding community. Due to the length of time the family had been in the United States, they fell into the category that was eligible for a fast track towards permanent residency and eventually citizenship. Legal status varied in the Varela family. Irma Varela had obtained a residency and work visa during her time in Mississippi and was in the process of filing paper work for her youngest children while the oldest siblings remained undocumented.[211] During the early 1980s, the youngest children were able to attend school without formal documents designating their legal status. All that was needed to register children for school was a valid birth certificate.[212] While the Varelas were able to navigate life in Mississippi while being without

[210] Varela Interview
[211] Varela Interview
[212] Varela Interview

documentation, the stress of their status weighed heavily on them until they received residency status in 1989 through Reagan's legislation.[213]

As word of the IRCA spread throughout the country, Latinos in Mississippi were incredibly eager for its passing. Within communities, both formal and informal, the Act was a significant topic of discussion. They felt as though they were being recognized by the larger American consciousness. The Varelas recalled their mother "talking about what a good president [Ronald Reagan] was and that he really noticed the Hispanic culture, he really noticed that people weren't here to just, you know, be here that they were hard workers and that they deserved [citizenship]."[214] For the Hispanic community in the state, the granting of amnesty to millions of migrants was, obviously, a massive occurrence. In communities, like church groups, the IRCA became a highly discussed topic that was brought up at any chance. The Varelas recollected how ever-present and positive this moment was for their family and the other Hispanics in their community:

> It was a huge deal. You know, I remember that being a positive thing. I don't remember people saying "oh my god that should not be happening" or "President Reagan doesn't know what he is doing." I don't remember negativity, I don't remember people being up in a roar, that "is a big mistake", "those people are taking our jobs." I don't remember any of that. All I remember is being positive. I remember everybody being happy that it was taking place. I remember people trying to get all the documents and trying to help each other to make that happen…everybody was talking about it at that time…I remember my mom her friends were Hispanic so they were talking about it so we would talk about it at home sometimes.[215]

[213] Varela Interview
[214] Varela-Quintero Interview
[215] Varela-Quintero Interview

Even among those who were not associated with formal organizations, Hispanics spread the word of what the IRCA could mean for them and helped out those who attempted to gain citizenship.

It is ironic that some Latinos looked kindly upon Reagan's actions. While the IRCA was a massive win for immigrants and migrants through its granting of amnesty, it also worked as a cover to the negative aspects of the law. As stated previously, this Act created a new understanding of immigration reform as being one of "control."[216] It also led to the growth of an "underground economy" of migrant workers that left them more vulnerable to exploitation through the fear of deportation.[217] The Act allowed for a portion of migrants to gain citizenship but it would be a step in the direction to outright criminalizing migration.

Outside of the United States, the Reagan administration was meddling with Central American governments. The administration would push to establish its presence in the region's governments, such as El Salvador, and make sure that those governments operated in American economic interests.[218] These instances of American involvement in Central America led to violence and even more people migrating and seeking asylum in the United States, which the Reagan administration was aiming to stop. The IRCA became a representation of the administration's conflicting views on migrants and Latinos.

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[216] Shull, *Detention Empire,* 193

[217] Stuesse, *Scratching Out a Living*, 172

[218] Hal Brands, *Latin America's Cold War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010), 198

The signing of the IRCA brought in a new wave of attention to the Hispanic community in the late 1980s. As expressed by the Varelas, their experiences in Mississippi were overall positive. They theorize that it was because they were some of the few Latinos in the area and some of the first interactions Mississippians had with Latinos. As more and more Mexicans and other Latinos arrived in the state, the interactions with Anglo-populations began to shift. Police started to target Hispanic men when making traffic stops. Jose Varela recounted how he and his brothers were harassed by local police just for being Hispanic while growing up:

> I was on my way to go eat, it was Thanksgiving, a cop stopped [me] and he was going to give me a ticket. He thought I was illegal, I didn't have my documentation. He said "can I see your driver's license." I said "I don't have any." He said "where are you from?" I said "I'm originally from Mexico but I have been here my whole life, I am an American citizen," … He says "how do I know you are an American citizen?" I said "I can give you my social security---" he didn't want that he wanted an I.D. and he said "step out the car." I said "why would I step out the car if I am an American citizen?" He said "well you are going to regret it." I said "no you are going to regret it, I am going to make you lose your job because you are profiling me now. I am an American citizen." So what happen when I told him, he did call. He tore the ticket because he knew he could get in trouble and that was…one of the problems that I had. He did thought I was an illegal alien and I wasn't you know.[219]

Hispanic men were becoming more and more vulnerable to racial profiling which had been (and still is) an ongoing problem for the Black population in Mississippi. As more and more Hispanic men became present in the community, law enforcement interactions were becoming increasingly targeted. In another instance of racial profiling experienced by the Varelas was when the youngest son was involved in a car accident with a White woman:

> I had another case where a lady hit me from behind. The cop pulled me over, let *her go*, and I was like "why did you let her go." "Step out the car,

[219] Varela Interview

> sir." "Why am I going to step out of the car, if you are going to--- she was the one who hit me. I didn't do nothing" I went like that (gestures with hands) and he tried to arrest me. And I was like "Man you are trying to arrest me for something I didn't even do." And I had to go to court for it and all that. Come to find out he through the case down [the case was dropped] because I won. It was because he thought when I raised my hand like that he thought I was going to do something. They were going to take me to jail but I called a friend of mine and the friend got me out.[220]

Varela expressed how he believed that a lot of the times he and his brothers were stopped was because they were Hispanic men. He did note that his sisters did not face this level of harassment by law enforcement and it seemed that the police were out right targeting the men. Despite the fact that they were legal citizens and at the very least had residency, the increase in the Hispanic population correlated with the increase in suspicion surrounding their presence.

Conclusion

The Varela family's experiences show the wide range of migration's impact. It shifts and varies depending on gender and age. For the younger children, adjusting to a new culture, school system, and language proved to be incredibly taxing. They dealt with administrations who did not want to put in the effort to provide equal learning opportunities. But they also encountered people who showed great empathy towards their situation and made strides to make the children feel welcomed and educated. The family's traditional gender roles altered as a result of migration. Both men and women performed wage-labor and domestic work becoming both the emotional support and financial providers.

