MAKING THE “INTERNATIONAL CITY”:
WORK, LAW, AND CULTURE IN IMMIGRANT ATLANTA, 1970-2006
by
TORE C. OLSSON
(Under the Direction of James C. Cobb)

ABSTRACT

In the wake of the Civil Rights movement, image-conscious Atlanta boosters unveiled a new slogan for their metropolis: the city that had previously been “too busy to hate” was now the “international city,” or “the world’s next great city.” Traditional historical accounts acknowledge the slow transition of Atlanta from Southern city to global landmark by viewing internationalization from the top-down, emphasizing the importance of the Hartsfield-Jackson international airport, growing foreign investment, and the later Olympic Games. But this dominant narrative leaves out an important factor that truly made Atlanta a cosmopolitan city: the steady influx of thousands of working-class immigrants and refugees. In portraying immigrant life within Atlanta since 1970, this thesis presents three vignette-style examinations of work, law, and culture in Atlanta’s immigrant communities, and demonstrates that making the “international city” was a slow and arduous process that sometimes faced resistance from native Atlantans.

INDEX WORDS: Atlanta, Immigration, Latino immigrants, Hispanic immigrants, Asian immigrants, Day labor, Vietnamese Amerasians, Immigration law, DeKalb Farmers Market, Food, Ethnic identity, Southern culture
MAKING THE “INTERNATIONAL CITY”:
WORK, LAW, AND CULTURE IN IMMIGRANT ATLANTA, 1970-2006

by

TORE C. OLSSON

Major Professor: James C. Cobb
Committee: John Inscoe
            Shane Hamilton

Electronic Version Approved:
Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
August 2007
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Without the help and guidance of my friends, family, and advisors, this Master’s thesis would never have become a reality. Having entered graduate school with intentions of studying the American Civil War, the shift towards recent immigration history was an odd and unplanned one, but I’d like to thank those who swayed me in this direction: Darren Grem, my informal “graduate advisor,” whose sagely advice and weekly Duvel breaks helped me survive my first year as a graduate student, and John Inscoe, who, in recommending that I look at the DeKalb Farmers Market, changed the course of my academic career. I also want to thank Jim Cobb, my ever-patient advisor, for providing me with excellent feedback and forcing me to rethink my assumptions about Southern history and culture. My parents and siblings, in cheering me on along the way, also inspired me throughout the process of researching, writing, and editing. But most of all, I want to thank Kelli Guinn for her never-ending support, countless rides to Atlanta, delicious meals, and limitless patience as I worked my way through this project. I couldn’t have done it without you.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION: Internationalization on a Human Level</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1  “This is Our City Not Theirs”: Latino Day Laborers and the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics of Public Space in Atlanta, 1980-2000</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2  Shaping Immigration Law at the Grassroots: Vietnamese Amerasians</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in Atlanta, 1975-2006</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3  Beyond Grits and Greens: The DeKalb Farmers Market, Food, and</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Identity in Atlanta, 1977-2006</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPILOGUE: A City Remade</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Internationalization on a Human Level

Ever since its founding as a railroad junction in the mid-nineteenth century, Atlanta’s leaders have been obsessed with the city’s image and status. In the wake of the Civil War, as the city was rebuilt after its strategic destruction by General William T. Sherman and his Union troops, Atlanta boosters achieved a Phoenix-like ascendency from ashes to greatness. Led by *Atlanta Constitution* editor Henry Grady, the city reinvented itself as the symbolic capital of the “New South,” a South that had recovered from the bitter war and was ready to move forward, melding a Northern-friendly industrial development ethic with a firm belief in white supremacy. When organized black southerners challenged the latter in the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and ‘60s, white progressives in Atlanta publicly embraced the social change, if only minimally at first, as Mayor William B. Hartsfield famously described his city as one “too busy to hate.”

However, Atlanta’s reinvention during the Civil Rights movement would not be its last image makeover. In the 1970s, the city grew rapidly but encountered massive problems that conflicted with its media-friendly proclamations of black and white brotherhood. Racial discord, economic inequality, and the dynamics of “white flight” helped to undermine Atlanta’s claims of having survived the previous decade’s racial turmoil unscathed. City leaders therefore planned a new transformation. Having already
looked beyond the South in the invention of the Sunbelt, an imaginary region defined not by “southern-ness” but by warm weather and a healthy “business climate,” they now looked beyond the borders of the United States. In cooperation with the city’s largest newspapers, the Journal and the Constitution, the now-biracial city leadership declared Atlanta an “international city,” and later, even more ambitiously, “the world’s next great city.” To Atlanta’s residents, who witnessed the construction of a massive airport that launched its first international flight in 1971, and the growing investment of foreign business, perhaps this slogan was more grounded in reality than its predecessor.

Acknowledging this development, recent writers have portrayed postwar Atlanta’s internationalization as a slow but steady process, beginning with the construction of the airport and culminating in the climactic 1996 Olympics. According to this dominant narrative, Atlanta joined the global sphere via transportation linkages, international investment, and finally the massive Olympic venture. But this top-down making of the “international city” leaves out a critical human factor that truly transformed Atlanta from a southern city into a global metropolis: a largely unforeseen immigrant influx and the demographic, social, and cultural upheaval that came with it. The story of Atlanta’s emergence as an international city is not simply a tale of boosters and bigwigs, but of working-class immigrants and refugees, primarily of Latin American and Asian origin, whose expanding presence often met resistance from natives who felt threatened by the arrival of a racially and culturally diverse population with few connections to established communities.¹

Demographic data reveal the tremendous impact post-Civil Rights immigration had on the city. In 1970, metropolitan Atlanta had a population of 1.39 million residents, of which only 16,119 were foreign-born. In 2005, the city’s total population had grown to more than 3,000,000, while its foreign-born contingent had exploded to 518,842, more than thirty-two times the original 1970 number. Outstripping any other immigrant group, residents of Mexican descent showed the most staggering growth: from 118 individuals in 1970, Atlanta claimed 217,873 residents of Mexican birth or ancestry in 2005. This exponential increase is only comparable with the arrival of Italian, Polish, and Jewish immigrants into northeastern cities at the turn of the twentieth century.\(^2\)

Atlanta’s immigrant experience, like the rest of the South, was and continues to be distinct from the rest of the nation. While many other major American cities were built around a century and a half of global migrations, Atlanta attracted few immigrant groups, due to a comparative lack of job opportunities and a rigid, racially obsessed social structure. Therefore, when foreigners arrived into Atlanta after the immigration law reform of the 1960s, they encountered a black and white city that lacked the diverse and distinct ethnic neighborhoods that characterized northern and western cities. Consequently, a majority of these newest immigrants were not joining previous families of settlers, but were pioneers in a developing migration pattern that was often composed of young, unattached, and relatively uneducated males, particularly for newcomers of Latin American origins.

\(^2\) In discussing “metropolitan Atlanta,” I refer to the five counties that constitute the bulk of the city’s population: Fulton, Cobb, Gwinnett, DeKalb, and Clayton. Data source: 1970 U.S. Census results and the U.S. Census Bureau 2005 American Community Survey for the said five counties.
In the last three decades of the twentieth century and continuing into the twenty-first, these immigrants and refugees interacted with, separated themselves from, and assimilated into mainstream Atlanta society. A vignette-style examination of three facets of immigrant life within the city – work, law, and culture – will illuminate this process and promises to enrich the still-slender historiography of the modern immigrant experience in Atlanta. In describing immigrant life within the city, these three snapshots connect the gradual process of internationalization with larger themes in ethnic, American, and southern history. By looking at specific immigrant groups and their interactions with the city’s labor market, laws, and culture, each vignette reveals the complexities of integration and assimilation in a previously biracial society.

A major theme that connects studies of post-1965 American immigration is the importance of work, both in attracting immigrants to the United States and structuring their lives upon arrival. While some of Atlanta’s newcomers were refugees forced out of their homelands by political and military strife, a larger majority were immigrants who relocated by their own volition, motivated by a wide range of factors. In the 1980s and ‘90s, Atlanta’s booming economy spawned the demand for inexpensive workers, especially within the construction industry, which was fueled by suburban sprawl as the white and black middle classes left the city’s core. But as labor demand was highest in the suburbs, where few low-wage workers resided, tremendous shortages arose. The mass influx of immigrant laborers, who were mainly Latinos, was critical in re-energizing these industries, lowering prices, and enabling Atlanta’s rapid suburban expansion.
While builders and contractors viewed their arrival as a blessing, Latino workers faced a far more hostile response from the established communities in which they settled. Chapter One explores how Latino day laborers, who sought temporary employment on the sidewalks and parking lots of the municipalities they lived in, were confronted, regulated, and effectively demonized by their neighbors and local governments. In their attack on day labor, native residents preyed on fears of racial and cultural upheaval to portray Latino workers as threatening, unclean, and dangerous to the well-being of established communities. Whereas African-Americans had previously been the targeted group in regulating the use of public space, under earlier Jim Crow era segregation, recent Latino immigrants would also face laws and restrictions limiting their public presence and right to work.

Conflict over day labor first arose in northern DeKalb County along the Buford Highway Corridor, where in the 1980s thousands of Latino and Asian immigrants found affordable housing and access to public transportation. In the early ‘90s, the DeKalb cities of Chamblee and Doraville provoked bitter controversy in their attempts to resolve day labor issues, and over the question of how immigrants would be integrated into their communities. In the later years of the decade, and as Latino immigrants moved outwards from the Buford Corridor, day labor again became problematic in neighboring suburbs, such as Roswell and Marietta, though these cities would be subtler in their regulation and less confrontational in their approach. The continuing battle over work and public space in Atlanta’s suburbs demonstrates the tremendous impact that these immigrants had upon the city, and reveals the fierce opposition that foreign laborers often faced.
Just as work structured the lives of recent Atlanta immigrants, the laws that regulated their existence in the United States had equal effect. The history of American immigration law is closely linked to theories of race, nationality, and restriction: from the exclusion of Chinese laborers in the 1880s to the “colorblind” legislation of the early twenty-first century, conflicts over nationalism and the definition of “American-ness” have long shaped the laws that permit and restrict immigration. How does immigration law create and destroy ethnic communities? How has federal law impacted foreign-born residents, both legal and undocumented, at the grassroots? In the creation of illegal aliens and permanent residents, how has immigration law transformed the meaning of American citizenship?

To answer such questions, Chapter Two examines the experience of Atlanta’s Vietnamese Amerasians, who were the children of American servicemen and Vietnamese women during the Vietnam War. Growing up in a post-war Vietnam, Amerasians suffered abuse and discrimination from both their Vietnamese brethren and the Communist government, which considered these “half-breed” individuals to be “children of the enemy.” In the relatively homogenous Vietnamese society, Amerasians occupied the lowest position in a racial hierarchy. By the early 1980s, as the United States began to acknowledge the bitter consequences of its involvement in Vietnam, the American media reported extensively on the status of the Amerasians, who despite their American heritage, often lived as beggars on the streets of Vietnamese cities. National public outrage led Congress to legislate the creation of a unique immigrant category for Amerasians within the Immigration and Nationality Act, which culminated in the 1987 Amerasian Homecoming Act. Through the Homecoming Act, tens of thousands of
Amerasians relocated to the United States with their families, and were initially provided with financial assistance and housing.

With nearly a dozen non-governmental refugee aid societies, Atlanta became the third largest destination for Amerasians within the United States. While exact numbers are difficult to calculate, nearly five thousand Amerasians settled within the city, usually in low-income neighborhoods on the outskirts of other Southeast Asian immigrant communities. The foremost obstacle for the newly-arrived Amerasians would be language: not only did very few understand English, the majority were unable to read or write in Vietnamese, due to childhood discrimination in their homeland.

Language deficiencies also posed a larger problem in preventing them from gaining full citizenship, as the 1987 Homecoming Act only granted Amerasians permanent residency, a sort of legal purgatory that curtailed their rights as Americans. As federal law required an English exam in the naturalization process, very few Amerasians would earn American citizenship, and this vulnerability became apparent as permanent residents in violation of the law were threatened with deportation and ultimately sent back to Vietnam. Unable to achieve full status as American citizens, Atlanta’s Amerasians, just like Chapter One’s undocumented Latino workers, encountered uncertainty and hostility at the often unacknowledged periphery of the American legal system.

In describing the Atlanta Amerasians and their interaction with federal immigration law, two legal conflicts provide insight into the social and legal tensions that divided one Atlanta immigrant community. In United States v. Loc Lam, et al (1996), an Atlanta Amerasian gang from the mid-1990s was tried, convicted, and deported,
demonstrating that despite their unique history and status, Amerasians would not receive preferential treatment in criminal courts. Secondly, in *United States v. Tuan Phuoc Le* (2006), a Gwinnett County, Georgia Amerasian construction worker was tried for a 2005 attack on a Vietnamese official in Washington, D.C, but avoided deportation through the political and financial support of natives and immigrants across the nation. In each of these cases, Atlanta’s Vietnamese and Amerasian communities organized in attempts to reshape immigration law from the bottom-up, with varying degrees of success. In commenting on how federal law is made and unmade, the history of the Amerasians transcends both Atlanta and the South, and tells a truly American story.

Whether naturalized citizens, permanent residents, or undocumented aliens, newly-arrived immigrants settling and working within Atlanta had a profound impact on the city’s culture. In grappling with the effects of the introduction of immigrant cultures into a previously biracial society, Chapter Three considers the role of food and cross-cultural eating in a history of the DeKalb Farmers Market. Formed in 1977, the Farmers Market began as a roadside produce stand in Decatur, Georgia, a middle-class suburb in DeKalb County. Robert Blazer, the Market’s founder and current owner, had earlier moved to Georgia from Rhode Island, where he had grown up working in his father’s variety store in Pawtucket. Blazer’s initial aspirations in establishing the market were humble, and it was only as time passed, and as Atlanta’s immigrant population grew, that Blazer recognized this nascent consumer base and transformed his business into an international marketplace. The wide array of produce, meat, fish, and dry goods offered by the Market, which evolved from an “apple and a crate of greens” to exotic ethnic foods, allowed the preservation of immigrant cuisines and facilitated the operation of
non-Euro-American restaurants, while simultaneously becoming popular among native-born black and white Atlantans.

The history of the Market’s growth and evolution is thus symbolic of the larger cultural changes occurring within Atlanta, and demonstrates that the significance of Blazer’s company extends far beyond the realms of food and consumption. The Market’s expansion paralleled broader trends in Atlanta’s changing foodways, as witnessed in the cuisines offered by its many restaurants and grocery stores. Atlanta’s culinary atmosphere, just like the food selection at the Farmers Market, underwent a similar diversification over these three decades. In illustrating how cross-cultural eating affected regional and ethnic identities, this chapter suggests that food played a dual role in preserving and dissolving cultural borders, and enters into a continuing academic discourse about the elective nature of ethnic and racial identity. Lastly, the transformation of Atlanta’s foodways undermines traditional assumptions of southern culture as static and resistant to change, as native-born Southerners shopped alongside newly-arrived immigrants and proclaimed the Market an Atlanta landmark.

Before delving into the various questions that recent immigration poses, however, it is helpful to review the postwar history and historiography of Atlanta as a city not typically southern, but closely linked with larger trends shaping the region. Studies of Atlanta can generally be divided into two categories: popular and scholarly, of which the former often adopts a highly celebratory tone, describing the “triumph of a people,” in reference to one book’s title. These accounts describe the successful growth of a bustling
southern town into a world-class city, with countless pages devoted to *Gone with the Wind*, Coca-Cola, and other renowned Atlanta products.³

When academic historians discussed Atlanta, however, the expansion and development of the city were centered around race relations, big business, and Atlanta’s obsession with image. In 1996, as global interest in Atlanta peaked with the Olympic Games, several scholars published books that looked beyond the city’s media-friendly slogans for the real story of Atlanta’s development. These studies found that beneath the veneer of its projected image, Atlanta’s history was violent, untidy, and rife with racial unrest. While the city never experienced the open conflict in the 1960s that would haunt some of its southern neighbors, desegregation was a strained ordeal that was rarely completed in entirety. More recent examinations have analyzed the racial politics of urban and suburban development, the city’s role in the making of modern American political conservatism, and the “Atlanta Paradox,” the troubling contrast between the desperate poverty of the inner city and the booming affluence of its suburbs.⁴

In examining immigration trends, it is easy to gloss over the importance of earlier foreign settlers within Atlanta and the rest of the South, but despite their relatively small

³ For some popular accounts of Atlanta’s history, see Norman Shavin and Bruce Galphin, *Atlanta: The Triumph of A People* (Atlanta: Capricorn, 1985). This is only one of many popular histories of the city that dedicates its narrative to the “arch of [Atlanta’s] progress,” and often glosses over the deeper problems that the city confronted in its expansion. Ibid., 5.
numbers, they were not invisible and had some influence on the region’s development. While their volume was less striking than in northern and western cities, several ethnic groups did settle in Atlanta, though many arrived with cultural and financial capital that eased their assimilation into an established society. Atlanta’s sizable Jewish community, which had existed since the mid-nineteenth century, occupied a tenuous position in a city of black and white gentiles, and was often forced to adopt Christian cultural norms. Other ethnic groups, such as Greeks, and Cubans fleeing the Castro regime, also established homes within the city prior to recent influxes in the late twentieth century. In other parts of the South as well, Jewish, Italian, and Chinese immigrants settling in urban areas upset existing racial dynamics of white and black.5

The first major volume to examine post-1965 immigration trends into the South appeared in 1988 with Shades of the Sunbelt, and though they “look[ed] especially” at Florida, which experienced quite different waves of immigration from the traditional South, the contributors maintained that the Sunbelt was entering an era of serious

---

transformation. Though these migrations were only beginning in the late ‘80s, the editors recognized immigration into the South as an “unfinished agenda.” Only in recent years, with the publication of Leon Fink’s *The Maya of Morganton*, and the edited volumes of *The American South in a Global World* and *Globalization and the American South*, have historians come to terms with a South that is “a part of the world,” not “a world apart.”

Though no historian has yet published an overview of immigrants in postwar Atlanta, several recent articles hint at the significant transformation the city has undergone. Scholars within both the historical discipline and the social sciences have analyzed the role of Catholic and evangelical churches in community organization, racial tensions between recent immigrants and whites, the curious phenomenon of interethnic business in the Buford Highway Corridor, and issues of labor competition between both immigrants and native workers. Synthesizing these various perspectives into a more complete rendering of immigrant life within Atlanta will be a challenge for future scholars of southern ethnic history.  

---


Additionally, Atlanta is only one of several destinations for recent immigrants within Georgia, and a handful of authors have documented the dramatic influx of Latino immigrants into north Georgia industrial cities and several agricultural counties in the south. The cities of Gainesville and Dalton, with their dominant poultry and carpet industries, respectively, became home to thousands of legal and undocumented immigrants over two decades, predominantly of Latin American origin, often provoking conflict with local white communities that were unprepared for this massive demographic change.⁸

As immigration into the Sunbelt South escalates and gains importance, these wide gaps within the historiography become increasingly problematic. Immigrants did not arrive overnight; thus, present-day examinations are insufficient for understanding the place of newcomers within Atlanta and the rest of the South, and a historical perspective is imperative. To elucidate the role of recent immigrants in making Atlanta an “international city,” the following chapter will begin by examining the opposition and conflict faced by one group of immigrant workers, the Latino day laborers.

