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# Mexican Americans and the Power of Culture in Houston

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Estella Gómez migrated to Houston with her family from the Mexican state of San Luis Potosí in 1920. The Gómez family sought to rebuild lives disrupted by the Mexican Revolution on the other side of the border where, Estella's father Melesio heard, the Southern Pacific Railroad was looking for Mexican workers. When she started classes at Sam Houston High School, Estella was one of four ethnic Mexican students. She felt like an outcast in the Anglo-majority school. "I was never invited to their social affairs," she recalled.[1]

The Gómez family became part of a small but growing ethnic Mexican community in Houston. Due to demands for labor, the Immigration Act of 1924 (also known as the Johnson-Reed Act) did not apply to residents of the Western Hemisphere. Without a quota restricting the number of immigrants arriving from Mexico to the United States, the ethnic Mexican population continued to grow.[2] Houston's ethnic Mexican population rose from less than 1 percent in 1900 to over 5 percent in 1940. Like the Gómez family, many of the migrants first moved north during the Mexican Revolution. They were joined by Tejanos, Texas-born Mexican Americans, who journeyed to Houston from southern and central Texas.[3] Together they had been lured by the promise of jobs in the industrializing Gulf Coast city, often by railroad agents who recruited ethnic Mexican men from Texas and Mexico specifically. The city's bustling ship channel, which exported an increasing volume of cotton and oil, offered labor opportunities for migrants.[4]

Houston was also a segregated society where Jim Crow laws enforced a black/white color line. A 1903 city ordinance segregated streetcars. In 1907 the city also segregated its theaters, hotels, restaurants, and other public facilities.[5] Legal segregation maintained a hierarchy between the Anglo majority and the black Houstonians who comprised around one-third of the city's population. Ethnic Mexicans were legally categorized as white, but as migrants quickly realized, their white legal status did not mean acceptance from Anglo Houstonians.

People of Mexican descent experienced what could best be described as *liminal* integration in Jim Crow Houston. They stood at the threshold of acceptance, but Anglos often used cultural difference to justify the exclusion of ethnic Mexicans who were legally white. Anglos "learned over the course of the mid-twentieth century to explain their exclusion of Mexican Americans

[1]Interview with Estella Gómez Reyes, Feb. 5, 1988, OH 261, Houston Metropolitan Research Center (HMRC), Houston, TX.

[2]On the Johnson-Reed Act and immigration, see Peter Schrag, *Not Fit for Our Society: Immigration and Nativism in America* (Berkeley, CA, 2010), 133.

[3]I use *Mexican American* to refer to U.S.-born people of Mexican descent, and *ethnic Mexican* to refer to Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants together.

[4]On Houston's economy during the war, see Bruce Andre Beauboeuf, "War and Change: Houston's Economic Ascendancy During World War I," *Houston Review* 14, no. 2 (1992): 89–112.

[5]Howard Beeth and Cary D. Wintz, eds., *Black Dixie: Afro-Texan History and Culture in Houston*, 1st ed. (College Station, TX, 1992), 88, 211.

on the basis of language and culture rather than race," the legal scholar Ariela Gross writes.[6] The first wave of Mexican migration to Houston occurred during an era of national anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy making. While nativist white Americans often directed those sentiments at eastern and southern European immigrants, people with Mexican ancestry also found themselves the targets of anti-immigrant backlash that focused on their supposed cultural inferiority.[7] In 1922, a former superintendent of Houston schools characteristically captured many white Americans' beliefs: "The Rio Grande marks the line between enlightenment and ignorance, between Christian belief and atheism."[8] Religion and language emerged as two particular cultural practices that nativists used to denigrate and exclude ethnic Mexicans.

