

# 1 Southern Fried

## GLOBALIZATION AND IMMIGRANT TRANSFORMATIONS

“Her husband used to run whisky as a bootlegger,” my acquaintance divulged in a low voice. It was December 2003 and I was visiting Forest, Mississippi, to secure a place to live in advance of my move there the following month. Among the many dead-end leads I pursued, someone suggested I call a widowed white woman who had some land outside of town where she rented a handful of trailers. I wasn’t sure I wanted to live even farther out in the country—Forest, with its population of six thousand and hour’s drive from the nearest city, seemed rural enough—but I was quickly learning that my housing options in the area were few and, thanks to the poultry industry’s booming business in immigrant labor, mostly overpriced and poorly maintained. I spoke to the owner briefly by phone and then drove out along a narrow country road until I met her at the old trailer for rent. She opened the door, and I quickly looked around the dimly lit space. My eyes fixated on the threadbare, olive-colored carpeting in the cramped living area. The trailer did cover the absolute basics, but I hoped it wouldn’t come to this.

As we stepped back out into the light of day, I looked around me and asked who else was renting on her property. “What can you tell me about who my neighbors would be?” Her response was surprisingly, painfully candid:

“Well, I don’t rent to Mexicans. But I do have a Mexican family that is *very good* and helps me keep up my properties.” A lump began to form in the pit of my stomach. She proceeded.

“Now, the one who lives down there,” gesturing toward the end of the road about three trailers beyond where we stood, “He’s a Black man. But he won’t hurt you.” The lump grew. While I had doubted this place’s suitability when I was inside, I now found myself silently plotting my escape. Ultimately, the condition and hue of the wearied rug were insignificant; what made me queasy were my potential landlord’s disgraceful views and the ease with which she had interpreted the shade of my white skin as an indication that I would share them.

As I drove away in dismay, wondering if I could ever feel at home here, the ethnographer in me found consolation—admittedly conflicted, but consolation nonetheless—in the realization that I had found fertile ground for my research on how new Latin American immigration was transforming the U.S. South. But I wasn’t merely studying this phenomenon; my encounter had made clear that I was also living the very changes I was seeking to understand. I hoped that my work would speak to—indeed, have a transformative impact on—the experiences of everyday people.

. . . . .

Two years later I’m reminded of this moment as I sit at dusk on the make-shift porch of a different trailer with Pablo Armenta, a father of four from Veracruz, Mexico.<sup>1</sup> An occasional car passes quietly down the winding country road as darkness falls—headlights approach first, engine rumbling, and soon the red glow of taillights trails behind. Several hundred-foot pine trees stretch up, stoic, from the patch of lawn before us. Three pairs of yellow rubber work boots stand neatly at attention on the ground below the porch, accompanied by three purple plastic aprons that drape over the stairs’ crude wooden railing, drying out after a long day’s work at the chicken plant. Tonight the warm air is still, but we can’t escape the familiar, pervasive odor of Forest—that stout, mealy, putrid aroma of chickens heading to and from slaughter. Around here they say it “smells like money,” or so goes the timeworn joke.

I faintly hear the sound of the TV through the closed door behind us. I've asked Pablo to recount his story of how he came to Mississippi. "Mississippi . . ." He pauses for several breaths in a moment of reflection before continuing:

I think God put it in my path. I was in Florida picking oranges. One afternoon I went to a Cuban store, and when I was walking home a van pulled over, and this guy says to me, "Hey, do you want to work in Mississippi?" And I told him, "Well, that depends." So he explained what it was about, a chicken plant, a factory where they process chicken, the work is like this, they pay this much. They were offering housing and everything, so yeah, it sounded good to me.<sup>2</sup>

I am incredulous. "So they just stopped you on the side of the road, and you said yes?" Pablo chuckles at my astonishment. Perhaps even he's a little surprised at the events that unfolded in its wake:

Yes! So then they said, "Tomorrow we'll come get you around this time." So I told them where I lived, and I talked with my two brothers, and we decided to do it. They said, "You go ahead, and if it all checks out, we'll follow." The next day I left. We went in a van, all piled up on top of one another; you know, in one of those vans that you can rent to move furniture. It was so full! I arrived, worked one week, received my first paycheck, it seemed good to me, and I brought them all here to join me.

Despite considerable challenges, ten years later Pablo and his brothers have made Mississippi home. The migration he describes, which began in the mid-1990s, has changed the landscape of both the chicken-processing industry and rural southern communities. Such changes have taken place amid social landscapes with previously established categories, as my ill-fated interaction with a prospective landlord made abundantly clear. How these transformations came about, and their impacts on poultry workers, their communities, and their possibilities for workplace justice, are the focus of this book.

## SOUTHERN TRANSFORMATIONS

For hundreds of years, the political, economic, and social fabric of the U.S. South has been spun from profound structural inequalities between Black

and white.<sup>3</sup> A Latin American migration of unprecedented scope has begun to bring this foundational feature of the region into question. The Hispanic population is growing faster here than in any other part of the country.<sup>4</sup> With the exception of Louisiana, during the 1990s every southern state boasted a greater-than 100 percent increase, with several registering growth rates of more than 300 percent.<sup>5</sup> Over half a million Hispanics moved to the region in this period, and the trend has continued in the new millennium. It is home to seven out of ten states with the largest increase in undocumented migrants between 1990 and 2010.<sup>6</sup> The majority are young, single Mexican men, though the incidence of women as well as migrants from other places in Latin America is on the rise. They have scattered across the region in a patchwork of rural, suburban, and metropolitan areas, following the job opportunities of a global economy. So while immigration is not new to the South, the intensity and breadth of this growing trend is novel.<sup>7</sup> The phenomenon has become so incisive and widespread that some scholars have dubbed the region the “*Nuevo* New South,” and white, Black, and new Latino communities find themselves grappling to make sense of the cultural changes and shifting social hierarchies sparked by these dramatic transformations.<sup>8</sup>