---

CHAPTER ONE

“This is our City not theirs”:
Latino Day Laborers and the Politics of Public Space in Atlanta, 1980 - 2000

In the early evening of August 14, 1992, a routine city council meeting in the northeastern Atlanta suburb of Chamblee exploded into controversy and opened a Pandora’s box of long-brewing racial tension. That night, amid the customary affairs of city government, the council received a petition, signed by thirty-seven homeowners calling themselves “the embarrassed part of Chamblee.” These outraged citizens, who were primarily native whites, claimed their hometown was turning into “the worst part of the Inner City area of New York.” Their contention lay with a critical issue: Latino men soliciting temporary employment on public property. These “aliens and vagrants,” claimed the petition, “gather, loiter and work in this country illegally,” and their presence is an “ever growing disaster within the City of Chamblee.” Reed Miller, Chamblee’s police chief, foresaw no simple solution: “your problem will exist until these people go back where they came from,” Miller told the petitioners. One council member joked that bear traps might prove the best solution, while another recommended the formation of a vigilante group. As reports of the council meeting became public, Atlanta’s immigrant communities expressed their outrage at such apparent nativism.¹

Yet to many Atlantans, Chamblee seemed an unlikely place for the making of history. Only a decade earlier, this small city of just seven thousand residents had been a primarily white working-class neighborhood, with little to grant it “international” status.

¹ City of Chamblee Council Meetings, Agendas and Minutes 1990-1993, 706, item 5: Chamblee City Hall, Chamblee, GA. Reed Miller quote is from the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, August 20, 1992, A2.
As Atlanta became a prime destination for immigrants throughout the 1980s, however, Chamblee and its neighbors in northern DeKalb County underwent a tremendous demographic transformation. In 1980, over 92 percent of Chamblee residents classified themselves as “white” for the purposes of the U.S. Census. Ten years later, this number had dropped to 56 percent, while Chamblee’s Latino population grew from 3 to 23 percent. Such rapid changes are rarely peaceful, and it is clear that the 1992 city council incident had its roots in the stresses of racial and demographic upheaval. And though day labor pools were not entirely new to Atlanta, they had previously been confined to the inner city, where they consisted primarily of homeless black and white men.²

While Chamblee was one of the first Atlanta suburbs to confront the task of integrating an informal immigrant work force, it would not be the last. As Latin American immigration into the South exponentially increased during the last two decades of the twentieth century, male Latino day laborers moved outwards into other Atlanta suburbs, such as Cobb, Gwinnett, and north Fulton counties, and the controversy in Chamblee would not remain anomalous for long. Additionally, these newly arrived Latino workers differed greatly from previous immigrants to Atlanta, and even from other Latino immigrants nationwide. In a 2005 Pew Hispanic Center report on Spanish-speaking immigrants in the late twentieth-century South, researchers found that Latinos in the new settlements of the South are much more likely than those in areas of traditional settlement [such as Texas and California] to have been born abroad, to have arrived recently, to be male, to be unmarried, and to be young. Most have relatively little education, and many do not speak English well.³

As few Latinos had resided in the area previously, these newest immigrants were not relocating for the purpose of family reunification, but were the trailblazers of a new surge in migration that often overwhelmed unprepared native-born residents.

This sudden introduction of low-wage foreign workers into Atlanta’s suburbs engendered countless conflicts and had lasting consequences. As latter-day Atlanta’s labor pools left downtown, lost their formal organization, and penetrated into the suburbs, racial, cultural, and class-based anxieties figured heavily into the regulation of an informal industry that had previously been untouched by government interference. The suburban day laborer, who was overwhelmingly a Latino male, was increasingly viewed as an undocumented and unwelcome racial “other” whose activities must be controlled. The politics of public space, which had proved so critical in the enforcement of segregation during the Jim Crow period, was reconfigured in the post-Civil Rights era to restrain and isolate a new racial minority: the Latino worker. From the perspective of native residents and suburban law enforcement, undocumented workers also presented a legal quandary and were often denied their human and civil rights.

Within DeKalb County, which was often the initial destination for arriving immigrants, the 1992 Chamblee city council conflict symbolized a critical turning point, as it ultimately forced Chamblee leaders to remake their city into a welcoming, immigrant-friendly ethnic enclave. However, Chamblee’s newfound willingness to capitalize on its diversity was not always mirrored by its neighbors, as witnessed in a series of events spurred by the 1992 controversy. In the outlying suburbs of Doraville, Roswell, and Marietta, the clash over day labor became one of the most heated components in the larger struggle of a southern city confronting a booming foreign-born
population. As the opportunity to work was a primary impetus behind recent waves of immigration, we must understand how and why Atlanta natives contested and regulated immigrant labor.

The historiography of Latin American immigration into the United States is a well-developed field, with roots in the Chicano movement of the 1960s, where scholars of primarily Mexican descent presented new models for understanding the assimilation and integration of Latinos into American society, particularly in the southwestern United States. Paralleling the rise of the “new social history” that showed early twentieth-century European immigrants transplanting their “old-world” roots in American soil, Chicano historians saw cultural continuity as a form of immigrant resistance to mainstream Americanization, for both foreign- and American-born Mexicans. In these studies, significant emphasis is placed on the long-term presence of Latinos in the Southwest, detailing the prolonged cultural exchange of the “borderlands” region.4

The explosion of Latin American immigration into the United States during the last fifty years has generated a distinct body of literature, which grows out of the earlier Chicano school. Questions of ethnic identity and culture remain, but they are often overshadowed by labor issues, as the opportunity to work was a critical “pull” factor in recent Latino immigration. The best studies discuss the complex interaction of labor

---

4 In regards to terminology, chicano refers to Mexican-born or Mexican-descended individuals living in the United States. The word often has political connotations, with its link to earlier indigenismo movements that sought to build pride in Mexican and indigenous heritages. Latino, a phrase that would arise later due to political necessities, describes a person from anywhere in Latin America, from Puerto Rico to Argentina. When speaking of Latino immigration into the United States, Mexican immigrants often constitute a vast majority, as they do in Atlanta. For examples of the foundational works of Chicano history, see Juan Gómez-Quiñones, “On Culture,” Revista Chicano-Riquena 5:2 (1977), Albert Camarillo, Chicanos in a Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios in Santa Barbara and Southern California, 1848-1930 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), and for a excellent synthesis, see George B. Sánchez, Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
demand and supply with national immigration law, in which the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act is often seen as a turning point in inadvertently encouraging immigrant family reunification and permanent Latino settlement within the United States. Only in the last five years have scholars analyzed the impact of Latino immigrants on the Southeast, though it is a rapidly growing field.\(^5\)

The day labor industry is not an entirely new phenomenon within the United States either, and long predated the arrival of recent Latino immigrants. Historians have demonstrated that unstable labor markets were common within the early American economy, and that immigrants often constituted a large portion of temporary workers, whether in nineteenth-century New York or early twentieth-century Los Angeles. Day labor work was often viewed as undesirable by most white American workers, but was often utilized by Irish and Mexican immigrants in the North and West, respectively.\(^6\)

Though historians have written extensively on immigrant day laborers in earlier periods, studies of recent Latino workers are dominated by social scientists, who approach the present-day informal labor market with a quantitative methodology, analyzing contemporary trends and focusing little on historical developments. The


\(^6\) Two studies of nineteenth-century New York City, Raymond Mohl’s *Poverty in New York, 1783-1825* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) and Sean Wilentz’s *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), found that day labor was an integral part of the city’s economy. Irish immigrants constituted a large portion of New York’s labor pools, and Wilentz found that a majority of male Irish workers relied upon temporary employment. In the West, day labor quickly became monopolized by Latino migrant workers. Albert Camarillo’s *Chicanos in a Changing Society* illustrates that in early twentieth century California, Mexican workers left agricultural areas in both Mexico and the United States, congregating in cities such as Los Angeles and Santa Barbara to seek temporary employment through informal labor pools.
majority of these studies address southern California or Texas, where the highest concentrations of day laborers were found in the 1980s and ‘90s. But as this type of immigrant labor expands into other regions of the country, a new framework is necessary that integrates historical trends and geographical contrasts.\footnote{For studies of recent Latino day laborers, see Abel Valenzuela, Jr., “Day Labor Work,” \textit{Annual Review of Sociology} 29, June 2003, and Abel Valenzuela, Jr., “Day Labourers as Entrepreneurs?” \textit{Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies} 27, No. 2, April 2001, and Abel Valenzuela, Jr., “Controlling Day Labor: Government, Community and Worker Responses,” in Mitchell, Daniel and Nomura, Patricia, eds., \textit{California Policy Options 2001} (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001). Though Valenzuela champions an interdisciplinary approach, he utilizes primarily sociological research techniques, surveying large numbers of workers in the Los Angeles area, and analyzing this data to find common trends. In his research, Valenzuela has questioned the “bottom-of-the-ladder” status that is often assigned to day labor work, arguing instead that it is inherently entrepreneurial and may offer advantages over long-term employment. Within Atlanta, only one study, María Luisa Amado’s \textit{Mexican Immigrants in the Labor Market: The Strength of Strong Ties} (New York: LFB Scholarly, 2006), examines Latino day labor within the city, though her approach looks only at contemporary trends and not at historical developments. As a part of her larger study of kinship ties within Atlanta’s Mexican community at the turn of the twenty-first century, Amado argues that seeking work on \textit{la esquina}, or “the corner,” is a last resort for “male workers who lack a supporting network of economically active relatives, friends, or housemates.” Maria Luisa Amado, \textit{Mexican Immigrants in the Labor Market}, 113-114.}

While Latino day laborers in California and the Southwest faced some restrictions and limitations in their search for work, those who moved South in the last decades of the twentieth century entered a region that had a long history of spatial segregation. Numerous historians have analyzed the intersection of race and space during the Jim Crow era, demonstrating that in the wake of slavery’s abolition, white supremacy was challenged in the new public spaces created by the railroad and consumer revolutions. As blacks and whites left rural areas to settle in towns and cities, the places where they met, in waiting rooms, restaurants, train cars and restrooms, became new battlegrounds of race and power. The death of Jim Crow did not destroy this system, however, and as legal segregation was outlawed, \textit{de facto} spatial segregation replaced the earlier \textit{de jure}
restrictions, as witnessed in urban renewal, white flight, and the tax revolts that followed desegregation in many southern cities.\footnote{For literature on segregation in public spaces, see Grace Elizabeth Hale, \textit{Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation In the South, 1890-1940} (New York: Vintage, 1998), especially chapter four, “Bounding Consumption.” For the best examination of the link between segregation and the growth of railroads, see Barbara Young-Welke, \textit{Recasting American Liberty: Gender, Race, Law, and the Railroad Revolution, 1865-1920} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Also, Kevin Kruse’s \textit{White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) is an excellent study of race in Atlanta’s development and politics, in the mid- to late-twentieth century, though it does not look at the role of immigrants within the city.}

Thus, when Latino immigrants entered Atlanta in large numbers, did the city’s particular history of racial turmoil shape the interactions of native blacks and whites with this new racial minority? How did prejudice and labor competition collide, and what were the results? The history of Atlanta’s Latino day laborers over two decades reveals larger trends in the gradual process of making an international city, and in the globalization of the American South.

In 1980, however, Atlanta and its suburbs seemed decades removed from the demographic changes that would lead to the Chamblee incident and its later equivalents. While the city had previously received several immigrant groups, such as Greeks and Jews who settled in Atlanta in the early twentieth century, along with Cubans fleeing the Batista and Castro regimes mid-century, these immigrants often arrived with job and language skills, integrating into mainstream southern society and facing few of the problems that later non-professional laborers would. In Chamblee and Doraville together, the 1980 Mexican population was just over one hundred, out of a total of nearly fifteen thousand. Foreign-born residents thus constituted a fractional minority, and had little impact on the area. In 1984, Dale Schwartz, one of the few immigration lawyers in Atlanta, commented on the near nonexistence of foreign laborers throughout the city: “I haven’t seen any big influx of aliens in Atlanta. What are they going to do here, pick...
cotton in the lobbies of the downtown banks? There obviously isn’t the problem in Atlanta with huge hordes of aliens, or the government would have assigned more [immigration] agents here. “9

Similarly, the situation facing day laborers throughout the 1980s was far different from the years that followed. Day labor pools existed in abundance, but were formally organized through temporary employment organizations, which catered to poor working-class and homeless black and white men who lacked transportation and thus had limited job options. With few exceptions, most labor pool gathering sites were located downtown, near the intersection of Interstates 20, 85, and 75. A 1986 Atlanta Journal-Constitution feature on temporary employment found “about a dozen labor pools around downtown Atlanta,” highlighting Techwood and Mitchell Streets as the main hubs of this growing industry. 10

When controversy over day labor did arise in the 1980s, it was not directed towards the undesirable existence of “aliens and vagrants,” as the Chamblee petition later claimed, but towards the “endless cycle” of poverty that plagued temporary laborers. In 1988, the Southern Regional Council published a muckraking report on labor pools in the Sunbelt, describing “an emerging trend now threatening both the working poor and working people” that was “largely ignored in matters of business and government policy.” The SRC report portrayed day labor as “nothing but a tossover from slavery,” trapping laborers within a system that worked you hard and gave little in return. Within

---

9 For an account of earlier immigrants into Atlanta, see Valerie Fennell, “International Atlanta and Ethnic Group Relations,” Urban Anthropology 6, No. 4, 1977; U.S. Census reports for the cities of Chamblee, GA and Doraville, GA, 1980. Chamblee had thirty-six Mexican residents while Doraville had seventy, though each had populations over seven thousand; Dale Schwartz quoted in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, May 20, 1984, 15B.
10 Atlanta Journal-Constitution, December 6, 1986, 10A.
Atlanta, “Techwood Street is the center of the universe for homeless and unemployed people who are looking for work,” where, “on a busy weekday morning, a thousand or more men” could be found. While one Atlanta activist claimed that day labor was “primarily a black phenomenon,” the SRC report found that both black and white men relied on temporary employment for survival. In analyzing Dallas and Houston, the report also showed that Latinos were entering the industry, though this was not yet the case in Atlanta.\(^{11}\)

Cheap, temporary labor was thus confined to the inner city, which proved problematic as the demand for inexpensive workers escalated in the suburbs. As middle and upper class blacks and whites left the city’s core in search of suburban homes, Atlanta underwent a tremendous construction boom, and the demand for labor often exceeded the supply. In counties like Cobb and Gwinnett, which were the quickest-growing suburban regions in the city, a lack of public transportation and high housing costs separated temporary laborers from the job sites where they were needed. In 1984, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reported that Gwinnett County employers “have resorted to stuffing job announcements beneath the windshield wipers of parked cars.” Ed Berry, the manager of an employment agency in Cobb County, lamented that “the building boom has drained so many laborers off, there aren’t enough to go around. This is absolutely the worst I’ve seen in the construction field.” Without a mobile suburban labor force willing to work for low wages, it seemed Atlanta’s sprawl would grind to a halt.\(^{12}\)

---


\(^{12}\) *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 15, 1984, A24; ibid.
The introduction of foreign laborers would fully transform Atlanta’s construction and service industries, and throughout the 1980s, city natives became increasingly aware of a growing immigrant population. The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) proved to be a critical step in making visible Atlanta’s hidden Latino communities. Though designed to restrict immigration and limit the number of illegal aliens entering the United States, the ultimate effect of the IRCA was far different. In granting legal status to undocumented immigrants who had resided in the U.S. since 1982, and by placing a moratorium on Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) enforcement until 1988, the IRCA created a two-year “window of opportunity,” as Louis Richard, the southeastern regional director of the INS, called it in 1987.13

To many Atlantans, it seemed the Latino community had arrived overnight. Ramiro Mendez, a Mexican-born immigrant who settled in Gwinnett County in 1984, commented on the increasing visibility of Atlanta’s Latino population: “When I came here, I never see [sic] another one…Right now, there’s a lot of Mexican people.” INS director Richard agreed, stating that “they’ve always been here. They are just more visible right now because we don’t have any enforcement operation out in the field.” Growing visibility was also due to a rapidly growing population: in the decade after 1980, the metropolitan area’s Latino population rose from approximately 20,000 to 50,000, notwithstanding the countless thousands of undocumented immigrants that census workers did not register.14

14 Ibid., B1, B2; U.S. Census records for DeKalb, Fulton, Gwinnett, Clayton and Cobb counties, 1990. These five counties constitute the core of metropolitan Atlanta’s population. Also, these numbers do not include the large numbers of undocumented Latino immigrants who were not acknowledged by the official census.
Of course, heightened visibility also increased friction between the primarily black and white Atlanta and its newest residents. INS enforcement resumed in the late ‘80s, and the agency led a series of raids against companies that were known to employ Latino immigrants. Many such crackdowns stemmed from complaints by local residents unhappy with the presence of a possibly-undocumented immigrant work force; one such example was a March 1991 raid at the north Atlanta All-American Gourmet Foods, where the INS arrested and deported 17 immigrants, all of Mexican birth. As raids continued, “a ripple effect of fear” spread through the Latino community, according to Rev. Edward Salazar of the Atlanta Archdiocese, and immigrants, whether documented or not, shied away from the public sphere. Less than a week after the All-American raid, forty demonstrators rallied in front of the Atlanta INS office, bearing placards claiming that “no human being is illegal.”

In no other part of Atlanta was this “new” Latino presence more apparent than in northern DeKalb County, particularly in the suburbs located around Buford Highway. The Buford Corridor, as Atlantans called the six-mile strip of highway and its surrounding neighborhoods, presented unique advantages to working-class immigrants. Vacant and low-priced rental housing was available, as the area had earlier lost population during the decline of heavy industry in the 1970s. In 1986, the introduction of MARTA, Atlanta’s light-rail public transit system, facilitated transportation in both Chamblee and Doraville, and attracted those who could not afford cars. Thus, by 1990, a demographic metamorphosis was in the making. Especially in Chamblee, but in Doraville as well, thousands of whites left the cities during the 1980s and were replaced

by both African-Americans and Latino and Asian immigrants. In both cities, the proportion of foreign-born residents as a part of the total population more than quadrupled in this decade.\(^\text{16}\)

The white residents of northern DeKalb were often less than enthusiastic about the changes remaking their hometowns. Johnson W. Brown, the Mayor of Chamblee and a longtime resident of the suburb, told a local newspaper in 1992 that he understood why his grown children had left DeKalb for northern Fulton and Forsyth counties. “I just don’t think Chamblee would be suitable for them now. I don’t think they will find here what they grew up with – it’s not like what Chamblee used to be.” As described by the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, the Chamblee and Doraville of thirty years ago, when Brown had first entered public office, had been “white, working-class towns… distinguished only for their relentless homogeneity.” By 1992, however, Buford Highway had become a bustling center for immigrant commerce, as Mexican, Korean, and Vietnamese grocery stores crowded into previously vacant strip malls. Nevertheless, Mayor Brown doubted that this new breed of ethnic suburban renewal “ha[d] helped [Chamblee] economically.”\(^\text{17}\)

Though a large population of low-wage Latino workers had existed in northern DeKalb for years, the informal day labor economy appeared only in the early ‘90s. Maritza Soto Keen, the executive director of Atlanta’s Latin American Association during the 1990s, remembered that “the day labor situation arose pretty quickly, again, somebody tells other people, etcetera.” Two factors contributed to the rise of Latino day


labor outside downtown Atlanta: first, the over-saturation of the low-wage labor market as increasing numbers of working-class immigrants settled within a relatively small area. Chamblee’s Latino population in 1980 was 217, but ten years later this had risen to 1,792. Nearly 70 percent of the 1990 population was male, and of adults aged 25 or over, 73 percent did not hold a high school diploma. A large labor force willing to work for low pay had thus flooded the northern DeKalb market by 1992.\textsuperscript{18}

Secondly, after the passage of the 1986 IRCA, companies faced excessive penalties for hiring undocumented workers, and were increasingly wary of hiring immigrants who could not prove their authorized status. The lack of legal papers thus isolated undocumented immigrants from the formal job market, though this would fluctuate as labor demand rose and fell in the following years. Day labor therefore provided a flexible alternative for workers who lacked papers or saw regular employment as overly binding and restrictive. “They make money the way they want to make money,” said Teodoro Maus, the head of Atlanta’s Mexican consulate throughout the 1990s.\textsuperscript{19}

Within Chamblee, day laborers began to congregate around a “Majik Market” convenience store on Chamblee-Dunwoody Road, a few blocks from Buford Highway. A half-year before the city council controversy, a reporter from the \textit{Atlanta Journal-Constitution} had spoken with some of the dozen men outside of the Market on a Friday morning, revealing the laborers’ own perspective on their work. Roberto Martinez

\textsuperscript{18} Maritza Soto Keen, interview conducted by the author, June 27, 2007; U.S. Census results for the city of Chamblee, GA, 1980, 1990. These statistics are only official numbers and may actually have been even higher, due to the difficulty of counting undocumented immigrants. The 1990 Latino population was not only overwhelmingly male, but also young: nearly 50 percent were between the ages of 18 and 40. Additionally, I avoid the classification of immigrant workers as “unskilled,” because more often than not this is a term used to justify the underpayment of migrant labor, especially in construction work.

