Introduction: Immigration History and the End of Southern Exceptionalism

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Introduction: Immigration History and the End of Southern Exceptionalism

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FROM METROPOLITAN HOUSTON TO North Carolina's Fort Bragg, from multi-ethnic Tampa to majority-white Northwest Arkansas, the locales highlighted by this special issue's authors represent a historical exploration of a South we knew was there, but that too few scholars have investigated. Across these varied landscapes, the authors find consensus in the assertion that, in Perla Guerrero's words, "place makes race." Each of the pieces charts the experiences of Latina/os or Asian immigrants in specific southern locations, and each shows how those experiences—socially, racially, and politically—depended upon intimately local dynamics.

Yet though none of the authors explicitly state as much, taken as a whole this special issue shows us that although place has definitively made race, region has not—at least in the twentieth century. Each of the southern places discussed in this issue has been profoundly shaped by the black-white binary; however, frameworks such as borderlands, the Sunbelt, and a global US imperial landscape prove more useful than region in helping these authors explain racial formations. Nonetheless, some of these pieces, as well as other work on immigration to the US South, point to the ways that discourses of regional exceptionalism—the *idea* that the South is unique in its racial history—have shaped immigrants' understandings of their experiences there.

Immigration history should help settle a major debate about the proper way to understand US history. For the past fifteen years, a group of historians has advocated, as the title of an edited collection suggested, for the end to "The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism."[1] This myth, they argue, has obscured the dynamics of US history in the service of letting the rest of the nation off the hook for racial divisions. The challenge to the very notion of southern history has matured concurrently to the literature on Latina/o and Asian migration to the region, as the latter was largely inspired by the 2000 census results showing dramatic growth in the region's ethnic diversity.

This special issue allows us the opportunity to take stock of these simultaneous intellectual developments by peering into the current state

of historiography on immigration to the US South. The issue's authors and editors are early-career scholars who have had the ability to build upon this subfield's first small wave. Rather than surprising readers with the mere presence of immigrants in the US South, these authors delve deeply into particular locations to reveal racial dynamics of interest to scholars of race and immigration nationally and even globally. By homing in on decidedly translocal historical actors, immigration history as exemplified in this special issue shows us that while place has mattered immensely and consistently in social and political history, region *sine qua non* has not.

Sarah McNamara's work on the 1930s documents the history of Latina activism in Tampa. McNamara applies both a southern history and a borderlands history framework to her subject: Luisa Moreno, an elite Guatemalan immigrant who became a labor organizer in New York City. Moreno succeeded in spurring Latina cigar workers to action in Tampa when she organized there between 1935 and 1937. The southern context, McNamara argues, is that Moreno organized in the backyard of a KKK that had violently lynched male organizers considered to be too radical; in this environment, Moreno had unusual leeway as a woman. Ultimately, though, the author's borderlands framework proves much more useful for understanding Moreno and her campaigns. As several historians have shown, the US West—particularly California and Arizona—also saw a stunning resurgence of the Klan in the 1920s.[2] Vigilante violence, and the unique place of women within its web, thus links the Florida borderlands to the Mexico–US borderlands at least as tightly as it connects Tampa to other locales in the South.

Moving into the postwar period, Yuri Doolan argues that military bases in southern communities became significant nodes in global flows of people, capital, and ideas—and that these flows' impact was not contained within the boundaries of the base. Indeed, Doolan establishes these bases as key drivers of Korean immigration to the US South. Korean women who came to the United States through marriage first established prostitution "camptowns" alongside southern bases. Eventually, war brides sponsored the immigration of additional family members to the United States and created Korean immigrant economies that encompassed far more than prostitution. In the South, military bases were "like islands in a sea of Jim Crow" because race relations on base were more equitable than in surrounding towns. Yet Doolan's work shows that similar phenomena extended to military communities beyond the South, for example in San Diego, California. The South here functions as a setting for a specific type of gendered migration to the

fringe of an imperial militarized space, rather than as a clearly defined region whose exceptionalism must always be recovered.