Migration affects whole communities and families. As they settled in, Mexican migrants began to create their own community networks as their populations in

[220] Varela Interview

Mississippi started to increase. These networks offered another layer of support and comfort to migrants both new and old. The next chapter will discuss how these communities were created both formally, through the Catholic Church, and informally, through casual relationships.

CHAPTER IV – From Household Services to the Hispanic Church

"It's amazing, it's a really great feeling; you really have an extended family."

On December 16, 1979, the first Spanish Mass was celebrated at St. Peter's Cathedral in Jackson, Mississippi.[221] Present to lead the rite was "Bishop Joseph Brunini, auxiliary Bishop William Houck, Father Mario Vizcaino, and Father Paul Madden."[222] Father Paul Madden, who presided over the Catholic Church in Crystal Springs, would take over as the primary priest to oversee Spanish Masses at the Cathedral.[223] The Mass was a small affair that was a "really simple ordinary Mass…there was nothing that was extraordinary about it at all."[224] The first Mass was reported by the dioceses to have an attendance of "about 200 Hispanics from the Jackson area", however, one of the Varela children described the first Masses as only around 30 people and how "back then it was real small."[225] Despite these conflicting accounts, what can be gathered is that these Masses were a crucial piece in gathering Latinos into one space. However, it was not the first Spanish Mass held in the state. As Hispanics arrived in Mississippi, they began to hold Catholic Masses within their own homes. These home worships brought together Hispanics across class and nationalities.

The Varelas were part of the first few families to participate in subsequent Spanish Masses. One of the daughters recalled how her mother "spoke very broken

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[221] Tereza Ma, "Hispanic Ministry in Mississippi, a history," https://www.mississippicatholic.com/2020/01/02/hispanic-ministry-in-mississippi-a-history/

[222] Ma, "Hispanic Ministry in Mississippi, a history"

[223] "Group of Hispanics Probably Smallest of State's Minorities," *Clarion -Ledger*, April 6, 1980

[224] Maribel Melo Interview, Personal Interview by Isabel Loya February 18, 2023, over Zoom

[225] Ma, "Hispanic Ministry in Mississippi, a history"; Melo Interview

English, so she did not like going to church in English" but despite this still made a point to attend Mass when they were able to.[226] Even though there were only a handful of Latino families, there was a need for a Spanish Mass and Hispanic Mississippians found different ways to create their own communities in their new home through the church.[227]

This chapter will discuss the role of religion plays migrant communities, how those communities are built, and how they are sustained. Religious organizations, like the Catholic Church, were used to create informal communities among migrants in the state. But the church was not a passive entity to build a community; church members took an active role in shaping and growing their new community. These organizations were a way for migrants to interact with Southern society and culture beyond the workplace while maintaining their own cultural practices.

Religion and Migration

Religion is a deeply personal matter that has been used as a form of social control but also as a way to create cultural ties. Within the study of migration, scholars have shown religious practices and culture are maintained through the process of migration. Through kinship networks, as previously described, migrants sustain their cultural traditions through familial connections, gendered labor, or even religion. Scholars argue that "religious as well as kin networks provide important frameworks" in the study of immigration in both sending and receiving communities.[228] The examination of religion

[226] Melo Interview
[227] Melo Interview
[228] Karen Fog-Olwig and Mikkel Rytter *Mobile Bodies, Mobile Souls : Family, Religion and Migration in a Global World*, edited by Mikkel Rytter and Karen Fog-Olwig (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2011) , 15

in relation to migrant groups offers a glimpse into the communities that are created out of a need to maintain some sense of normalcy among migrants.

Migrants find emotional support in various space, through those they meet in the work place, to their family members, and, especially, religious organizations. As migrant communities are created and grow, they bring with them cultural practices that extend outside of the household, such as religion. Religious practices are a way for migrants "to maintain networks of relationships…that keep them connected to their country/region/culture of origin and to kindred communities around the world."[229] More anthropological views of religion recognize that the "social capital" gained through participation in religious organizations is "particularly valuable for migrants who have to start… from scratch."[230] It allows migrants first arriving in a new community to have some basis of cultural relation with those already settled in.

There is a significant social function of religion. Among marginalized groups, churches provide "a major-often the only- source of mutual support and aid."[231] These areas of aid are where the community can come together to provide services for one another. Marginalized groups lack access to governmental or official services, leaving said marginalized groups the responsibility of picking up the slack and forming their own social safety nets. This type of communal aid and assistance establishes stronger bonds and "functions as a 'home-away-from-home'."[232] In other words, churches create a

[229] Martha Frederiks, "Religion, Migration, and Identity: A conceptual and theoretical exploration," (BRILL: 9-29, 2016),15

[230] Frederiks, "Religion, Migration, and Identity", 16

[231] Robert Whitney and Graciela Chailloux Laffita, *Subjects or Citizens: British Caribbean Workers in Cuba, 1900-1960*, (Gainsville: University Press of Florida, 2013), 150

[232] Frederiks, "Religion, Migration, and Identity," 15

community that allows migrants to feel connected to their places of origin and find a way to sustain their cultural ties.

Other studies of religion and migration have noted that migrant communities use the establishment and continuation of churches and church groups as mode of cultural preservation.[233] For these groups, churches are a safe-haven where they can practice their language and traditional rituals among others who share their culture. Catholicism involves numerous rituals and prayers that call for group participation. Due to Spanish colonizers systematic establishment of the Catholicism, often through violence, during the 1500s throughout Latin America, a large portion of Latinos are Catholic.[234] Catholicism became an identifying feature of Latino cultural traditions and practices. Scholarship that centers around Catholicism and Latino migration claim that "kinship and religion [allow] migrants to create sodalities united by faith in [Catholicism]."[235] The prevalence of Catholic traditions amongst Latinos continued into newly forming migrant communities within the United States and, more specifically, the Southeast. Interviews conducted with the Varela family support these ideas of religious traditions in migrant communities. Their experiences with migration show how forming a Hispanic Catholic community within Mississippi, a predominately Protestant state, allowed them to create informal networks of support.