\textsuperscript{19} Teodoro Maus, interview conducted by the author, June 30, 2007.
described the transnational network that had brought him to Atlanta: “Before I got to this country the first time, I notice they all talk about Chamblee. Everybody is saying, ‘you gotta go to Chamblee.’ I thought it was like a city.” Yet despite the opportunities day labor presented, Martinez was aware of his uncertain status as an undocumented worker: “[employers] know they can take advantage of wetbacks.” Nevertheless, Martinez and the other day laborers expressed a fierce pride in their work. “This is our turf. The rich people, they take care of themselves. In my country, if you don’t work, you don’t eat.”

The first spark of the emerging conflict came with an INS raid on the Majik Market on May 20, 1992. Incited by “loitering complaints from neighbors and merchants,” Operation “Clean Sweep” arrested thirty-seven undocumented Latino immigrants in the Market parking lot. Several of those arrested denied being day laborers, claiming instead that they were waiting for a ride to work. Though Thomas Fischer, Atlanta’s INS director, told local Spanish-language newspaper Mundo Hispánico that the raid was part of a larger plan to “remove foreign criminals from the streets of Georgia,” those arrested in the Majik Market raid were not targeted as criminally suspicious. After numerous complaints from residents, the raid was more likely an attempt to placate the local community who disdained the growing numbers of men gathering in the mornings.21

Though the raid did temporarily remove several workers, neither the INS or local residents viewed it as a success. The INS’s Fischer himself admitted that, compared to the large numbers of workers who used the Market as a space, “we captured relatively few aliens that day.” It was within this atmosphere of frustration, distrust, and

21 Atlanta Journal-Constitution, May 23, 1992, B1; Mundo Hispánico, June 1, 1992, 3 (translated from Spanish by the author.) The thirty-seven men arrested in May were later deported from the United States.
xenophobia that the residents of Cumberland Estates submitted their petition to the Chamblee city council on August 14, 1992. Thirty-seven homeowners signed the appeal, demanding the city government take a “pro-active roll [sic]” in restricting the solicitation of day labor. Insisting that “this is our City not theirs and the City of Chamblee has surrendered this part of town to them,” the “embarrassed part of Chamblee” made clear that they would combat the presence of Latino workers, whether “it takes forming citizens groups, rallies, calls to the state, [or] calls to Washington.” Florena Rae, an elderly woman who told the council that she had purchased a firearm to keep immigrants off her lot, referred to the day laborers as “just terrible filthy people. I don’t want them in Chamblee.” Residents accused the laborers of urinating and defecating in their yards, though Chamblee Public Works director Jim Dill later claimed that an investigation “found little to substantiate those claims.”

Also attached to the petition was a letter from a female resident of Cumberland Estates who claimed to have “heard noises at nite, [sic] and also two poodle dogs stolen from my dog house.” In her plea to the council, she maintained that “I realize that [the police] can not be at my house every nite [sic]. I live alone, I am very afraid, and do hope that something can be done to protect me and other people in our neighborhood.” In alluding to the delicate, defenseless nature of southern white femininity, the letter exemplifies the emerging stereotype of Latino males as oversexed and threatening to women. Reminiscent of the mythical “black beast rapist” stereotypes of African-Americans in the Jim Crow era, unspoken tensions over sexuality joined the prejudices of...

---

22 Mundo Hispánico, June 1, 1992, 3 (translated from Spanish by the author); City of Chamblee Council Meetings, Agendas and Minutes 1990-1993, 702, 706; Chamblee City Hall, Chamblee, GA; Florena Rae quote from the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, August 20, 1992, F1; Jim Dill statement is from the Atlanta Journal, August 20, 1992, F6.
race and class, and would be a powerful tool in rallying against the immigrant outsiders. Only months later, an Atlanta lighting store owner reported that “groups of men, dressed for manual labor” frightened her female customers, who demanded to be escorted to their cars by store employees.23

As news of the petition and the council’s remarks reached the public, with its most incendiary quotes highlighted in the Atlanta newspaper, the Latino community was understandably outraged. In an interview with Mundo Hispánico, Ricardo Santiago, the owner of Papa Tino’s Latin Club on Buford Highway, commented that “it seems we are truly living during the worst era of the Ku Klux Klan.” Diana Sánchez, a salon owner in Doraville, deplored that “there’s such a negative concept of Hispanics. I would like to show the North Americans that we are worth more than they think.” Maritza Keen of the Latin American Association deemed the city council’s comments “absolutely outrageous” and unacceptable; “maybe in 1892, but not in 1992.”24

While some saw the controversy as entirely negative, Teodoro Maus, the Mexican consul general in Atlanta who was a vocal spokesman for Latino rights, realized that the conflict provided an opportunity. “That was the first time the community got together in an ‘attack’ mode, saying ‘we’re not going to allow this, this is too much.’” The conflict thus afforded a “very good chance of explaining to the community that we are human

---


24 Quotes from Santiago and Sánchez are from Mundo Hispánico, September 1, 1992, 21; quotes from Martiza Keen from Atlanta Journal-Constitution, August 21, 1991, D3. Keen’s organization, the Latin American Association, was founded in 1972 as a group to raise awareness about issues facing Latinos in the metro Atlanta area, and to provide a social network for immigrants across the city. Today, the LAA is the largest such organization in the city.
beings,” Maus remembered. Maus proved correct, as most newspaper reports portrayed the day laborers as victims of the oppressive and nativist all-white city council, provoking accusations of racial prejudice and intolerance.²⁵

It was less than two years earlier that Atlanta had been awarded the 1996 Olympic Games, and the Chamblee controversy led some to question the city’s much-touted “international” and immigrant-friendly reputation. One letter to the editor reminded Atlantans that “before we let the world in, let’s learn to get along.” Another implicitly challenged Atlanta’s “too busy to hate” slogan: “Chamblee’s elected officials express bigotry about their Hispanic community, Gainesville allows a Ku Klux Klan parade…and Atlanta prepares to invite all the races of the world to the 1996 Olympics. Are we ready?” Jim Wooten, an Atlanta Journal columnist, described his adverse reaction to the Chamblee incident: “As a native Georgian who still gets a bit defensive at media portrayals of Southern sheriffs, [Chamblee Police Chief Reed Miller]’s response grates. Surely he doesn’t realize how close-minded, rigid and racist it sounds.” Chamblee’s ethnic conflict made it obvious that Atlanta had a long way to go before truly realizing its dream of becoming “the world’s next great city.”²⁶

Attempting to heal its wounds and recover from the negative publicity, the Chamblee city council launched an aggressive rehabilitation campaign to restore its reputation, which would prove to be a critical turning point for the suburb and its neighbors in northern DeKalb County. At the following September 11 meeting, council member Lee Floyd “expressed his desire, as a citizen, to let the public know that people of all nationalities have been and always will be welcome in Chamblee.” Others issued

²⁵ Teodoro Maus, interview conducted by the author, June 30, 2007.
public apologies, while one responded with a letter to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* claiming that the “inflammatory quotes [were] taken out of context.” In cooperation with Atlanta’s Justice Department, the city council organized a task force to analyze the impact of immigrants within Chamblee. This group reported back in early 1993 that the newcomers were a “boon, not burden” to the community, due primarily to the economic infusion they brought to the suburb.27

To facilitate the implementation of the task force report, Chamblee created the position of city manager to share the Mayor’s duties in local administration, and in April of 1993, the city council hired George Rodriguez, a Puerto Rican immigrant who had grown up in New York, for the job. *Mundo Hispánico* heralded Rodriguez’s appointment as a “historic first in the Southeastern U.S.,” and it was obvious that Rodriguez’s presence was closely linked with the earlier controversy. Yet after six tumultuous months, marked by increasing tension between the new city manager, mayor, and city council, Chamblee leaders dismissed Rodriguez from his position in November, over the unauthorized appointment of a Spanish-speaking police officer. The Latino community was torn; though an editorial in *Mundo Hispánico* faulted Rodriguez for “fail[ing] the very Hispanics who need him the most,” they acknowledged that Chamblee remained a city “where a Southern rural mentality reigns still.” Rodriguez himself was bitter about the dismissal, insisting that “an Anglo would have gotten a better shot at it. There was no tolerance because I’m not one of them.”28

---

27 City of Chamblee Council Meetings, Agendas and Minutes 1990-1993, 716: Chamblee City Hall, Chamblee, GA; letter to the editor quote is from the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 31, 1992, A8; *Atlanta Constitution*, January 7, 1993; XA1, XA2.
28 *Mundo Hispánico*, May 15, 1993, 1; editorial quote is from *Mundo Hispánico*, December 1, 1993, 13; Rodriguez quote is from the *Atlanta Constitution*, December 13, 1993, B6. In the months when Rodriguez was city manager, he clashed with the city council and mayor over topics that ranged from the use of a parking space to unauthorized hiring of workers. *Atlanta Constitution*, December 13, 1993, B6.
However, the most divisive aspect of Chamblee’s immigrant-friendly reformation was the city council’s endorsement of the “International Village,” which again raised difficult questions over day labor and immigrant integration. First proposed by the DeKalb Chamber of Commerce in 1991, the Village was one of many internationalizing projects undertaken by Atlanta prior to the Olympics. The DeKalb Chamber envisioned a “living, breathing village” in the Buford Corridor: though the area was already a massive ethnic enclave, it was hardly a destination for the average white suburbanite. The Village would feature pedestrian-friendly, tree-lined sidewalks, cooperative efforts between ethnic businesses, and community centers catering to various immigrant groups, including the Latino day laborers whose presence had heightened ethnic tensions within DeKalb County. In essence, the project would capitalize on an existing phenomenon, by rendering it palatable and consumable for the worldly tourist, whether they be from a neighboring suburb or a foreign country. “We hope we can transform DeKalb County into the multicultural center of these United States,” claimed one project booster in 1992, and the forward-looking Business Atlanta magazine predicted the Village “could be a gateway to Atlanta’s future,” and “the real definition of an international city.”

Nevertheless, the initial reaction to the Village was lukewarm. Project managers insisted that the Village would not only benefit the immigrant population, but the entire county; one supporter predicted that “[the International Village] will not only bring the international crowd but it will bring the American crowd.” But after the 1992 Chamblee crisis, the Village received a massive boost of attention and publicity, due partially to the Chamblee Task Force’s recommendation that the city become actively involved in the

---

29 “Living, breathing village” was Ray Kemper’s term, the initial manager of the project. Quote is from the Atlanta Constitution, August 30, 1992, H4; Atlanta Constitution, November 19, 1992, E7; Business Atlanta 22, No. 7, July 1993, 39.
project. Whereas Chamblee leaders had earlier been skeptical of the plan, the bad press of the August controversy led to a noticeable about-face. Now the city council and Chamber of Commerce marketed the project as a resource to “help diffuse [sic] ethnic tension by highlighting cultures from the Caribbean to Katmandu that are shaping Atlanta today.” The International Village would “not only help heal rifts but will provide a tourist attraction,” reported the *Atlanta Constitution* in May of 1993.30

As the project gained popularity and support, the immigrant communities that the Village would showcase raised their voices to ensure the enterprise was more than a beautification project aimed at attracting tourist dollars. “My interest was to get some community-based organizations to be at the International Village,” remembers Maritza Keen of the Latin American Association, and *Mundo Hispánico* hoped the Village would become a “multicultural communication center.” Mexican Consul General Teodoro Maus advised the construction of “a lot of soccer fields,” “because there are no sports” for Latino children. But perhaps most importantly, several immigrant advocacy groups recommended the construction of a center to organize and train day laborers. The proposed day labor center would consolidate the many informal waiting areas around northern DeKalb, offer English language training to workers who did not find employment, and provide refreshments and restrooms to those awaiting work.31

With Chamblee “vigorously promot[ing] the village,” it seemed the dream was destined to become reality. However, a major conflict erupted when the DeKalb Chamber of Commerce suggested that the project extend into neighboring Doraville,


which was then the second largest immigrant enclave in northern DeKalb. The Doraville city council blasted the Village plan, with one member attesting that “there won’t be anyone employed from Doraville. It will only be immigrants.” Another official agreed, arguing “that’s just not our way of life here. We’re basically Baptists and Methodists and Presbyterians. We don’t believe in that.” The vice mayor, Lamar Lang, described his opposition to the plan: “The International Village wanted us to go after low-rent housing to attract more immigrants. Why would we want to attract more immigrants when we got all we want? We got plenty. We got enough to go around. If you want any in your neighborhood, we’ll send you some.”

By casting the debate over the Village as a battle for racial and cultural identity in an era of upheaval, Doraville’s leaders undermined native support for the project within their suburb. Their unwillingness either to participate in the International Village or to recognize their growing immigrant population antagonized the DeKalb Chamber of Commerce and local Latino and Asian communities. “Doraville did not want to become a Chamblee; in fact, not being a Chamblee was a priority to them,” remembered Maritza Keen. The inclusion of day labor facilities in the project was especially controversial in Doraville, where “people who had business there…thought the day labor situation would hurt their business,” argued Keen. As it became clear that the Village would be limited to Chamblee, some of the project’s supporters were taken aback at the fierce opposition directed towards their seemingly harmless initiative. “The International Village was the most logical thing in the world, except in Georgia, where they don’t want an International

---

32 Atlanta Constitution, June 17, 1993, A2; Atlanta Constitution, July 6, 1993, B6;
Village because they don’t want an international life,” recalled Teodoro Maus with a hint of wistful regret.33

A year after Doraville’s renunciation of the Village, and when it seemed the episode was nearly forgotten, an article in the New York City-based Village Voice magazine rehearsed the bitter hostility between the planners and opponents of the project. Titled “Mall-ticulturalism,” the September 1994 Voice article detailed how the battle over labor and ethnic commerce had created a “house divided,” and unexpectedly placed northern DeKalb in the national spotlight. However, the Village Voice writers oversimplified the conflict by only presenting two sides, the “Diversity Managers” and the “Traditionalists,” while leaving out the Latino and Asian supporters who saw the Village as a powerful tool for advocacy and community organization. The article offended local Atlanta leaders, and Doraville’s characterization in the article enraged the city’s officials: “the whole City Council is upset,” said Mayor Gene Lively after the essay’s publication. In reporting on the article and its fallout, Atlanta Journal-Constitution staff writer Tim Fay fired back, attacking the “big-city Northern writers” and describing the Voice article as the work of “hip Yankee[s]” “intent to focus on discord.”34

Due to the project’s many opponents and persistent lack of funding, the DeKalb Chamber of Commerce never completed the International Village in time for the Olympics, nor in the years that followed. Certain sections were constructed, such as the Chamblee division of Sheltering Arms, a nonprofit childcare center, but the tree-lined

---

33 Maritza Keen, interview conducted by the author, June 27, 2007; ibid.; Teodoro Maus, interview conducted by the author, June 30, 2007.
34 The Village Voice, September 20, 1994, 27; Gene Lively quote is from the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, October 9, 1994, XJ10; ibid.
parkways and “living, breathing village” planned for the Buford Corridor did not become a reality. Additionally, the day labor dilemma was not resolved, and many workers returned to city streets in search of work. Yet despite the setbacks, the project’s boosters remained active, and directional signs for the Village are still seen around Chamblee and on Interstate 85, and at the time of writing, Chamblee city officials spoke of the project as a future possibility. As northern DeKalb has only become more diverse since 1990, with a majority of Chamblee’s population being foreign-born in 2000, the project has not lost any of its relevance.35

As the first contact zone between immigrant workers and an established biracial society, the Buford Corridor’s battle over Latino day labor served as a forewarning of what other suburbs would face in the following decade. In the years that followed, as immigrants increasingly found financial and social stability, many left northern DeKalb for homes outside of the densely-populated strip where they had initially settled. In relocating to Cobb, Gwinnett, and north Fulton counties, immigrant families established support networks within these formerly homogenous suburbs that allowed newly arrived Latinos to settle outside of the crowded Buford Corridor. The cities of Roswell and Marietta, in north Fulton and Cobb counties, respectively, witnessed massive increases in their Latino population during the 1990s. And just as in Chamblee and Doraville, this rapid transformation engendered animosity and conflict.36

By the mid-1990s, several sectors of Atlanta’s economy were so heavily dependent on Latino labor, particularly within construction, landscaping, and the poultry

---

35 U.S. Census results, 2000, for the cities of Chamblee, GA and Doraville, GA. In 2000, Chamblee was 64.2% foreign-born, while Doraville was 46.6%.

36 U.S. Census results, 1990, 2000, for the cities of Marietta, GA and Roswell, GA. Marietta’s Latino population was 1.2% of the total in 1980, 3.4% in 1990, and 17.0% in 2000. Roswell’s increase was slightly lower, yet still impressive: from 1.1% in 1980, to 2.8% in 1990, to 10.6% in 2000.
industry in outlying Gainesville, that employers openly acknowledged their reliance on foreign workers, documented or not. At a 1999 panel discussion on labor issues in homebuilding, one representative attested that “we would be out of business, were it not for the Hispanic work force.” Another saw the Latino influx as “the salvation of Georgia’s construction industry.” Even for those who looked down upon immigrant labor, opportunities of financial gain often outweighed racial prejudices. One Gwinnett County construction supervisor bluntly admitted that “we all used to be rednecks. We wanted white contractors. [But] Latino contractors will do for $7 an hour what I can’t get white guys to do for $12.”