The Spanish language was a sonic marker of cultural difference—one that some Houstonians heard with disdain.[9] Debates over whether Mexicans were fit for citizenship often centered on language. "Without the ability to speak English," the *Houston Post* argued of Mexican people living in the United States in 1922, "they can not become efficient citizens."[10] African American press writers, for their part, also raised the issue of language, but they questioned why people from Mexico and other nations attained rights and status that white Texans did not extend to black people. Ethnic Mexican people could sit at the front of streetcars and their children could attend white schools, while segregation laws barred black Houstonians from both. An editorial in the Houston black newspaper the *Houston Informer* seethed over the difference in treatment: "There are numerous foreigners in this city, who can barely speak our common tongue; yet these outlandish hordes get far more consideration from the 'powers-that-be' than the colored race with its years of residence in this city, its loyalty to the municipal and county government and its steadfastness to and support of the American ideals and institutions."[11] Another article similarly noted, "It is strange how the Southern white man is willing to regard the Mexican and scum of Europe, Asia and Fiji Islands as worthy partakers of all the rights, privileges and opportunities America affords and then deny the same things to his best friend and most trusted ally—the colored man."[12] In a changing city, anti-immigrant rhetoric became part of some *Informer* writers' appeals for black civil rights.

*Informer* writers argued that ethnic Mexicans held a privileged status, but people like Estella Gómez certainly felt the sting of discrimination in Jim Crow Houston. She and other ethnic Mexican students who attended white public schools experienced backlash based on their cultural differences. In 1918, the Texas legislature declared that no languages other than English could be used for curriculum and instruction in public schools. Implementing "no-Spanish-

[6]Ariela Gross, "'The Caucasian Cloak': Mexican Americans and the Politics of Whiteness in the Twentieth-Century Southwest," *Georgetown Law Journal* 95, no. 2 (Jan. 2007): 338–92, here 342.

[7]For a history of anti-immigrant sentiment since the Civil War, see John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1955). On immigration and race, see David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991; New York, 2007); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA, 1998); Thomas A. Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890–1945* (New York, 2003); David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York, 2006). On Mexican Americans and whiteness, see Gross, "'The Caucasian Cloak'"; Thomas A. Guglielmo, "Fighting for Caucasian Rights: Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and the Transnational Struggle for Civil Rights in World War II Texas," *Journal of American History* 92, no. 4 (Mar. 2006): 1212–37; Ian Haney-López, *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York, 1996).

[8]*Houston Post*, Apr. 17, 1922, 7.

[9]On the connection between the Spanish language, citizenship, and power, see Rosina Lozano, *An American Language: The History of Spanish in the United States* (Oakland, CA, 2018).

[10]*Houston Post*, Apr. 8, 1922, 6.

[11]*Houston Informer*, Feb. 23, 1924, 4.

[12]*Houston Informer*, Nov. 1, 1919. For a larger discussion of black and ethnic Mexican responses to segregation in Houston, see Tyina Steptoe, *Houston Bound: Culture and Color in a Jim Crow City* (Oakland, CA, 2016).

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speaking rules" in the classroom and on the playground, Anglo administrators forced them to abandon Spanish, which stigmatized the primary language associated with Mexico.[13]

Differences in language became the basis for exclusionary policies at Anglo-majority schools attended by ethnic Mexican students. Since the 1910s, youth living in Segundo Barrio, an ethnic Mexican enclave that emerged in the early twentieth century, attended the Anglo-majority Rusk Elementary. While their white racial designation allowed them to do so, administrators used cultural differences like language to isolate them from Anglo students. School officials funneled ethnic Mexican children into separate classrooms, arguing that their linguistic differences necessitated the separation. Administrators at Rusk labeled them as "subnormal." Twenty years later, other schools still showed reluctance to allow Anglo and ethnic Mexican students to mingle. Administrators at the Anglo-majority Hawthorne Elementary worked with the Settlement Association of Houston, an organization that helped establish classes in English, citizenship, and the arts, to create programs for ethnic Mexican students. Hawthorne only allowed the students who participated in these programs to meet separately from Anglos, in order to discourage the groups from intermingling.[14] The ethnic Mexican students who attended Anglo-majority public schools remembered feeling like outcasts. Catalina Gómez Sandoval, whose family migrated from Aguascalientes in 1927, was one of four ethnic Mexican students at her school. "At that time there was a lot of discrimination. They used to beat us up and chase us. Every day they used to chase us. We would get home crying."[15]