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[233] Whitney and Laffita, *Subjects or Citizens*, 154

[234] Matthew O'Hara, *A Flock Divided: Race, Religion, and Politics in Mexico, 1749-1857*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 27

[235] Karsten Paerregaard, . "Mobile Bodies, Mobile Souls: Family, Religion and Migration in a Global World." in "Mobile Bodies, Mobile Souls : Family, Religion and Migration in a Global World," edited by Mikkel Rytter and Karen Fog Olwig (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2011) 182

The Catholic Church in Mississippi

The Catholic church has been present in Mississippi since the arrival of European colonizers. During the 1500s, Spanish and French explorers travelled across the North American Southeast in hopes of extracting resources for their empires. During these expeditions, missionaries and priests that arrived to the continent made attempts to convert native populations to Christianity.[236] In the what would become present day Mississippi, Spanish and French missionaries encountered various tribes in their quest to spread Catholicism leading to intense conflicts between the Native peoples and Europeans.[237] Over the next 200 years, the territory would be controlled by different groups, from being stolen from the American Indians who resided in the area, to the Spanish, then the French, the British, the Spanish again, and finally the budding American government.[238] Within the territory, the Catholic church established the city of Natchez as the "center of Catholicism" in the Southeast.[239]

However, after the creation of the Mississippi territory under the United States government, Catholicism's spread and influence was at an apparent stand still. The Mississippi diocese was first under the control of the archbishop in Havana, Cuba then fell under the oversight of Florida and Louisiana.[240] Natchez saw a sharp decline in Catholicism due to the U.S. Government's seizure of all Spanish assets, including property belonging to the church purchased under Spanish rule and they lacked a

[236] Michael Namorato, *The Catholic Church in Mississippi, 1911-1984: A History*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998), 2
[237] Namorato, *The Catholic Church in Mississippi*, 2
[238] Namorato, *The Catholic Church in Mississippi*, 3
[239] Namorato, *The Catholic Church in Mississippi*, 3
[240] Namorato, *The Catholic Church in Mississippi*, 5

residential priest.[241] The city rose to prominence within the church again in 1837 when Pope Gregory XVI established the See of Natchez.[242]

Over the next century, the Catholic church would grow but Catholic Mississippians would remain a minority in the state's population.[243] During the 20th century, there was an increase in the number of immigrant Irish priests being sent to Mississippi who helped increase the visibility of Catholics in the area.[244] Though the state would still be considered a missionary area and received funds from outside of the state, the laypersons, the non-ordained, in the community played a major role in sustaining the church.[245] Often times, laypeople ran the church offices, offered community programing, and ran church functions. Laity would play a significant role in the creation and sustainment of minority gatherings and Masses that would occur in dioceses of Mississippi during the 1980s.

Home Churches

As the Latino population grew in Mississippi, migrant laborers began to establish communities outside of work and their households. The Varela family grew up Catholic and attended church regularly when they lived in Mexico. When they arrived to the state there was no Hispanic outreach by the Jackson dioceses. Seeing a need for a Mass specifically tailored to Latinos in the area, Hispanic families began taking matters into their own hands to continue their religious traditions.

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[241] Namorato, *The Catholic Church in Mississippi*, 5
[242] Namorato, *The Catholic Church in Mississippi*, 5
[243] Namorato, *The Catholic Church in Mississippi,* 5
[244] Michael Namorato, "Catholicism", Mississippi Encyclopedia, https://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/catholicism/
[245]Namorato, "Catholicism"

Shortly after the Varelas relocated to the Jackson area from Morton, they became friends with a Costa Rican family, the Ramoses. With children around the same ages, both families saw a need to hold Catholic prayers and Masses in Spanish. The Varela and Ramos families would attend English Mass but that was not enough. They wanted a space where they could practices Catholicism in Spanish. First, the two families began holding weekly prayers in their own homes. Then the Ramos parents reached out to a priest they knew would be interested in performing Masses in Spanish.[246] The third youngest Varela daughter recalled how:

> We used to get together without a priest and say the rosary and just kind of pray. So, we would always go to their house or they would come to our house. And then they somehow made a contact with one of the priests from Florida and then we celebrated Mass in their [Ramos's] house for the first time and then he came and celebrated Mass at our house.[247]

The Masses were performed by Father Mario Vizcaino, a priest from Florida.[248] These types of at-home Spanish Masses became a pattern for the two families. The lack of an official Spanish Mass held in a church did not stop other Latino families from taking matters into their own hands. This type of makeshift Mass did not only occur amongst the Varela family and immigrants in Jackson.

Back in Morton, the Echiburus, who were part of the recruitment of migrant laborers, also held prayer and Mass in their home. After arriving in Morton and gaining status in their community, the Echiburus were still left without a place to practice their religion. Wilda Echiburu, wife to Tito, recalled how when they first settled into Morton, the fact that they were Catholic "was not known at the time."[249] Wilda and Tito Echiburu

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[246] Melo Interview
[247] Melo Interview
[248] Melo Interview
[249] Echiburu Interview

described how families in Morton would go to their house on Sundays and a priest from Forest would perform Masses for them.[250]

> There was no church over here and there weren't many Catholics. So, many years later, I don't remember the year, but we started having Mass, believe it or not, in my house. We have a den over there (gesturing) that used to be a kindergarten. She [Wilda] used to run a kindergarten for seven or eight years. So, we used to have it there and we had families come on Sunday and the Father would come from Forest and had a service for us. There wasn't many of us, 10, 15. Then we were good friends with the preacher at the Methodist church so we started having it on Sunday afternoon at the Methodist church, Catholic Mass. And then of course it got bigger and bigger then they opened, the Catholic Church, opened one in downtown .[251]

In Morton, Catholic immigrants were able to make connections in the larger community to be able to find ways to worship in Spanish. Notably, these types of makeshift ceremonies spanned across Latino communities, encompassing those who recruited other Latinos and the labor migrants themselves. Religious Hispanics would not be deterred from practicing ceremonies even without a formal setting to do so. Latino migrants' participation in religious practices was a way for them to create their own support systems in their receiving communities.

Creating "Hispanic" Communities

The first official Spanish Mass signaled a change for religious migrants. They now had an official space outside of the home to worship. These Masses brought together Latinos from different work sites, across class divides, and Spanish-speaking immigrant populations not from Mexico. The blurred lines created by the church created a community that was not just Mexican or just Costa Rican, it created a Pan-Latino

[250] Echiburu Interview
[251] Echiburu Interview

community that encompassed a wide range of people who would not have interacted so closely otherwise. Official Masses were a way for Hispanics to create and shape their community networks through participation in religious activities and ceremonies.

