

JUAN CROW IN GEORGIA

by Roberto Lovato

Justeen Mancha's dream of becoming a psychologist was born of the tropical heat and exploitation that have shaped farmworker life around Reidsville, Georgia, for centuries. The wiry, freckle-faced 17-year-old high school junior has toiled in drought-dry onion fields to help her mother, Maria Christina Martinez. But early one September morning in 2006, Mancha's dream was abruptly deferred.

From the living room of the battered trailer she and her mother call home, Mancha described what happened when she came out of the shower that morning. "My mother went out, and I was alone," she said. "I was getting ready for school, getting dressed, when I heard this noise. I thought it was my mother coming back." She went on in the Tex-Mex Spanish-inflected Georgia accent now heard throughout Dixie: "Some people were slamming car doors outside the trailer. I heard footsteps and then a loud boom and then somebody screaming, asking if we were 'illegals,' 'Mexicans.' These big men were standing in my living room holding guns. One man blocked my doorway. Another guy grabbed a gun on his side. I freaked out. 'Oh, my God!' I yelled."

As more than twenty Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents surrounded the trailer, said Mancha, agents inside interrogated her. They asked her where her mother was; they wanted to know if her mother was "Mexican" and whether she had "papers" or a green card. They told her they were looking for "illegals."

After about five minutes of interrogation, the agents--who, according to the women's lawyer, Mary Bauer of the Southern Poverty Law Center, showed no warrants and had neither probable cause nor consent to enter the home--simply left. They left in all likelihood because Mancha and her mother didn't fit the profile of the workers at the nearby Crider poultry plant, who had been targeted by the raid in nearby Stilwell. They were the wrong kind of "Mexicans"; they were US citizens.

Though she had experienced discrimination before the raid--in the fields, in the supermarket and in school--Mancha, who testified before Congress in February, never imagined such an incident would befall her, since she and her mother had migrated from Texas to Reidsville. Best known for harvesting poultry and agricultural products, Reidsville, a farm town about 200 miles southeast of Atlanta, is also known for harvesting Klan culture behind the walls of the state's oldest and largest prison. But its most famous former inmate is Jim Crow slayer and dreamer, Martin Luther King Jr. His example inspires Mancha's new dream: lawyering "for the poor."

The toll this increasingly oppressive climate has taken on Mancha represents but a small part of its effects on noncitizen immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants, and other Latinos. Mancha and the younger children of the mostly immigrant Latinos in Georgia are learning and internalizing that they are different from white--and black--children not just because they have the wrong skin color but also because many of their parents lack the right papers. They are growing up in a racial and political climate in which Latinos' subordinate status in Georgia and in the Deep South bears more than a passing resemblance to that of African-Americans who were living under Jim Crow. Call it Juan Crow: the matrix of laws, social customs, economic institutions and symbolic systems enabling the physical and psychic isolation needed to control and exploit undocumented immigrants. Listening to the effects of Juan Crow on immigrants and citizens like Mancha ("I can't sleep sometimes because of nightmares," she says. "My arms still twitch. I see ICE agents and men in uniform, and it still scares me") reminds me of the trauma I heard among the men, women and children controlled and exploited

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Marie Justeen Mancha, 15, tells reporters about her terrifying experience with immigration officers. With her are her mother, Maria Christina Martinez, also a plaintiff, Atlanta attorney, Brian Spears & Center chief counsel, Morris Dees. (Photo: Erik S. Lesser)

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by state violence in wartime El Salvador. Juan Crow has roots in the US South, but it stirs traumas bred in the hemispheric South.

In fact, the surge in Latino migration (the Southeast is home to the fastest-growing Latino population in the United States) is moving many of the institutions and actors responsible for enforcing Jim Crow to resurrect and reconfigure themselves in line with new demographics. Along with the almost daily arrests, raids and home invasions by federal, state and other authorities, newly resurgent civilian groups like the Ku Klux Klan, in addition to more than 144 new "nativist extremist" groups and 300 anti-immigrant organizations born in the past three years,

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mostly based in the South, are harassing immigrants as a way to grow their ranks.

Meanwhile, a legal regime of distinctions between the rights of undocumented immigrants and citizens has emerged and is being continually refined and expanded. A 2006 Georgia law denies undocumented immigrants driver's licenses. Federal laws that allowed local and state authorities to pursue blacks under the Fugitive Slave Act appear to be the model for the Bush Administration's Agreements of Cooperation in Communities to Enhance Safety and Security (ACCESS) program, which allows states to deputize law enforcement officials to chase, detain, arrest and jail the undocumented. Georgia's lowest-paid workers, the undocumented, now occupy a separate, unequal and clandestine place that has made it increasingly difficult for them to work, rent homes or attend school.