Mississippi is the most recent southern state to experience these changes. It has long been considered the “deepest” part of the South, holding a place of “symbolic importance . . . in the national imagination.”<sup>9</sup> For many Americans the state conjures up images of the Mississippi Delta, the land along the floodplains of the Mississippi River that has, since the mid-1800s, been home to some of the largest cotton plantations and the most concentrated population of African Americans in the country.<sup>10</sup> Mississippi reminds others of pivotal periods in our nation’s history, such as the Civil War or the Civil Rights Movement. For younger people the state may have entered their consciousness following 2005’s Hurricane Katrina, which devastated the Mississippi Gulf Coast before decimating New Orleans.

When they hear the word “Mississippi,” few people think of the poultry region at the center of the state. Yet this is precisely the area to which Latinos began arriving in the mid-1990s. Because the phenomenon is so recent—at least ten years behind other states in the region with more established immigrant populations—Mississippi’s communities have limited infrastructure to support the integration of newcomers, and most

residents know little about their backgrounds or reasons for coming. Similarly, new immigrants are generally unaware of the social and political histories of the United States or the South. Moreover, Mississippi's Latino population is extraordinarily diverse, with people from over a dozen countries across Latin America. These realities add to the complexity of social relations in communities and workplaces.

Mississippi is an important place to examine new Latino immigration to the South precisely because of these characteristics. Whereas in other parts of the country immigrants often replace a majority-white workforce, in Mississippi's poultry region they work alongside African Americans in some of the lowest-paid and most dangerous jobs in the country. While the state's high percentage of working-class Black residents and entrenched racial hierarchies have long contributed to the public perception of Mississippi as "the most southern place on Earth," these extremes also enable us to more acutely observe the effects that these new arrivals are having on the deeply engrained social order.<sup>11</sup> I am not suggesting that Mississippi or the Deep South are qualitatively different from other parts of the country. While their legacies of slavery and segregation produced particular social processes and relationships that continue to hold meaning today, the transformations taking place are emblematic of a larger shift throughout the United States, in which new Latino immigrants bring into question long-standing racial hierarchies and ways Americans relate to one another. Rather than seeing the Deep South as exceptional, then, let us consider what it can teach us about broader changes taking place across the country in the realms of social relations, racial identification, and the global economy.<sup>12</sup>

#### SLAUGHTERING AMERICA'S CHICKENS

America loves chicken. So much, in fact, that we eat almost ninety pounds of it per person, per year. That's nearly double what we ate when I was young (forty-eight pounds annually in 1980) and over ten times what our parents and grandparents consumed in 1950 (eight pounds per capita).<sup>13</sup> Our voracious appetite for this bird has fueled the transformation of poultry production from a backyard endeavor that supplemented families'

dinner plates and incomes into one of the most highly specialized and labor-intensive forms of industrial agriculture in the world.<sup>14</sup>

But chicken processing is one of the worst jobs in America. Work on the processing lines is loud and fast. Communication is brusque and kept to a minimum. Pervasive fats and fluids ensure everything stays damp and slippery. Temperatures are extreme, knives often dull, and protective equipment in short supply. Supervisors regularly push bodies and patience past their limits and compensate it all with poverty-level pay. U.S.-born and immigrant workers alike complain of a litany of unjust practices, including wage theft, denial of bathroom breaks, unnecessarily hazardous working conditions resulting in high rates of injury, deceptive use of labor contractors, and abuse by supervisors and higher-level management, including discrimination and sexual harassment.

While corporate earnings continue to rise, poultry workers' real wages have declined steadily since 1970.<sup>15</sup> A national study found violations of minimum wage laws in 100 percent of poultry plants surveyed.<sup>16</sup> Jobs have been "deskilled" and production sped up through remarkable technological advances, and workers now repeat the same monotonous—and often hazardous—movement throughout their entire shift. As a result, repetitive motion injuries plague the workforce.<sup>17</sup> Plants are often out of compliance with federal safety and health regulations, and the government agency charged with oversight of these laws, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), is appallingly underresourced and, consequently, largely ineffective.<sup>18</sup> All workers are expendable; injured or disabled ones are typically disposed of. The annual turnover of workers is as high as 100 percent in some locations.<sup>19</sup>

Workers who try to organize to change these conditions are often met with stiff resistance. "There is no industry harder to organize than the poultry industry," said an international leader of the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union at a gathering of poultry worker leaders from across the South in 2005. "I had heard stories and rumors about what went on in the plants, but I didn't really know till I got to visit a couple plants last year in Mississippi. There is no other place in this country where organizing is harder than in the South. There is no place else in the country where workers are facing such horrific working conditions. Poultry workers represent some of the most exploited workers in this world."



*Figure 2.* Poultry workers processing America's chickens. Photo by Earl Dotter. Courtesy of EarlDotter.com.

Aside from their claim to being the only major employer in many rural towns, poultry processors are giving their workers virtually no incentive to stay. As this ethnography shows, however, such incentives are unnecessary at the dawn of the twenty-first century, when workers, effortlessly recruited from across the world, are literally expendable and infinitely replaceable.