At first, the regularly occurring Spanish Masses were thrown-together events. There was no choir created yet and no one was able to perform hymns and other songs, so the group would play tapes to provide music for the church.[252] Later on, one of the Ramos children, Ricardo, would eventually play the guitar for Masses and assist with the music.[253]

Figure 5: Spanish Mass Taking Place in 1986 at St. Peter's

[252] Melo Interview
[253] Melo Interview

Image depicts a Spanish Mass taking place in 1986 at St. Peter's.[254]

It was not just local, Jackson based Hispanics who would attend these Masses. Latinos from across the state would make the journey to Jackson every Sunday from Hazlehurst, Greenville, Greenwood, and other rural areas.[255] The majority of the attendees worked picking cotton in the Delta region of the state or in other agricultural production. They traveled to the capital city to celebrate Mass. Religious practices drew in a Latinos who were spatially separated all around the state. For these migrant workers, there simply was no other option for them to practice their religion.

The church blurred class lines amongst Latinos. The Echiburu's were crucial in recruitment for the local poultry plant. They gained status within the community and eventually went on to become well-known figures for the growing migrant community in Morton. The Echiburus were also in need of a place to worship. Once official Spanish Masses began to be held in the state they too jumped at the opportunity to celebrate their religion in Spanish. Echiburu noted that "when you first come, as a matter at that time—when you first came, especially Hispanic families for some reason we always, not only us, I am talking about people around the state close to Jackson would go to the Cathedral in Jackson."[256] This shows the connective aspect of the church. It brought together recruiters and the recruited under one community.

A theme that kept arising when discussing early Hispanic, Catholic communities was "Laity." In the Catholic church, Laypeople are non-ordained members of the church. Laypeople take on various roles in the church from being just average parishioners, to

[254] "Hispanic Catholics Celebrate Liturgy in Spanish" *Mississippi Today*, April 4, 1986
[255] Melo Interview
[256] Echiburu Interview

attending church events, or even taking on administrative roles in the parish. Scholars have noted the importance of laypeople in migrant community religious organizations claiming that they "were often the most pious members of the parish" and readily volunteered when needed.[257] Laity was also away for migrants to establish themselves as leaders in the community. Laypersons were able to gain agency and legitimize their power as leaders through associating with the church.[258] For the Jackson diocese, "the Hispanic community is held together by a lay committee."[259] The Ramos family took the lead with establishing regular Spanish Masses with them being the ones to contact Father Mario Vizcaino.[260] Besides a priest performing Mass, majority of the community building was done by community members.

An average Mass in the 1980s consisted of around 40 to 50 people gathering to pray together in Spanish.[261] Spanish Masses would take place every Sunday. As time went on, St. Peter's began listing it along with their English church time listings in local newspapers.

[257] Fink, *The Maya of Morganton*, 156
[258] O'Hara, *A Flock Divided*, 176
[259] "Hispanic Catholics Celebrate Liturgy in Spanish" Mississippi Today
[260] Melo Interview
[261] "Group of Hispanics Probably Smallest of State's Minorities" Clarion -Ledger

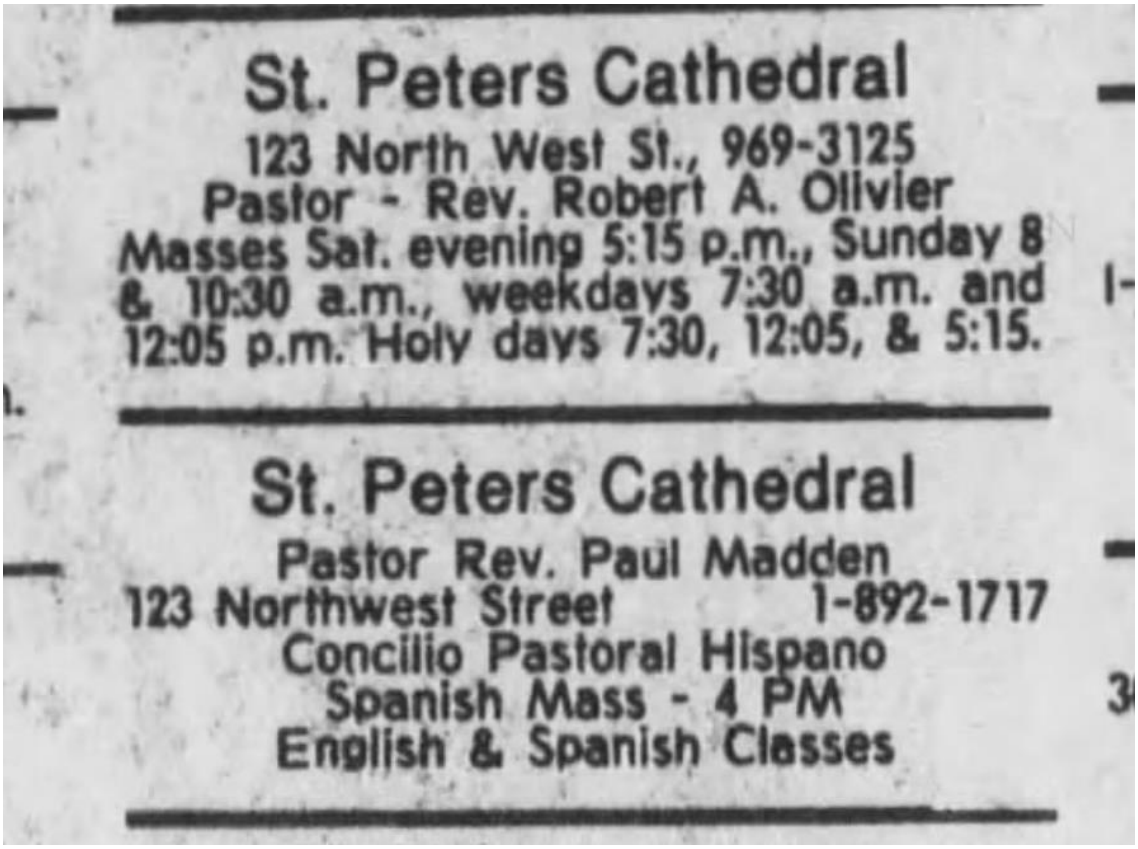

Figure 6: Church Time Listings

Image shows church time listings for both English and Spanish Masses for St. Peter's Cathedral in Jackson Mississippi.[262]

A notable feature of these Mass listings was the addition of English and Spanish classes after Mass. In an interview in 1986, Jorge Ramos Ortiz described the importance of these Masses and church gatherings because "it gives us [Latinos] the opportunity to speak our language."[263] Having a community space where people can converse with one another in their native language after a long week of speaking English became a source of relief for new Hispanics. With most Latinos performing wage-labor, they found solace in being able to relax after a long week with people who understood them on a deeper level.