The experiences of ethnic Mexicans within the Houston public school system illustrate the liminality of their position in Houston. Even when they could attend white schools, they experienced segregation and exclusion within the institutions. School policies and social ostracism offered regular reminders that the Anglo majority did not accept ethnic Mexicans as equals.[16]

Anglos also sometimes used religious difference as the basis for exclusion. Anglo Protestants often did not consider Catholics to be true Christians, which initially impeded ethnic Mexican women's ability to join the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). The Houston YWCA was segregated; black and white women joined two different branches. Anglo women initially rebuffed ethnic Mexican women's desire to join the white branch, justifying the decision on the basis of religious difference rather than race. But ethnic Mexican woman continued to push for admittance; as one asserted, "Catholics are the original Christians." Eventually a

[13]Guadalupe San Miguel, *Brown, Not White: School Integration and the Chicano Movement in Houston*, 1st ed. (College Station, TX, 2001), 23.

[14]San Miguel, *Brown, Not White*, 28–30.

[15]Catalina Gómez Sandoval interviewed by Tom Kreneck and Emma Pérez, Feb. 3, 1989, OH 377, HMRC, Houston, TX. In response to the growing number of ethnic Mexican students in the Magnolia Park neighborhood, the school district built a new school there in 1920. School officials did not formally mark Lorenzo de Zavala Elementary as a segregated school for ethnic Mexican children, but it existed because of concerns over the high number of Spanish-speaking students attending the two white schools in the area. San Miguel, *Brown, Not White*, 21.

[16]The segregation of Mexican Americans in public schools did not occur uniformly. For example, the Denver school district never formally segregated its public schools; however, school officials enacted practices that created racially segregated schools for Mexican-American and black students. Historian Danielle Olden writes, "These practices included selecting school building sites, gerrymandering attendance boundaries, and busing students to ensure as little racial mixing as possible between Anglo and other students." As a result, Denver was home to schools that were majority Anglo, majority black, and majority Mexican American, though some schools were black and Mexican American. Even within Texas, different patterns of segregation emerged. By the early 1940s, at least 122 school districts in fifty-nine Texas counties had separate schools for Mexican American students. See Danielle Olden, "Becoming Minority: Mexican Americans, Race, and the Legal Struggle for Educational Equity in Denver, Colorado," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 48 (Spring 2017): 44; David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836–1986* (Austin, TX, 1987), 4–5, 160–1. See also Brian Behnken, *Fighting Their Own Battles: Mexican Americans, African Americans, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Texas* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2011); Guadalupe San Miguel, *Chicana/o Struggles for Education: Activism in the Community* (College Station, TX, 2013).

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group of northern-born administrators took the issue to the YWCA board, who voted that Catholic women could join the branch. In the early 1930s the ethnic Mexican women created a subgroup within the white branch that they called El Club Femenino Chapultepec.[17]

Since Anglos often used culture as justification for exclusionary practices, culture was part of Mexican Americans' strategies to gain equal treatment. Those strategies took different forms. Some Mexican Americans distanced themselves from certain aspects of Mexican culture. A 1932 article in the journal of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) argued that Mexican Americans should not celebrate Mexican holidays: "American Citizens of the United States should cease to observe the holidays of Mexico and join heartily in observing the holidays of the United States."[18] Since Spanish-speaking children experienced stigma and exclusion in public schools, LULAC also made language acquisition part of their activism. LULACer Felix Tijerina, who immigrated to Houston from Monterrey, Mexico, and became national president of the organization in 1956, believed that acquiring English would allow Spanish speakers to succeed in the United States. He was a co-creator of LULAC's Little School of 400, a program that taught English words to Spanish-speaking children in Texas before they entered kindergarten. At home, he did not allow his children to speak Spanish.[19]

But Tijerina also thought that some cultural practices could be used to offer Anglos positive depictions of people of Mexican descent. He and his wife, Texas-born Janie Tijerina, used food to appeal to Anglos who used cultural difference as the basis for discrimination. In 1929 the Tijerina family opened a restaurant that served Mexican cuisine to Anglo customers. Preparing dishes that catered to white Texan tastes, they aimed to introduce Anglos to Mexican food, in hopes that this familiarity would improve the image of Mexico and its people in the Anglo imagination.[20] Significantly, the restaurant was white-only; Tijerina did not allow black patronage until passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.[21] And soon, the Tijerina family restaurant business grew into a chain, Felix Mexican Restaurants, helping to make Mexican food part of Houston's culinary mainstream by the end of the twentieth century.

