A Not-So-Nuevo Past: Latina Histories in the US South

Sarah McNamara

Viridiana Martínez once proclaimed herself an “undocumented southern belle.” Stuck between who she was and who she wanted to be, this identity illustrated a longing for acceptance in a space that rejected her. As an activist, Martínez was bold, brash, and unapologetic. Over the past ten years she has organized rallies, coordinated hunger strikes, challenged political campaigns, and even infiltrated a detention center in Florida—all things southern belles do not do. But as a young woman in North Carolina, Martínez yearned for acknowledgment as a person, a southerner, and an American, not as an outsider without papers.¹

Unlike movement leaders in California who embrace Chicanx identities, southern organizers face different political machines and cultural expectations that shape not only their organizing methods but how they define themselves. Latinas like Martínez have routinely been vibrant voices and leaders in movements for social and economic justice in the US South. But the omission of their experiences has made it seem as though Latinas/os “have no history here.”² The history of Latinas/os in the US South is integral to seeing and understanding the region for what it truly is—a multiethnic and multiracial space with a legacy of people who have struggled, nego-

This roundtable would not have been possible without the intellectual camaraderie of the strong women in this forum. I thank Perla Guerrero, Cecilia Márquez, Yalidy Matos, and Iliana Rodriguez for their commentary and notes as we shaped this discussion. I appreciate the support of Vicki Ruiz and Nancy Hewitt, who have shared oral histories and sources with me—this generosity has allowed the women I write about to tell their own stories. I am forever grateful to Viridiana Martínez, who has trusted me with her memories and allowed me to share her experiences as an undocumented activist in the South. As always, Elizabeth Ellis and Jessica Wilkerson read this essay every step of the way, and I am thankful for their friendship and editorial eyes. Finally, it is because of Cindy Hahamovitch that our panel at the Southern Labor Studies Conference evolved into this published forum. I thank her for seeing the importance of the subject.

1. Viridiana Martínez, from interviews by author, March 1, 2011, and April 2015 (interviews in possession of the author). For more, see McNamara and Martínez, “I Speak Inglés.”

2. McNamara and Martínez, “I Speak Inglés.”
tiated, and survived centuries of colonialism, enslavement, white supremacy, industrialism, and capitalism. And much like Native Americans, African Americans, and European immigrants who have contributed to understandings of this past, through histories of power and oppression, so too have Latinas/os—even if historians have failed to effectively communicate the long history of Latinas/os in the region.

When I think about the world Martínez navigates today, it does not look drastically different from Florida between the 1880s and 1940s. During this era, Tampa, Florida, was a city with a sizable migrant and immigrant Latina/o population that over time created a community composed of nearly half people of color. Just as present-day southern industries—from poultry and agriculture to construction and goods manufacturing—rely on Latina/o labor, so too did the Tampa cigar industry. Cuban women and men quite literally built Tampa by establishing the economic pillar that upheld the city. But while white politicians and city planners welcomed the profits from Latina/o labor, they rejected Latina/o bodies. In reaction to African American and large, newly arrived Latina/o populations, the local chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy fundraised for and bestowed a Confederate monument to the city of Tampa in 1913. At the dedication ceremony, the mayor publicly proclaimed that the monument would serve as an emblem that “the South detests and despises all” who “encourage social equality with an ignorant and inferior race.” While oftentimes such symbols are read as expressions of Jim Crow that applied solely to Black community members, in multiethnic and multiracial spaces Confederate monuments illustrated the vehement rejection of any cultures, ideas, and peoples whom those in power viewed as nonwhite or not like them. To this day, that monument sits outside the city courthouse as an imposing, aggressive reminder of who controlled the city and who defined its history.

Resistance to Latina/o power in Tampa evolved over time and manifested itself through violence. A combination of brutal beatings and public lynchings by local Ku Klux Klan members targeted Latinas/os who belonged to labor unions as well as those who associated with radical and progressive political parties. The effort to regulate Latina/o politics and Latina/o power stemmed from the fact that this growing population was no longer a group of migrant workers. Women and men who came to work in the cigar industry made Tampa their home, and while most

3. Examining Florida holds particular significance, for much of the work on the “Nuevo South” excludes Florida and Texas, claiming the histories are simply different because of the longer presence of Latina/o communities in the regions. However, Latina/o histories of Florida remain understudied. For more, see Odem and Lacy, Latino Immigrants and the Transformation of the U.S. South.