[262] "Church listings" *Clarion-Ledger*, December 26, 1981
[263] "Hispanic Catholics Celebrate Liturgy in Spanish" *Mississippi Today*

Usually after Mass, Latinos would gather in the basement of the church to enjoy coffee, donuts, cakes, dinners, etc.[264]

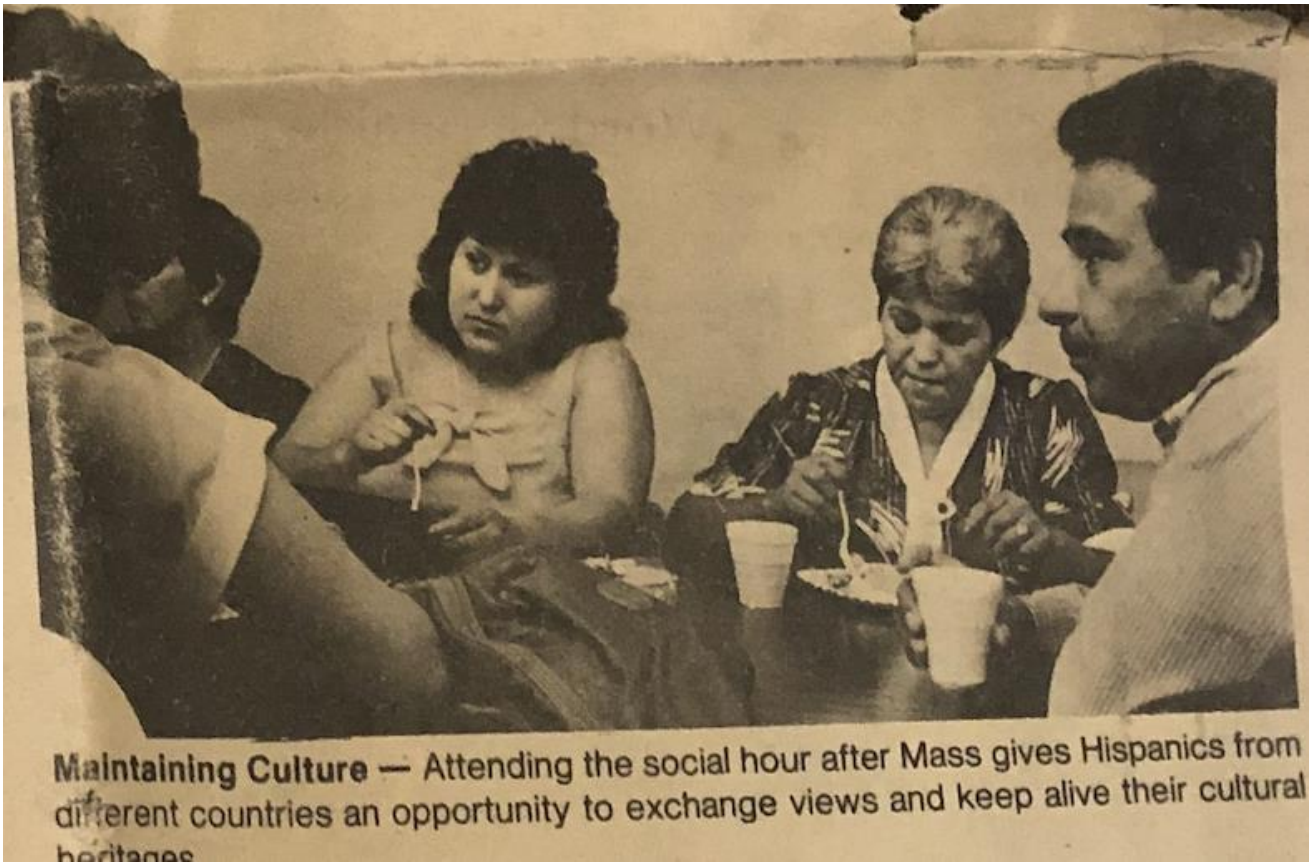

Figure 7: Irma Olivas Varela and Her Daughter at Church Dinner

Image depicts Irma Varela Olivas (right) and Carmela Varela (left) at an after Mass social function enjoying a meal.[265]

Moments like these were seen as a reprieve from constantly having to speak English in their public lives and allowed "friends [to] catch up on the latest news in a rush of Spanish."[266] One parishioner noted in a newspaper interview that "Hispanics are

[264] Melo Interview
[265] "Hispanic Catholics Celebrate Liturgy in Spanish" *Mississippi Today*
[266] "Group of Hispanics Probably Smallest of State's Minorities" *Clarion -Ledger*

appreciative of the ministry they receive from the Jackson diocese because it helps them preserve their cultural religion."[267] This idea of cultural preservation is a key feature of Hispanic ministry in Mississippi. It allows for a community to emerge that revolves around a shared language and religion and to be able to find a sense of comfort and normalcy as they are being thrown into a new environment and culture. In spaces like the church Latinos were able to exchange news of important events, be it personal or political. Religious gatherings "were moments of socialization and celebration."[268] As discussed earlier, Hispanic communities in Mississippi used the church as a way to assist one another in gathering paper work and letters of recommendation for the pivotal IRCA of 1986.[269] Religious social functions acted as a beacon for community building. But what makes this special is that it brought together not only Mexican migrants but created a new pan-Latino community that would only grow from the early 1980s and onward.