#### IMMIGRANT WORKERS IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

The dismal working conditions, poverty-level wages, and corporate resistance to collective bargaining that poultry workers endure are not new. Many of these problems were brought to the public's attention more than a century ago, when Upton Sinclair famously detailed the dangerous and unjust practices of Chicago's meatpacking industry in his acclaimed book, *The Jungle*.<sup>20</sup> Even the employment of immigrant laborers and other marginalized groups to weaken worker power is a legacy that extends back to (and before) Sinclair's lifetime.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, industrial capitalism has existed as the principal mode of production in the global economy since at least the nineteenth century, and this system has always reached beyond national boundaries.<sup>22</sup> Given these continuities, what has changed?

Anthropologists and others argue that we are in a unique historical moment in which the local and the global intersect in ways qualitatively distinct from the past.<sup>23</sup> Whether it is conceptualized as a "speeding up" or a "stretching out," globalization theory understands time and space as having been reconfigured through the development of new communication and transportation technologies—what some scholars have termed the "conditions of postmodernity."<sup>24</sup> Developments such as high-speed air travel, global telephone infrastructure, and the Internet have intensified human interaction on a global scale, fundamentally disembedding social and cultural relations from traditional spatially bounded contexts and linking distant places so that "local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away."<sup>25</sup>

Theories of globalization have been used to explain fluxes and flows ranging from money, commodities, and industries to people, ideologies, and ideas. Yet while these discussions recognize that transnational capital plays an important role in the globalizations they analyze, they fail to explain the



economic, political, and cultural logic that fuels processes of globalization. In other words, while globalization theories help us understand *how*, they generally leave unanswered the question of *why* people, money, and goods are moving across international boundaries at such unprecedented rates. The answer lies in understanding what drives today's global economy.

Beginning in the 1970s neoliberal economic theory suggested that governments, or "the state," should interfere as little as possible with the market, instead allowing its "invisible hand" to guide economic, political, and social relationships.<sup>26</sup> But in practice, governments *do* regulate the market in all sorts of ways. In recent decades they have implemented policies to deregulate industry, divest the state of social responsibility for the poor, criminalize immigrants, weaken worker protections, invest public funds into private endeavors, and liberalize finance, among other interventions. Rather than shrinking away, states have become the principal enforcers of neoliberalism, wielding regulatory powers in ways that ensure that capitalist logic can govern society.<sup>27</sup> As a result, over the past thirty years global inequalities have grown significantly as wealth has consolidated around the globe.

Such inequalities are exacerbated by international trade agreements, structural adjustment policies, and U.S. foreign policy, which have disproportionately benefited capitalists and increased the vulnerability of the poor.<sup>28</sup> As a result, working people in the global South face increasingly bleak conditions in their sending communities and home countries, leading them to take advantage of globalization's new technologies to migrate in search of better opportunities.

In the meantime, corporate strategies such as outsourcing, contracting, part-time employment, and union busting allow for greater capital accumulation. Workers are on average being paid comparatively less, finding less job security, and laboring in increasingly dismal conditions. While companies have promoted these labor control tactics for achieving greater "workforce flexibility," from the standpoint of workers they are more accurately ensuring "job insecurity."<sup>29</sup> Corporations have come to count on the limited and underenforced nature of U.S. labor laws to shift the risks of capitalism onto individual laborers and thus secure greater profit.

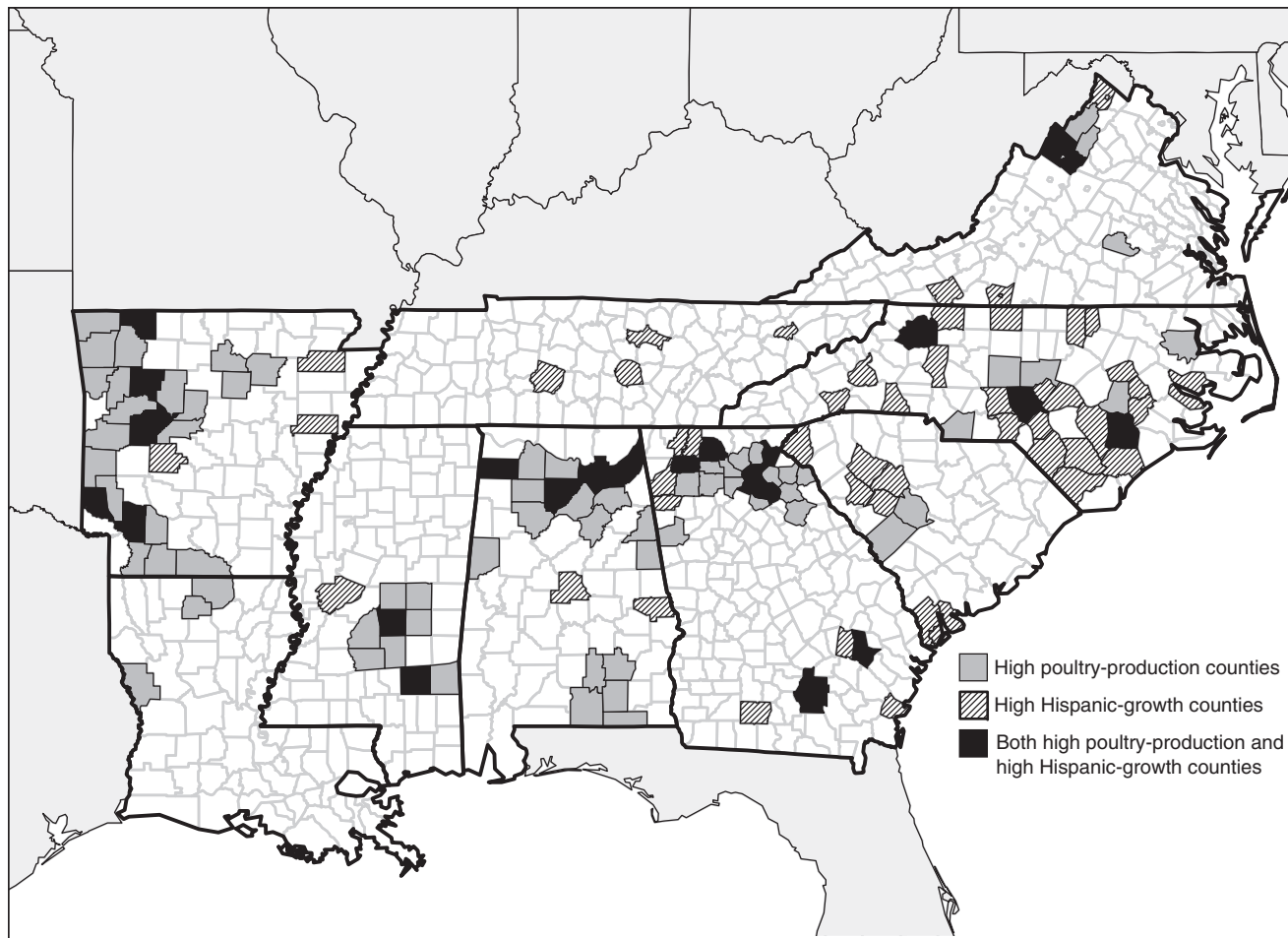
While some companies have moved their manufacturing to other countries with advantageous trade policies and exceedingly low wages, some

