This book is about first-wave immigrants to a new area. It is about those who left danger for opportunity despite uncertainty. It is about individual people who worked, lived, died, played, and organized in and around the Chicago neighborhood called South Chicago. It is about the individual people coming together by creating clubs, societies, and teams to advocate, socialize, play, and endure despite harassment and discrimination. This story of early Mexican immigration to South Chicago is as relevant today as it was nearly a century ago.

On March 10, 2006, ninety years after the first significant Mexican immigration to the Windy City, somewhere between 100,000 and 300,000 Latino immigrants and their supporters took to the streets to protest the Sensenbrenner Bill. The U.S. House of Representatives had passed the bill three months earlier. The Sensenbrenner Bill made it a felony for undocumented immigrants to live in the United States or for anyone to “aid, abet,” or “counsel” an undocumented immigrant. Immigrant advocates credit this Chicago protest march as the event that galvanized a nationwide protest movement, taking place a full two weeks before 500,000 Latinos and their supporters rallied in Los Angeles. Chicago’s largely Mexican immigrant population, with the support of Mexican Americans and other immigrant allies, reacted against a bill that targeted non-white immigrants. The first organizing meeting was held February 15, at headquarters of Casa Michoacán.

Today, Casa Michoacán is one of the most prominent Chicago-based Mexican hometown associations. Working much like mutual aid societies, these hometown associations were originally informal groups created by immigrants to “function as social networks as well as transmitters of culture and values to the U.S.-born generation.” Many associations that matured around the turn of the twenty-first-century have focused on larger, more politicized goals. Casa Michoacán and affiliated Chicago-based Michoacáno hometown associations have arguably led the way in advocating for social development projects back home in their communities of origin as well as in actively defending Mexican immigrant rights in the Chicago area.

Like the Mexican immigrants who sought support from the Mexican consul against harassment and discrimination during the interwar years, Chicago Mexican activists during the 2006 protests requested support from Mexico
Fig. I.1. Pro-immigration rally participants march through the canyons of the Chicago Loop, March 10, 2006. Photograph by Joseph Voves.
City. Emma Lozano and Artemio Arreola, Mexican community leaders and organizers for the March 10 protest, were part of a Chicago delegation that visited Mexico City shortly after the protest to seek support from the Mexican government. At the Mexican presidential residence, Chicago community leader and immigrants’ rights activist Juan Salgado argued that Chicago was “recognized as the place where all of these marches were born.” Lozano, Salgado, Arreola, and other protesters raised issues that have persisted throughout much of United States history, especially those pertaining to: racialization of particular immigrant ethnic groups and the targeting of these groups as distinct and somehow dangerous to the “American” way of life.

How did Chicago, an area with virtually no Mexican presence before 1916, become a national hub of Mexican and Mexican-American activism where, by 2010, 557,000 people of Mexican descent lived in the city and comprised almost 22 percent of its population? Why did Mexican Americans feel a close bond to Mexican immigrants in a large city of immigrants and traditional Anglo-American power? To understand how the Chicago area became a hub for Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants, we should examine closely the origins of the community and the factors that led to a vibrant and continually growing Mexican Chicago. To do this, I have singled out the early years of a Mexican community in one industrial neighborhood within the city and its relationship with other communities. South Chicagoan Jesse Escalante’s gathering of oral histories in the early 1980s and his subsequent donation of his collection to the Chicago History Museum made it possible for me to take a close look at early Mexican South Chicago through the eyes of several community members.

Gilbert Martinez was one of these Mexican South Chicagoans. In 1980, Martinez sat down with Jesse Escalante to record a conversation about life there in the early years of the twentieth century. Martinez arrived in South Chicago in 1919 at the age of nine and would become a steelworker. Escalante was born in the neighborhood in 1924 and would become a civil servant and community leader. Very early on in the interview, Martinez turned to one of his favorite topics and what had been one of his favorite pastimes just before and during the Great Depression. “So what we used to do is put on the uniform, with spikes and everything and go over there and get the number 5 streetcar on Sundays” reminisced Martinez. “We used to take out bats and balls—a couple of new balls—and go to Washington Park.” In the audio recording, one can hear the pride and joy in Martinez’s voice as he reminisced about being part of the Mexican community of South Chicago as a teenager and young man in the 1920s and early 1930s. Before long, Martinez and his teammates were “tangling up, playing ball with the Irish.” Getting on
a streetcar and traveling the 6 1/2 miles to the large park in the neighborhood of the same name is significant on several levels. First, most contact between Mexican youth and youth of other ethnic groups within their own neighborhood of South Chicago was usually negative and led to confrontation. The neighborhood’s Polish and Irish residents made it difficult for Mexicans to use South Chicago parks. In order to gain regular access to baseball fields and avoid trouble, Martínez and his teammates felt that they had to leave their regular stomping grounds and go where anti-Mexican tensions were less pronounced. Second, Martínez and his teammates set out to represent themselves and their neighborhood in a positive way by putting on clean uniforms and using the best equipment they had. Third, baseball became an avenue for the new and exciting as players looked for opportunities to play in other parts of town or in nearby Northwest Indiana.