Other scholarship surrounding migrant communities have also found the creation of a pan-Latino identity through these types of religious communities.[270] In his study of Mayan labor migrants, Fink notes that migrants felt Latino solidarity because they experienced similar treatment from Americans.[271] In their eyes, Americans saw no cultural difference between indigenous Mayans and Mexicans.[272] A similar pattern emerged for Latinos in Mississippi. Melo recalled how "there were several families we

[267] "Hispanic Catholics Celebrate Liturgy in Spanish" *Mississippi Today*
[268] O'Hara, *A Flock Divided*, 162
[269] Varela-Quintero Interview.
[270] Fink, *The Maya of Morganton*, 157
[271] Fink, *The Maya of Morganton*, 157
[272] Fink, *The Maya of Morganton*, 157

had and not all of them were from Mexico too…Like we had friends from Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Peru, yeah a lot of them just Latin America part."[273]

The church helped sustain its growing Latino community, not only in Jackson but across the Southern United States through its youth ministry. Melo described how at the beginning of the 1980s, there were only a few teenagers and children her age leading the Varela and Ramos families to become close.[274] Originally, the small group of teens would get together every once and a while after church.[275] However, Hispanic youths could only keep this up for a short while before they began to lose interest in attending small church functions that did not cater to their age group. Utilizing their contact with Father Vizcaino, Hispanic youth were able to participate in retreats outside of Mississippi.

> [Vizcaino] would come maybe every, once a year and come and celebrate with us but he put the Hispanic teenagers in touch with people in New Orleans and in touch with people from Florida. They had what they called SEPI -- he was in charge of all the southern area and he, they themselves put in a retreat from all the Southern kids and it was in St. Augustine, Florida. So, we got to go to that and within that we also made some real contacts around the New Orleans area and that's what we used to go to the retreats with.[276]

By participating in these retreats, Mississippi Latinos were able to create new social networks that expanded beyond the state. These connections show how religious gatherings were a catalyst for Latinos of any age to create their own communities that spanned across the region.

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[273] Melo Interview
[274] Melo Interview
[275] Wiesenberger Interview
[276] Melo Interview

During the early 1980s, Latino participation in the church was a come one come all. At the time, Catholic Hispanics would show up to church when they could. Due to the limited size of the community, participation was split between genders.[277] Both men and women, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters would attend church at an even percentage. However, as the Spanish Masses grew in size and more Latinos settled in the Jackson area, a shift occurred. Towards the end of the decade and into the 1990s, women became the primary makeup of church participation.[278] With more children in the parish, women took the lead on creating programming specifically for Hispanic children causing a rise in their lay participation but a decrease in male church involvement. Women's increased participation in the church shows the "larger transformation of gender roles."[279] They are active in the community, beyond just the home. It also shows how adjusting to new communities has impacts on transnational cultures.[280] However, despite these changes, the church was a vehicle for Latinos to continue cultural religious traditions through the celebration of Latino specific religious remembrances.

Within Hispanic Catholic communities, particularly Mexicans, Our Lady of Guadalupe is an important symbol in the church. The image of Our Lady has migrated along with Latinos and transformed to represent Hispanic culture.[281] It was important for Mississippi Latinos to carry on with these celebrations. Every year on December 12, Catholic Hispanics would gather at midnight to sing "serenatas."[282] The next day at noon

[277] Melo Interview
[278] Melo Interview,
[279] Fink, *The Maya of Morganton*, 158
[280] Fink, *The Maya of Morganton*, 158
[281] Gordillo, *Mexican Women*, 71; Our Lady of Guadalupe is a depiction of the Virgin Mary as she appeared to an indigenous peasant in the Mexican countryside. This image has become synonymous with Mexican culture.
[282] Melo Interview

they would attend Mass and bring flowers to lay at the feet of a statute of the Virgin of Guadalupe.[283] These ceremonies were incredibly simple in the beginning but as the Masses grew bigger and bigger leading to large processions around the church and even a shrine dedicated to the religious figure in Pass Christian, located South Mississippi.[284] Annually celebrations, like Our Lady of Guadalupe, shows the religious practices that the entire church community could participate in, but it is important to understand that these helped strengthen the community as a whole. Latinos centered themselves around the church, but through added interactions with parishioners outside of the church, Hispanics supported one another and created their own community providing emotional, financial, and physical support.

The Varela children fondly remembered how helpful their church community was for them. It was where they met their friends and could find people who related to their cultural experiences. This community also acted as a support system for those in need. Melo described how if someone in the community was sick, they would take food and visit the person or family.[285] This idea of an extended family became extremely important for Latinos in Mississippi. It helped them cope with being isolated from their countries of origin and helped create a pan-Latino space that transcended national ethnicity. Irma Varela would "always have the kids over" and she would cook for anyone who showed up.[286] Her children later recalled what great lengths their mother went to help those who needed it when she could.

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[283] Melo Interview,
[284] Carl McIntire, "Shrine Dedicated at Pass Christian," *Clarion-Ledger*, July 31, 1977
[285] Melo Interview
[286] Melo Interview

> She was such a good-hearted person, I mean she would take people in all the time, they would just come here. There was a man from Mexico City that stayed with us for a few months and there was another guy and I want to say he lived where we lived and he stayed with us for a little bit. And we had an older man and that I think he was Hispanic but he had already been here for a while, not in Mississippi, but in the U.S. somewhere and he was older and he was sick so my mother took him in. She was always helping people.[287]

It is quite remarkable that this would happen considering that Varela was already trying to support seven children as a single mother. The communities that Latinos created for themselves provided a safe space for new arrivals and laid the groundwork for larger more publicized migrations into Mississippi.

Conclusion

Through the 1990s, the church has grown larger and larger, offering more programs for its members. Some of the Varelas left the Spanish church for a few years but returned after their children had grown up. Melo began to work with the Spanish community to create programs for the youth in the Spanish community. The sense of community in the Spanish Mass has only grown since its inception. However, some of its parishioners feel as though there is not enough support from the diocese due to the lack of Spanish speaking priests.[288] Despite these issues, the community has steadily grown and remained a pillar in the Hispanic community.

The Varela family was one of the first to participate in Hispanic ministry in Mississippi. Their accounts note how important the Catholic church was for the growing Hispanic community. Hispanic ministry blurred the lines between

[287] Varela-Quintero Interview
[288] Melo Interview

management and workers, workers from different work sites, and Spanish speaking immigrant populations not from Mexico. The church created a pan-Latino space where migrants from all backgrounds could find a sense of kinship, create an extend family and build an informal social support system. Through these informal communities, Mississippi Hispanics in the 1970s and 1980s set the groundwork for the larger Latino Catholic community in the state that continues to grow.

