Across Races and Nations:
Building New Communities in the U.S. South

Conflict and Collaboration: Our Internal Challenges
by Barbara Ellen Smith, Susan Williams and Wendy Johnson
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The central theme of this project—the prospects for conflict and collaboration between recent Latino immigrants and more long-term Southerners—unfolds not only in Atlanta, Memphis and other “external” locations, but also inside our own organizations. The social adjustments and political choices that others face, we face too. Disagreements over priorities when resources are chronically scarce—should the next staff hire be a bilingual Latino immigrant or an African American youth?—create tensions in our organizations just as in other workplaces. Carrying this project through to its conclusion required repeated debates over race and racism in the United States vs. Latin America, the racial/ethnic status of Latinos, the relationship between immigrant rights and racial justice, the relative significance of class as a source of both unity and disunity, and many other issues. These disputes involved not only our contrasting political perspectives, but also our different social experiences as recent immigrants and U.S.-born Latinos, black and white Southerners, people of different class backgrounds, and so on.

This chapter seeks to summarize the central issues and dilemmas that we confronted. Most are ongoing, so we provide few answers. However, our experiences, including our problems and mistakes, hopefully offer some lessons and cautions for those wrestling with similar internal debates and strategic adjustments in organizations across the U.S. South.

Political Dilemmas: Immigrant Rights and Racial Justice

Beginning with the initial conceptualization of the “Across Races and Nations” project, we faced strained and challenging conversations over the project’s focus and goals. These occurred with potential funders, some immigrant rights advocates, certain of our own constituents, and among the project staff. Those involved with the project who were long-term activists and staff in southern social justice organizations, most of which are rooted at least in part in the region’s civil rights struggle, were concerned about the implications of the large influx of new immigrants for our understandings of and strategies for racial justice. We knew that such dramatic change in the racial/ethnic demography of the South and the national origin of its residents created a new landscape for the pursuit of racial justice in particular and social justice more generally, but we were unsure of the implications for our organizations’ strategies and priorities. However, to the Latino immigrant staff who were hired for this project, and to certain potential funders, especially those with expertise in immigration and immigrant rights, our concerns and knowledge base were one-sided. We worried about the implications of immigration for racism, racial division and the longstanding struggle for racial justice in the U.S. South, but we were ignorant of the needs and rights of new immigrants who, we were told, rarely defined themselves in terms of race or articulated their own interests as “racial” justice.

Indeed, the very meaning of race and the salience of racism as a strategic focus for multi-racial/ethnic coalitions became topics of internal debate. Latino staff disagreed
among themselves about the nature and extent of racism in Latin America. Although
discrimination against indigenous peoples clearly exists in Latin America, the extent to
which this represents primarily racism, class exploitation, or ethnocentrism was a matter
of dispute. The extent of skin color discrimination, i.e., U.S.-style racism, in various parts
of Latin America was also a source of contention. Although this may sound academic, at
stake in such discussions was the extent to which recent Latino immigrants of various
ethnic and national origins might already be familiar with racism and race discrimination,
define themselves in racial/ethnic terms, and be appealed to accordingly.

Language differences probably contributed to the disagreements. To some
foreign-born Latino staff, the English term “race” denoted an assertion of biological
difference that is by definition racist. Frequent staff discussions of race, from this
viewpoint, only constructed and reinforced divisions that did not and should not exist.
For U.S.-born staff of whatever race and ethnicity, the term “race” connoted systematic
inequality tied primarily to skin color, but did not refer to any meaningful biological
distinction. Calls to downplay discussion of race had worrisome parallels to neo-
conservative arguments for “color-blindness,” i.e., the evasion of racism in the name of
false egalitarianism. The existence of multiple races within the U.S. Latino population,
which ranges from white to black, and the politics of asserting a common Latino racial
identity as “brown”—all of which was relatively unfamiliar and confusing to those of us
steeped in the bipolar divide of the South—contributed to the complexity.

We were also unprepared for the sensitive minefield of national immigration
politics and immigrant rights advocacy. As we set out to analyze the common fears and
allegations of working-class Southerners—above all, that immigrants “take our jobs”—
we were immediately repudiated by immigrant rights advocates who viewed such
sentiments as both inaccurate and anti-immigrant. The manipulation of working-class
economic fears by anti-immigrant politicians and organizations, which profess concern
about the economic impacts of immigration, especially for African American workers
(but may otherwise oppose pro-worker initiatives such as increases in the federal
minimum wage), has created such strident arguments about this issue that we could not
raise it as a legitimate topic for research without becoming suspect in our motives. This
forcefully came home when we explained our project to a national immigrant rights
advocate (and potential funder), who asked us point blank at the end of a lengthy
meeting, “Are you pro-immigrant?” That there would be any question about our support
for immigrants and their rights was quite perplexing, but we soon came to understand
better the political origins of this skepticism.