The pre- and post-Reconstruction regional economic system centered on the stately Southern mansions that once graced Atlanta's storied Peachtree Street has given way to a more global finance-driven system centered on the cold, anonymous skyscrapers that loom over Peachtree today. And in a more hopeful sign, some veterans of the civil rights struggle against Jim Crow are joining Latino immigrants in what will likely be one of the major movements of the twenty-first century.

These and other facets of immigrant life in Georgia, the Deep South and the entire country are but a small part of the labyrinthine institutional and cultural arrangements defining the strange career of Juan Crow.

The immigrant condition in Georgia worsened in the wake of the failed immigration reform proposal last year. The national immigration debate had the effect of further legitimizing and emboldening the most extreme elements of the anti-immigrant movement in places like Georgia. Since the advent of what he terms "Georgiafornia," for example, D.A. King, a former marine



Go to the Immigration Section of Homeland Security to Get Fingerprinted by Sue Coe, 2004.

and contributor to the anti-immigrant hate site VDARE, has leapfrogged into the national limelight to become one of the major advocates for deportation and security-only "immigration reform." Strengthened by the defeat of national reform, King, State Senator Chip Rogers and a growing galaxy of formerly fringe groups succeeded in getting some of the country's most draconian anti-immigrant laws passed. These new racial codes are disguised by the national security-infused bureaucratic language of laws with names like the Georgia Security and Immigration Compliance Act (GSICA).

Their efforts were egged on by the Bush Administration's implementation of the ACCESS program last August. ACCESS provided new excuses for state and local officials to pursue the undocumented in states like Georgia. In tandem with the federal government, King and Rogers led the push to pass GSICA, which requires law enforcement officers to investigate the citizenship status of anyone charged with a felony or driving under the influence. GSICA and federal efforts laid the foundation on which the other legal and social structures of Juan Crow grow.

Georgia's estimated 500,000 undocumented immigrants must think twice before seeking emergency support at hospitals or clinics because of laws that require them to prove their legal status before receiving many state benefits. "No-match letter" regulations requiring all employers to confirm the Social Security numbers of their employees have been issued by the Social Security Administration and have resulted in firings and growing fear among immigrants. But even without the no-match letters, undocumented immigrants in Georgia have many reasons to fear going to work. If they work at a company with more than 500 employees, for example (and most undocumented immigrants are employed in meatpacking, agricultural, carpet and other industries with hundreds, sometimes thousands, of workers), they must worry about laws that punish employers who knowingly

hire undocumented immigrants and mandate that firms with state contracts check the immigration status of their employees. Similar laws denying or restricting housing, education, transportation and other aspects of immigrant life are also being instituted across Georgia.

For a firsthand look at how the interplay of state and federal policies fuels Juan Crow, one need go no further than the immigrant-heavy area surrounding Buford Highway in DeKalb County, near Atlanta. During the weekend of October 18, 2007, the Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights (GLAHR) and other advocacy groups from across the state reported sharp increases in arrests of immigrants in the area. "This weekend alone we received more than 200 phone calls from people telling horrible stories of arrests," said GLAHR executive director Adelina Nicholls of Mexico City. "There are hundreds of Latinos who've been hunted down like animals, taken to jail, and they don't even know why or whether or not they'll be released," said Nicholls more recently.

Nicholls and other advocates are working feverishly in response to the exponential increase in official and extra-official profiling of immigrants. Last year there were forty-four reported armed robberies of DeKalb County-area Latino immigrants in August alone. One especially outrageous incident took place just west of Atlanta, in the rural town of Carrollton, last June.

Emelina Ramirez, a Honduran immigrant, called local police to report that her roommates were attacking her, punching and kicking her in the stomach. Ramirez was pregnant. Locals say that when police got to Ramirez's apartment, officers handcuffed her, took her to jail and then ran her fingerprints through a federal database. After discovering that she was undocumented, they contacted federal authorities as stipulated under ACCESS and GSICA. Ramirez was then deported.

Nicholls says she and GLAHR staff exist in a perpetual state of exhaustion after having to expand their DeKalb County work to deal with cases like Ramirez's. Adding to their load is the situation in nearby Cobb County, where the local jail has 500 adults captured on streets, at work and in their homes. All of these people, says Nicholls, are awaiting deportation.