CHAPTER V – Conclusion

Since the first wave of Mexican labor recruitment, the Latino population in the state has grown. According to the 2020 census, Latinos comprised 3.6 percent of Mississippi's population.[289] Scott County, where Morton is located, had the highest population of Latinos totaling 14 percent.[290] The census indicated that since 2010 the population of Latinos has grown by 29.1 percent in the state. However, the 2020 census data gathering process was plagued with discrepancies.

Further research done by journalists and the Census Bureau, revealed that Mississippi's total population is "larger and most likely more diverse" than what was reported in the official census.[291] While the census showed that the population decreased by 0.2%, the follow-up work suggests that the state actually increased in population. The majority of the undercounted population growth "was among Mississippi's racial minority groups."[292] The population was undercounted by 4.11 percent.[293] Studies conducted by the Urban Institute, a nonprofit research organization, concluded that the undercount in Mississippi occurred amongst African American and Hispanic populations.[294] Researchers have estimated that African Americans were undercounted by 3.3 percent and Hispanics by 4.99 percent.[295] So while the state reported that it had lost

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[289] *Mississippi: 2020 Census*, United States Census Bureau, https://www.census.gov/library/stories/state-by-state/mississippi-population-change-between-census-decade.html

[290] *Mississippi: 2020 Census*, United States Census Bureau.

[291] Bobby Harrison, "Mississippi Has More People and is Most Likely More Diverse Than the 2020 Census Reported," *Mississippi Today*, May 29, 2022, https://mississippitoday.org/2022/05/29/mississippi-census-undercount-population/

[292] Harrison, "Mississippi Has More People"

[293] Harrison, "Mississippi Has More People"

[294] Harrison, "Mississippi Has More People"

[295] Harrison, "Mississippi Has More People"

6,000 people in its population, in actuality the state actually gained around 100,000.[296] The large undercounting is initially shocking however, in the context of the 2020 census and the political climate at the time, things begin to make more sense.

During 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic and interference from the presidential administration created the perfect storm for the discrepancies in the census. Recent lawsuits and new documents have revealed that the Donald Trump administration actively sought to tamper with the census process and results. It was discovered in an email exchange with members of the Census Bureau that "Trump's political appointees… demonstrated an 'unusually' high level of 'engagement in technical matters, which is unprecedented relative to the previous censuses."[297] Commerce secretary Wilbur Ross was discovered to have asked the Bureau if they could "produce a state-by-state count of unauthorized immigrants and citizenship data" that could explicitly politically benefit Republicans with the redrawing of voting districts.[298]

Due to 2020 being an election year, the Trump administration was dealing with the fact that if Trump lost his election, the administration would also lose the chance to alter census data. The hope was that these alterations would affect voting districts and representation. In July of 2020, Trump released a presidential memorandum that called for the exclusion of undocumented immigrants in the census's counting.[299] The administration's hope was to alter the trajectory of the House of Representatives and the

[296] Harrison, "Mississippi Has More People"

[297] Hansi Lo Wang "Trump Officials Interfered with the 2020 Census Beyond Cutting it Short, Email Shows," *NPR,* January 15, 2022, https://www.npr.org/2022/01/15/1073338121/2020-census-interference-trump

[298] Lo Wang, "Trump Officials Interfered with the 2020 Census"

[299] Lo Wang, "Trump Officials Interfered with the 2020 Census"

Electoral College.[300] Despite public uproars, the census counting was cut short by the administration which led to a federal lawsuit and resulted in the undercounting in various states, including in Mississippi.

The undercounting of the Latino population in Mississippi echoes issues that occurred in censuses taken fifty years ago. The 1970s Census severely undercounted migrating Mexicans and recent data shows that the same problems. Census records make it nearly impossible to understand the scope of the Latino community in the state. Therefore, it is imperative that scholars take a deeper look into these communities beyond census records by studying the on the ground experiences of migrants.

The Varelas

After Irma left B.C. Rogers, she held a string of jobs for the next thirty years. She worked as a photo developer at School Pictures in Jackson then moved into the food service industry. Irma became locally known in Jackson after she became the chef at Iron Horse Grill, a well-known restaurant in the city. She is credited for introducing Mexican food onto the menu which has now become a mainstay for the restaurant.

[300] Lo Wang "Trump Officials Interfered with the 2020 Census"

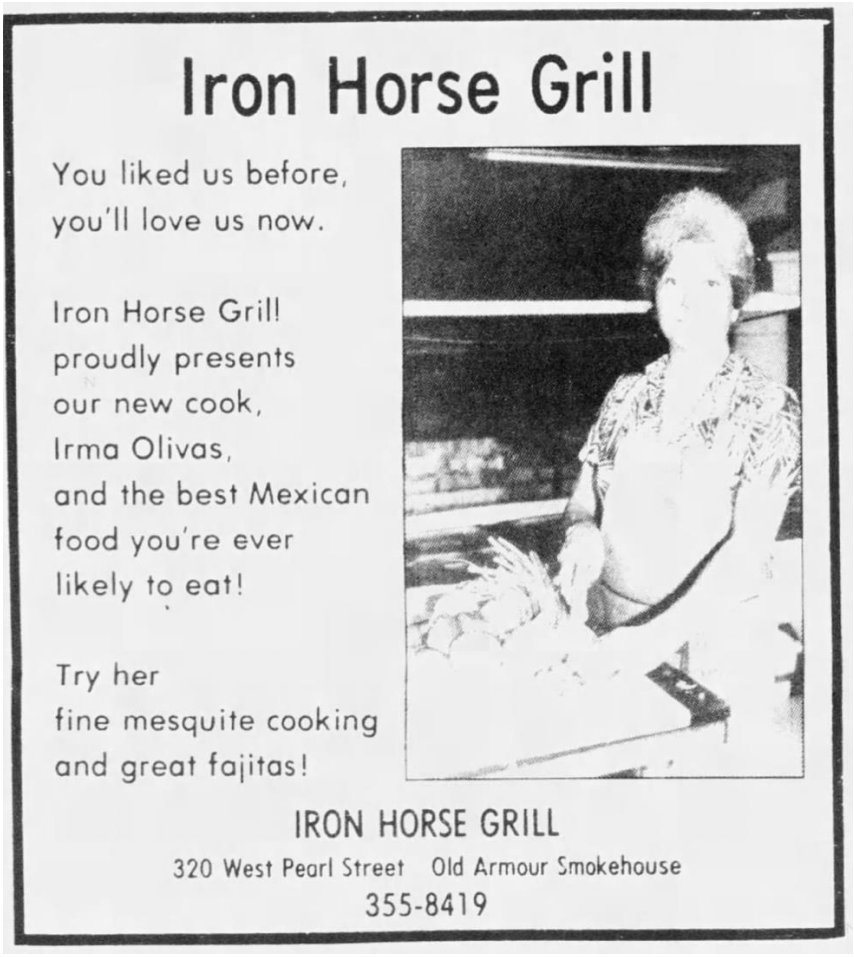

Figure 8: Irma Olivas Varela in an Ad For Iron Horse Grill

Image depicts Irma Olivas Varela in an ad for Iron Horse Grill.[301]