At the same time as immigrant rights funders and advocates questioned our
intentions, certain longstanding supporters expressed opposition to our plans to re-orient
some organizational resources to Latino immigrants. All of our organizations agreed that
the agenda of civil rights was not simply unfinished, but that the prospects for racial
justice were actually worsening in the new millennium. For some constituents, the
political implication was a mandate to address above all else the needs of African
American Southerners. Our apparent intention to dilute limited resources and divert
political attention from the urgency of this need was, in the eyes of some, indefensible. In
the worst case, it meant betrayal of longstanding organizational commitments to the agenda of civil rights.

Our response to this seemingly no-win situation was in part pragmatic: immigrant rights advocates had to acknowledge and address the powerful fears of U.S. workers, civil rights activists and other constituencies in order to reach them with messages regarding, for example, amnesty proposals; similarly, civil rights activists had to broaden their definition of and constituency for “racial justice” in order to revitalize the movement and gain new allies. As our research proceeded, we became aware of deeper interrelationships between immigrant rights and civil rights, or racial justice. As other chapters in this resource book document, the perceived economic threat of new immigrants is triggering a white supremacist response that potentially makes allies of African American and Latino workers in the South. Our debates over Latin American vs. U.S. conceptions of race faded somewhat as we witnessed and documented Latino immigrants being defined as a racial group and subjected to various forms of racial discrimination by U.S. citizens and institutions. Moreover, since September 11, 2001, the incarceration of immigrants and violations of their civil liberties have come to parallel more visibly the treatment of many African Americans in the criminal justice system and resonate with the legal focus of certain civil rights advocates. Joint efforts to curb racial profiling have emerged as one local manifestation of this perceived commonality. The mutually reinforcing relationship between nationalism and racism has also become more evident—as in the practice of fingerprinting all non-citizen entrants to the U.S. except those from Europe.

Despite such commonalities, however, the prospects for collaboration did not steadily improve over the course of the project, and our internal differences did not automatically recede. The events of September 11, 2001 and its aftermath shifted the national debate over immigration in ominous directions. For those of us involved with this project, 9/11 starkly illuminated the geo-political aspects of immigration (as distinct from the domestic context of racism, racial identity and multi-racial/ethnic coalition-building). However, incorporating such factors as national origin and citizenship status into our understanding of oppression and social justice resistance was not easy. For some African American staff, the idea that their U.S. citizenship represented a form of privilege in relation to undocumented but light-skinned Latino immigrants was not persuasive; skin color discrimination, in their own experiences, not only preempted most other forms of oppression but also compromised the supposed protections and privileges of U.S. citizenship. Citizenship seemed less a privilege than part of the background context for race discrimination, which they experienced precisely because they were black citizens of the U.S. For Latino staff, especially those who were immigrants, both citizenship and immigration status (including one’s legal permission to hold a job) were in and of themselves far more fundamental factors in discrimination and opportunity. The announcement by the U.S. Bureau of the Census that Hispanics had surpassed African Americans as the largest minority in the nation only magnified the potential for tension. Some black and white staff feared that this news would be used as one more justification to disregard African American needs, and that Latino population growth would undermine hard-won gains in black political power.
These and other crosscurrents affected many discussions during the life of the project, but never became debilitating. Rather, each of us learned a great deal from our different perspectives. We were able to sustain dialogue in the face of disagreement in part because of common organizational and personal commitments to the broad goal of social justice and to the eventual construction of multi-racial/ethnic coalitions as one of many strategies to reach it. Like the successful examples that we document in the section on “Case Studies of Collaboration,” the leaders of ARN’s three partner organizations were strongly committed to the project, and the overall project director had close organizational and personal ties to each of the other directors. However, unlike many of those other successful collaborations, the three partners did not each represent a single racial/ethnic group, but rather combined black, white and Latino (and Asian) staff in a single organization. Our internal multi-racial/ethnic dynamics were probably easier to manage than those confronted by actual coalitions, as staff self-selected based on commitment to the project’s goals and shared a common organizational context that required cooperative relations to succeed. However, conveying what we learned through the ARN project to all staff in our respective organizations and expanding our organizational capacities accordingly remain formidable challenges.