Beneath the growing fear and intensifying racial tensions of Georgia lies the new, more globalized economic system that sustains Juan Crow. At the core of the economy in Dixie are the financial dealings taking place in the shiny towers of Peachtree Street, buildings constructed atop the ashes of plantation houses.

Lining Peachtree today are SunTrust, Bank of America and other titans of global finance with major operations in downtown Atlanta. Along with the financial players of Charlotte, North Carolina, the companies occupying the towers on Peachtree are among the prime movers behind the transformation and restructuring of the Georgia economy--and of its race relations. On Peachtree you can find US banks and financial firms investing in companies doing business in post-NAFTA Latin America, where nonunion labor and miserably low wages drive immigration to Georgia and other states. The investment portfolios of many of these companies have grown fat with high-yield investments in the

poultry, meatpacking, rug, tourism and other Georgia industries employing undocumented immigrants from Mexico and Latin America. The need to keep down the wages of these undocumented workers is fulfilled with the legal, political and psychological discipline of Juan Crow. Along with the most visible legacy of Jim Crow--Georgia's massive and growing population of black prisoners, housed in Reidsville and other, mostly rural prisons--the Peachtree State's undocumented immigrants find themselves at the bottom of the South's new political and economic order.

By keeping down wages of the undocumented and documented workforce, Juan Crow doesn't just pit undocumented Latino workers against black and white workers, it also makes possible every investor's dream of merging Third World wages with First World amenities. Promotional brochures put out by the state's Department of Economic Development, for example, tout Georgia's "below average" wages and its status as a "right to work" (nonunion) state. Georgia's infrastructure, its proximity to US markets and its incentives--nonunion labor, low wages, government subsidies, cheap land--allow the state to position itself as an attractive investment opportunity for foreign companies. While the fortunes of Ford, GM and other US companies have declined in the South, the fortunes of foreign automakers here are rising. Companies like Korean car manufacturer Kia, which plans

to open a \$1.2 billion plant by 2009, see in Georgia and other Southern states a new pool of cheap labor. Of the \$5.7 billion of total new investment in Georgia in 2006, more than 36 percent was from international companies--companies that were also responsible for nearly half of the 24,660 jobs created by government-supported foreign ventures that year.

Also critical to the economic strategies formulated in the towers on Peachtree Street is another Latin-centered component: free trade with Latin America. "We are the gateway to the Americas," boasted Kenneth Stewart, commissioner of the Georgia Department of Economic Development. Stewart was among the more than 1,000 people, including three US Cabinet members and finance ministers, trade representatives, investors, corporate executives and politicians from thirty-three countries in the hemisphere, who attended the sold-out Americas Competitiveness Forum at the Marriott on Peachtree Street last June. As an organizer of the event, the gregarious Stewart, like many of the region's economic leaders, considers hosting the forum a critical part of Atlanta's bid to become the secretariat of the Free Trade Area of the Americas organization. Local elites support building a \$10 million, privately financed FTAA headquarters complex, possibly in the area near Peachtree and the Sweet Auburn neighborhood.

Before being rapidly gentrified by the white-collar employees working in the Peachtree towers, Sweet Auburn, the birthplace of Martin Luther King Jr., was one of the cradles of the African-American freedom struggle. Echoing the connection frequently made here between increased globalization and commerce and improved race relations, Stewart told me that free trade "will benefit

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citizens of Georgia and the citizens of Mexico and other Latin American countries.” But when I asked him about the increased racial tensions, including the murders of some immigrants in Georgia, and about the growing repression of noncitizen Mexican workers, Stewart abruptly ended the interview.

For her part, Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin--among the most recent in a long line of African-American Atlanta mayors that includes former Martin Luther King colleague and Wal-Mart consultant Andrew Young (who has an office in a Peachtree high-rise)--also linked local freedom struggles with global free trade. Before the Americas Competitiveness Forum, she and other regional elites distributed splashy brochures promoting the city’s FTAA bid. Included in the brochure was a picture of the headstone of King’s grave, which bears the inscription Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty I’m Free at last. The brochure promoting “the city too busy to hate” also paints a positive, global Kumbaya picture of the plight of Georgia’s migrants: “With its attractive quality of life and rapidly expanding job market, Metro Atlanta draws thousands of newcomers every year and has growing Latin, Asian and African American communities.”

“This is the home of Dr. King,” said Franklin in her welcome speech at the packed forum. “It is in the spirit of peace, it is in the spirit of collaboration and it is in the spirit of fairness that we attack this issue of [economic] competitiveness,” she told her audience in King-like cadences. But had Franklin taken her foreign visitors on the short stroll from their hotel to Sweet Auburn, they would not have found the racial harmony described in the glossy brochures and spirited speeches.

