



The Borderlands of Race: Mexican Segregation in a South Texas Town

Jennifer R. Nájera

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Throughout much of the twentieth century, Mexican Americans experienced segregation in many areas of public life, but the structure of Mexican segregation differed from the strict racial divides of the Jim Crow South. Factors such as higher socioeconomic status, lighter skin color, and Anglo cultural fluency allowed some Mexican Americans to gain limited access to the Anglo power structure. Paradoxically, however, this partial assimilation made full desegregation more difficult for the rest of the Mexican American community, which continued to experience informal segregation long after federal and state laws officially ended the practice.

In this historical ethnography, Jennifer R. Nájera offers a layered rendering and analysis of Mexican segregation in a South Texas community in the first half of the twentieth century. Using oral histories and local archives, she brings to life Mexican origin peoples' experiences with segregation. Through their stories and supporting documentary evidence, Nájera shows how the ambiguous racial status of Mexican origin people allowed some of them to be exceptions to the rule of Anglo racial dominance. She demonstrates that while such exceptionality might suggest the permeability of the color line, in fact the selective and limited incorporation of Mexicans into Anglo society actually reinforced segregation by creating an illusion that the community had been integrated and no further changes were needed. Nájera also reveals how the actions of everyday people ultimately challenged racial/racist ideologies and created meaningful spaces for Mexicans in spheres historically dominated by Anglos.

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