

Introduction

NEW DESTINATIONS

One of the most notable demographic shifts in recent decades is Latino migration to nontraditional destinations in the US South. These migrants are transforming the landscape, the soundscape, and cultural, political, and economic life of the communities where they settle. In 2010, the sheriff of Osceola County, Florida, a Central Florida native, told me that “we went from a rural county to mouse house, SeaWorld, and the large influx of Hispanics. Businesses had to adapt.” His office had to change. “We needed Spanish speakers, receptionists, employees, and officers that could not only communicate with the people verbally, but that also understood their culture.” In his mind, the tourist industry and the migration of Hispanics were the two forces that were transforming the county. He was right.

Latino Orlando: Suburban Transformation and Racial Conflict documents the migration and settlement of Puerto Ricans and other Latinos in Greater Orlando; identifies the transformations these migrants have made to the landscape and the soundscape and the local response; and examines how race- and class-based identities are constructed and represented. The book focuses on Greater Orlando, which consists of the four counties—Orange, Osceola, Lake, and Seminole—that are part of the Orlando-Kissimmee-Sanford, Florida, Metropolitan Statistical Area.¹ This book draws attention to the Puerto Rican population, diversifying the academic literature on the Latino migrants who have settled in the South.

Latino settlement patterns in the United States have historically been associated with urban life. Migrations to gateway cities—such as the movement of Mexicans and Central Americans to Los Angeles, Houston, and Dallas; Puerto Ricans to Chicago and New York City; and Cubans to Miami—are well documented.²

Since the mid-1990s, however, Latinos have dispersed in massive numbers, moving primarily to rural towns and large cities in the South and Midwest and to smaller cities in the Northeast. Added to rapid growth in particular rural areas is a shift toward the suburbs, areas where people have “little to no recollection of experience with Latino/a newcomers.”³ These settlements are much smaller than the communities in traditional gateway cities such as East Harlem. However, rapid population growth and community formation has increased the visibility of migrants in new destinations. It is speed, not size, that is defining Latino population growth in southern states. Table 0.1 shows the demographic changes in the ten states with the fastest-growing Latino population in the period 1990 to 2010, most of which are in the South. Table 0.2 shows the more modest change in the traditional settlement states in that same period.

Table 0.1. US states with fastest-growing Latino population, 1990–2000

	1990	2000	% Change	2010	% Change
North Carolina	76,726	378,963	+394	800,120	+111
Arkansas	19,876	86,866	+337	186,050	+114
Georgia	108,922	435,227	+300	853,689	+96
Tennessee	32,741	123,838	+278	290,059	+134
Nevada	124,419	393,970	+217	716,501	+82
South Carolina	30,551	95,076	+211	235,682	+148
Alabama	24,629	75,830	+208	185,602	+145
Kentucky	21,984	59,939	+173	132,836	+122
Minnesota	53,884	143,382	+166	250,258	+75
Nebraska	36,969	94,425	+155	167,405	+77
US total	22,354,059	35,305,818	+58	50,477,54	+43

Source: Social Explorer, “Census 1990 [Hispanic or Latino by Specific Origin, Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Minnesota]”; Social Explorer, “Census 1990 [Hispanic or Latino by Specific Origin, Nebraska, Nevada, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee]”; “Census 2000 [Hispanic or Latino by Specific Origin, Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Minnesota]”; Social Explorer, “Census 2000 [Hispanic or Latino by Specific Origin, Nebraska, Nevada, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee]”; “Census 2010 [Hispanic or Latino by Specific Origin, Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Minnesota]”; Social Explorer, “Census 2010 [Hispanic or Latino by Specific Origin, Nebraska, Nevada, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee].”

Table 0.2. Change in the Latino population in traditional settlement states, 1990–2010

	1990	2000	% Change	2010	% Change
California	7,687,938	10,966,556	+43	14,013,719	+28
New York	2,214,026	2,867,583	+30	3,416,922	+19
Illinois	904,446	1,530,262	+69	2,027,578	+32
New Jersey	739,861	1,117,191	+51	1,555,144	+39

Source: Social Explorer, "Census 1990 [Hispanic Origin by Race, California, Illinois, New Jersey, New York]"; Social Explorer, "Census 2000 [Hispanic Origin by Race, California, Illinois, New Jersey, New York]"; Social Explorer, "Census 2010 [Hispanic Origin by Race, California, Illinois, New Jersey, New York]."

An examination of the geography and demography of new destinations in the South reveals that the initial population of Latino migrants who settled in nontraditional places tended to be born outside the United States. They also tended to be young, undocumented Mexicans who were attracted to employment opportunities.⁴ Yet "in less than two decades, this migration has transitioned from a seasonal, agricultural migration of young *mexicanos* into Georgia and North Carolina to a regional settlement of Latino families from other US cities and towns, all parts of Mexico, [Puerto Rico] and much of Central and South America."⁵ These shifts in migration patterns were driven by political unrest in Central America, southern employers' recruitment of labor, environmental disasters, the desire of immigrants to start over, and economic crises across Latin America.⁶

Focusing on the "new geography of Mexican migration," Vanesa Ribas points to the legalization programs of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, which "regularized the status of several million Mexicans." Many of these "legalized migrants left traditional settlement areas in the Southwest and California and made their way East and South in search of new opportunity structures."⁷ Other factors drew millions of Latino/a migrants to the Southeast, such as "the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border" and "the increasingly adverse context of reception in traditional destinations."⁸ Latino migrants were drawn to the Southeast because of economic restructuring and the rise of the manufacturing, construction, and meat-processing industries.

I am not suggesting that Latino migration to the Southeast region is a completely new phenomenon. Particular places in the Southeast, such as rural Osceola County, have become new or maturing destinations of migration. Anthropologist Angela Stuesse points out that the “intensity and breadth of this growing trend is novel.”⁹ Historian Julie Weise argues that “when Latino migration to the U.S. South became visible seemingly out of nowhere in the 1990s, the newness of this ‘Nuevo’ South went unquestioned.”¹⁰ Weise, who recovers and compares earlier histories by documenting the experiences of Mexicans in New Orleans, the Mississippi Delta, the Arkansas Delta, rural southern Georgia, and the exurbs of Greater Charlotte found that a few southern planters “briefly recruited Mexicans in 1904, but in that and other cases the early immigrant experiments were short-lived.”¹¹ Through her comparisons, Weise is able to show that the experiences of migrants were place specific. The Mexican cotton pickers who were recruited to the Mississippi Delta during the 1920s did not enjoy the same privileges as the Latin American population of New Orleans due to their social class position. In New Orleans, the Latin American population numbered 1,400 in 1930 and included middle-class professionals, agents for shipping companies, and refugees from the Mexican Revolution who “secured their place among European-style white immigrants.”¹²

Despite the fact that Latinos have been in the Southeast since at least the early twentieth century, their presence has remained marginal in the collective memory of local populations. Many of the early migrants were largely transitory seasonal laborers who did not choose to remain in states such as Mississippi or Arkansas to form large, visible communities. Anthropologist Patricia Silver also notes the transitory nature of the earliest Puerto Rican migrants to Central Florida: “The stories we heard combine to give evidence of a diverse, and perhaps largely transient, Puerto Rican population in Central Florida in these earliest decades.”¹³

However, the Puerto Rican population in Greater Orlando is no longer transient. In the 1990s, Orange and Osceola, two of the four counties in Greater Orlando, became the leading destinations for Puerto Rican migrants and Florida displaced New Jersey as the state with the second-largest concentration of Puerto Ricans.¹⁴ The exodus of Puerto Ricans to Florida has intensified since Hurricane Maria wrought such destruction in 2017.