Documented and undocumented Latinos dealing with the economic and political effects of Juan Crow in Georgia (and across the country) find themselves unwitting actors in a centuries-old racial drama, which they must alter if Juan Crow is to be defeated. The major difference today is that Latinos also find themselves having to navigate a racial and political topography that is no longer black and white. Young Latinos, in particular, attend schools that teach them about Jim Crow while giving them a daily dose of Juan Crow.

High school senior Ernesto Chávez (a pseudonym) does not look forward to becoming one of the few undocumented students in Georgia to go to a university like Kennesaw State, which requires them to carry student IDs with special color coding, or to a college that denies them aid and forces them to pay exorbitant, nearly impossible-to-pay out-of-state tuition. He has already learned enough about Jim Crow--and Juan Crow--in high school.

Chávez, who sports a buzz cut and wears baggy clothes, said that when he studied Jim Crow in school, he identified strongly with the heroic generation of African-American youth

who rebelled against it. “They couldn’t ride in the same trains, they couldn’t drink from the same fountains,” he said during an interview in a classroom at Miller Grove High School in the Atlanta suburb of Lithonia. “I felt mad when I read about that, even though they weren’t my people,” said the soft-spoken Mexican, who is part of the small but growing minority of Latinos at Miller Grove (African-American students make up about 93 percent of the student body).

Chávez said he came to know the limits of his physical, social and psychic mobility, thanks to the Georgia law that requires people to show proof of citizenship or legal status in order to obtain a driver’s license. “It’s hard to describe what it feels like to be ‘illegal’ here in Georgia. It’s like you can’t move,” he said, his voice cracking slightly. “It feels scary because you know that when you go out to a public place, you might never know if you’re going to come back. I’m really scared because my mother drives without a license. She’s scared too.”

Chávez and other Latino students also expressed their shock and dismay at being discriminated against by some of the descendants of those discriminated against by Jim Crow.

“When I first got here, I was confused. I went to a mostly white school in Gwinnett County and started noticing the fifth-grade kids saying things to me, racial stuff, asking me questions like, ‘Are you illegal?’” said Chávez as he fidgeted nervously in one of those ubiquitous and visibly uncomfortable school desks. “But when I was in seventh grade, I went to Richards Middle School, where it wasn’t the white people saying things, it was black people. They didn’t like Mexican kids. They would call us ‘Mexican border hoppers,’ ‘wetbacks’ and all these things. Every time they’d see me, they yelled at me,

threatened to beat me up after school for no reason at all.” Asked how it felt, he said, “It’s like, now since they have rights, they can discriminate [against] others.”

Chávez’s family, along with many immigrant families in Georgia, will be watching closely to see how the state’s justice system deals with the still-pending 2005 case of six Mexican farmworkers killed execution-style in their trailers, which were parked near the cotton and peanut farms they toiled on in Tifton. Pretrial motions began last July in the case, in which prosecutors allege that four African-American men bludgeoned five of the immigrants to death with aluminum baseball bats and shot one in the head while robbing them in their trailer home. Though the face of anti-immigrant racism in the Juan Crow South is still overwhelmingly identified as white by the immigrants I interviewed, some immigrants also see a black face on anti-immigrant hate.

Politically, a growing divide has emerged between pro- and anti-immigrant blacks in Georgia. The African-American face of Juan Crow is embodied by State Senator and probable Democratic



Uncle Sam by Sue Coe, 2004.

Atlanta mayoral candidate Kasim Reed (he's also considering a gubernatorial bid). Reed proposed a five-year prison sentence for anyone caught trying to secure employment with a false ID. Local Latino and African-American activists have criticized Reed for what Bruce Dixon of the online Black Agenda Report called his "morally bankrupt attempt to outflank Republicans on the right."

Activists like Janvieve Williams of the US Human Rights Network, based in Atlanta, counter the anti-immigrant tide by elevating the tone of the debate and shifting the terms to human rights. As an Afro-Panamanian immigrant, Williams says she feels discrimination from many whites in Georgia, but she also experiences discrimination from mestizo immigrants. Her perception of anti-immigrant sentiments among African-Americans adds another layer to the complex racial dynamics unleashed by Juan Crow. "I'm caught between African-Americans who don't want to understand immigration and immigrants and Latinos who use words like 'moreno,' 'negritos,' 'los negros' and other terms that are not good," says Williams.