industries—like poultry—have figured out how to bring the global labor force to them.<sup>30</sup> One of the leading labor control strategies that has emerged in the global economy is the active recruitment of undocumented immigrant workers. These workers' social, legal, and economic precarity renders them hyperexploitable. Their heightened vulnerability makes them a "docile" labor force, weakening workers' potential for collective bargaining, putting downward pressure on wages, and showing local (often Black) workers the meaning of a "work ethic." The state's selective enactment and enforcement of immigration laws and labor protections facilitates this exploitation. This all enables corporations and their shareholders to maximize profits, which, under neoliberalism's economic and cultural logic, is the ultimate objective.

#### MISSISSIPPI'S POULTRY COMMUNITIES

As our consumption of America's favorite white meat escalated, the poultry industry harnessed globalization's technologies and neoliberalism's labor control strategies and began recruiting immigrant labor at unprecedented rates.<sup>31</sup> Whereas, traditionally, local whites and, later, African Americans supplied the industry's labor power, today in many U.S. poultry plants Latin Americans constitute the majority of workers. By 2000 over half of the country's quarter-million poultry workers were immigrants, the vast majority of these foreign-born Hispanics.<sup>32</sup> Since eight of the top ten poultry-producing states are located in the South, it's fair to say that shifting national food-consumption patterns and the poultry industry's heavy reliance on immigrant labor have contributed to the recent demographic transformation of the region. A mapping of the Hispanic population in the rural South confirms that poultry has been a major driving force; in Mississippi it has been *the* driving force (see map 1).<sup>33</sup>

Mississippi ranks as the country's fourth largest producer, and poultry has been the state's top agricultural product since 1994, the year after local processors began recruiting workers from Latin America. In 2010 the state's nearly twenty chicken plants processed 757 million chickens for an average of nearly 1,500 per minute, employing approximately twenty-eight thousand people and generating over \$2.8 billion in revenue.<sup>34</sup>



*Map 1.* Poultry production and Hispanic growth in the Deep South. Map by Austin Kocher, based on Kandel (2006), using data from the 1987, 1992, and 1997 Census of Agriculture and the 1990 and 2000 Census of Population.

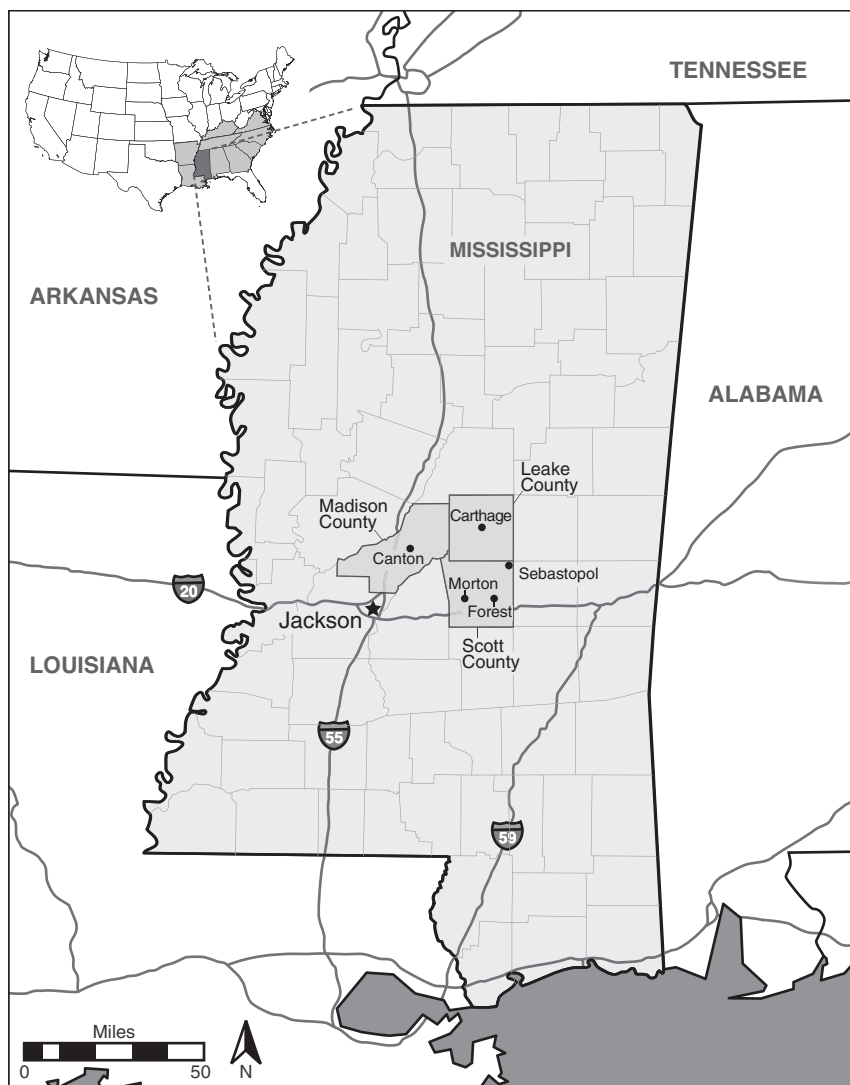
Nevertheless, the average worker makes just over \$23,000 per year, significantly below the federal poverty guidelines for a family of four.<sup>35</sup>

