

Stanford sociologist goes undercover to study Latino immigration in the South

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Monica McDermott, an assistant professor of sociology, is writing a book based on her research in Greenville, S.C.

(PhysOrg.com) -- Monica McDermott spent a year working in a South Carolina discount store to see how an influx of Hispanic immigrants is changing the area's social dynamics.

Monica McDermott was away from Greenville, S.C., for several years before she returned to her hometown for a visit in 1997.

A lot had changed.

The sign for a bowling alley long known as Greenville Bowl was plastered over with a marquee advertising the Las Americas sports center. A real estate office in a tiny strip mall was now sandwiched between La Poblana Mexican Store and a check-cashing place called Gusto Cash. Suddenly, it seemed, Spanish was everywhere - on storefronts, on billboards and tumbling out of people's mouths.

Confederate flags still flew around town - a reminder of the South's history of rough relations between blacks and whites. Now signs of a budding Latino culture spurred by newcomers from

Mexico and throughout Central America signaled a new era of cultural tension.

"There was an obvious shift from the long-term black-white social order," said McDermott, an assistant professor of sociology at Stanford. "I was curious to see how the new immigration would affect the area."

At the time, McDermott - who is white - was a [graduate student](#) at Harvard. And she formulated a research project that would span the next decade while never losing its relevance.

As a new immigration law in Arizona is sparking marches and protests across the country and highlighting strains between whites and [Latinos](#), McDermott is writing a book that explores those tensions based on years of observations she made in South Carolina.

'Undercover' in Greenville

Four years into her teaching career at Stanford, McDermott took a 12-month sabbatical in 2005 to go "undercover" in Greenville. Her goal was to see firsthand how whites and Latinos were getting along. She rented a house in a neighborhood that was home to working-class Hispanic immigrants and native Southerners, and took a \$10-an-hour job stocking shelves at a discount retail store.

It's a style of research she had used before. McDermott wrote *Working-Class White: The Making and Unmaking of Race Relations*, a 2006 book based on the year she spent observing interracial interactions while working as a convenience store clerk near predominantly black neighborhoods in Atlanta and Boston.

With a clipboard always handy for easy note-taking while on the job in South Carolina, McDermott kept track of conversations she overheard and interactions she witnessed.

"What people said to me when there were only whites around was different than what they'd say to me in a mixed crowd," she said. "There was a sense of civility when whites interacted with Latinos."

For the most part, whites were still getting used to seeing newcomers move to the area.

In 1990, less than 1 percent of Greenville County's population was Hispanic. A decade later, the number grew to 3.8 percent. By 2005, nearly 6 percent of the county was Hispanic. A study done by the University of South Carolina showed that the state's foreign-born population grew faster than that of any other state between 2000 and 2005.

The sudden influx of Latinos often led to confusion over the group's race. They didn't quite look white. They didn't quite look black. In a community that had long been exposed to only two skin tones, the question was often asked: Who are these people?

Clearly, they were outsiders. And the way the locals treated them was with a heavy dose of paternalism - an attitude coming from many whites that showed they assumed Latinos couldn't do certain things. McDermott watched how whites butted in and tried to take over when a Latino was about to start just about any routine, everyday task, like using a vending machine or mailing a package.

"There was this sense that they needed to help this poor, helpless person," McDermott said. "They'd treat them like children."

Most of the prejudice she witnessed wasn't overtly hostile at first.

Then came the marches.

Impact of marches

Millions of people across the country had been organizing and participating in rallies to protest legislation being considered in Congress in early 2006 that would have raised penalties for illegal immigration.

In a mile-long march along Greenville's Main Street

on April 10, 2006, Latinos waving mostly Mexican and American flags made it clear that they were vying for respect and recognition in South Carolina.

Their demands for attention brought a backlash.

As critics of the marches latched on to a popular sentiment that illegal immigrants were taking jobs that should go to American citizens, McDermott saw a spike in anti-Latino sentiment in the Greenville area.

If paternalism defined the negative attitudes whites had for Hispanics before the Greenville march, outright bigotry surfaced afterward.

"The power of the unintended consequences of the marches was to shape public opinion and attitudes," McDermott said.

When one white man learned McDermott had come to South Carolina from California, he told her to "take the Mexicans back with you."

One of her co-workers at the retail store moved from her apartment in Greenville to a rented shack off a dirt road in a rural, mostly white area outside the city to be as far away as possible from Latinos.

Ironically, the woman had recently moved back to South Carolina after living for a time in Los Angeles.

"She said she hated it there because there were so many Mexicans," McDermott said. "She would say, 'I can't stand them.'"

Since returning to Stanford in 2006, McDermott has made several more research visits to South Carolina to see how Latinos and whites are getting along.

She predicts whites will become more accepting of the children and grandchildren of Latino immigrants, but immigrants themselves will remain at the bottom of the social pecking order.

"That's based on the aspects of immigration that causes the most animosity," she said. "There's a suspicion of a lack of legal documentation, a sense

that they're undercutting wages and other frustrations like a lack of English skills."

And that's the attitude that seems to be governing much of today's debate over immigration.

While lawmakers - including Republican Sens. John McCain of Arizona and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina - have framed immigration reform and the need to ease certain restrictions as a pro-business move that would help the labor force, there's been a shift to what McDermott calls "a more nativistic stance."

McDermott predicts Arizona's new immigration law allowing police to demand proof of citizenship will be struck down in the courts, but she doesn't expect federal lawmakers to pave the path for meaningful reform anytime soon.

"A fundamental sea change is under way," she said. "There's a definite moving away from that pro-business standpoint. Ever since the marches and rallies, there's been a very deep concern with the United States harboring a group of people that is thought of as criminalized."

Provided by Stanford University

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