Yet despite the immigrants’ massive contributions to the Atlanta economy, many natives saw their arrival as solely negative, and sought to regulate and constrain the activities of Latinos in the suburbs where they now worked and lived. The first conflict outside of DeKalb County came in Roswell, a primarily white suburb in north Fulton County, directly outside of the city’s I-285 perimeter. While Chamblee and Doraville had seen their immigrant explosion during the 1980s, Roswell’s boom came a decade later, with its Latino community growing nearly fivefold between 1990 and 2000.

As was earlier seen in Chamblee, day labor was one of the primary elements of the Latino immigrant influx that caused friction. In response to dissatisfaction and escalating complaints from residents, council members presented an ordinance to prevent “urban camping” before the Roswell city council on June 1, 1998. Contending that the solicitation of day labor “interferes with the normal use of a property,” the proposed

---

38 U.S. Census results 1990, 2000, for the city of Roswell, GA. Roswell’s 1990 Latino population was 1,702, but would rise to 8,449 ten years later.
ordinance would make it illegal “to sleep, to reside, to store personal property, or to sit or to lie down on any public” or private property. During the debate, Roswell officials showed little concern for the consequences it would have on the laborers themselves. When asked where the workers would go, “Chief [of Police] Williams said he did not know but said he thought they would probably go to some other part of the county.” After some deliberation, the council unanimously passed the ordinance on July 20, 1998.  

Though the law seemed draconian, it was laxly enforced and received little public attention until months later, where a series of arrests led to an outburst of controversy. In late February of 1999, after the Chief of Police had declared that the day labor problem “was getting worse” on Frazier Street, in a neighborhood heavily populated by Latino immigrants, officers arrested five men and ticketed several others one morning as the street was busy with morning commuters. Leaders of the Latino community protested the arrests when they discovered that those arrested “included men who lived in the apartment complex and were waiting for a ride to work from their boss.” Teodoro Maus declared the ordinance “a very dangerous law,” while Sora Chavez McFarlane of the Fulton-Atlanta Community Action Authority claimed the regulations “part of a subtle discrimination in Roswell towards various minority groups.” The Roswell Police later apologized for the incident, disciplining the “overzealous lieutenant” who had ordered the arrests.  

39 References to “urban camping,” the “normal use of a property,” and the Police Chief’s response are from the first reading of the ordinance: City of Roswell Council Minutes, June 1, 1998, 10, 9, 9: Roswell City Hall, Roswell, GA; wording of the ordinance is from Fulton County, GA Legal Code, “Ordinance to Amend Chapter XII of the Code of Ordinances of the City of Roswell,” July 20, 1998, 1.  
40 All quotations are from the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, April 7, 1999, B3.
Only a few months after the Roswell arrests, the city of Marietta introduced a similar law to control day labor within their city limits. Marietta, an affluent suburb in Cobb County located a few miles north of the I-285 perimeter, was perfectly representative of the post-Civil Rights Republican revolution in the Sunbelt, being home to Newt Gingrich and his particular breed of “Cobb-servatism.” In their attack on day labor, the Marietta city council framed the presence of Latino workers on city streets as a threat to public well-being, whose elimination is “in the best interest of the health, safety and general welfare of the public.” On May 12, 1999, the city government passed Ordinance 5980, which banned both the solicitation of work and picking up workers, and would go into effect on July 1. As workers continued to gather in the weeks leading up to July, it seemed Marietta’s police department and city government would be tested on their commitment to the ordinance. One editorial in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* expressed concern over how Cobb County would deal with this “touchy issue that has recently bedeviled several cities,” and argued that the law should “be enforced but not taken overboard,” as it had been in Roswell.41

Marietta’s leaders had learned from the Roswell incident, however, that direct enforcement could invite accusations of racial discrimination. Therefore, the police department sought cooperation with the INS, just as Chamblee had done in 1992. On the morning of June 22, 1999, the INS and the Marietta police department jointly targeted a popular gathering site, posing as potential employers to lure workers into pickup trucks, where they would be arrested. INS agents detained and deported sixty-two

undocumented male immigrants, all of Mexican or Central American descent. “We intend to be back here,” said one INS agent to a reporter from the *Atlanta Constitution*. The fear of additional raids effectively intimidated the remaining day laborers, whether documented or not. “People are afraid to go in the streets,” explained a worried driver for the Marietta taxi company “La Recuerdos” a week after the raid. And when July 1 finally arrived, no additional crackdown proved necessary, as the numbers of workers had been drastically reduced.42

Just as in DeKalb County, unease over gender definitions and sexual anxieties occasionally arose when the outlying suburbs debated day labor. Comments in news reports asserted that the presence of Latino workers “scares off customers [and] makes women feel uneasy,” and natives complained of laborers “making advances toward women.” One gas station customer reckoned that “if I was a female, and there was a hundred males standing around, I wouldn’t stop here.” Though the portrayal of Latino male sexuality was never as graphic or blatant as it had been for African-Americans in the New South, subtle remarks insinuating the lascivious nature of the working-class immigrant men set them apart from native residents, and triggered complaints at their presence.43

The dawn of a new century did not bring solutions to Atlanta’s suburbs. While no major controversies arose in the following years, resentment between displeased residents and Latino workers often flared up in lieu of a formal understanding between the two. Other suburbs pursued regulatory efforts as well, as in June 2000, when Gwinnett County

---

42 INS agent quote is from the *Atlanta Constitution*, June 23, 1999, F1; cab driver Alfredo Garcia quote is from the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 4, 1999, XJ1.
officials toyed with the idea of requiring Latino men from one overcrowded apartment complex to carry identification cards at all times. The only city where leaders attempted to reach an agreement between workers and natives was Roswell, whose Roswell Intercultural Alliance secured a private space for laborers to congregate in late 2000. But this proved an imperfect compromise, as fewer employers were aware of its location, and the relocated laborers saw a drop in job opportunities. Solutions were thus difficult to come by, even when local governments wished to establish more positive relations with their immigrant residents.

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, the battle over Latino day labor in Atlanta’s suburbs was one of the most volatile aspects of the larger integration of immigrants into a city that had historically seen few foreign settlers. The right to work became a highly contested issue as a new class of laborers suddenly became visible in suburban areas that had previously known a dichotomous racial structure. In losing its formal organization and leaving the inner city, where few whites resided during the ‘80s and ‘90s, the suburban day labor industry faced enormous opposition in the form of threats of violence, strict regulation, and deportation in nearly every municipality it entered. This confrontation was exacerbated by the demographic nature of the Latino immigrants themselves, who were overwhelmingly male, young, and unmarried. At first in Chamblee and Doraville, but later in Roswell and Marietta, native opposition portrayed the day labor conflict as a clash of racial and cultural interests, hoping to solidify the support of native whites against newly-arrived immigrants.

But in a city that had played a central role in the civil rights movement, many Atlantans were familiar with race-driven politics and recognized nativism when it
occurred. Therefore, when Chamblee whites openly confronted their Latino neighbors in 1992, the backlash from progressive Atlanta and local immigrant communities was overwhelming. To recover from the negative publicity, Chamblee leaders redefined their community as a welcoming refuge for immigrants of every race, lending support to several projects such as the International Village, which would in turn create more tension when the local government of neighboring Doraville refused to take part. And in learning from the earlier mistakes of Chamblee, the cities of Roswell and Marietta refined their approach to controlling day labor in the late 1990s, avoiding open conflict in favor of subtle discriminatory efforts, whose effectiveness was often limited.

Well into the twenty-first century, questions of day labor, public space, and immigrant integration are yet unresolved within Atlanta. As anti-immigrant activists neglect and deny the growing Sunbelt reliance on undocumented foreign labor, and as the national mood remains harshly negative towards immigrant rights and needs, animosity and fear will continue to permeate the South’s newest race relations issue. While recent Latino immigrants have yet to establish a strong public and political voice, due to the large number who lack legal status and documentation, future immigration reform and a growing Latino voting bloc could dramatically transform the political landscape of Atlanta and the larger South.

In the study of immigrants making an “international Atlanta,” the nature of work and labor is clearly critical. But in designating who is allowed to work and live within the city, immigration law is equally significant. How is immigration law shaped, what motivates its passage, how does it impact ordinary people, and how do ordinary people
impact it? This will be explored in the history of one particular immigrant group in Atlanta: the Vietnamese Amerasians.
CHAPTER TWO
Shaping Immigration Law at the Grassroots: 
Vietnamese Amerasians in Atlanta, 1975-2006

“Being of neither East nor West purely, 
He will be rejected of each, for none will understand him.”
- Pearl S. Buck, East Wind: West Wind, 1931

On June 21, 2005, Washington D.C. was abuzz with the news of a historic
diplomatic visit. The Prime Minister of Vietnam, Phan Van Khai, had arrived in the
capital to speak with U.S. President George W. Bush, the first such meeting in over thirty
years. Officials in both Vietnam and America expressed optimism over the celebrated
conference, hoping that it would signify an important step in mending the relations of the
once-antagonistic nations.

On the streets of Washington, however, hundreds of protestors, many of whom
were Vietnamese expatriates, gathered to criticize the meeting and waved banners
demanding “Democracy Now” and “Stop Religious Oppression.” At one o’clock in the
afternoon, the Vietnamese delegation arrived at the Willard InterContinental Hotel, where
several dozen protestors awaited the Prime Minister’s arrival. As the group of dignitaries
entered the building, out of the crowd emerged Tuan Phuoc Le, a dark-skinned
Vietnamese man in his thirties, who ran towards the officials in anger. Before security
could intervene, Le reached Nguyen Quoc Huy, the Vice Chairman of the Prime
Minister’s Office, and struck Huy several times in the face and neck with his fists. Le
attempted to escape into the crowd, but the delegation’s Secret Service officers quickly
apprehended and handcuffed him. Within hours, Le was in prison and facing
deportation charges: as a permanent resident of the United States, Le could be expelled from the country for a serious violation of the law.¹

While it may appear to be insignificant, Le’s attack and his subsequent prosecution were only the culminating events in a protracted yet unfinished struggle over the legal rights of a unique and extraordinary immigrant group. Tuan Phuoc Le was Amerasian: the son of an American serviceman and a Vietnamese woman, Le was born in the Mekong Delta during the Vietnam War in 1971. Children like Le were not uncommon in this period, and it is estimated that tens of thousands of Amerasians were born in Vietnam during the war. In the years following America’s military withdrawal in 1975, these mixed-race children faced perpetual discrimination and abuse at the hands of their government and fellow citizens; those of African-American heritage, like Le, were particularly singled out. Through the Amerasian Homecoming Act, an agreement negotiated between the two nations in of 1988, Le emigrated to the United States in 1993, where he eventually found work in the construction industry of Gwinnett County, a booming Atlanta suburb. Le became one of many thousand Vietnamese and Amerasian refugees to settle in Atlanta, whose Asian immigrant community was rapidly expanding and continued to grow in the following decades.²

Le’s remarkable story raises significant questions about the nature of U.S. immigration law, and how American refugee policy has been and continues to be shaped. In the 1980s, the United States government designated the Vietnamese Amerasians as a

¹ The Washington Post, June 22, 2005, A1; U.S. Department of Justice Court Report, 4th Police District, July/August 2006, 8; Permanent residents within the United States enjoy many of the same privileges that citizens do, except they cannot vote, and may be deported if convicted of a felony, among other restrictions that will later be discussed. A permanent resident’s status must also be renewed every decade, for a fee of several hundred dollars.
² Numerical estimates are from Ernest Robear, “The Dust of Life: The Legal and Political Ramifications of the Continuing Vietnamese Amerasian Problem,” Dickinson Journal of International Law 8 (1990), 126; the term “Amerasian” was coined by American writer Pearl S. Buck in the 1930s.
unique immigrant category, as their existence was a reminder of American involvement in a bitter war, and aided them in their flight from an oppressive regime in their motherland. Yet few Amerasians were warmly welcomed in the land of their fathers, and Atlanta Journal-Constitution columnist Elizabeth Kurylo rightly described Georgia’s Amerasians as “strangers in a strange land.”

As such, these mixed-race immigrants were both acted upon, and actors in, the complex struggle of shaping national immigration law. Where previous historians have often interpreted this as a top-down process, Atlanta’s Amerasians were active participants in defining their legal status, which continues to be negotiated. Moreover, within the city of Atlanta, where immigrant communities were only becoming visible in the 1980s and 1990s, the Amerasians presented a legal quandary that exposed many problematic aspects in the rigid nature of federal immigration law. As the children of United States citizens, Atlanta’s Amerasians should have been granted full citizenship, though the vast majority were not. In a city where officials had little experience in enforcing immigration law, the case of the Amerasians raised complex issues that were not resolved easily. Amerasian immigrants faced innumerable obstacles in settling within Atlanta, and their experiences demonstrated that the “international city” was not built without hardship and difficulty.

Two legal disputes are pivotal in illustrating these points. In United States v. Lam, et. al. (1996), and its follow-up United States v. Tam Tran Nguyen, Binh Hoa Le, et. al. (2001), members of an Atlanta Amerasian gang were tried, convicted, and deported for dozens of crimes committed throughout the 1990s. The Atlanta courts showed Amerasian gang members little sympathy despite their troubled pasts, and their

---

indictment demonstrated that once settled in the United States, Amerasians would not receive preferential legal treatment. Secondly, Tuan Phuoc Le’s prosecution in United States v. Le (2006) again exposed the vulnerable status of Amerasians and other permanent residents, though unlike the earlier gang trial, Le’s defense received widespread support from both the Vietnamese community and native residents. Though neither case established a legal precedent that formally resolved the Amerasians’ status, both are what legal scholars Karl Llewellyn and E. Adamson Hobel have called “trouble cases,” revealing the social and legal tensions that divide a community. Each case demonstrates the tenuous and ambiguous position of Atlanta’s Amerasians, and forces us to rethink the role of legal subjects in shaping immigration law.⁴

Yet to understand the larger problems that these cases addressed, we must recognize the ways in which Congress amended and reshaped immigration law to create a legal niche for Amerasians prior to their arrival, and how their status was contested and negotiated in the following decades. In doing so, we can place Atlanta’s Amerasian community within the larger discourse of American immigration history, itself central to our understanding of the nation’s past.

Asian immigrants and their descendants had long been a presence within the United States, though their legal status, relationship with the national government, and position within American society was often in flux. While governmental controls on immigration were exceedingly lax during the first century of American nationhood, Chinese migrant laborers were the first ethnic group to be targeted by nativist reformers.

⁴ Hobel and Llewellyn were jurisprudential scholars writing in the mid-twentieth century, best known for their work in the school of “legal realism,” which approaches law not as a science but an interaction of flawed human beings. For the best example of their work and “trouble case” methodology, see K. N. Llewellyn and E. Adamson Hoebel, The Cheyenne Way: Conflict and Case Law in Primitive Jurisprudence (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1941).
in the 1880s, who had “discovered” the problem of unemployment and saw an expanding immigrant labor force as unnecessary competition for American-born workers. Historian Ronald Takaki notes that “one way to solve [this] ‘Chinese problem’ was to legislate the disappearance of the Chinese presence in America,” and Congressional approval of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 would be the first racially-motivated restriction of immigration into the United States. The act enjoyed wide support throughout the nation, even in Eastern states where the Chinese were nearly nonexistent, and would remain in effect until 1943. In reality, the act did not fully limit the arrival of Asian laborers, but enacted severe punishments for its violation; Mae Ngai argues that the Act created “the nation’s first illegal aliens as well as the first alien citizens.”

Restrictionist trends continued throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as exemplified in the limitations placed on immigrants from all parts of the globe. The Immigration Act of February 5, 1917 extended the earlier Exclusion Act into the “Asiatic Barred Zone,” which encompassed most of Eastern Asia and the Pacific Islands, and also placed literacy requirements on immigrants over the age of sixteen. Congress passed the 1917 Act over the veto of President Woodrow Wilson, who deemed the object of the nativist legislation as “restriction, not selection.” Less than a decade later, the most exclusory immigration law in American history would be enacted through

the National Origins Act of 1924. In establishing quotas for individual nations, and limiting a foreign nation’s allotment to less than two percent of the number of immigrants already living within the United States, the 1924 Act reflected the goals of its Congressional authors: “to guarantee, as best we can at this late date, racial homogeneity.” As America embraced isolationism in the wake of the First World War, and in a society were eugenics remained an influential scientific discourse, racial fear and prejudice would shape immigration policies for several decades.6

Liberal critiques of the overly prohibitive quota system would gain national prominence in the years following the Second World War, as displaced immigrants from war-torn Europe attempted to gain access to American prosperity. Yet the growing antagonism between the U.S. and the Soviet Union ensured that the immediate post-war era would not witness relaxed tensions, and national fears of Communist infiltration replaced the racial xenophobia of the early twentieth century. In establishing the Immigration and Nationality Act, which remains the central body of American immigration policy, the McCarran-Walter bill of 1952 was “less an overhaul [of the 1924 Act] than a hardening of existing policy.” As in 1917, the 1952 Act passed despite a presidential veto. Harry Truman later declared that “in no other realm of our national life are we so hampered and stultified by the dead hand of the past, as we are in this field of immigration.” The text of the bill devoted particular attention to restricting immigrants from Communist nations, though it did little to revise the structural problems of the earlier quota system. However, the subsequent Refugee Relief Act of 1953 began to

---

address the needs of immigrants escaping oppressive, often Communist, regimes, as the Cold War escalated in Eastern Europe. In establishing refugee quotas separate from existing immigrant categories, the Act was the first of many that emphasized America’s humanitarian role in the Second and Third worlds.7

It was only with the social and political pressures of the Civil Rights movement in the mid-1960s that American immigration policy would undergo sweeping changes. With the passage of the 1965 Hart-Celler Act, Congress removed preferential quotas for specific countries in favor of a universal annual cap of 20,000 immigrants per individual nation in the Eastern Hemisphere. In signing the bill into law, Lyndon Johnson declared that the Act would “repair a very deep and painful flaw in the fabric of American justice.” Yet despite apparent improvements, the “first-come, first-served basis gave way to a narrower and more historically parochial framework that provided few, if any, obvious advantages for prospective Asian immigrants,” argues historian Bill Ong Hing. Those who benefited most from the 1965 Act were clearly Eastern Europeans, whose restriction had been critical to the shaping of the original National Origins legislation. But when “mainland China had the same quota as Tunisia,” it became clear that inequalities remained within the system. Recent scholarship has reconsidered Hart-Celler’s larger effects, by paying particular attention to those left out. As Mae Ngai attests, the 1965 bill “altered and refined but in no way overturned the regime of restriction.”8

---

8 “Remarks at the Signing of the Immigration Bill, Liberty Island, New York,” October 3, 1965, quoted in Ngai, Impossible Subjects, 259; Bill Ong Hing, Making and Remaking Asian America Through Immigration Policy, 1850-1990 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 40; The Hart-Celler Act’s amendments to the INA also established a preference system within the annual cap that sought to reunify immigrant families. First preference (20% of the total) went to unmarried children of American citizens,
The escalation of the American conflict in Vietnam had tremendous implications for the future of Asian immigration into the United States, and also became the unfortunate cradle of the Vietnamese Amerasians. While mixed-race children had previously resulted from American military involvement, particularly in Korea, Japan, and the Philippines, the numbers within Southeast Asia far exceeded these. Susan Brownmiller has argued that decades of aggressive French, Chinese, and American military occupation created a “sociological crucible of rape” in Vietnam, and both consensual and forced sexual relations became common between male soldiers and local women. Upon their birth into Vietnamese society, Amerasians would occupy a thorny position: often called *bui doi* or *con lai*, “dust of the earth” or “half-breed,” the children of American soldiers would forever carry the burdens of their parents in their physical appearance. In the immediate aftermath of American withdrawal and Communist reunification of North and South Vietnam in 1975, full-blooded Vietnamese increasingly viewed the Amerasians as the “children of the enemy,” and discriminated against them in both their education and employment. Many were abandoned, orphaned, or left in the care of family members; others became homeless on the streets of Vietnam’s larger cities.\(^9\)