El Club Femenino Chapultepec similarly used Mexican cultural practices to build community among the women in the group and to teach Anglo members of the YWCA about their heritage. When deciding on the name El Club Femenino Chapultepec, they "wanted something typically Mexican," recalled Carmen Cortés. A Nahuatl word, Chapultepec refers to a hill outside of Mexico City and the site of a battle in 1847 during the Mexican-American War. "We decided on Chapultepec because we were Mexican American and we wanted to keep our culture, not lose it," asserted Estella Gómez. They also decided to conduct official business in Spanish. But they invited the Anglo women to attend their parties at the YWCA so they could learn about one another's cultures.[22]

And while the writer of the LULAC editorial may not have approved, El Club Femenino Chapultepec helped introduce Mexican holiday celebrations to a broader audience in Houston. The group's members organized the city's first Cinco de Mayo and 16 de Septiembre celebrations in 1932, both held in the City Auditorium with members of the

[17]Carmen Cortés interviewed by Tom Kreneck, Dec. 16, 1983, OH 313, HMRC, Houston, TX; interview with Carmen Cortés, May 2, 1989, OH 313, HMRC, Houston, TX. On the formation of the club, see also Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington, IN, 1999). On Catholicism in Houston's ethnic Mexican communities, see Roberto R. Treviño, *The Church in the Barrio: Mexican American Ethno-Catholicism in Houston* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006).

[18]Sid L. Hardin, "The Glory of American Citizenship," *LULAC News* 2, no.4 (Dec. 1932): 3.

[19]Interview with Janie (Gonzales) Tijerina, Oct. 16, 1978, OH 234, HMRC, Houston, TX.

[20]Thomas H. Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey: Felix Tijerina, Entrepreneur and Civic Leaders, 1905–1965* (College Station, TX, 2001), 53; 62-3.

[21]F. Kenneth Jensen, "The Houston Sit-In Movement of 1960–61," in *Black Dixie*, 217; Kreneck, *Mexican-American Odyssey*, 261–2.

[22]Carmen Cortés interviewed by Tom Kreneck, December 16, 1983, OH 313, HMRC, Houston, TX; interview with Estella Gómez Reyes Feb. 5, 1988, OH 261, HMRC, Houston, TX.

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Anglo press in attendance. In contrast to the disparaging reports printed by the *Houston Post* about Mexicans in the early 1920s, coverage of festivities such as these focused on positive aspects of Mexican culture. A 1930s description of a Cinco de Mayo celebration for example stated, "In Houston's 'Little Mexico' dark eyes flashed and men walked proudly Thursday as they recalled the battle of Puebla."[23] The Tijerina family and the women of Chapultepec offered some of the first positive depictions of Mexican culture that Anglo Houstonians consumed.[24]

Segregationist practices in Houston that targeted ethnic Mexicans were not always based on legal restrictions. People of Mexican descent had legal access to white institutions in Houston like public schools and the YWCA. But stigma against their cultural practices allowed nativist Anglos to justify excluding them in spite of their legal status. In response ethnic Mexicans often used culture to combat notions of Anglo supremacy. Their fight to improve their liminal standing in Houston did not take place exclusively in courtrooms, but also on the battlefield of culture.

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[23]The undated article can be found in a 1930s scrapbook in the Melesio Gómez Family Collection, Folder 18, Box 1, MSS 135, HMRC, Houston, TX.

[24]See also Elliott Young's study of celebrations and pageants in Laredo, Texas, at the turn of the twentieth century: Elliott Young, "Red Men, Pocahontas, and George Washington: Harmonizing Race Relations in Laredo at the Turn of the Century," *Western Historical Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 48–85.

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