After working as a chef in different restaurants, the Varelas went on to open their own restaurant called "Ruben's" which was primarily run by Ruben Varela with Irma working in the kitchen.[302] The family would sell the restaurant after the death of Ruben and go on to other occupations. Varela would then work at a crockpot factory in Pearl, Mississippi until she was injured on the job and retired.[303] The children got married and had children of their own, creating an even larger family that remained incredibly close to one another.

[301] "Iron Horse Grill" *Northside Sun*, October 16, 1986
[302] Varela-Quintero Interview
[303] Varela-Quintero Interview

Varela remained heavily involved in her family's lives until her death in the late 2000s. The story of the Varelas is one of perseverance and resilience. What began as a single mother of seven uprooting her life in Mexico to work in a small town in Mississippi has turned into a flourishing community of multiple generations of Mexican-Mississippians.

Figure 9: Irma with Her Children and Grandchildren in the 1990s

Image depicts Irma (third from left) with her children and grandchildren in the 1990s

Figure 10: Varela Grandchildren with Their Grandmother, Irma in the 2000s

Image depicts Varela grandchildren with their grandmother, Irma in the 2000s

The Latino Community Today

The growing Latino community in Mississippi, like the Varela family, has grown and expanded throughout the state. Their presence can be seen in the growing number of Hispanic grocery stores in large and small cities and other businesses. Mexican restaurants began to become as common as fast food joints. Spanish newspapers, like *La Noticia de Misisipi*, circulate around the state providing news and other information for the Spanish speaking population. Evidence of a growing Latino community can still be

found in small towns near poultry plants. Towns like Morton and Canton have a significant population of Latinos that remain consistently present.

Older Hispanic communities, like the Catholic Church, have also grown. The church in Jackson now offers religious education for Hispanic children and ceremonies, like Our Lady of Guadalupe, have only grown in size and magnitude.[304] Since the 1990s, different churches across the state have begun to offer programs to help Latino children with school work and learning English. Sacred Heart Catholic Church, located in Canton, MS near PECO chicken plant, offered tutoring for children, advertised in their church bulletin:

> We are organizing an after-school program to help our Hispanic children with their homework. Since many of their parents don't speak English they are not able to help their children. We have a special fund for this program. We can pay trained teachers $20 per hour and assistants $15 per hour. Please call if you can help. Classes will be held on Tues., Wed., and Thurs. at the trailer park from 3 to 7. Please call Fr. Mike if you can help![305]

Programs, like tutoring, were a mainstay in Hispanic community of Canton until the pandemic struck, which ended the program for the church. However, the years that it was offered allowed children to work on their language skills while still being surrounded by other Hispanic children and families. The church would become an even bigger presence in the lives of Hispanic children in the face of immense trauma that would occur in 2019.

[304] Melo Interview

[305] "Sacred heart Catholic Church Canton, Mississippi: Twenty- Second Sunday in Ordinary Time September 3, 2017," 2017, https://files.ecatholic.com/16967/bulletins/20170903.pdf?t=1504206594000

Immigration Raids

In 2019, multiple coordinated raids were executed by U.S. Immigration Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations at seven poultry plants throughout Mississippi.[306] The raids specifically targeted Latino immigrant laborers working in these plants. The arrest totaled to over 600 workers. The raids were a result of the Trump administration's attempt to remove "millions of undocumented workers from the country" and are believed "to be the largest statewide immigration crackdown in recent history."[307]

The raids' effect was immediately felt. Children were quickly informed that no one would be home for them when they returned from school, families were left scared and confused about how to process what had just happened. Over six hundred people had been detained and hundreds of families were left broken. Days after the raids, poultry plants, like Koch formally B.C. Rogers, had almost instantly refilled the positions that had been left vacant.[308] Businesses that catered to the Spanish speaking community were empty and schools in the area were left scrambling with how to comfort hundreds of children who had been left parentless.[309] Churches and schools became ground zero for helping families with basic needs, like paying bills, buying groceries, and providing clothing and toiletries. Shelters were set up in church and school buildings with areas designated for legal aid.[310] Companies were hit with fines for hiring undocumented

[306] Richard Gonzales, "Mississippi Immigration Raids Lead to Arrests of Hundreds of Workers," *NPR,* August 7, 2019, https://www.npr.org/2019/08/07/749243985/mississippi-immigration-raids-net-hundreds-of-workers

[307] Richard Fausset, "After ICE Raids, a Reckoning in Mississippi's Chicken Country," *The New York Times*, December 28, 2019

[308] Charles Bethea, "After ICE Came to Morton Mississippi," *The New Yorker*, October 19, 2019

[309] Bethea, "After ICE Came to Morton"

[310] Bethea, "After ICE Came to Morton"

workers but carried on with operations despite the large loss of their workforce, business as usual. Government reports alleged that chicken plants were using out of state "payroll company[ies] in order to minimize responsibility for employing undocumented workers."[311]

These raids reveal that migrant labor recruitment is still rampant in the poultry industry in Mississippi. The methods of recruitment may have changed but the outcomes remain the same. Poultry companies continue to use tactics of labor exploitation to find a cheaper way to make their product. Latino migrant communities carried on with their lives as best as they can. The only safety nets they have are the communities they build for themselves. The Mississippi Latino community is still reeling from the ICE raids but like the first wave of labor migration into the state, they have built stronger communities and areas where they find support. These migrants have continued the efforts first began by families, like the Varelas.

[311] Bethea, "After ICE Came to Morton"

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