The core of Mississippi's poultry industry is Scott County. The county seat, Forest, is located approximately fifty miles east of the state capital of Jackson along U.S. Interstate 20. In 2005 Forest was home to five processing plants, with two others in nearby Morton and Sebastopol. Thirty miles north of Forest sits Carthage, in Leake County. Carthage boasts the largest poultry-processing facility in the country, owned by Tyson Foods, with a capacity to process 2.5 million chickens per week.<sup>36</sup> To the west, forming a triangle with Forest and Carthage, rests the city of Canton, in Madison County, with two more chicken plants. It is this area, formed by Scott, Leake, and Madison Counties, that I call central Mississippi's poultry region and sometimes just central Mississippi (see map 2).<sup>37</sup>

The country roads and two-lane highways connecting these towns wind over rolling red clay hills, around reservoirs, and through pine forests. Chicken farms dot the landscape, evidenced by groupings of large metal warehouses, set far back from the road, that glimmer in the evening sun. Older chicken houses made of wood beams and plastic sheeting decay on smaller plots nearby. Rickety trucks haul live chickens to slaughter, birds peering out from their cramped cages, tufts of white feathers littering the air in their wake. Amid the farms sit modest homes, decrepit trailers, and family-run corner stores in varying degrees of disrepair. The poverty here is palpable, even from behind the wheel of a car.

Forest, Carthage, and Canton, the main towns in their respective counties, serve as commercial centers that sustain more rural populations for miles around. Each is home to a variety of fast food options and gas stations and a more limited supply of small, family-owned businesses. Following Walmart's arrival to each of these towns, however, local retailers have been forced to close in growing numbers. Meanwhile, in many communities Walmart represents the most racially integrated space in town, with people flocking there to shop as well as socialize. Social outlets such as community centers, restaurants, and other entertainment options are limited; going to a mall or movie theater, for example, requires traveling a considerable distance into Jackson's suburbs.

Central Mississippi's poultry towns remain rigidly segregated by race. The literal and figurative railroad tracks often demarcate the line between tradi-



Map 2. Central Mississippi's poultry region. Map by Austin Kocher.

tionally white and African American neighborhoods. There's a church seemingly on every corner, and most of these, too, remain segregated. Some high schools elect separate Black and white student leaders or crown two homecoming queens. Many country clubs still deny entrance to nonwhite visitors. People tolerate and are often cordial to one another in public spaces, and some consider coworkers of the "opposite" race to be friends, but Black and white residents rarely socialize in more private realms. While perhaps, as one white pastor asserted, "at least a part of that overt racial tension [of the past has been] resolved," such quiescence at times feels no more than skin deep.

During my time in Mississippi, Canton had recently elected its first Black mayor since Reconstruction, but Carthage, Forest, and Morton have not followed in these footsteps. A successful Black attorney in the area told me a judge had recently called her "nigger" from the bench. She ran in a local election but lost after her opponent reminded people that she had represented a Black man who killed a white man and was acquitted. If elected, it was implied, no white person would be safe. The Ku Klux Klan remains active in parts of the state, appearing occasionally for marches, rallies, or autograph signings at the state fair.<sup>38</sup>

Neighborhoods are largely working class, with small single-family homes. Land is cheap, and home sales typically cost little more than the value of a lot's improvements. When I lived there, older two-bedroom homes in Scott County were often appraised for as little as \$25,000. Beyond limited federal public housing options, few apartment complexes exist. Decrepit trailers abound, particularly just beyond city limits. The wealthy, too, tend to live outside of town (in Jackson's suburbs), though every poultry town boasts a few stately homes of its own.

Forest typifies distributions of wealth and poverty in Mississippi's poultry region. When I lived there, half of the city's households earned less than \$25,000 each year, and barely 10 percent had an annual income of \$75,000 or more. A mere 2 percent earned \$200,000 or more per year, most of these hundred households making their fortunes in poultry and ancillary industries. Nearly half of adult individuals living without families were subsisting below the poverty level. Less than two-thirds of adults over age twenty-five had graduated from high school. By 2010 the median salary for full-time employed men was \$36,023, while that for women was nearly half of men's earnings at \$19,245. These statistics are illustrative of

rural Mississippi poultry towns dominated by low-wage work opportunities that have brought both enduring poverty and a more recent explosion of migration from Latin America.<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, over the past twenty years central Mississippi has become home to the state's greatest concentration of Latinos. The U.S. Census, which regularly undercounts new immigrants, reported 3,024 people of Hispanic origin living in Scott County in 2010, as compared to 1,660 ten years before and only 141 in 1990. While the population nearly doubled during the most recent decade on record, more astonishingly, it increased by over 1,000 percent in the 1990s, when the poultry industry first began recruiting Latin American workers. Hispanics now represent over 10 percent of the county's total population, and the vast majority of these are foreign-born. This figure stands in contrast to the rest of the state, where Hispanics make up just over 2 percent of the population.<sup>40</sup>