5. *Tampa Morning Tribune*, “Five Thousand Attend the Unveiling of Handsome Confederate Shaft,” February 9, 1913, 3–4, courtesy of the Tampa Bay History Center Archives, Tampa, Florida.

6. Lowery, “We Are the Original Southerners.”
adults were immigrants or residents, their children were birthright citizens. Like their parents, however, these citizens were largely Spanish-speaking and saw politics as transnational rather than local. In an effort to curb the influence of these new “foreign” citizens, white vigilantes reinforced the principles that the Confederate monument espoused by publicly mutilating the bodies of those who challenged Anglo authority. As the Florida pines dripped with the blood of the KKK’s victims, Tampa gained national attention in 1935 when the American Civil Liberties Union declared the city “one of the worst centers of repression in the United States,” for it was “under the control of public officials dominated by the Ku Klux Klan.”

In some ways, this is a predictable narrative. Racial violence, control of public spaces, and legal repression were essential to maintain white supremacy in the South and in the nation. But if we look beyond the obvious it-happened-here-too conclusion, the significance of this history lies in the fact that these legal and extralegal tactics have not disappeared but simply evolved. As Yalidy Matos explains in this issue, “the South’s history of racist exclusionary projects has only resurfaced under a new name.” Present-day laws and programs such as 287 G and Secure Communities have led to a resurgence of institutionalized racial profiling. States in the South and throughout the nation, “claim anti-immigration legislation is needed to protect their borders, but at the heart of it is surveilling and marking bodies as other in order to justify unjust treatment, detention, and deportation.” These measures do not indicate new reactions to a Latina/o presence; instead, they are part of a century-old pattern of repression of people of color in the American South. Such stories and histories of exclusion, however, have also been met with resistance from unexpected places. While women like Viridiana Martínez feel as though they are breaking new ground with every step they take, Latinas who came before them have blazed a trail and left a model of leadership.

Luisa Capetillo was a Puerto Rican labor organizer, free love activist, and writer who moved between the Caribbean and the United States during the early 1900s. When Capetillo arrived in Ybor City in 1913, she walked into a community with an active anarcho-syndicalist network and a grassroots tradition of labor unionism surrounded by a southern, white supremacist government. Hired by factory workers to be their lectora, Capetillo educated and entertained tabaqueros during their workday. As Latino cigar makers labored at their benches and rolled Cuban tobacco into American cigars, Capetillo stood at a podium in the center of the factory and performed writings by political thinkers such as Marx, Proudhon, and Bakunin in addition to local and international news. Although Capetillo published a collection of essays titled Mi opinión sobre las libertades, derechos, y deberes de la mujer (My Opinion on the Liberties, Rights, and Duties of Women) in 1911, her time in Tampa redirected the focus of her feminist treatise from the virtues of motherhood and child rearing

7. American Civil Liberties Union, Eternal Vigilance!, quoted in Ingalls, Urban Vigilantes in the New South, 13; see also Hewitt, “Economic Crisis and Political Mobilization.”
to the importance of women as intellectual leaders. Capetillo once famously declared that “women are capable of everything and anything,” but the updated version of Mi opinión, published in Tampa, envisioned a world where women were capable of anything, but perhaps they did not have to be everything to everyone.⁹

Although Capetillo’s ideas were certainly revolutionary, it was her body that left an unshakeable impression on Tampa and its Latina/o community. In 1984, when a young historian named Nancy Hewitt interviewed writer Jose Yglesias, he asked if Hewitt had ever heard of the Black woman reader who came to Ybor. Yglesias was too young to have known or had any firsthand knowledge of Capetillo, but the women who raised him told stories of the remarkable “cross-dressing Puerto Rican woman” writer and organizer.¹⁰ While Cecilia Márquez, in this issue, stresses the importance of examining the intersections of latinidad and Blackness, Capetillo’s experience in Tampa demonstrates that as historians take on this challenge we must rethink the rigidity of the Black/White binary and understand how the collision of varying interpretations of race in the South, in the United States, and beyond national borders influences how race is made and interpreted by those in the region. Because Capetillo was from Puerto Rico, she was able to assume a prominent job that an African American woman could have never held, even in Ybor City. Capetillo was accepted because of her position as an organizer of semi-celebrity status and as a Latina, not because community members did not see race or were necessarily dedicated to a vision of universal racial equality. The rigidity of postwar racial categories did not exist in Captetillo’s world, but the divisions between insiders and outsiders did. Black Latinas/os were routinely discriminated against in Latina/o workplaces in Ybor City, and the longer women and men lived in the United States the more elements of Jim Crow seeped into the community to enforce legalized divisions that superseded the more fluid understandings of race Latinas/os brought with them from Cuba, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and Central America.