---

This troublesome legacy of the war would enter the American public consciousness in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s, as the nation began to acknowledge the consequences of its involvement in Southeast Asia. Immediately before its withdrawal in 1975, the U.S. military made efforts to remove the children of American personnel in “Operation Babylift,” which abruptly ended in the April 5, 1975 crash of a Lockheed transport plane carrying over three hundred Vietnamese orphans, of which nearly one hundred and fifty died. Three years later, the flight of thousands of Vietnamese “boat people” brought international outrage: Kevin Nguyen, the Atlanta director of Boat People SOS, a national organization formed to aid Vietnamese refugees across the United States, estimated that nearly “a hundred thousand people died” attempting to escape Communist Vietnam by boat.10

In the early ‘80s, the existence of a generation of Amerasian children dawned on American citizens, who heard returning veterans’ stories of mixed-race children living on the streets of Ho Chi Minh City, and popular television programs, like a 1979 M*A*S*H episode titled “Yessir, That’s Our Baby,” or the 1982 60 Minutes investigation of Amerasian Kieu Nguyen, “Honor Thy Children,” brought the fallout of the Vietnam War into American living rooms. Even in Georgia, where few Vietnamese had previously settled, an editorial in the Atlanta Constitution urged readers not to “delay [our] Vietnam responsibility” in aiding these mixed-race children. Fed by guilt and a recognition of the war’s aftermath, public support for Amerasian legislation began to build.11

---

10 Kevin Nguyen, interview conducted by the author, June 7, 2007.
Initial governmental efforts to ameliorate the plight of Vietnamese Amerasians were slow in developing and ineffectual. In reaction to the deaths of thousands of escaping boat people, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, with the aid of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, enacted the Orderly Departure Program in 1979, which sought to regulate outmigration from Vietnam and grant refugee status to those fleeing. But the ODP became a “Kafkaesque process that could take years and required as many as 30 signatures and multiple fees,” and had little impact on the majority of Amerasians who were illiterate and lacked financial security.12

The first Amerasian-specific Congressional action came in the 1982 Amerasian Amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act. As the children of American citizens, Amerasians would theoretically be eligible as primary category immigrants under the INA, but illegitimacy and a lack of documentation complicated, and often disqualified, claims of legal entry into the United States; the Amendments hoped to remedy this continuing problem. In the Senate hearings before the Subcommittee of Immigration and Refugee Policy, supporters of the bill presented testimonials from Amerasian families, such as letters from Vietnamese mothers with “American halfbreed children,” and the bill achieved wide bipartisan support. Nevertheless, the Amendments failed to stimulate any serious Amerasian immigration, as children could not travel with relatives, had to secure a financial sponsor within the United States, and were required to give the Attorney General “reason to believe” that he/she truly was the child of an

---

12 April 15, 1985 Newsweek article quoted in Robear, “The Dust of Life,” 128.
American citizen. The burden of proof fell ultimately on the child, and prevented thousands from applying.\textsuperscript{13}

Further legislation throughout the decade attempted to refine and facilitate the complex process of relocating Amerasians, but a lack of formal diplomatic relations between the two countries often hindered this, as the U.S. State Department refused to establish ties due to the Vietnamese occupation of neighboring Cambodia. The Amerasian Initiative, signed into law by President Ronald Reagan in September of 1984, allowed for either a spouse or parents to accompany documented Amerasians, but retained requirements for an American sponsor. Months later, the Vietnamese government suspended the Orderly Departure Program, removing yet another avenue for outmigration; the relations between the two nations began to resemble “a game of political chess with the Amerasian children being used as pawns.” The popular media criticized the crawling pace of progress in repatriating Amerasians, and news magazines and television programs again ran stories on the misery of the mixed-race orphans: a New York \textit{Newsday} feature on Le Van Minh, a polio-stricken boy homeless on the streets of Ho Chi Minh City, prompted a Long Island high school class to write their congressman in protest.\textsuperscript{14}

The final, and seemingly conclusive, effort to overhaul Amerasian relocation policy came in the 1987 Indochinese Refugee Resettlement and Protection Act, commonly known as the Amerasian Homecoming Act. Initially designed to transfer all Vietnamese Amerasians to the United States within two years, Congress extended the


\textsuperscript{14} Robear, “The Dust of Life,” 133; Bass, \textit{Vietnamerica}, 45.
deadline indefinitely in 1990. However, the foremost achievement of the Act lay in its removal of restrictions on eligible family members and its provision of travel funds for relocation. No longer were independent American sponsors necessary. Almost overnight, the Amerasians turned from “dust to gold,” in their ability to circumvent the otherwise-strict controls on emigration.\textsuperscript{15}

For many, the Homecoming Act appeared to be the final chapter in a long struggle to rectify one of the many bitter memories of the war, and the Act was successful in relocating the vast majority of Vietnamese Amerasians. A 1994 government report estimated that “about 75,000 Amerasians and members of their families have left Vietnam to resettle in the United States.” But deeper problems lay hidden within the Homecoming Act, and would surface years later. In granting solely permanent residency to Amerasian immigrants, a sort of legal Purgatory, the act made the acquisition of citizenship a major obstacle.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{15} Indochinese Refugee Resettlement and Protection Act, Pub. L. No. 100-202, 101 Stat. 1329-40 (1987); After 1990, an Amerasian could bring both a spouse and family members, eliminating the impossible choices that previous agreements had made necessary. Initially, $20 million was set aside to aid in resettlement, though this grew to over $40 million after a 1990 recalculation of the total number of Amerasians in Vietnam. A portion of this money was spent on a transitional program in the Philippines that would train Amerasians to speak English and introduce them to American culture. Levi, “Legacies of War,” 487-489; Yarborough, \textit{Surviving Twice}, 97. Interestingly, in relaxing the restrictions on eligible family members, fraud became problematic, as Amerasians received large sums of money from other Vietnamese to claim them as family members. Pham, an employee at Doraville’s Center for Pan-Asian Community Services, admits that “we bought [the Amerasians] – or, we can’t say buy, but we put in the papers that they were my dad’s godson, so I got over with ten people.” Pham Song, interview conducted by the author, June 11, 2007 (name is fictitious to preserve anonymity).

\textsuperscript{16} United States General Accounting Office, “Vietnamese Amerasian Resettlement: Education, Employment, and Family Outcomes in the United States” (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994), 1. Although Vietnamese Amerasians have received serious scholarly consideration in the last decades, two critical gaps remain within the historiography. While several volumes have been written concerning the plight of Amerasians within the United States, none have addressed the continuing legal paradoxes inherent to their ambiguous status as permanent residents. Additionally, Amerasian resettlement has never been examined within the Southeast, a region that later attracted many of the Amerasian and Vietnamese refugees who originally settled elsewhere. Much of the writing on resettled Amerasians has been done by journalists, who rely on descriptions of individual Amerasians to suggest broader issues. The best such volumes are the previously mentioned Bass and Yarborough works, and Steven DeBonis, \textit{Children of the Enemy: Oral Histories of the Vietnamese Amerasians and their Mothers} (Jefferson, N.C.:
Thanh Dang’s first memory of Atlanta were the trees: “They were so big. They were so many. In Vietnam, my family was woodcutters. Now, suddenly, I found myself once more surrounded by woods. And I was afraid.” Dang, like many other Amerasians arriving in Atlanta during the early 1990s, had exceedingly high expectations of their new life in the United States, despite the anxiety of entering into a new culture. “We had arrived in America and now we would have a happy, successful family,” Dang wrote in a recollection of early impressions of her new home. “Their idea is that American people are very rich and very generous,” observed Xuan Sutter, refugee coordinator for Atlanta’s Save the Children in the early ‘90s. But “all these things that they thought would happen, don’t,” and most would face isolation, poverty, and culture shock. However, persistent hopes of “new lives [and] families” would preserve such initial optimism for some.17

Atlanta was only one of many cities where Amerasians settled, and benevolent aid organizations were critical in determining the final U.S. destinations for those who received permission to emigrate. Often arranging financial assistance and housing upon an immigrant’s arrival, these agencies were integral to the resettlement process, and cities that could provide such support were the largest recipients of Amerasian immigrants. In 1988, when the Homecoming Act began relocating Amerasians in large numbers, Atlanta was home to six major benevolent associations, which would make the city “one of the nation’s largest resettlement sites for Amerasians.” The Amerasian reliance on a private,


17 Dianne Monroe and Nguyet Lam, Scattered Children (Atlanta: Save the Children/Refugee Program, 1995), 33. Monroe and Lam’s little book is an anthology of personal recollections by six Atlanta Amerasians, but none are mentioned by name, therefore Thanh Dang is a fictitious name; Xuan Sutter quoted in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, December 15, 1991, A8; Atlanta Journal-Constitution, April 13, 1985, C1.
non-governmental web of social welfare, as opposed to Cold War-era state-funded and sponsored programs, was part of a growing trend in American foreign policy to privatize its humanitarian efforts, both domestically and abroad.\textsuperscript{18}

It is difficult to determine exactly how many Amerasians settled within Atlanta, as U.S. Census records did not classify Amerasians independently of other Vietnamese immigrants. Estimates ranged from one to five thousand by the late 1990s, and many refugee agencies believe this number is growing larger, as low housing costs and employment opportunities draw Amerasians from other parts of the country into Atlanta. “They just follow the job,” said Kevin Nguyen of Boat People SOS, and “don’t have a stable life.” At the same time, Atlanta’s larger Vietnamese population exploded during the last decades of the century, from 1,082 in 1980, 5,004 in 1990, to an estimated population of 25,283 in 2005. Nevertheless, full-blooded Vietnamese often marginalized their Amerasian brethren, as they transplanted old racial prejudices into the United States. “An Amerasian in America is like he is in Vietnam – he’s an outcast,” argued a Department of Justice employee who worked with Amerasians in 1988.\textsuperscript{19}

Interestingly, the rapid growth of Atlanta’s Vietnamese population demonstrates the changing trends of Asian immigration into the city. The first Asians to arrive in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s were educated professionals, primarily of Japanese and Korean descent, and the 1980 census found Korean immigrants to be the largest Asian immigrant group within metro Atlanta. However, arrivals in the ‘80s and ‘90s were generally less

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Atlanta Journal-Constitution}, December 15, 1991, A1. The transition towards private aid organizations over federal programs in assisting refugees is an understudied phenomenon in the post-1965 era that deserves further analysis.

\textsuperscript{19} Kevin Nguyen, interview conducted by the author, June 7, 2007; these estimates of Amerasians within Atlanta do not include the family members who accompanied Amerasian children to the United States; U.S. Census results for 1980, 1990, and the 2005 American Community Survey. In discussing “metro Atlanta,” I am referring to Cobb, Fulton, Gwinnett, DeKalb, and Clayton Counties, where the majority of the city’s urban and suburban population resides; \textit{Atlanta Constitution}, September 5, 1988, A1.
educated and poorer, often coming from China or Southeast Asia. In the course of twenty years, the makeup of Atlanta’s Asian communities changed drastically: in 2000, the largest immigrant group was the Vietnamese, having increased twenty-fold from their much smaller 1980 population.²⁰

Within the city, Amerasians settled in low-income neighborhoods where other Southeast Asian immigrants were already established and housing was inexpensive. “Hidden communit[ies] of Amerasians” were scattered across the city, but most resided in Chamblee, Clarkston, College Park, and Doraville; a 1991 report found 73.9 percent of Georgia’s Amerasians living either in southern Fulton or northern DeKalb counties.

Nguyet Lam, a black Amerasian woman who later founded Chamblee’s Refugee Resource Center, remembered her first residence in Summerhill, near the Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium, as an area “some Americans would call a very bad neighborhood.” The Buford Highway Corridor, a six-mile stretch of highway that the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* described as “the real international boulevard,” served as a hub for expanding Asian and Latino immigrant communities by offering a variety of retail and ethnic food stores, of which dozens were run by Vietnamese.²¹

Once settled in Atlanta, many Amerasians actively searched for their American fathers, if they had any clues regarding his identity or whereabouts. But as the military was reluctant to release information that would compromise the privacy of former soldiers, many Amerasians had little more than a dated photograph and a nickname to go by. For the minority who did find their parents, the reunion was often bittersweet.

---

“Some of them found their fathers, and their fathers didn’t want to do with them. They have new lives, they have second wives, and children. It’s not just himself anymore,” said Kevin Nguyen of Boat People SOS, who remembers “only three cases in Atlanta” of successful father-child reconciliation. Therefore most Amerasians, both in Georgia and across the nation, never met the men who had inadvertently brought them to the United States.  

As laborers, most Amerasians entered low-wage, low-skill jobs that did not require extensive knowledge of English. The most significant barrier obstructing Amerasian assimilation into Atlanta’s labor market would be language: “they just work in [companies] with a lot of Vietnamese, so they speak Vietnamese every day,” said Suong Phan at Good Shepherd Services in Atlanta, “so they still have problems.” Poultry processing plants in Gainesville, nearly fifty miles from Atlanta, attracted several refugees, where “pay is good, and language skills aren’t necessary,” according to an Atlanta Journal-Constitution report. In grappling with language difficulties, Amerasians faced a twofold problem that distinguished them from other immigrants: many were unable to read or write in Vietnamese, in addition to problems with English. Years of discrimination and humiliation in Vietnamese schools resulted in severe undereducation: in a 1994 study, 48 percent of the Amerasians surveyed had received less than a sixth grade education, and this percentage was significantly higher for those of African-American Asian descent. “Language,” Nguyet Lam said, “is the key. If you have the

---

key, you can open any door.” But as Amerasians struggled to meet demanding financial obligations, often “working two or three jobs, day and night,” as Kevin Nguyen described, little time existed for pursuing further education.23

Due to these enduring problems in Amerasian assimilation, refugee aid groups throughout the city became involved in the Vietnamese community. The larger nationwide organizations, such as the International Rescue Committee, Lutheran World Relief, and Catholic Social Services, which had earlier provided travel loans to Amerasians leaving Vietnam, did not play a significant role once immigrants were successfully resettled in the United States. Instead, local grassroots organizations, often led by educated Amerasians, sprung up to meet the needs of the community. Initially formed in 1981 to aid refugees fleeing Vietnam by boat, Boat People SOS became a critical organization in uniting Vietnamese Amerasians and educating them about the realities of life in the United States; in 2000, BPSOS established a chapter in Atlanta. “We try to bring them together to help them,” said Atlanta director Kevin Nguyen of BPSOS’s mission, where Amerasians are designated as one of the “big three focus groups” that the organization is most involved with.24

Other organizations became increasingly involved in aiding Atlanta’s Amerasians. The Center for Pan-Asian Community Services, originally founded in 1980 as the Korean Community Service Center, provided educational and legal services to the larger Asian community in Atlanta, and held language classes in both Vietnamese and

23 Suong Phan, interview conducted by the author, June 11, 2007; Suong’s last name is fictitious, as it was not given at the time of interview; Atlanta Journal-Constitution, April 1, 1993; United States General Accounting Office, “Vietnamese Amerasian Resettlement,” 10-11; Nguyet Lam quoted in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, December 15, 1991, A8; Kevin Nguyen, interview conducted by the author, June 7, 2007.
24 Kevin Nguyen, interview conducted by the author, June 7, 2007.
English for Amerasians. Sister Christine Truong My Hanh founded Good Shepherd Services in 1993, and offered counseling and interpretation services to Vietnamese refugees. In working with Amerasians, Hanh’s central goals were to help individuals “become self-sufficient and gain U.S. citizenship.”

Despite the good intentions of aid societies around the city, uniting Amerasians proved to be a difficult task. “They feel they don’t trust anybody,” said Kevin Nguyen of Boat People SOS, “and they just group in small groups, [with] other Amerasians.”

Distrust among the various refugee aid groups also caused problems: each agency was extremely critical of the objectives and methods of their associates. Employees at CPACS and Boat People SOS, both secular, government-funded agencies, expressed disdain for ecclesiastical groups, particularly Chamblee’s Good Shepherd Services. Many Vietnamese “believe that religion [in the United States] is a business,” argued Nguyen, accusing church-affiliated aid groups of “want[ing] to take money from ignorant people.” Pham Ho, an employee at CPACS who had volunteered at Good Shepherd as a teenager, declared that “now [we] work against them.” Class differences also alienated groups from each other, and Boat People SOS attacked CPACS for “just focus[ing] on helping Korean people,” who were often wealthier than Southeast Asian immigrants. The invented racial category of “Asian” did not always bind immigrants together, as socioeconomic differences often divided the various ethnic groups.

All of these obstacles and difficulties highlighted the paramount legal quandary that Amerasians confronted: the near unattainability of American citizenship. For many

---

26 Kevin Nguyen, interview conducted by the author, June 7, 2007; Pham Song, interview conducted by the author, June 11, 2007: name is fictitious to preserve anonymity; Kevin Nguyen, interview conducted by the author, June 7, 2007.
aid groups, and for Amerasians themselves, this legal uncertainty became the foremost problem in the wake of the Homecoming Act. “This is their home! [Nowhere else] is there a person who lives in their home country that’s not a citizen - that’s not right,” argued Nguyen at BPSOS. The vast majority of Amerasians, unable to pass the citizenship exam due to financial or educational shortcomings, remained permanent residents and faced significant restrictions: limited voting rights, a lack of access to Social Security benefits upon retirement, the inability to bring over family members from Vietnam, and most importantly, the “immediate deportation of aliens in violation of law,” under Section 237 of the Immigration and Nationality Act. While few Amerasians knowingly attempted to violate American laws, cultural misunderstandings and a lack of education resulted in frequent threats of deportation for Amerasian immigrants.27

Such fears increasingly gained public attention in the early 1990s as Atlanta witnessed a surge in organized crime among Vietnamese, and dozens of Amerasian youths joined gangs that seemed to promise an alternative shortcut to the elusive “American Dream” via theft, extortion, and murder. “Vietnamese gangs bring war to South,” announced one Atlanta Journal-Constitution headline in 1987, describing the “new Vietnamese civil war in Fulton, Gwinnett, DeKalb and Clayton counties.” Racism fueled the bitter gang wars, because “the Chinese, the Koreans, the Laotians – they think the Vietnamese are lazy, ambition-less robbers,” argued Detective M.C. Cox, the Atlanta Police Bureau’s liaison to the Asian community, in 1987. Gang activity and violence was often contained within immigrant neighborhoods, and “citizens outside the Asian community are unaware of the Vietnamese and Chinese gangs,” reported the Atlanta

Journal-Constitution in 1996. Bang Bui, editor of the semi-monthly newspaper Atlanta Viet Bao, described the gangs as a “hundred-headed snake. You cut off one head, and there are 99 more.”