In central Mississippi's poultry towns Latinos join a population in which Black residents generally outnumber white residents by a considerable margin.<sup>41</sup> The region also neighbors the reservation of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians and is home to a small but significant Native American population. In Forest, Hispanics represent one quarter of the town's residents, and a majority is from Mexico's newer sending region of the southeast, particularly the states of Veracruz and Chiapas. Nearby Morton (pop. 3,500) is home to more Cubans, Argentines, and other Caribbean and South American immigrants, and Hispanics there make up over 15 percent of the population. Carthage (pop. 5,075) has become a principal receiving community for indigenous Mam migrants from Comitancillo, a small town in the highlands of Guatemala. While Mam leaders and local church representatives estimated the number at as high as 1,000 individuals in 2005, the Census Bureau measured the city's Hispanic population at half that, or just 12 percent.<sup>42</sup> Of the communities included in this rendering of central Mississippi's poultry region, Canton (pop. 13,000) has the lowest official count of Hispanics, at just 5 percent. But because the city's geography is gerrymandered so as to locate the chicken plants and a large neighboring trailer park—where many immigrants live—just outside the city limits, this figure does not provide an accurate representation of the Latin American population in the Canton area. A largely southeastern Mexican community at first, Canton became



*Figure 3.* Modern chicken houses on a central Mississippi poultry farm. Photo by author.

home to a growing number of Guatemalans moving from Carthage in search of work beginning in 2005 (see chapter 8).

The area's rural nature makes distances between poultry towns significant. I drove nearly fifty thousand miles in the two years I lived there and spent so much time in the car that I often took advantage of the ride by speaking my field notes into a handheld digital audio recorder. Such rurality can isolate people from one another as well as from bigger metropolitan areas. This limits education and employment options, keeps economies and wages depressed, and presents a real challenge for organizing workers dispersed throughout different plants and towns, not to mention regionally or across the industry. It is not a coincidence that poultry corporations have chosen to locate their processing facilities in some of the most remote areas of the South; indeed, the region provides them with just what they need.

#### ACTIVIST RESEARCH

I first went to Mississippi in the summer of 2002 in hopes of figuring out how research could support a budding coalition of immigrant and civil



rights advocates, communities of faith, union leaders, employment justice attorneys, other politically engaged academics, and poultry workers grappling with questions of worker justice within the context of new Latino immigration into the area's chicken plants. My arrival there was a product of many months of conversation with my mentor at the University of Texas, Charlie Hale, and the Equal Justice Center, a nonprofit organization in Austin that was supporting poultry justice advocates across the South. In what ways could a politically engaged approach to research advance the work of this loose-knit Mississippi group struggling to help immigrant and U.S.-born poultry workers alike improve their wages, working conditions, and quality of life? And how might such activist scholarship breathe new life into a discipline that had long struggled with its colonialist roots?

My graduate training in activist research suggested a way forward in response to the dual concerns before me. Driven by a politics of liberation, the education I had received at the "Austin School" answered the question, "Anthropology for whom?" with an explicit political alignment with "people organizing to change the conditions of their lives."<sup>43</sup> This radical reconception of anthropological research, used as a tool that marginalized people could wield to effect social transformation toward greater equality and justice, held promise—I hoped—for decolonizing both the discipline and the world more broadly.<sup>44</sup>

My time in Mississippi that first summer helped me establish key relationships and identify some of the biggest problems poultry workers and their supporters encounter. It revealed local people's commitment and perseverance, as well as an abysmal lack of resources and information with which they were working to improve conditions in their chicken plants and communities. It also suggested that a better understanding of these challenges could help my interlocutors develop organizing strategies to begin to overcome them. Enthusiastic about the prospects for conducting activist research in this context, I committed to returning for long-term fieldwork, which I would carry out in dialogue and close collaboration with my new colleagues. In partnership with the Equal Justice Center and other supporters, I began helping to organize and facilitate Know Your Rights workshops in the area. Workers and advocates expressed interest in the idea of starting a workers' center to help them address ongoing obstacles to poultry worker justice.<sup>45</sup>

By the time I moved to Mississippi full-time in January 2004, the creation of the Mississippi Poultry Workers' Center, with a local advisory committee and the Equal Justice Center at the helm, was in the works. I took on the title of community outreach and education associate, which, in practice, meant I was the principal liaison between the workers' center's leadership in Austin and the poultry workers and advocates it was being created to support in Mississippi. "Research" became inextricable from my everyday life supporting struggling poultry workers and helping them find the resources—individual, institutional, and informational—to address their problems. I interpreted for union representatives in plant break rooms, accompanied injured workers to doctor's and lawyer's offices, helped immigrants plan for and communicate at court proceedings, continued to lead popular education workshops, organized events, built relationships with community allies, attended coalition meetings, and participated in the organizational development of the fledgling workers' center.

In the first year, as the Equal Justice Center sought funding to sustain the project, my work was unpaid and conceptualized as part of my role as an activist researcher. Our partnership was mutually beneficial: my on-the-ground efforts were vital to the establishment of the workers' center, serving as an anchor between the Austin-based collaborators and those in Mississippi, and this affiliation provided me with organizational support, credibility, and access to spaces to which I may otherwise have struggled to gain entry. To make ends meet, I also began teaching ESOL classes at a local mission and community center.<sup>46</sup> This work advanced both my research and the workers' center's efforts because it enabled me to build trusting relationships with immigrant poultry workers of different backgrounds, learn about their daily lives and struggles, meet others in their social networks, and connect them to workers' center efforts when appropriate.