Thirty-three years after Capetillo’s time in Florida, Rosa Rodríguez de León left her husband, the Communist Party, and New York City and took on the challenge of organizing in the multi-racial and multi-ethnic US South. With her seven-year-old daughter, Mytyl, by her side, de León boarded a bus and headed south to Tampa, where she worked as an AFL organizer for a little less than two years. It was in this southern space where Rosa Rodríguez de León became Luisa Moreno.¹¹ Historian Vicki L. Ruiz postulates that Capetillo influenced Moreno’s professional persona as she evolved into the seasoned labor organizer who led the United Cannery,

⁹. Hewitt, “Luisa Capetillo”; Ruiz, “Nuestra America.” Also see Valle Ferrer, Historia de una mujer procrisita; Matos, A Nation of Women; Matos and Delgado, Puerto Rican Women’s History; Walker, Absolute Equality; Ramos, Amor y Anarquía.
¹⁰. Jose Yglesias, interview by Nancy Hewitt, 1984 (in author’s possession); Hewitt, Southern Discomfort, 3; Yglesias rejected accent marks in his name; Cristina Guzzo notes, scholars disagree on Capetillo’s racial identity, “Luisa Capetillo y Salvadora Medina Onrubia de Botana,” 169.
Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America union. Aside from Capetillo’s mere presence and ideas, Moreno may have found camaraderie in a shared experience as women of color in the South. During Moreno’s time in Florida, she wrote poems about bodies that hung from trees and the violence that controlled African American and Latina/o communities. Just as Capetillo’s stay in Ybor City reshaped her ideas on women and feminism, Moreno’s period in the sunshine state influenced her approach to activism and challenged her ideas on race.

Moreno was conscious of her gender and the power it had in this southern space. In an interview with Ruiz, she explained that she knew the AFL had sent her to Florida because they hoped a woman organizer might survive the violence men had been unable to escape. Moreno was a successful organizer, but because the AFL did not support her tactics, she organized beyond their jurisdiction. Against the wishes of union leadership, Moreno mobilized seven thousand Latinas in an antifascist march that protested not only US foreign policy but the South’s fascist-like treatment of Latina/o immigrants and Latina/o citizens. Just as the AFL recognized the advantage of Moreno’s gender in the southern state, she too recognized the importance of mobilizing Latinas to advocate for equal access to relief for their husbands and brothers. Being a woman was a powerful negotiating position in a region that normalized the brutalization of men of color who challenged white authority.

Remembering the histories of women like Capetillo and Moreno not only helps us understand the current struggles for racial justice and immigrant rights as part of an ongoing process, it counters the insidious narrative that the South belongs to white Americans. A genuine history of Latinas/os in the US South is one that finds connections and reaches beyond region to provide a more realistic view of the nation and its past. Viridiana Martínez lives in the South and unknowingly walks in the path of Latina activists who sought to shape the region for generations. Recent discussions of walls along the US southern border and the disturbing rise in anti-Latina/o violence have happened, in part, because as a nation we do not know who we are, and we fantasize that immigration or multilingualism in the American South is a recent phenomenon. By taking southern histories seriously and embracing the diversity that has always been here, it is possible to combat misconceptions and myths that render the South simply black or white and maintain the region as a footnote to the national narrative. Latina/o history is southern history, and southern history is part of a national story. Just as Latinas/os are not new to the South, the importance of their history is not so nuevo.

SARAH MCNAMARA is an assistant professor of History at Texas A&M University. Her research focuses on Latina/x/o, women and gender, and labor histories in the modern United States. McNamara is working on her manuscript, “From Picket Lines to Picket Fences: Latinas and the Remaking of the Jim Crow South, 1930–1963.”

References


*Tampa Morning Tribune*. “Five Thousand Attend the Unveiling of Handsome Confederate Shaft,” February 9, 1913, 3–4, courtesy of the Tampa Bay History Center Archives, Tampa, Florida.