Similarly to new immigrant populations in the United States today, Mexicans in South Chicago dealt with economic hardship, ethnic prejudice, nativism, and intra-ethnic divisions. These factors reinforced their sense of difference and their propensity to see themselves as sojourners desiring to return to Mexico as soon as possible. However, this sojourner attitude was not an absolute obstacle to the creation and support of a Mexican culture in South Chicago. Mexicans who migrated to South Chicago—in a pattern that began with workers being hired by labor agents along the Texas-Mexican border in 1919—entered a neighborhood that was already blighted by decades of environmental racism and were confined to clearly demarcated community and workplace niches. They came through the encouragement of friends, after being recruited in Mexico or along the border, or after many years of working in other parts of the United States Midwest and West.

Until recently, the assumption of most scholarship on Mexicans in the Chicago area was that weak, fractured communities existed within the three major concentrations of Mexicans in the city and that little area-wide cooperation existed because Mexicans tended to stay, work, and play, within their respective neighborhoods. South Chicago Mexicans, however, did create links and cross-community organizations in order to improve their environment and defend against the social, political, and economic harassment and discrimination that plagued their everyday lives. These ties to Mexicans in the Near West Side and Back-of-the-Yards neighborhoods of Chicago, as well as in Gary and East Chicago, Indiana, helped South Chicago Mexicans survive the Great Depression as a distinct community. They might have used survival skills they learned from wartime shortages and uncertainty in places like Guanajuato, Michoacán, and Jalisco, or they might have learned the survival skills they perfected after years of mistreatment and neglect as
immigrant workers in the United States. For many, a combination of these experiences hardened them and helped them survive. They also survived and persisted with help from community leaders, social workers, immigrant advocates, and others in South Chicago. And they found further strength through a common cultural bond to and identification with Mexico.

Individuals such as steelworker Justino Cordero, activist and social worker Mercedes Ríos, grocery store owner and Yaquis sports club founder Eduardo Peralta, and steelworker and union organizer Alfredo De Avila emerged from Mexican South Chicago as leaders. They, along with others, formed a community that was able to change its physical and cultural environment to help its members and create a degree of resistance that enabled Mexicans to persevere against the intimidation and prejudice that rose exponentially as the national and local economy faltered.

The idea that such leaders emerged might not seem exceptional or new, but scholars have not paid much attention to this development. Contemporary scholars who studied Mexicans in Chicago before World War II assumed that such leadership did not exist—or need to exist—because of a strong Mexican consular presence, Catholic and Protestant organizations, and settlement houses. The settlement house work with Mexicans included teaching them how to negotiate local and federal government mazes and protecting them from obvious forms of discrimination and harassment by property owners, employers, and city leaders.

Although settlement house workers did play important roles in the Near West Side and Back-of-the-Yards Mexican communities, the lack of a large, secular settlement house in South Chicago placed a larger burden on South Chicago community members to lead from within. This need for Mexican leadership became most significant in times of economic crisis, when white and ethnic European Chicagoans blamed Mexicanos for lower wages and lack of jobs.

The acute crisis of the Great Depression and the subsequent movement of Mexicanos out of the neighborhood caused profound changes in the Mexican community of South Chicago. First, there was significant, mostly voluntary, outmigration to Mexico of members of the community. Second and simultaneously, those who stayed organized themselves through political, religious, social, recreational, and pro-patria groups and claimed their rights as residents of the United States. These factors helped in the creation of a post-depression Mexican community in South Chicago which was much smaller than before, but was better able to fend for itself and to organize against economic, social, and political discrimination and harassment. Focusing on these trends, this study ends in 1940, when the economic rebound caused by
World War II in Europe brought a renewed demand for new immigrant labor from Mexico and the beginning of a new era for Mexican South Chicago. By 1940, leaders in a much smaller and highly organized community sought to distance themselves from the new immigrant generation, which looked much like the one that entered the Chicago area in 1916 and South Chicago in 1919.