Of the many gangs that formed in the city, the most prominent and infamous was the Loc Lam gang, named after its leader, which terrorized Atlanta’s larger Vietnamese community from 1993 to 1998. “Of the 26 suspected Loc Lam gangsters,” reported the Atlanta Journal-Constitution in 1996, “most are Amerasian.” The group was particularly violent, “binding [victims] with rope, electrical cord and duct tape, and then shocking them with cattle prods,” according to charges brought against several gang members in 1996. Kim Nguyen, a well-educated Vietnamese Amerasian who later worked for CPACS, knew several Loc Lam members: “They don’t have education, and they don’t care for life,” remembered Nguyen.

Yet despite the gang’s brutality, some Atlantans recognized the Loc Lam syndicate as a product of deeper problems: “As the twig is bent, so grows the tree,” said Marge Flaherty, Atlanta director of the International Rescue Committee, a group that had earlier been involved in relocating Amerasians to the United States. “I think they’re victims as well as perpetrators, and maybe, we are reaping what we’ve sown.” Atlanta’s police department was less sympathetic, as Assistant U.S. Attorney Art Leach described

29 Atlanta Journal-Constitution, December 13, 1996, E1; ibid., E1; Kim Nguyen, interview conducted by the author, Doraville, Georgia, June 11, 2007. Most of the Amerasian gang members were in their late teens to mid-twenties at this point.
the gang as “an extremely violent group who plied their trade by imposing a state of terrorist on their victims.”

A number of arrests decimated the gang’s membership in the late ‘90s, and their trials tested the government’s power in deporting Amerasians who violated the law. In the first trial, *United States v. Lam, et al* (1996), Lam himself testified against many of his former underlings in a grueling multilingual trial with over twenty defendants and nearly 200 criminal counts. Reaching a unanimous verdict proved difficult, as the unique history of the Amerasians complicated the case, and the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reported that the “jury’s deliberations were the longest in recent memory.” A majority of the defendants were naturalized citizens, including Lam, but nearly a dozen were simply permanent residents and subject to deportation. The final verdicts showed no leniency towards the defendants, who were all given long jail sentences followed by forced removal to Vietnam for those who lacked American citizenship.

However, the 1996 trial was only the first of several legal battles that followed the gang’s liquidation, as indicted members who faced deportation sought to have their cases reheard. In the subsequent *United States v. Tam Tran Nguyen, Binh Hoa Le, et. al.* (2001), four of the ten defendants were not citizens. But a retrial did not overturn the earlier decision, as for Binh Hoa Le, Thang Doan, Quoc Thai Minh Thuy, and Son Van Pham, “the court further ordered that the defendants be deported after they had served their sentences.” The case was finally brought to the U.S. Supreme Court in 2003, where the court denied its petition for a writ of certiorari. Ultimately, this series of decisions

---

demonstrated to Atlanta’s Vietnamese community that the American legal system would not give preferential treatment to Amerasians despite their extraordinary status, and underscored Amerasian vulnerability to deportation to a people already tense and anxious about their status.\textsuperscript{32}

While the gang gained few sympathizers among Atlanta’s Vietnamese population, the trial’s newspaper publicity revealed to both native and immigrant Atlantans the harsh reality Amerasians faced in their relocation, and aroused local demands for legal change. After the turn of the century, Boat People SOS initiated a grassroots drive to rally support for legislation that would guarantee citizenship to all Amerasians, regardless of performance on the required written exam. In October of 2003, immigrant-friendly representatives introduced the first such bill before the House of Representatives, which would “amend the Immigration and Nationality Act to provide for the automatic acquisition of citizenship” by Vietnamese Amerasians. Proposed by California Representative Zoe Lofgren, the Amerasian Naturalization Act was later referred to the Subcommittee on Immigration, Border Security, and Claims, but was tabled and underwent no further discussion.\textsuperscript{33}

Vietnamese communities across the country organized meetings and protests to defend Lofgren’s bill; in Atlanta, “some forty Amerasians decided to make a difference in their own future” and met at Chamblee’s Canton House Restaurant to vocalize their

\textsuperscript{32} United States vs. Tam Tran Nguyen, Binh Hoa Le, et. al., United States District Court for the Northern District of Georgia, case number 98-9334, July 6, 2001, \textsuperscript{5}; United States v. Tam Tran Nguyen, United States Supreme Court, case number 02-9786, May 5, 2003. The Loc Lam case was not the only instance of Amerasians being deported for crimes committed in the United States: in 2001, an African-American Amerasian living in Dallas, Texas was arrested for drug possession and threatened with deportation. Though the case did not gain as much publicity as the Loc Lam affair, it also highlighted the difficult position of the Amerasians. See the Dallas Observer, June 21, 2001.

\textsuperscript{33} The Atlanta Constitution and Journal published over a dozen articles on the gang’s arrests and trials between 1996 and 1998; H.R. 3360 IH, October 21, 2003, “Amerasian Naturalization Act of 2003,” \textsuperscript{1}; as of December 2006, the bill has not been passed.
support of the legislation. At the meeting, Thong Van Than expressed the common sentiment of Atlanta’s Amerasians: “All I ask for is recognition of my American identity.” Additional groups formed to pursue similar goals, such as the Amerasian Citizenship Initiative, organized in 2005 by Boat People SOS in Houston.  

However, in demanding immigration reform, grassroots organizations found the American political climate to be rather hostile to their pleas. As a result of the September 11th terrorist attacks, the United States government toughened immigration restrictions to protect national security, and the newly-formed Department of Homeland Security absorbed the Immigration and Naturalization Services agency. A national backlash against the proliferation of undocumented aliens grew to a crescendo in the mid-2000s, and those seeking a liberalization of immigration policy were vastly outnumbered in Congress. In the Southeast, politicians were slow in acknowledging the plight of Amerasians, and showed little interest in adopting their cause. Discussing local Atlanta representatives, Kevin Nguyen at Boat People SOS claimed that “we feel like they not totally agree with us, not one hundred percent wanting to support us.” “For a minor group like us,” Nguyen lamented, “this is not a good time in Congress.”

It was in the midst of this volatile debate that Tuan Phuoc Le traveled from Atlanta to Washington in June of 2005, to protest the Vietnamese Prime Minister’s meeting with George Bush. Like many other Amerasians, Le was a bitter opponent of Communist rule in Vietnam. As a child, Le had faced particularly brutal racial persecution, according to Dat Vo, a long-time Amerasian friend of Le’s from Boston. Le was once “forced to undress and dance around in a circle by a group of Communists,” Vo

---

35 Kevin Nguyen, interview conducted by the author, June 7, 2007.
told the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* after Le’s arrest, and “[he] carries those scars.”

During the protest on June 21, security guards with the Vietnamese delegation had “recognized Mr. Le and began calling him a ‘half-breed,’” which would conjure painful memories for the already-resentful man. As the Secret Service guards carried him away after attacking Huy, Le screamed that the Communists had “killed my U.S. Marine father in Vietnam.” Le’s attack and subsequent trial brought the plight of Amerasians into the national spotlight once again, as major newspapers across the country reported the assault.\(^{36}\)

In Atlanta, reactions within the Vietnamese community were somewhat mixed. Suong Phan of Good Shepherd Services disapproved of the attack, explaining that “he do something that don’t look good here!” But Phan was in the minority: Le got a “hero’s welcome” upon his return to the city, and on July 22, three hundred supporters met in Norcross to show support for Le’s approaching trial. “We have to help him,” said Tri Tran, a Stone Mountain landscaper who donated to Le’s legal defense fund, which grew to several thousand dollars. “That’s our duty, because we are Vietnamese,” Tran declared, despite Le’s Amerasian ancestry. At the Norcross meeting, Le, speaking through a translator, told reporters he didn’t fear threats of deportation because “the people will protect me.” Even outside of Georgia, Le received substantial support: Vietnamese “in the Washington area and around the country have raised about $45,000 to help pay the legal bills of Le,” reported the *Washington Post* in August 2005.\(^{37}\)

---


\(^{37}\) Suong Phan, interview conducted by the author, June 11, 2007: Suong’s last name is fictitious, as it was not given at the time of the interview; *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 24, 2005; Tri Tran quoted in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 24, 2005, D5; Tuan Phuoc Le quoted in the *Atlanta Journal-
Aside from the Vietnamese immigrant community, Le also received national support from native-born Americans across the political spectrum. Jim Wooten, a writer for the AJC’s “Thinking Right” column, presented “open arms to [the] Marine’s son.” “Under no circumstances” should Le be deported, wrote Wooten, arguing instead that “children of U.S. military personnel should have been granted dual citizenship at birth.” FrontPage Magazine, an online publication edited by arch-conservative pundit David Horowitz, also published an article inspired by Le’s predicament, describing “the living hell of Amerasians.” Claiming that “America’s misguided judicial system is trying to deprive Tuan Le’s children of their father, and Tuan Le of his freedom,” the FrontPage writers sided with the Amerasian community, though the magazine’s editorial staff notoriously opposed any other immigration reform.38

As Le went to trial, his case entered into an ongoing legal discourse over the rights of permanent residents facing deportation proceedings. Four years earlier, in Zadvydas v. Davis, the U.S. Supreme Court decided that “the authority to hold an alien past the normal removal period if he or she is dangerous to the community does not permit indefinite detention of an alien whose removal is not reasonably foreseeable,” or more concisely, that if trouble is encountered in deporting an alien, he or she may not be held indefinitely. In 2004 Tuan Thai v. Ashcroft challenged the Zadvydas ruling, in which Thai, an Amerasian who had been convicted of a number of violent crimes within the United States, was held for a period exceeding that allotted in Zadvydas. Due to

---

difficulties in negotiating his deportation with the Vietnamese government, which did not want to receive Thai, and claims that the Amerasian “pose[d] a special danger to the public,” authorities imprisoned Thai for several months after the duration of his regular prison sentence. In May of 2004, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit ruled that Thai could not be held further and must be released, overruling a previous District Court mandate.39

For Tuan Le, whose crime was far less severe than Tuan Thai’s, the foreseeable difficulties in deporting a Vietnamese Amerasian were considerable enough to temper governmental threats of expulsion. Though Le had initially considered an insanity defense to reduce the severity of his sentence, he finally plead guilty to violating 18 USC 112(a) in the “assault on a foreign official,” and in October 2006, the court sentenced Le to nine months in prison, followed by a three year period of “supervised release” in Georgia. The verdict claimed that Le “is more likely than not to be tortured” if returned to Vietnam, and could therefore not be removed from the United States. Le’s success symbolized a triumph in the eyes of his Atlanta Vietnamese sympathizers, as their dedication and contributions had enabled Le to fight for a milder sentence. “He will not be deported,” Kevin Nguyen at Boat People SOS claimed, “because our community gave support.”40

39 Zadvydas v. Davis, U.S. Supreme Court, case number 99-7791, June 28, 2001; Zadvydas quote is from the Metropolitan News-Enterprise, November 26, 2004, 1: the News-Enterprise is a Los Angeles newspaper that focuses on legal issues; Tuan Thai v. Ashcroft, United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth District, case number 03-35626, May 3, 2004, 5639; interestingly, these issues will once again be considered, when deportation proceedings are held for members of the Loc Lam gang, upon their release from prison.
40 United States v. Tuan Phuoc Le, United States District Court for the District of Columbia, case number CR 05-334, October 19, 2006, 3; quote from verdict is from Washington Post, December 24, 2006, C2; Kevin Nguyen, interview conducted by the author, June 7, 2007.
In their defense of Tuan Le, and through continued agitation against disparities in national immigration law, Atlanta’s Vietnamese and Amerasian communities confronted the legal boundaries of their status as Americans, with varying degrees of success. Recognizing that governmental promises of deliverance remained unfulfilled, Amerasians in Atlanta and around the United States demanded recognition as the American children of a bitter war. As American citizenship eluded these “children of the dust,” their hope of achieving prosperity and success in the land of their fathers was similarly uncertain. Through protest and polemic, Atlanta’s Amerasians and their Vietnamese supporters sought to shape their own fates in a new land, and demonstrated the potential political clout of a mobilized immigrant community. Nevertheless, efforts to guarantee citizenship to Amerasians have yet to succeed, though future legislation may bring resolution to this protracted debate.

As one of the many Asian immigrant groups that have settled in the United States, the Vietnamese Amerasians also force us to reconsider recent myths about the legal history of American immigration. While the federal government significantly reformed the racialized nature of previous immigration law in the late twentieth century, unresolved problems persist, as the text of the INA subtly grants preferences and restrictions to different groups under the guise of impartial treatment. For those left outside of the privileged circle of citizenship, whether they be Amerasian refugees or the undocumented Latino day laborers discussed in the previous chapter, the reality of American resettlement was a conflicted and deeply hypocritical experience. As Atlanta and the rest of the nation continue to be reshaped by both legal and undocumented immigrants, these issues will remain central to our understanding of American history.
Work and law were hardly the only issues directing the lives of immigrants that settled within Atlanta. No matter what their legal status, and no matter where they found work, cultural issues were central to the daily lives of Atlanta’s newcomers. In being transplanted into an alien and unknown culture, many immigrants relied on tradition and heritage to maintain their national and ethnic identities. Of these methods of cultural preservation, food was perhaps the most noticeable medium for illustrating internal conflicts over ethnic self-definition. Within Atlanta, Decatur’s DeKalb Farmers Market provides an excellent example of how immigrants adapted to and resisted their new setting, and deserves further attention.
CHAPTER THREE

Beyond Grits and Greens:
The DeKalb Farmers Market, Food, and Ethnic Identity in Atlanta, 1977-2006

In the summer of 1977, Robert Blazer opened a local farmers market in Decatur, Georgia, only a few miles from the heart of downtown Atlanta. The market began humbly in a former greenhouse without refrigeration, and Blazer’s operation initially served as a simple exchange point between local farmers and consumers. Born into a middle-class white family of Italian descent in New England, Blazer had grown up in his father’s variety store in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, and was quite familiar with the food retail industry. After securing a loan from his family, Blazer moved South with aspirations of entering the grocery trade himself. His initial goal seemed simple: “to provide the people in the neighborhood with high quality product,” and maybe turn a bit of a profit along the way. In the city of Atlanta, Blazer saw a “traditional” community that reminded him of his New England roots, “especially when it came to cooking.”

The very same year that Blazer relocated to Georgia, Herbert T. Jenkins, the former long-time police chief of Atlanta, published a short book on the history of Atlanta’s produce business. Titled Food, Fairs, and Farmers Markets in Atlanta, Jenkins’ essay portrayed a city whose food industry truly was as “traditional” as Blazer remembered. In describing the Atlanta State Farmer’s Market, which was then the largest such venue in the city, Jenkins wrote of a “pleasant nostalgic scene” where Georgia farmers brought their harvest directly to local consumers. One annual

---

celebration was the “popular and enduring” Watermelon Day, where free slices of watermelon and live country music were a “big highlight for the entire family.” Though the State Farmer’s Market occasionally sold “esoteric produce” like “clementines, romaine, [and] shallots,” such items did “not comprise a typical Atlanta menu.”

But over the course of three decades, the DeKalb Farmers Market, along with Atlanta’s food industry and culinary atmosphere, were dramatically transformed by an immigration revolution that continues to redefine the dynamics of the urban South. Though the DeKalb Market began as a roadside produce stand, ten years later it was one of the largest indoor food markets in the nation, occupying a facility of over 140,000 square feet, while selling products that would have been unheard of a decade earlier. Simply witnessing the operation of the DeKalb Farmers Market is impressive: laden shopping carts collide in crowded aisles, hundreds of voices speaking dozens of languages blend into a jarring cacophony inside the refrigerated warehouse, and nearly two hundred flags from all corners of the globe hang from the rafters, reflecting the diversity of both the employees and clientele of the Market.

While the phrase “farmers’ market” brings to mind images of local growers peddling their produce, Blazer’s operation has been fully centralized, with all workers officially employed by the Market. Out of these nearly 550 employees, no more than two dozen are native-born southerners, and Blazer claims that his workforce hails from “every area that has a large immigration going on;” the DeKalb Market’s clientele is similarly diverse. The product line has also shifted to meet the preferences and tastes of its new clientele, as bok choy, carp, and tofu samosas displaced grits and fried chicken.

---

The DeKalb Farmers Market, as a pioneer of multicultural consumerism, has become a symbol of the city’s larger cultural transformation.\(^3\)

While the Market’s astonishing transition from produce stand to ethnic marketplace is partially due to its owner’s innovation, it would have been impossible without the tremendous demographic transformation that internationalized Atlanta. While statistics can only represent a piece of reality, a comparative analysis of the 1980 and 2000 censuses is solid proof that the city underwent tremendous change. DeKalb County, home to the city of Decatur and the Farmers Market, attracted thousands of immigrants within these two turbulent decades. While the county grew 38 percent in total population between 1980 and 2000, the number of non-white/black residents grew by 747 percent, from 1.5 percent of the population to nearly 10 percent. Comprised mainly of Asian and Latino immigrants from around the globe, this wave of newcomers found homes in all of Atlanta’s fast-growing communities. In metro Atlanta, while the total population grew by 47 percent, foreign-born residents saw their numbers rise by 728 percent, and the non-white/black demographic increased by 1,190 percent. From being little more than 2 percent of the population in 1980, foreign-born residents composed more than 13 percent of metro Atlanta’s population in 2000. Across the state, similar changes were occurring. Georgia’s population grew by 50 percent from 1980 to 2000, but its foreign born and non-black/white populations grew by 531 percent and 892 percent, respectively.\(^4\)

\(^3\) Robert Blazer, interview conducted by the author, May 19, 2007.

\(^4\) U.S. Census figures: DeKalb County, Congressional Districts 4,5,6, State of Georgia, 1980-2000. When I refer to “metro Atlanta” in quoting census figures, I am referring to Congressional Districts 4, 5, and 6 as a representation of Atlanta and its most populous suburbs. Districts 4, 5, and 6 contain the majorities of Cobb, Fulton, Gwinnett and DeKalb Counties.
This chapter will thus formulate a historical ethnography of Blazer’s DeKalb market, with a theoretical understanding of culture as an open system of symbols and meanings, to illustrate the role of cultural change in making Atlanta an “international city.” A few central questions will orient the essay: how has southern culture, long seen as static and resisting outside influence, been reshaped by the introduction of a large immigrant population? How does cultural and culinary diversity shape regional, ethnic, and racial self-awareness? And in looking at trends within the food industry and Atlanta cuisine, why did a restaurant like the Rebel Chef Drive-In close while the Thai Diner opened a second location? Atlanta’s culinary transformation demonstrates that ethnic food, in its sale and consumption, was critical to both the dissolution and preservation of ethnic and regional identity, for recent immigrants and native southerners. And while some natives resisted the growth of the DeKalb Market and the cultural amalgamation it represented, Blazer’s business was more often embraced and promoted by those who saw ethnic and cultural diversity as vital to the making of a truly cosmopolitan city.5

In the course of a quarter century, this tremendous immigrant influx internationalized Atlanta on a human level, and deeply affected the way white and black southerners eat, drink, and think about food and themselves. Atlanta’s cultural transformation has affirmed the classical adage “you are what you eat,” and deserves serious analysis.

This examination of food and ethnic identity within a modern southern city raises difficult questions about assimilation, Americanization, and cultural adaptation that are

---

5 I borrow this methodology from Clifford Geertz’s *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). In doing ethnography, Geertz pioneered the use of “thick description,” in which an observer attempts to interpret and decode the “stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures” that constitute human culture. Ibid., 7.
central to American historiography. In order to understand how Atlanta’s recent immigrants fit within this larger framework, it is necessary to review the major literature dealing with immigrant culture and assimilation. Does the South’s difficult history of segregation, white supremacy, and rural poverty shape the modern southern immigrant experience? In studying these complex questions of assimilation and adaptation, we have to understand that scholarship is not monolithic, but that over time, historians have approached the mass movement of peoples in various ways with differing conclusions; there remains no singular explanation as to how immigrants entered into American society, or what effects this has on the nation itself.