Organizational Dilemmas

Building organizational capacity to serve a new constituency of Spanish-speaking immigrants requires far more resources than we anticipated. Knowledge and information about immigration and immigrant rights, expanded staffing, bilingual skills, and internal organizational education are all necessary—along with the requisite funding. We launched this project with far more commitment than knowledge, and with only partial funding of the overall budget.

The ideal staffing for this project was a three-person team, including the constituencies with whom we were working (black and white Southerners and Latino immigrants), in each participating organization. Although as a partnership we maintained that diversity, it was impossible to finance within each organization over the entire life of the project; we simply did not have the resources, given other organizational commitments and the size of the project budget. Because our existing staff was overwhelmingly black and white, each of the three partners made it a priority to hire at least one Latino to work on the ARN project. However, sustaining that position financially throughout the life of the project, much less beyond it, was not necessarily feasible. Today, only one organization has been able to maintain a significant Latino presence on staff, though all three of us continue to pursue commitments related to the project (e.g., research on Latino immigrants in the South, active participation in statewide coalitions supportive of immigrant rights).

Staff turnover was an additional challenge. In part because we sought to address immigration issues, with which few southern social justice activists have significant experience, identifying new staff who could provide effective leadership for the project was difficult. Although we were able to hire new staff who were Latino immigrants, some of the very issues that we studied—difficulties with work permits, the need to
return home to attend to family members, problems re-entering the U.S.—in certain cases affected their longevity with the project.

Extending what we were learning through the project to other staff and garnering their consistent support for this organizational initiative were also difficult. Although there were certainly differences in perspective among project staff (see above), in the long run the more challenging internal disagreements were between project staff and those not directly involved with the project. Many of these tensions reflected the fundamental difficulty of shifting the focus of a well-established organization toward new constituencies and issues, especially during a time of great economic instability (personal, organizational, national) and political uncertainty. For example, office staff who were working-class wage earners (whether black or white) in some cases felt that U.S.-born workers’ deteriorating economic prospects were being neglected as organizational leaders and “professional” staff increasingly focused on Latino immigrants and immigration-related issues. Similarly, some board members questioned the political wisdom of addressing such issues when traditional constituents, particularly working-class African Americans, were in crisis.

Perhaps the greatest practical obstacle that we failed to anticipate involved language differences. Although some English-speaking staff sought to learn Spanish, the burden of bridging the language gap fell overwhelmingly on Latino staff, whose bilingual capacity varied. Translating written products into both languages and providing interpretation during certain project activities were additional expenses that we did not adequately anticipate, and they involved complicated considerations for which we were unprepared. For example, whose version of Spanish to utilize in our written products became a source of disputes among translators (and some Latino staff). Decisions about what to translate or when to arrange for interpretation services were not necessarily straightforward. For example, some written materials were clearly intended for U.S. audiences (e.g., an explanation of basic terms regarding immigration), but might also be useful to Latino immigrants. Ultimately, we decided to translate all of our major written materials into both languages, in part because we were committed to minimizing language as a barrier to collaboration and mutual understanding.

We also learned that language differences could become symbols of deeper social differences and a potential source of tension. For example, one statewide meeting of African American and Latino activists who were seeking common ground for collaboration opened with a request from an African American participant that English only be spoken over the course of the weekend. Her strong feeling that speaking a language other than English was exclusionary and disrespectful mirrored the sentiments we encountered in some interviews for the research component of the ARN project.

This situation was resolved by agreeing to speak English during the meetings (fortunately, all Spanish-speaking participants also spoke English), while simultaneously acknowledging people’s right to speak their native language in other social contexts over the weekend. Although this allowed the gathering to go forward, requiring people to forsake their own language is neither feasible nor ideal as a solution to language
differences. We gradually learned that language is a form of power that those who speak the dominant language in any particular situation may too easily ignore. Discussing language (e.g., as a vital element in racial/ethnic identity) on the front end of meetings and taking care to anticipate the need for interpretation (including languages other than Spanish, which indigenous people from Latin America do not necessarily speak) can be important to the success of multi-racial/ethnic collaborations.

This litany of difficulties by no means represents the sum of our experiences with the ARN project, which on balance was enormously important for each organization’s efforts to generate new strategic understandings of and responses to immigration and, more generally, globalization in the U.S. South. Both Highlander and SRC are pursuing programs and coalitions that incorporate the needs of new immigrants into their broader missions. CROW continues to conduct research on Latino immigrants in southern labor markets. All three organizations now offer at least a portion of their web sites and/or newsletters in Spanish. (See the Introduction for more information on these and other outcomes.) However, we offer this summary of key problems that we encountered because we suspect they are not unique to this project, and because we hope that they may help others who are undertaking related efforts to address immigration and the changing prospects for social justice in the South.