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from North Carolina

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A conversation with Hannah Gill

Author of *The Latino Migration Experience in North Carolina:*

New Roots in the Old North State

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Q: How did you become interested in Latin American immigrants in North Carolina?

A: Growing up in North Carolina, I experienced firsthand the changing demography in the 1990s. My hometown in Alamance County is now the home of Latinos and Latin American migrants. Talking to my new neighbors got me really interested in why people had moved to the state. I decided to study international migration in college and graduate school and live in Latin America, which deepened my interest in these issues.

Q: When did Latin American immigration become a hot topic in this state?

A: In 2005, the unsuccessful effort to push North Carolina legislation of HB 118, which would have granted in-state college tuition for undocumented immigrants, created a lot of controversy. Also, the Spring rallies of 2006, in which thousands of people gathered in solidarity in the largest organized march of Latinos in the history of the state, increased the public visibility of new immigrant communities.

Q: Why do you think Latin American immigrants would choose North Carolina as their new home? Why is it particularly attractive?

A: Prior to the recession, North Carolina's growing economy opened up jobs in a number of different sectors, like service, construction, and agriculture, and immigrants have been recruited to fill these positions. North Carolina is a more affordable place to live than on the west coast in historical Latino immigrant destinations, and many people prefer the quiet and rural atmosphere of many communities in the state.

Q: Why do you think that the number of immigrants coming to North Carolina has risen so dramatically in the past decade or so?

A: North Carolina is part of a larger national trend of Latin American migrant populations shifting from historic destinations in the southwest and west coast to the southeast United States. This trend is related to economic growth in this region. North Carolina has been at the forefront of that economic growth, which pulls immigrants to our industries and farms. As communities are established and international migration

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networks are created and strengthened, people move to North Carolina to reunite with their families. Social scientists also attribute the growth in Latino populations nationwide, as well as the increase in undocumented migration, to unintended consequences of our US border policy. The border has been fortified to the extent that Mexican and Central American migrants cannot travel back to their communities of origin as they have in past cyclical labor migrations, and are instead staying in the United States and bringing their families over.

Q: How would you define a Latin American immigrant versus a native North Carolinian of Latin American descent? When and why does the line become blurred?

A: An immigrant is a foreign-born person who has moved to a different country to settle. All native North Carolinians (i.e. people born in North Carolina), regardless of whether their parents or a distant ancestor were born in another country, are U.S. citizens. Native North Carolinians with parents or grandparents from a Latin American country are like virtually all native North Carolinians: we all come from immigrant stock, unless we are 100% Native American.

Q: In your book, you mention the attempts that have been made at immigration policy reform by the federal government. What do you think can or should be done about this issue on a local governmental level?

A: On a local government level, it is critical that policy makers and officials understand that Latinos are now permanent communities in North Carolina, and that we create policies that incorporate them instead of alienating them.

Q: What can or should native North Carolinians do to aid the process of immigration for new Latin American migrants?

A: We should all urge our policy makers to support comprehensive immigration reform that will eliminate backlogs, adjust visa quotas to meet our labor demands, and address the millions of undocumented people currently living in the United States.

Q: Do you have any suggestions about what can or should be done on a day-to-day basis by local people to raise awareness for the growing issue of Latin American immigration?

A: Support or volunteer at your local or regional Latino Resource Center. These are places that are on the front lines of dealing with many of the challenges and issues that face new immigrants. These centers are places where immigrants get public health and legal information, educational opportunities to learn English, assistance for domestic violence victims, and resources for dealing with common workplace abuses like wage theft and uncompensated on-the-job injury.

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If you live in a county with the 287(g) program, urge your local law enforcement agencies to revoke their contracts with ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) for the 287(g) program. Studies show that this program is bad for everyone in the short and long-term, not just immigrants, because it breaks down the trust between immigrants and police and drains resources needed to fight serious crime.

Q: Can you explain what the 287(g) program is and what it implies for the Latino population in North Carolina?

A: The 287(g) Program authorizes participating local and state law enforcement officials to partner with ICE to enforce immigration violations. North Carolina is on the forefront of deportation policy: nine of the state's 100 sheriff's offices, including Alamance, Cumberland, Cabarrus, Gaston, Mecklenburg, Henderson, Guilford and Wake counties, along with the Durham Police Department, have implemented 287(g) agreements. As a result of these policies, thousands of immigrants have been deported to their native countries, separated from families in the United States, and compelled to start the migration process anew. While ICE intends for the program to prioritize violent offenders, the majority of undocumented immigrants are deported for driving related offenses, not serious or violent crimes. Between 2007 and 2009 in Alamance, Cabarrus, Gaston, Mecklenburg, and Wake, 86.7% of all individuals booked through the program in were charged with misdemeanors, while 13.3% were charged with felonies. The 287(g) program has had significant impacts on Latino communities, which include the breakdown in trust between Latino communities and local law enforcement and underreporting of crime.

Q: How and why has the general public's attitude toward Latin American immigrants changed since Latinos began migrating to North Carolina?

A: I think that attitudes towards immigrants are connected to attitudes about the changing face of North Carolina in general. The state's population has grown over the past four decades, not just because of immigration from Latin America, but from people relocating from all parts of the US. Increased development, a growing economy, and a higher standard of living for North Carolinians are changing small towns and rural communities into more urban places— threatening our “Mayberry” identity.

The arrival of undocumented immigrants has presented a number of challenges for local communities facing increased demands on services at the local level, while the economic benefits of immigration are going primarily to federal coffers. These demographic and physical changes, which also bring new cultural and linguistic perspectives to communities, combined with a complete failure on the federal level to reform a backlogged immigration system, have generated alarm throughout North Carolina and the sense that no one is doing anything to deal with these pressing issues.

We are seeing a backlash against Latinos—not just migrants but also native North Carolinians of Latin American descent—in the form of hate crimes and racial profiling.

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Unfortunately, individual migrants are only a small and easy to blame part of a much larger system that involves employers, American consumers, and corporate interests in a globalizing world. The rhetoric is framed as an illegal vs. legal issue that rests on the choices of individual migrants, when the real key to dealing with these issues lies in federal reform and development of viable economic opportunities in migrants' origin communities.

Q: How has the recession impacted the Latin American immigrant population in the state?

A: We do not yet have conclusive data about the impact, but it's clear by talking to food banks and resource centers that people are experiencing great difficulties in meeting basic daily needs for themselves and their families.

Q: In your opinion, what would be the social implications of immigration continuing to grow at its current rate? What would be the political and legal implications?

A: A combination of the recession and anti-immigrant legislation has slowed the rate of immigration to the state, so the high growth rate that we experienced in the 1990s is no longer happening in North Carolina. Nevertheless, the current presence of nearly half a million Latinos in the state means that we urgently need to address the needs of a population that ranks highest in terms of statewide poverty rates. The social and economic future of this state depends on incorporating many of these immigrants, allowing them to access educational opportunities, and increasing their political participation so they can advocate for themselves.

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This interview may be reprinted in its entirety with the following credit: A conversation with Hannah Gill, author of *The Latino Migration Experience in North Carolina: New Roots in the Old North State* (University of North Carolina Press, Fall 2010). The text of this interview is available at www.ibiblio.org/uncp/media/gill/.

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