By the start of 2005, the Mississippi Poultry Workers' Center had a small office in Morton and had hired its first full-time Mississippi-based community organizer, an African American woman who had been deeply involved as an advocate for social justice in Jackson. The workers' center had been successful enough in fundraising that it was also able to employ me as part-time staff throughout that year. While I still felt I was always scrambling to help the workers' center address the most recent violation of people's human dignity and basic rights at the chicken plants—which

provided a wealth of research opportunities as well as loads of frustration and disappointment, alongside some key victories—this formalization of our relationship and the addition of other local staff enabled me to focus some of my time on developing more proactive programming. During this year I helped to establish the Workplace Injury Project and piloted *Solidarity/Solidaridad: Building Cross-Cultural Understanding for Worker Justice*, a popular education curriculum that brought African American and Latino immigrant poultry worker leaders into dialogue, which I continued to coordinate over the subsequent three years.

My activist fieldwork method might best be characterized by the term “observant participation,” in which ethnography’s cornerstone, participant observation, is inverted to emphasize one’s role as a participant in the processes under study.<sup>47</sup> As the previous narrative suggests, my observant participation took place in a variety of settings, such as workers’ center campaigns, workshops, and other gatherings; advisory committee planning sessions; English and Spanish classes; courtrooms; doctors’ and lawyers’ offices; kitchen tables; living rooms; soccer fields; police stations; church services; funerals; health fairs; union meetings; advocate conferences; community forums; chicken plant break rooms; industry recruitment events; and poultry farms, feed mills, and hatcheries. These activities included hundreds of informal one-on-one and group meetings and dozens of more organized small-group discussions among poultry workers. The latter were akin to focus groups, though they typically prioritized organizing or educational goals first, research objectives second.

Amid the intensity of fieldwork in this setting, I also conducted approximately sixty formal unstructured and semistructured interviews with people of diverse backgrounds. These included poultry workers from Mississippi, Mexico, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, Cuba, Venezuela, Peru, Uruguay, and Argentina; former and current poultry plant executives; union organizers and business agents; faith leaders; teachers; small business owners; local civil rights veterans and historians; immigrant rights advocates; law enforcement officers; injured workers; Black and Latino victims of racial profiling; and workers’ center staff and advisory committee members. In addition, I carried out approximately two months of concentrated archival research in the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, the Forest Public Library, and local, privately held archival collections.

In early 2006, as I prepared to wrap up my fieldwork and leave Mississippi, the workers' center hired a second community organizer, a Salvadoran woman who had previously worked in the chicken plants. While she took over some of my responsibilities, I continued to support the workers' center, first from Austin and later from Santa Fe, until 2008, when completion of my doctoral program coincided with a cross-country move, a postdoctoral research appointment, and the birth of my daughter. A period of six years of engagement, punctuated by two intense years of round-the-clock immersion and political participation in the issues at the core of this book, had come to a bittersweet close.

Many aspects of my identity shaped my fieldwork experience, including my positioning as a young, white, non-Mississippian woman fluent in English and Spanish. I wore multiple hats, including those of graduate student, advocate, organizer, interpreter, and part-time teacher of English. Coming from a middle-class, educated, U.S. citizen background also influenced the process of research. When I failed to secure funding to support my fieldwork, I didn't have to turn to the chicken plants to make a living. I considered seeking a job there only as a research strategy, to build relationships and heighten my own understanding of and empathy for the struggles of poultry workers. When I decided the risks of crippling injury were too great and the returns on my "investment" too low, I had the luxury of revising my research design and dropping the idea altogether.

Permitted to obtain a driver's license, I didn't worry that in a traffic stop I might lose an entire month's earnings to fines or be detained or deported. I might be pulled over because of my out-of-state license plate, but not likely because of my fair skin and hair. With a social security number, I had a bank account and thus didn't have to worry that my savings could be stolen from underneath my mattress. Despite my concerns that I would have a hard time finding affordable rental housing in Forest, I was ultimately able to find a two-bedroom house on an acre of land for far less than most poultry workers pay to share a dilapidated trailer. These privileges of race, class, and citizenship were palpable as I went about my daily life in Mississippi, fighting alongside others as they fought to access such basic human rights as dignity on the job, a living wage, minimal health and safety protections, affordable housing, and the ability to help their families thrive. In the book's postscript I consider this experiment in

activist research in greater detail, outlining the genealogies of politically engaged scholarship, analyzing the promises and pitfalls of this approach, and further considering how my positionality molded my experiences, conclusions, and contributions.

## ORGANIZATION

This book addresses the transformation of rural Mississippi, its relationship to capital and labor, and its human implications for established southern communities as well as new immigrant groups. It explores the ways in which people of different backgrounds understand and experience immigration, shaped to a large degree by the historical and contemporary political economies of race in this region. It examines the changes in the poultry industry over time that led to its strategic recruitment and exploitation of immigrant laborers. It illustrates the ways in which difference is constructed and maintained among people of diverse backgrounds in both communities and workplaces, and it discusses the implications this has for possibilities of workers' political mobilization in the twenty-first century. Finally, it points to new strategies of organizing across difference emerging from the efforts of people and organizations working to build more just workplaces and communities in Mississippi's poultry region today.