But rather than see her Afro-Latino identity and her Latin American political experience as a barrier between communities, Williams—who co-hosts Radio Diaspora, a weekly Afro-Latino program that helped promote the 50,000-plus immigrants' rights marches in 2006—uses Latin American media and organizing experience to cross linguistic and political borders. "We need to move from civil rights to human rights. We need to start using the language and tools of human rights around the issue of immigration. It's an international issue that needs an international framework," says Williams, whose organization co-sponsored the visit to Atlanta last May by the United Nations special rapporteur on the human rights of migrants. Williams's organization brought together many groups who shared stories of Juan Crow with the special rapporteur, who took his report to the UN General Assembly.

In the same way that the concept of civil rights grew as a response to Jim Crow, the human rights framework advocated by Williams and other immigrants' rights activists in the South and across the country challenges traditional approaches to race and

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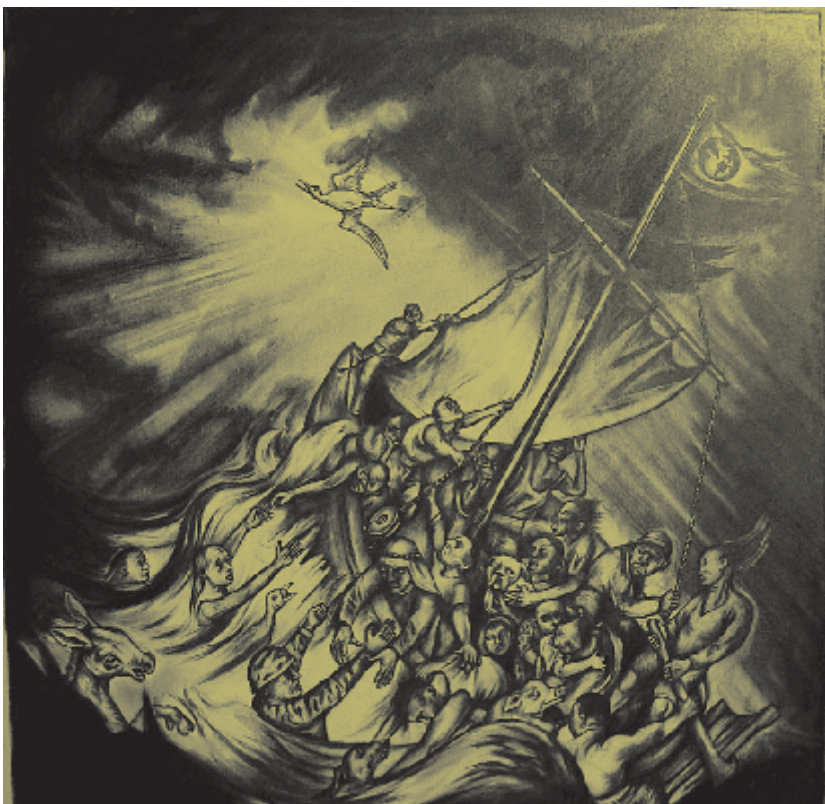
rights. "Some civil rights leaders here don't think human rights affects us in the United States," says Williams. "A lot of the [civil rights] elders of that movement are not linked to the human rights movement, and that also gets in the way of working together."

Not all of Georgia's civil rights elders fit thirtysomething Williams's description. The Rev. Joseph Lowery, the lieutenant to Martin Luther King Jr., says he did not perceive the threat that some whites and African-American Georgians felt from the massive immigrant marches of 2006; instead he sees in the millions marching in Atlanta and across the country "instruments of God's will to change this country." Reverend Lowery, who now leads the Georgia Coalition for the People's Agenda, has spoken eloquently and vociferously against what he considers "wicked" immigration policies and has attended pro-immigrant rallies. He believes that massive immigration to the United States came about because of the workings within the tall buildings like those in spitting distance of his office in the historic Atlanta Life building on Auburn Avenue. "We've globalized money, we've globalized trade and commerce, but we haven't globalized fairness toward work and labor. The solution to the 'problem' of immigration and other problems is globalization of justice," he said.

Speaking of the relationship between American blacks and Latino immigrants, Lowery said, "There are many differences between our experience and that of immigrant Latinos—but there is a family resemblance between Jim Crow and what is being experienced by immigrants. Both met economic oppression. Both met racial and ethnic hostility.

"But the most important thing to remember," said Lowery, as if casting out the demons of Juan and Jim Crow, "is that, though we may have come over on different ships, we're all in the same damn boat now."

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We are all in the same boat by Sue Coe