Nueva New Orleans: Race Relations and (Im)migration in the Post-Katrina South

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The United States has experienced dramatic demographic shifts in the last 50 years, due in large part to Latino immigration. While cities such as Los Angeles and New York have traditionally served as the receiving hubs for Latino immigrants, Latino immigrants are now settling in "new Latino destinations" (Suro and Singer 2002) such as Atlanta, Greenville and Memphis at higher rates than ever before. Intriguingly, all these "new Latino destinations" are located in the South, a region of the country where race relations have long been viewed in black and white terms. Blacks and Latinos now comprise the majority in America's largest cities, not only in major metropolitan areas like New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, but also in southern cities such as Houston and Dallas. This has made it ever more important to understand black-Latino relations and how they shape the social, political and economic circumstances of urban America.

Unlike many other Southern cities, New Orleans had not experienced a significant influx of Latino immigrants prior to hurricane Katrina (Fussell 2009, U.S. Census Bureau 2010, GNOCDC 2012). In the aftermath of the hurricane, however, the racial and ethnic composition of New Orleans and other cities such as Dallas and Houston shifted dramatically because of increased Latino immigration[1] and the out-migration of many low-income African-American women and their families. How do changing demographic and cultural contexts influence racial attitudes? What is the role of migration in shaping race relations?

Until recently, much of the literature outlining racial attitudes towards immigration has focused on white attitudes. Research has begun to broaden the racial and ethnic scope of race relations to include Asians and Latinos (see Bobo and Hutchings 1996), but contemporary research can do more to move away from studying the relations between dominant and subordinate groups and pay greater attention to the relations between minority groups (Hernandez-Leon and Zuniga 2005, Taylor and Schroeder 2010). Much of the current literature outlining black-Latino relations disproportionately focus on the labor market. While blacks are often sympathetic and can relate to the social isolation of Latinos, they also feel threatened or in competition with Latinos out of fear that immigrants will displace them in the labor market (Bobo and Johnson 2000, McClain et al 2007, 2009, Marrow 2008). Since the 1990's, there has been a growth in Latino migration and immigration to new destinations in the American South. There is a burgeoning literature examining black-Latino relations in the context of understanding Latino experience in new destinations (Mohl 2003, Hernandez-Leon and Zuniga 2005, McClain et al 2009, Marrow 2008, 2011, McDermott 2011). Studies of immigrants in new destinations

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[1]According to GNOCDC, the Latino population in the New Orleans metro area spiked 57 percent between 2000 and 2010, gaining more than 33,000 Hispanic individuals.

have concluded that tension between blacks and Latinos is structured by social class (Hernandez-Leon and Zuniga 2005, Marrow 2011, McDermott 2011) and exacerbated when they share living environments (Mohl 2003, McClain et al 2007, Marrow 2009). While the past decade has sparked a growth in race relations literature explicating black-Latino relations, the implications of increasing Latino immigration, particularly in new destinations, are still largely unexamined. This project seeks to unpack the tensions described by McClain, Marrow, Mohl and others and identify how, or whether, these attitudes might be different among low-income African-American women from New Orleans. The exogenous nature of hurricane Katrina provides a critical case to test current theoretical perspectives on black-Latino relations.

In order to address my research questions, I draw on qualitative interview and survey data from the Resilience in Survivors of Katrina Project (RISK) in which respondents discuss race relations, their post-Katrina neighborhoods and Latino immigration to New Orleans following the disaster. The data used for this paper stem primarily from 82 in-depth interviews with 63 individuals[2] through two rounds of qualitative data collection following Hurricane Katrina. Additionally, I supplement qualitative data with quantitative survey data regarding race relations and immigration following hurricane Katrina[3].

The demographic changes that took place following hurricane Katrina represent significant racial, ethnic and cultural change at the neighborhood level for the majority of my respondents. However, how these changes correlate with racial attitudes varies between movers and stayers. Prior to Katrina, my respondents were comparable across nearly all demographic dimensions such as race, gender, marital status, level of education and receipt of government benefits. After the hurricane, migration on the part of movers and immigration on the part of Latinos influenced the racial attitudes of women who otherwise appear to be strikingly similar.

I find there to be both quantifiable and a qualitatively different nature to how movers and stayers describe their post-Katrina neighborhoods. While movers are much more likely to cite worse race relations in their post-Katrina neighborhoods and organically bring up discussions of race, stayers are more inclined to speak little about race in their post-Katrina neighborhoods with the vast majority indicating a belief that race relations in their post-Katrina neighborhoods remain the same. I find that much like race relations, movers and stayers are divergent on their overall attitudes towards Latinos. However, attitudes towards Latinos are less stark than attitudes about race relations in post-Katrina neighborhoods. Movers are more likely to be indifferent to or negative about Latino immigration to New Orleans. In most cases they claim that immigrants do not bother them and that they are simply trying to make a better life for themselves and their

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[2] 19 women were interviewed in both rounds of qualitative data collection.
[3] For the purpose of my paper, I used two survey questions: (1) whether or not respondents perceived race relations to be better, the same or worse in their post-Katrina neighborhoods and (2) whether or not they thought immigration to New Orleans following hurricane Katrina was bad or good. Survey data was not available for all respondents. N = 32 for the post-Katrina neighborhood question. N = 33 for immigration question.

families. In many ways, as migrants themselves, they can related to or understand the fact that the immigrants are trying to make a better life for their families. The data suggest that movers' attitudes towards immigrants in New Orleans might also be shaped by new (and often negative) experiences with Latinos in Texas. While many stayers share similarly indifferent attitudes towards immigration, they claim that they are not bothered by immigration because the immigrants are helping the city. Stayers are also more inclined to be in favor of Latino immigration, especially when compared to movers. They tend to describe immigrants as cheap labor and often spoke about how they were grateful that the immigrants came to do the work.

The findings suggest that being the outsider matters as respondents who harbor more negative attitudes towards Latino immigrants and experience worse race relations are the movers, not those who stayed in New Orleans as the literature would suggest. Furthermore, this study reinforces the complexity of black-brown relations and how they not only depend on demographic factors previously identified in the literature such as social class but also which group is moving in. As the Latino population in the US continues to grow, and the minority population eventually exceeds that of whites, especially in America's urban centers, an understanding of the social, political and contextually contingent nature of black-brown relations is critical. I contribute to this body of work through an exploration of the ways in which demographic shifts, namely Latino migration and immigration, can shape attitudes and social relations low-income, African-American women.

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