Both Perla Guerrero's reflections and Uzma Quraishi's article move us into the years of Jim Crow's conflictual dismantling. Guerrero's recollections of being presumed Vietnamese when her Mexican immigrant family moved from Los Angeles to northwest Arkansas in 1996 reinforce her indisputable claim that place makes race. Indeed, her experiences point to the comparative significance of a sub-regional context, northwest Arkansas, because they were shaped by a local history: the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees there during the 1970s. Guerrero likely would have been presumed Puerto Rican in the environs of a southern military base, or recognized as Mexican in Atlanta as the building of Olympic venues brought an influx of Mexican immigrants to that city the very same year.

In Quraishi's work, we see how Indian and Pakistani immigrants remained on the margins of Houston society even as they found welcome economic opportunity in the city's universities, engineering firms, and oil companies during the 1960s and 1970s. Quraishi's oral history subjects spoke of the discrimination they faced, which was occasionally overt but more commonly unspoken. Her account of Houston's phenomenal growth and accompanying discourse of internationalism rings of contemporary developments in southern growth magnets like Charlotte and Atlanta. Yet it is likely that further research would reveal that South Asian immigrants had comparable experiences during that period in other segregated tech hubs, such as Boston or Seattle.

Though Quraishi's subjects' experiences may not have been uniquely southern, the oral history of Indian immigrant Ashok Dani attests to the power of southern-ness in constructing *narratives* about race. "Texans, they're very rough," Dani observed, adding that his new neighbors' cowboy attire signaled their unwillingness to "accept the modern world." Dani, who had previously lived in New York, was the only subject who specifically framed his observations of white Houstonians' racism within liberal American stereotypes of white Texans. He likely picked up such ideas from white New Yorkers, for whom condemnations of southern racism have historically functioned as proclamations of their own racial innocence.

By using regions as too-powerful frames for historical training, analysis, and writing, the field of US history—including immigration history—has played a key role in generating and communicating the discourses of regional exceptionalism that Dani later repeated. Immigration historians

have largely neglected the South until recently, despite obvious clues that immigration had long shaped the region. Postbellum southern planters' longstanding search for non-black labor and the desire of immigrants to leave behind saturated labor markets and racially oppressive environments in their initial migration destinations made the existence of these southern migration histories predictable. The South's immigrants were mostly hiding in plain sight in US census documents. Yet stereotypes of the region's insularity—in Ashok Dani's words, its unwillingness to "accept the modern world"—prevented immigrants' children from seeing their own communities as potential subjects of academic research even as it hindered academic historians from "finding" these communities sooner.

Thus, since high school curriculum lags far behind academic production, today's Latina/o and Asian youth in the US South still find themselves unnecessarily history-less. "Which water fountain would I be able to drink from?" they ask their teachers.[3] Trapped in the regional narratives that we historians have promoted, many feel themselves less entitled to make political claims and alienated from the very histories of civil rights struggle with which they could otherwise connect. Their material and racial experiences bear much in common with those of their compatriots in Delano, Chicago, and Denver. Yet, their political potential is different because they are uniquely alienated from history.

The academic debate over southern exceptionalism is thus far more than a nerdy indulgence. Immigration historians must devote further attention to the region because its history, like that of any other region, contains usable pasts for those living today—and not just those living in the South. This nascent historiography has shown that at times the South presented unique challenges or opportunities to its newcomers, but that it did so in ways that reflected and connected to other places domestically and internationally rather than in a regionally coherent fashion. As immigrants confront renewed hostility everywhere in the age of Trump, scholars must also look everywhere for critical histories of US immigration while dismantling the notion that white supremacy—and resistance to it—was ever contained in a single corner of the country.

NOTES

1. Matthew D. Lassiter and Joseph Crespino, eds., *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010).

2. Katherine Benton-Cohen, *Borderline Americans: Racial Division and Labor War in the Arizona Borderlands* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 260; Albert Camarillo, *Chicanos in a Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios in Santa Barbara and Southern California, 1848–1930* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 193–94; Matt García, *A World of Its Own: Race, Labor, and Citrus in the Making of Greater Los Angeles, 1900–1970* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 76.

3. Jamie Winders, *Nashville in the New Millennium: Immigrant Settlement, Urban Transformation, and Social Belonging* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2013), 127.