The work of a French expatriate, Hector St. John Crèvecoeur, whose *Letters from an American Farmer* commented on early American society’s unparalleled ability to transform European immigrants into a unique race that eschewed the antiquated trappings of feudal European society, heavily influenced early American immigration studies. However, it is important to acknowledge that this wave of immigrants that Crèvecoeur observed were primarily western European, and that when thousands of southern and eastern Europeans arrived in the late nineteenth century that were quite distinct from the earlier Anglo-Teutonic settlers, Crèvecoeur’s mythical melting pot came into question as insufficient for explaining immigrant assimilation. As the nature of immigration changed, the rapid and painless conversion of ethnic Europeans into mainstream Americans became less apparent.⁶

---

Therefore, in the 1920s, the “Chicago school” of sociologists, notably Robert Park, began to question Crévecoeur’s assumptions, arguing that Americanization was a long and arduous process rarely welcomed by immigrants themselves. In *Old World Traits Transplanted*, Park and co-author Herbert Miller described the “serious hindrances” that served to slow and reduce immigrant assimilation. As the title suggests, eastern and southern Europeans were not uniformly melted into American society, but retained their ethnic heritage and formed independent enclaves. A generation later, Oscar Handlin’s *The Uprooted* further undermined the Crévecoeurian synthesis, arguing that immigrants rarely relinquished their native cultures, but instead formed tightly-knit ethnic communities that resisted forced assimilation. *The Uprooted* portrayed an immigrant America that was bleak, disorganized, and alienating, yet Handlin predicted that pluralism, not the Crévecoeurian “new race of men,” would be the future of America.7

By the early ‘60s, historians such as Rudolph Vecoli and Herbert Gutman, the founders of the American school of social history, attacked both Handlin’s “epic story” and Crévecoeur’s idealism. Looking at mass migrations through the lens of Marxist class theory, this “new immigration history” overturned long-held myths of immigrants as anti-capitalist peasants fleeing a world threatened by modernism; instead, argued Vecoli and Gutman, many migrating foreigners saw America as a temporary labor market, not a new home. Immigrant groups were not disorganized or “uprooted,” but calculating and

---

mobile laborers who often spurned the “American dream” of social mobility in favor of repatriation.  

With the coming of black Civil Rights and immigration law reform in the 1960s, Americans of all ethnic backgrounds began to slowly reject the homogenizing Americanization of the previous forty years, favoring instead a revival and celebration of their diverse heritages and cultures. However, the advent of a pluralistic and multicultural America (or an America that pays lip service to these qualities) was not without its problems or critics. Historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. has claimed that a fractured society of distinct, self-interested ethnic groups would cause the “disuniting of America,” while scholars such as David Hollinger, Mary C. Waters, and Werner Sollors have each argued that ethnic identity is rarely predetermined at birth, but is instead an elective characteristic that is often influenced by social and historical patterns of self-identification. Other recent historians have reevaluated the effects of mass culture, consumerism, gender, “whiteness” and race in the process of acculturation, proving that historical context must be central to considering the immigrant experience.

---


Food and consumption history, both relatively new disciplines, have each become central to the study of twentieth-century immigration. In looking at the advent of a modern consumer-based society, scholars such as Lizabeth Cohen have analyzed the transformation of Americans from producers to consumers, demonstrating that as recent immigrants engaged with mass culture, consumption served to uphold ethnic identities and traditions rather than forcing assimilation. Membership in a mass-market consumer society therefore did not invalidate individual distinctions of ethnicity, class, or culture.¹⁰

Long relegated to cookbooks and amateur historians, the study of food is today a growing field that spans several disciplines. Anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and historians alike have come to realize that food tells us “who we are, where we came from, and what we want to be,” as Warren Belasco attests in an overview of the budding discipline. In analyzing how food makes ethnic Americans and Americans ethnic, Donna Gabaccia sees food and diet as “binding taste and satiety to group loyalties,” and that the multiethnic eating habits of modern Americans are essential to creating an identity separate from the “mixed salad” or “melting pot.” It is “how we eat, not what we eat” that defines Americans today. Food is often coupled with consumption theory, and Gabaccia argues that consumer choices in eating should not be “dismissed as superficial simply because they are expressed in the marketplace.”¹¹


Scholarship on regional southern food has only recently begun to transcend the confines of televised cooking programs and tourism brochures, and the best modern examples are seen in the work of John T. Edge and the Southern Foodways Alliance. In recognizing that “traditional” southern cooking is far from monolithic, having roots in various European, African, and Native American cuisines, Edge and others are moving beyond works such as Nathalie Dupree’s *Southern Memories*, a cookbook whose culinary “reminiscences” retain the nostalgic tinge of Old South romanticism. Still, much of today’s southern food writing is cast in a framework of black and white, despite the addition of Latin American, Asian, and African cuisines to the southern diet.\(^\text{(12)}\)

However, when Robert Blazer opened the DeKalb Farmers Market in the summer of 1977, these foods remained fringe delicacies enjoyed only by a small percentage of Atlanta’s expanding population. Glancing through the 1977 Atlanta Yellow Pages reveals a society that had yet to be transformed by the proliferation of ethnic food: only ninety-two out of approximately fifteen hundred restaurants could be classified as non-Euro-American. With forty-six Chinese, fourteen Japanese, eighteen Mexican, and only two Thai restaurants, Atlanta was a city still characterized by “all-American” food, such as the Varsity and Chick-Fil-A, two popular restaurants who both claim Atlanta as their

birthplace. Blazer was therefore not incorrect in describing Atlanta’s culinary atmosphere as “traditional” upon his arrival.\textsuperscript{13}

It was in this city of grits and greens that the Farmers Market opened, on the second of June in 1977, at Scott Boulevard and North Decatur Road in Decatur. The Decatur-DeKalb News/Era described the Market as a “new business that will specialize in the sale of fresh fruits and vegetables.” The newspaper likened Blazer’s business to a “street market,” where “nothing will be held over night,” and any remaining produce was to be “sold at special prices just before closing.” The range of food sold was “traditional” as well, “from apple[s] to a crate of greens.” Two weeks later, the Market ran an advertisement in the same paper, advertising “FRESH FRUIT AND VEGETABLES DIRECT FROM THE FARM TO YOU!” The produce sold was mostly locally grown, as nearby Georgia and South Carolina farmers brought their goods to the city. While Blazer’s operation may have been primitive in comparison with today’s warehouse and lacking its multicultural focus, the Market was initially successful, as it faced little competition from similar vendors in the local neighborhood.\textsuperscript{14}

In the following months, the Market quietly grew and built a consumer base in the city of Decatur and DeKalb County, but February of 1979 brought an unplanned catastrophe: a build-up of ice and snow on the roof of the building caused a collapse, inflicting more than $100,000 in damage. Dedicated customers proved to be critical in financing the reconstruction, as Blazer went door-to-door in Decatur raising nearly

\textsuperscript{13} Greater Atlanta Yellow Pages, 1977 edition, covering area code 404. In categorizing restaurants by ethnicity, I am relying completely on their names: while not 100 percent accurate, it is clear that The Golden Buddha and Frank’s Ol’ Home Place serve quite different entrees. I am not insisting that these numbers fully represent the number of non-European restaurants, as there may be many more that are not listed, but the Yellow Pages do provide a telling glance at the culinary atmosphere of Atlanta.

$25,000 to aid in the rebuilding the Market. Upon completion, “the grateful market honored [customers’] canceled checks at the check-out counters.” In discussing the Market’s early customers, Blazer saw community aid as essential to the Market’s success: “They even gave us the money to rebuild it; they felt like it was their market.” Blazer’s brother and sister, Harry and Linda, also moved to Atlanta to help rebuild the Market and join the business, and Harry Blazer became general manager for several years.15

The Market’s reinvention as an ethnic bazaar had its roots in these early years, and was not only inspired by changing demographics, but by food industry trends as well. Throughout the 1980s, the commercial food industry underwent large-scale consolidation, and the massive supermarkets run by corporations such as Cincinnati’s Kroger, Inc., placed enormous pressure on smaller, independently-run firms. To survive these “supermarket wars,” a business like Blazer’s needed a competitive edge, and this came in an expanded selection of foods unavailable in larger grocery stores. The DeKalb Market was one of the first groceries to experiment with internationalizing their product line, though by the end of the decade, Blazer would have a score of followers: in 1988, one Atlanta food writer claimed “the revolution is now. Atlanta’s former beans-and-potatoes complacency is being subverted by cadres of strange and alien fruits, nuts and vegetables.” Growing public awareness about the benefits of fresh foods and a varied diet, inspired by the countercultural health-foods movement of the 1960s and ‘70s, also contributed to the Market’s popularity. In 1991, James Hood, editor of supermarket trade publication The Shelby Report, praised Blazer’s business as a “throwback to the old days

of traditional markets.” “We’re seeing more of these places in response to consumer demand,” argued Hood in an interview with the *Atlanta Constitution*.16

With a new building and an evolving business strategy, the Market prospered as it began to attract a clientele that was quickly expanding in Atlanta. The non-white/black population of DeKalb County nearly tripled in the 1980s, and Asian and Hispanic immigrants flocked to the Market as Blazer’s business began catering to this new demographic influx. Connie Siu Guinn, the daughter of two Asian immigrant entrepreneurs who opened one of the first Chinese restaurants in nearby Snellville, Georgia, remembers shopping at the Market throughout the ‘80s. “Going to the market was a ritual – every Saturday my family would go – my mom would buy the produce and the products she missed so much, and my father would pick up wholesale items for the restaurant.” In providing the raw materials for ethnic restaurateurs, the Farmers Market facilitated the operation of dozens of restaurants like the Siu family’s Golden China in Snellville. The market also became a social experience: “I knew I would not only get a Toblerone all to myself, but that I would get to see some ‘non-white’ kids. Many times it was a social place too – my parents would see friends from the tightly knit Asian community.” Atlanta immigrants began forming what Daniel Boorstin has called “communities of consumption,” where “nearly all objects,” certainly food, “became symbols and instruments of novel communities.” These informal networks would only multiply as more immigrants settled within the city.17

---


Increased growth soon became problematic at the Scott Boulevard location, as thousands of shoppers swarmed the cramped aisles on weekends. The food editor of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution quipped in 1986 that “if the three words ‘DeKalb Farmers Market’ leave a bad taste in your mouth, it’s probably because three shopping carts pinned you in between the peppers and cucumbers one Saturday morning or a noisy, honking forklift chased you from the seafood to the cheese department.” Spatial constraints necessitated a move, and in September of 1986 the Market relocated to an expanded building on East Ponce De Leon Avenue in Decatur. Designed by Robert Blazer himself, the new facility was more than four times the size of the previous location, and promised “the widest, cross-cultural array of seafood, produce, deli items and baked goods ever assembled in Atlanta.”\textsuperscript{18}

At the same time, local residents near the old Scott Boulevard location, who had experienced first-hand the explosive growth of the Market and its new customer base, were “glad they’re gone.” Despite reassurances from the DeKalb Health Department that the Market violated no regulations, unhappy neighbors deemed the Market rodent-infested, malodorous, and disruptive, as traffic flowing in and out of the Market’s undersized parking lot congested city streets. “Unfounded rumors of poisonous snakes in the produce” plagued the Market, reported an Atlanta Journal-Constitution writer in 1984, and it is clear that not every Atlanta resident enthusiastically embraced the sudden introduction of foreign foods and cuisines into the city.\textsuperscript{19}

A bitter family feud would disrupt the operation of the Market in 1987, as Harry Blazer left the company after a personal dispute to undertake an independent venture,

\textsuperscript{18} Atlanta Journal-Constitution, September 24/25, 1986, F1.
\textsuperscript{19} Atlanta Journal-Constitution, North DeKalb Extra, October 9, 1986, JA5; Atlanta Journal-Constitution, July 1, 1984, D6.
Harry’s Farmers Markets. Eschewing the utilitarian focus and multiethnic clientele of his older brother’s company, Harry opened stores in Cobb and Gwinnett Counties, which were quickly suburbanizing and becoming home to middle- and upper-class white-collar workers from Atlanta. Harry’s Farmers Markets, while still selling products from all over the globe, had higher prices and immaculately decorated interiors that were far different from the wet concrete and fluorescent lighting of the DeKalb Market. While “the brothers are divided by their differences,” reported the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, the two markets have “divided shoppers as well.” As the visually pleasing Harry’s Markets attracted well-to-do whites, the DeKalb Market solidified the loyalty of its growing immigrant clientele. Many shoppers living in the suburban communities north of Atlanta stopped making the “long trip down” to Decatur, but not all believed Harry’s gloss and sheen to be superior: “Harry’s took the idea and made it commercial,” one loyal DeKalb Market shopper insisted.20

Robert Blazer assured reporters that while “the appearance of the [DeKalb] market may not be spectacular…when the smoke clears, DeKalb will still be around. I don’t know what will happen with these other markets.” The elder Blazer was right. Though initially successful, Harry’s Farmers Markets never turned a profit after 1993, and natural-foods giant Whole Foods Market eventually bought out Blazer’s business in 2001. “Our aspirations have exceeded our grasp because of our performance,” Harry Blazer told the press as he finalized the deal. While a buy-out from a larger corporation was often financially lucrative for a smaller company, the Whole Foods deal was not negotiated entirely on Harry Blazer’s terms: several of the smaller Harry’s In A Hurry

---

stores were not included in the purchase. As Harry’s Markets failed, the DeKalb Market persevered.\(^{21}\)

In addition to fierce competition from Harry’s and similar copycat markets, the DeKalb Farmers Market also faced opposition from native southerners who didn’t see growing multiculturalism as a positive trend. During the first Persian Gulf War in 1991, more than a hundred war veterans picketed and boycotted the Market, opposed to the presence of an Iraqi flag among the nearly two hundred others hanging from the rafters of the relocated East Ponce Market. Ten Atlanta VFW posts organized the demonstration, in response to Blazer’s refusal to remove the flag, which had been hanging inside the Market for more than three years. “Reports of harassing telephone calls, of veiled insults, and even bomb threats” alarmed Market employees and shoppers, but Blazer did not yield. “We said the flags represented the people, not the politics,” Blazer recalled. Many Atlantans agreed, such as one who wrote a letter to the editor of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*: “The notion of removing an enemy’s flag in time of war reminds me of an emotional teenager tearing up the photograph of an ex-boyfriend or girlfriend.” While the Market resolved the conflict without a major boycott, it was clear that not all saw the expansion of the all-inclusive, immigrant-friendly Market as a positive development.\(^{22}\)

Nevertheless, the flag protests, along with the earlier snake rumors and parking complaints, were isolated incidents and not representative of most Atlanta residents. The Market’s popularity, with both natives and newcomers, grew enormously over the years. “As many as 10,000 people come to shop on weekends and hundreds of others come simply to marvel at the piles of fruits and vegetables and the attendant babel of

---


languages,” wrote one AJC reporter in 1984. As Atlanta’s boosters actively promoted the city’s “international” status, the Farmers Market became an oft-mentioned symbol of Atlanta’s diversity. “If Atlanta has any claim to world-class rankings,” argued one 1991 editorial in the Atlanta Constitution, “the market boosts that claim considerably.” An Atlanta Journal writer described the Market as “Atlanta’s greatest cultural melting pot,” and a 1988 National Geographic feature on Atlanta’s “energy and optimism” singled out the DeKalb Market as “something Atlantans like to brag about,” as it was “an international city in itself.” By 2007, nearly 100,000 people visited Blazer’s market every week. As Atlanta residents enthusiastically lionized the Farmers Market and incorporated it into the city’s mythology, it seemed southern culture was more flexible and adaptive than previously thought.23

Popularity and growth brought internal problems though, as interactions between different immigrant groups and the management of the Market occasionally proved difficult. In December of 1988, eight ex-workers of various nationalities, both native and foreign-born, sued the Market in federal court over questionable training practices involving an alleged “New Age quasi-religious cult” that subjected employees to “harassment, humiliation and interrogation.” Robert Blazer had joined the “Forum” in 1987, a “human potential program” linked to New Age philosopher Werner Erhard’s est seminars that had gained popularity in the 1970s. Blazer allegedly forced employees to attend group training sessions, and workers later protested that the Forum sessions violated their right to religious freedom “under the guise of ‘management training.’”

With eventual American Civil Liberties Union involvement, the case received significant national publicity, but was eventually settled out of court in June of 1989 by Blazer and the plaintiffs.24

This would not be the last dispute between labor and management: in June of 1991, Blazer fired twenty-eight Ethiopian employees for leaving work to attend a protest in Atlanta against U.S. foreign policy in their home country. A misunderstanding arose when several workers believed they had received permission to attend, while Blazer later denied granting any such request. “They decided that they would much rather be at a demonstration than keep their jobs,” Blazer told the press. An ex-employee countered, insisting that “we love our jobs, but we love our country too.” Despite the ensuing protests, Blazer did not offer a public apology or rehire the workers. Both the lawsuit and the 1991 firings indicated that the assimilation of immigrants into the Market’s workforce was not without its problems.25

Despite competition, opposition, and internal division, by the mid-1990s the Market had established itself as a permanent institution for incoming Atlanta immigrants, particularly in offering employment to newly-arrived labor. Blazer describes the often-shifting workforce: “With waves of immigration, we absorb those people: some will stay, because they really like the business, but others will just pass through. But they get their start here: thousands and thousands of people.” The Market began to assume almost a charitable, philanthropic position in the burgeoning immigrant community, as it accepted refugees from around the world into its growing workforce; an Atlanta newspaper even

---

24 Atlanta Journal-Constitution, December 8, 1988, B11; quote describing the Forum as a “human potential program” comes from an article in The Wall Street Journal, December 8, 1988, B10; Atlanta Journal-Constitution, June 8, 1989, E2. In the out of court settlement, Blazer most likely paid the plaintiffs, but these details were not disclosed to the press.
described Blazer as “do[ing] his small share in helping race relations.” Mekonnen Yayne, an Ethiopian refugee who arrived in Atlanta in 1987 after fleeing an oppressive regime in his home country, expressed gratitude to Blazer’s company: “I am very grateful to the DeKalb Farmer’s Market for the opportunity to support myself in my new life. I miss [my family] greatly, but get comfort from the family I’ve developed here at the market.” As the Market hired one member from a large immigrant family, they made possible the relocation of more relatives from their native countries. “[Employees] send money [home], to protect their people as best they can, but as soon as they can get them over here, they do,” Blazer recalls.²⁶

Perhaps most interestingly, the wide selection of ethnic foods at the Market facilitated the retention of ethnic identities among recent Atlanta immigrants. Having moved far beyond the original “apple [and] crate of greens,” the Market became famous for its “squirming mudbugs, morbier cheese, [and] tapioca flour,” among thousands of other unusual items. Because of the rapid product turnover and large clientele of the Market, Blazer has been able to order foods from all over the globe. “A guy like me can foster all this product coming in, but it’s not easy to find,” Blazer says. Despite this difficulty, Blazer’s efforts have paid off: for Juan, a DeKalb Market employee for more than twenty years and a native of Puerto Rico, “everything is here [at the Market]: no matter what country you come from, you’ll always find the stuff you need.” Connie Siu Guinn agreed: “You are not going to find beef tongue, tripe, fresh made samosa or rice candy at your local Kroger.” Since “food was my parents’ way to hold on to memories

and pass on traditions,” Connie and her family found the Market to be critical in preserving their memories, traditions, and identities.\textsuperscript{27}

While many older immigrants clung to native foodways and shunned American mass-market hamburgers and hot dogs, their children were often drawn to the mystique of a new culture. Wendimu, a young Ethiopian who worked at the Market for two years after fleeing his homeland, admitted that he “first shop[ped] at the Ethiopian restaurants for a year, then we go out to Chinese restaurants; we move on and try new things.” Robert Blazer also saw younger immigrants “branching out, and start[ing to] cook different things for their families,” whereas the older generation is “not going to change much.” As the children of immigrants forego their traditional identities, or “get caught up in the nonsense,” as Juan says, their community suffers. “They need to stay together,” Juan demands, “to continue to develop their cultures.” As the children of immigrants immerse themselves in mainstream American culture, the once-rigid boundaries between ethnic cuisines and cultures will continue to blur and break down.\textsuperscript{28}

In preserving ethnic identities for immigrants, the Farmers Market raises difficult questions about the mutability of culture and cuisine, and what the word “authentic” actually means. Since Blazer was the one determining what products were supplied on his shelves, was he dictating what sorts of food were “authentically” ethnic? As a white Yankee, Blazer would certainly be an odd choice for directing this venture. Jeffrey Pilcher has demonstrated in his study of food and the making of Mexican identity, ¡Que Vivan Los Tamales!, that foods viewed as symbolic of national heritage often have an

\textsuperscript{27} Atlanta Journal-Constitution, May 20, 2001, B3; Robert Blazer, interview conducted by the author, May 19, 2007; anonymous worker interview (name is fictitious) conducted by the author at DeKalb Farmers Market, May 19, 2007; e-mail interview with Connie Siu Guinn, July 3, 2007.