I begin in chapter 2 by locating the development of central Mississippi's poultry industry within the area's deep tradition of racial apartheid. From the region's "founding" amid Choctaw removal and the institution of slavery through repeated claims of the birth of a "New" South to a budding industry in the 1950s, the chapter illustrates early poultry processors' reliance on these relations of inequality—as well as on the melding of state and industry power—from its very inception. Playing on the industry's buzzword of "integration," I expose the very dependence of such early integration on rigid structures of racial segregation.

Chapter 3 examines the relationship between central Mississippi's Black communities, the state, and the poultry industry during the Mississippi Freedom Struggle. Presenting previously untold histories of Black struggles for civil and labor rights between 1950 and 1980, I trace

the path of local African Americans into the chicken plants and their attempts at unionization as the industry gained power and the seeds of neoliberal globalization began to take root.

Then, as the industry's growth accelerated, local plants began recruiting immigrant workers from Miami. Reconstructing the story of B.C. Rogers Poultry, chapter 4 reveals the logics and elaborate mechanics through which an extraordinarily diverse cross section of Latinos came to call central Mississippi home. It suggests that they entered the plants not in response to a simple "labor shortage," as management suggested, but amid a climate of neoliberal restructuring that responded to growing efforts to organize the area's poultry workers. It also shows how calculated recruitment led to chain migration with increasing reliance on immigrants' social networks.

Chapter 5 examines the reality that when people of any background in central Mississippi talk about immigration, they tend to talk in terms of race and work. Beginning with the area's first encounters with immigrants, then focusing on concerns over housing and residential segregation, and finally considering the various discourses in circulation among white, Black, and Latino Mississippians that attempt to explain the area's demographic transformation, I analyze the roles of whiteness and Blackness in shaping and constraining immigrants' social positions, carving out a contested third space between white and Black.<sup>48</sup> Communities' relationships to these categories, as well as to the poultry industry, play a key role in molding their beliefs about the immigrant work ethic and its impact on African American workers.

In chapter 6 the reader enters the chicken plants to witness the labor regimes management strategically wields to govern workers and ensure maximum profits. Revealing a remarkably hostile, hazardous, and hurtful work environment, I interrogate the industry's exploitation of identity categories of race, gender, and other forms of difference to suppress worker organizing. While some strategies reflect old "plantation mentality" approaches to labor control, neoliberalism heightens their effects and provides new opportunities for worker division and exploitation.

Chapter 7 introduces the recent efforts of unions to confront the new realities of chicken plant labor and improve wages and working conditions. A discussion of language barriers, immigrant diversity, divergent

ideologies surrounding organizing and resistance, and anti-Black racism lays bare the major obstacles to bringing Black and Latino workers—as well as immigrant workers of different backgrounds—together across difference. An assessment of recent union organizing strategies that highlights their prospects and limitations in light of social movement theories and considers the potential of increased collaboration with the Mississippi Poultry Workers' Center suggests that unions' efforts to partner with community organizations offer a possible, if conflicted, path forward.

Chapters 8 and 9 focus on the issue of migrant worker illegality as a particularly acute challenge for organizing poultry workers in the early twenty-first century. I present two different cases analyzing the role of the state in constructing heightened vulnerability among undocumented workers while increasing protections for corporations. Chapter 8 chronicles a Tyson Foods campaign to rid its Carthage plant of its largely unionized Guatemalan immigrant workforce through the reverification of workers' "papers." Chapter 9 narrates the struggle of undocumented workers who sought to unionize a Koch Foods chicken plant in Forest, revealing the impossibilities of organizing in the context of third-party labor contract work. Together, these cases demonstrate how the present immigration and employment policies of the United States, contrary to their stated purpose, effectively incentivize employers to hire and abuse undocumented workers, further complicating worker organizing efforts today.

Chapter 10 returns to the question undergirding my activist research engagement in central Mississippi: what does all this mean for poultry workers' possibilities for organizing in the rural South for better pay, working conditions, and basic human dignity? It considers the Mississippi Poultry Workers' Center's efforts to create spaces for poultry workers to come together across difference and begin to build a shared political consciousness about the ways their lives are affected by neoliberal globalization, structural racism, and the criminalization of migration. While not fully realized, these attempts suggest an approach to organizing that values differences in identity and experience as well as a political and ethical bottom line.

Finally, in the postscript, I consider in greater depth the collaborative nature of the research that gave life to *Scratching Out a Living*. The discussion offers a concrete case through which to consider issues of power,

accountability, and reciprocity in anthropological work concerned with social justice. It rejects the notion that one can be an unperceived observer and recognizes that all research is political and all encounters have consequences. By making my positioning—both personal and methodological—explicit, I seek to illuminate the ethical and practical challenges I faced as an activist anthropologist “in the field,” rejecting the artificial divide between theory and practice and contributing to a growing conversation on the promises and pitfalls of engaged scholarship.

This book’s narrative moves intentionally from a heavier reliance on archival and oral historical sources (chapters 2, 3, and 4), to the words and lived experiences of Mississippians of diverse backgrounds (chapters 5, 6, and 7), to my own activist ethnographic activities and experiences (chapters 8, 9, and 10), and, finally, to the more self-reflexive postscript on the potentialities of engaged scholarship. I chose this structure to privilege the voices and lives of Mississippians new and old, using the book primarily to share their stories of change, while also creating space for the reader to position me, the author, vis-à-vis the narrative.

Readers primarily interested in the story I have to tell about southern transformations and the poultry industry should proceed in the order the chapters are presented. Those who find a deeper discussion of the research process necessary for interpreting my analysis may want to read the postscript first. Whichever the proclivity, it is my hope that the postscript will provide readers an opportunity for sustained consideration of the methodological and epistemological potential of activist research.