\textsuperscript{28} Anonymous worker interview (name is fictitious), conducted by author at DeKalb Farmers Market, May 19, 2007; Robert Blazer, interview conducted by the author, May 19, 2007.
odd history, whose place in the cultural pantheon was often planned and directed by those with political and social goals. In his ability to oversee the availability of ethnic foods, Blazer complicates ideas of inflexible and unchanging immigrant cuisines.²⁹

The Market would not be alone in providing ethnic food to recent immigrants for long, as Atlanta’s restaurant industry experienced an explosive growth in the numbers of non-European eateries. From 92 ethnic restaurants in 1977, Atlanta in 2005 could claim 579, with nearly 200 Chinese, 162 Mexican, and more than 50 Thai restaurants. These numerical estimates may even be low, as many smaller restaurants operating with solely immigrant clienteles are not listed in the Yellow Pages. Frank Ma, a former chairman of the Atlanta Chinese Restaurant Association, declared in 1995 that “there are about 520 [Chinese restaurants] in Atlanta now.” While Johnny Reb’s Cottage and the Rebel Chef Drive-In had gone out of business, they were replaced by such restaurants as those who blend several ethnic cuisines, such as Chico And Chang’s, serving both “authentic” Mexican and Chinese food in one building.³⁰

While the DeKalb Farmers Market may be the largest, it is only one of many ethnic food retailers in Atlanta: equally famous is the Buford Highway Corridor, a six-mile stretch of highway that spans three counties, and was the home to more than seven hundred immigrant-owned businesses in 1998. This “real international boulevard,” as the Atlanta Journal-Constitution has called it, features the Buford Highway Farmers Market, ³⁰

²⁹ Jeffrey Pilcher, ¡Que Vivan Los Tamales! Food and the Making of Mexican Identity (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998). Pilcher discusses the conflict between corn, an indigenous staple, and wheat, which was brought to Mexico by Spanish settlers, to show how widespread consumption of the tortilla and tamale were linked with ideas of indigenismo and native pride.
³⁰ Greater Atlanta Yellow Pages, 2005-2006, covering area code 404. Again, numerical counts are based on names of restaurants and occasional brief descriptions and advertisements. Large international chains, such as Taco Bell, were not counted, as I don’t consider them “ethnic food” retailers. The total number of restaurants listed in the 2005-2006 Yellow Pages was approximately 2,500; Frank Ma quoted in Jianli Zhao, Strangers in the City: The Atlanta Chinese, Their Community, and Stories of Their Lives (New York: Routledge Books, 2002), 107.
a near-duplicate of Blazer’s Decatur market, along with the nearby International Farmers Market in Chamblee, founded by former DeKalb Market employees and offering similar products. As Atlanta’s immigration increased over the years, more and more newcomers became food entrepreneurs, and provided their compatriots with an opportunity to maintain culinary traditions.  

Atlanta’s new ethnic restaurants and markets did not cater solely to immigrant communities: white and black southerners alike became regular shoppers and consumers of these newly-introduced cuisines. As Donna Gabaccia has noted in examining the impact of ethnic food in the early twentieth century, “enclave markets” that catered exclusively to fellow immigrants came to realize that their consumer base “provided a rather fragile financial foundation.” By reaching “beyond the boundaries of ethnic communities,” immigrant entrepreneurs attempted to expand their horizons in catering to native southerners. The process was difficult at first, as rigid ethnic identities made for strictly defined tastes and preferences. A Chinese restaurant owner, arriving to Atlanta in 1977, described his experience in catering to a non-Asian clientele: “Many of my colleagues advised me not to experiment with things that were too authentic because American customers were not used to them.”

Yet despite initial misgivings, with some adaptation by those who prepared the food and those who consumed it, cross-cultural eating became ubiquitous over time. The “novelty, entertainment and a sense of partaking in the excitement of big city life,” Gabaccia argues, drew Americans to eating outside of their traditional culture. Food consumption, as Andrew Heinze has noted in his examination of European Jews in

32 Gabaccia, We Are What We Eat, 65; Zhao, Strangers in the City, 134.
America, became a “bridge between cultures,” capable of signifying “one’s attitude toward and place within society.” As food brings different cultures together, the importance of cross-cultural eating will prove central to eliminating stereotypes and teaching open-mindedness. Perfectly reflective of modern Atlanta’s culinary mélange, John Kessler, a food writer for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, described his intimate relationship with the DeKalb Farmers Market: “I love the thrilling strangeness of the place, the feeling that this – right here, right now – is my culture.” Kessler, like many other Atlantans, is embracing Atlanta’s burgeoning cultural diversity and recognizing it as his own.33

As immigrants from around the globe remade Atlanta into an international city, Robert Blazer capitalized on this nascent consumer base and eventually the DeKalb Farmers Market became symbolic of a multicultural Atlanta. The process was neither simple nor speedy, but reflects the profound demographic changes that are giving rise to what historian Leon Fink has termed the “Nuevo New South.” As Atlanta lost its reputation as a city cast solely in the colors of black and white, ethnic food became the vanguard of cultural interaction, increasingly blurring the lines between foreign and native cultures and cuisines.

The cultural exchanges that occurred across Atlanta’s dinner tables testify to the mutability and plasticity of ethnic identity, a conflicted concept that has been at the center of ongoing academic debate. Blazer’s business and the Atlanta it represented evoke what historian David Hollinger has called “postethnicity”: a society where self-identification is an open and flexible process not constrained by the “distinctive system of classification

33 Gabaccia, We Are What We Eat, 105; Andrew Heinze, Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption and the Search for American Identity (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 1, 8; Atlanta Journal-Constitution, May 20, 2001, B3 (Kessler’s emphasis).
by descent-defined communities,” or the compartmentalization of Americans into separate and distinct categories based on physical appearance (i.e., African-American, Asian-American, etc.). As racial and ethnic groupings are social constructs, not inherent biological traits, the persisting use of these broad and fictional categories limit Americans both native and foreign-born to a single, static identity, where in reality, ethnic group identification flows in, out, and around these artificial units. In Atlanta, this was clearly demonstrated in the fluid interaction of foreign-born immigrants with each other and native-born Americans, as they crossed cultural boundaries while eating and shopping alongside one another in the DeKalb Farmers Market or the hundreds other immigrant-run restaurants and grocery stores around the city.34

The history of Blazer’s market also undermines the long-held and popular interpretation of southern culture as reactionary, stagnant, and resistant to change. The interaction of native and foreign cultures in the last decades of the twentieth century was less of a “clash” than a slow intermingling that melded the exotic with the “down-home.” In a recent book, James C. Cobb wrote of southern identity as “not a story of continuity versus change, but continuity within it.” The same can be said for trends within foodways and ethnic cuisine, as witnessed in the eventual eagerness of Atlanta residents to experiment with their eating. Grits and fried chicken won’t disappear, but perhaps future southerners will enjoy them with a side of rice noodles or enchilada sauce.35

At the entrance of the Market hangs a plaque with Robert Blazer’s motivational philosophy, entitled “Our Stand”:

We declare the world is designed to work.

34 Hollinger, Postethnic America, 21.
We are responsible for what does not work.  
We make the difference.  
No matter how technologically advanced we become,  
we cannot escape our fundamental relationship with food and each other.  
The possibility of these relationships is the world market.  
In this context, the world works for everyone free of scarcity and suffering.  
We commit ourselves to the possibility that this world market is for the future 
generations of this planet.

As customers of all races, nationalities, and cultures pass the sign by the thousands, I 
doubt that many stand in awe and contemplate the meaning of both this declaration and 
the larger Market. But in the capital of the Sunbelt South, the quiet revolution of 
immigration and food continues to upset and redefine the meanings of local, regional, and 
global identity.
EPILOGUE

A City Remade

As global spectators focused attention on Atlanta in the years prior to the 1996 Olympics, city boosters only amplified their decades-old claim to international stardom. Exuberant newspaper editorials wrote of “a city poised to realize its long-held dream of ranking among the great international cities,” describing Atlanta as a “global center for human dignity, the cradle of the civil rights movement, [and] an international city.”¹

But beneath the hoopla and catchy slogans, some Atlanta residents expressed anxiety over how their city would be viewed by the millions of outsiders arriving with the Olympics. In a series of articles, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution asked a nagging and unsettling question: “is Atlanta an international city?” Respondents, especially those of foreign birth, were highly critical of the boosters’ overblown claims. “The city is a young and modern city [and] it is not used to dealing with foreigners,” said David Yu, a Taiwanese banker living in the city. Thomas Thangaraj, an Asian Indian Emory professor, agreed that “as you enter Atlanta, you don’t get the feeling of an international city. You have to go to the DeKalb Farmers Market to get a feel of what multicultural Atlanta is like.” Most damning was a 1995 editorial by Constitution staff writer Carrie Teegardin: “Let’s get one thing straight right now. Atlanta is not an international city in the classic sense – we’re not a place populated with a lot of people from all over the

globe. And we shouldn’t try to be something we’re not. Otherwise, we’re going to look like the Beverly Hillbillies trying to fit in at a neighborhood dinner party.”

Teegardin and her fellow critics were both right and wrong. Atlanta was not a classic “international city” in 1996, but was increasingly becoming a racially and culturally diverse city, especially in comparison with the Atlanta of 1970. While the integration of newly-arrived immigrants into southern society was a slow and complex process, it was one that became more and more noticeable as the city neared and entered the twenty-first century. These pre-Olympic anxieties reveal that the city had changed significantly over the three decades, but also that the making of an international and cosmopolitan Atlanta was far from complete.

In settling within the Sunbelt South’s capital city, working-class immigrants upset the prevailing dynamics of labor, law, and cultural identity. While the presence of these recent immigrants was occasionally celebrated when Atlanta natives looked to prove their diversity or “international” status, more often newcomers encountered resistance and difficulty in relocating to and working within the city. Of course, this was true for immigrants in other American cities as well, and it would be unfair to deny that many newcomers to Atlanta did achieve substantial success. In any event, whether as Latino day laborers seeking work on city streets, Vietnamese Amerasians negotiating their ambiguous legal status, or shoppers at the multicultural DeKalb Farmers Market, these recent immigrants played as large a role in Atlanta’s internationalization as foreign investment, the Hartsfield-Jackson airport, and even the 1996 Olympics.

In the spring of 1995, the Journal-Constitution published more than a half dozen articles as a part of this series, and the answers received ranged from total rejection of Atlanta’s international status to fervent acceptance of it. Atlanta Constitution, May 19, 1995, G4; ibid., G4; Atlanta Constitution, August 3, 1995, D3.
The story of Atlanta’s newest immigrants thus complicates an ongoing academic dialogue over the rationale, trajectory, and effects of post-1965 migration into the United States. But if the dynamics of immigration into the “city too busy to hate” and the larger South are to be considered exceptional from the rest of the nation, it is only for two reasons: a chronologically different pattern of migration from northern and western cities, which received a major immigrant influx a century earlier, and consequently, the relative absence of extant, culturally insular ethnic communities to welcome Atlanta’s newest settlers. For Latino immigrants, as the most numerous and noticeable group in Atlanta, these differences meant that when outmigration from Latin America began to climb rapidly in the early 1980s, those arriving into the Southeast were young, relatively uneducated single men, who often planned to repatriate after a few years of work in the booming Sunbelt economy. In contrast with the established, family-structured Latino communities of the American West and Southwest, Atlanta’s Latin American immigrants were initially deracinated and disoriented in a city whose natives did not always welcome newcomers with open arms.

Though employment opportunities were abundant, many of Atlanta’s undocumented Latino immigrants who arrived after the 1986 IRCA immigration reforms found that life on the periphery of the American legal system was uncertain and often characterized by fear, distrust, and vulnerability. Despite their central role in Atlanta’s expansion, Latin American workers, such as the day laborers described earlier, were rarely acknowledged by Atlanta natives, but instead vilified and restricted as a labor force and ethnic group. Their conflicted existence, as both desired and unwanted actors in the
city’s development, reflects the problematic intersection of law, immigration, and labor economics in American history and historiography.

Likewise, Atlanta’s Vietnamese Amerasians also lived outside of the sphere of American citizenship, though their unique status was the result of quite different historical forces. First welcomed in an attempt to heal the wounds of a bitter and controversial war, the Amerasians were later neglected as they foundered in a society that could not understand their difficult pasts. The history of their resettlement undermines several assumptions about the nature of American immigration law, particularly the tendency to view recent immigrants as powerless agents in the top-down making of federal law. As demonstrated by the organized and motivated Vietnamese and Amerasian communities of Atlanta, legal subjects were actively engaged and committed to shaping their legal status in their new homes, though this was a complex process that was never accomplished easily.

The failure of the Amerasians to achieve citizenship in the land of their fathers, along with countless other refugees and immigrants who encountered similar setbacks and restrictions, also challenges our understanding of the 1965 Hart-Celler Act as a total revision of America’s racially-motivated system of immigration law. Though the Act overturned the nativist “national origins” categories of the previous half-century, it was aimed at reinstating the flows of southern and eastern European “white ethnics” that had been halted in 1924. Yet to the surprise of the bill’s proponents, the patterns of global migration had so significantly shifted between 1924 and 1965 that the lasting effects of the reform bill proved far different. As the text of American immigration law continued to subtly grant preferential treatment to European settlers, it lagged behind the realities of
late twentieth and twenty-first century immigrants, who arrived from Mexico and Vietnam, not Italy or Greece.

The growth and diversification of Atlanta’s international and ethnic foods industry, as best exemplified in the expansion of Robert Blazer’s DeKalb Farmers Market, speaks to an evolving debate over the importance of food and cultural practices to the formation of national, regional, and ethnic identities. Despite the pressures of mass-market Americanization, Atlanta’s recent immigrants strived to retain their distinctive traditions and foodways, by founding or choosing to shop at immigrant-run restaurants and groceries. Simultaneously, American-born Atlantans themselves explored the introduction of foreign cuisines into the southern diet, at first hesitatingly, but eventually with enthusiasm. While some scholars would discount these consumer choices as trivial, they were symbolic and meaningful to both immigrants and natives, and attest to the increasing disintegration of once-solid cultural boundaries. It would be utopian to assume that the evolution of consumer capitalism will blur the racial and ethnic distinctions that have long characterized American society, but the growth and success of Blazer’s market and its equivalents allude to an important developing trend.

Although they provide new evidence about the Atlanta immigrant experience, the three case studies presented within cannot possibly present all the complexities of life in a massive city. As historians begin to examine the impact of recent immigration on Atlanta and the American South, work, law, and culture will surely prove to be central themes, but many other issues not discussed here must be addressed in future research. Language, as the medium of communication between immigrants and an established society, was critical to assimilation and adaptation, and restrictions such as the “English-
only” laws that Georgia politicians advocated and passed in the 1990s demonstrated that language was a key battleground in a changing South. Immigration also affected schools and education, especially as immigrants arrived in family units and non-English speaking children flooded unprepared school systems. The interaction of recent immigrants and native blacks is also a significant factor, especially as competition for labor and resources arose between the two. The role of churches and religion in organizing immigrant communities was also principal, whether for Mexican Catholics or Korean Methodists. Additionally, geographical contrasts must be acknowledged and explored. Clearly, Atlanta differs from other parts of Georgia, and even from other southern cities.

As the Sunbelt South rapidly expands in the twenty-first century, the impact of immigration on the region continues to gain importance. On April 5, 2007, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that Atlanta was the fastest-growing metropolitan area in the country, having gained nearly 900,000 new residents since the turn of the new century. Of that number, nearly 180,000 were foreign-born immigrants, both documented and not, and in the years to come, their presence will only become more significant. Economically dynamic and culturally diverse, Atlanta, as the most salient example of the booming postwar Sunbelt, may indeed serve as a portent not only of tomorrow’s South, but all America.³

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Newspapers and periodicals:

*Atlanta Constitution*
*Atlanta Journal*
*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*
*Business Atlanta*
*Decatur-DeKalb News/Era*
*Mách Sông*
*Metropolitan News-Enterprise*
*Mundo Hispánico*
*National Geographic Magazine*
*The Village Voice*
*The Wall Street Journal*
*The Washington Post*
*The Washington Times*

Federal / local government documents:


**Legal documents:**

City of Marietta Legal Code and Ordinances. Marietta, Georgia.


**Reference sources:**

Atlanta Yellow Pages, Area Code 404, 1977.
Atlanta Yellow Pages, Area Code 404, 2005-2006.


**Interviews / oral history documents:**

Personal interview with Robert Blazer, at DeKalb Farmers Market, Decatur, Georgia, on May 19, 2007.

Personal interview with two anonymous Market employees, at DeKalb Farmers Market, Decatur, Georgia, on May 19, 2007.

E-mail interview with Connie Siu Guinn, on July 3, 2007.

Personal interview with Kevin Nguyen at Boat People SOS in Chamblee, Georgia on June 7, 2007.

Personal interview with Kim Nguyen and Pham at the Center for Pan-Asian Community Services in Doraville, Georgia on June 11, 2007.

Personal interview with Hoa, Quang, and Suong (full names unknown) at Good Shepherd Services in Chamblee, Georgia on June 11, 2007.

Personal interview with Maritza Soto Keen at the University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia on June 27, 2007.

Personal interview with Teodoro Maus at La Kermex Mexican restaurant, Chamblee, Georgia, on June 30, 2007.

**Secondary literature:**