This study goes beyond the workplace. As with most migration, work was the primary reason the vast majority of Mexicans came to South Chicago. The large industrial buildings where these migrants worked—the steel mills dotting the landscape—helped define the neighborhood. Although I take into consideration the workplace and the unions that fought to organize the workers, I am primarily concerned with the lives of working-class Mexicans in an urban, industrial, ethnic neighborhood. They organized independently of their workplaces in mutualistas, social clubs, and church organizations. They resisted harassment by government officials, bosses, coworkers, union organizers, property owners, and others who racialized their existence in Chicago. This study is, then, also an examination of how Mexicans persisted in the steel barrio despite the steel mills. Steel mills provided jobs for Mexican men, but were not at the center of community life or the source of collective identity. Discrimination by company management and labor unions prevented Mexicans from identifying closely with the workplace or the union hall. Surviving thus meant creating community outside the mill gates, but in a neighborhood whose existence depended on steel mills.

There is a vast literature on Chicago as an urban center in the Midwest, on various ethnic communities in Chicago, and on the labor histories of meatpacking and steel. However, this study of an emerging Mexican community in the Midwest is most directly in conversation with scholarship focused on urban Mexicans in the United States. Within this field, the study of the history of Mexicans in the industrial Midwest is a relatively new development and that of Mexicans in the Chicago area an even more recent one.

Paul S. Taylor and Manuel Gamio completed sociological and anthropological studies of Mexicans in the United States that included significant research on the Chicago area in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Arguably the two most important archival collections for the study of the Mexican population of interwar Chicago, their collections are housed at the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley. Not only did both scholars conduct extensive interviews of Mexicans in the Chicago area and throughout the country during this period, they also recorded their own observations relevant to the community and interviewed employers and officials who were in contact with Mexicans in the community. Both of these collections are invaluable to the study of Mexican Chicago and provide the vast majority of
first-person accounts and interviews of and about Mexicans in Chicago during the interwar years. Gamio’s books resulting from his study included *The Mexican Immigrant: His Life Story* and *Mexican Immigration to the United States: A Study of Human Immigration and Adjustment.* Taylor’s volume on Mexicans in the Chicago area, *Mexican Labor in the United States: Chicago and the Calumet Region,* is part of a multi-volume series on Mexicans in the United States. Also notable are the vast majority of extant Spanish-language Chicago newspapers collected and saved by Manuel Gamio.

In the same period, students at the University of Chicago School of Social Work produced several relevant studies. Other Chicago-area scholars produced useful journal articles, WPA reports, and church sponsored publications. While many were merely paternalistic overviews of Mexicans in the area, a few stand apart. Most significant of these is Robert C. Jones and Louis R. Wilson’s report titled, *The Mexican in Chicago, The Racial and Nationality Groups of Chicago: Their Religious Faiths and Conditions.* Later in the book, I will discuss this report in detail.

The next significant scholarly work on Mexicans in the industrial Midwest did not come out until the 1970s, when it appeared in conjunction with and as part of the nationalist Chicano movement. Most of it concentrated either on the entire urban Midwest, on Detroit, or on Northwest Indiana. The only substantial scholarly work to focus exclusively on Mexicans in Chicago was Louise Año Nuevo-Kerr’s 1976 “The Chicano Experience in Chicago, 1920–1970,” a groundbreaking study of urban Mexican communities outside of Texas and California which focuses primarily on the “establishment and evolving differentiation of the Chicano settlements in Chicago” during four distinct periods between 1916 and 1970. In her study, Año Nuevo-Kerr argues that because Mexican communities existed in separate neighborhoods of Chicago, these disparate communities did not evolve in the same manner. Thus, Mexicans in these communities experienced “a differential development of conscious ethnicity and community identity.”

After Año Nuevo-Kerr, Gabriela Arredondo produced pioneering work in the early 2000s. In *Mexican Chicago: Race, Ethnicity and Nation, 1916–1939,* she focuses on the racialization of Mexicans city wide and the establishment of a fragile *Mexicanidad* throughout the city. *Steel Barrio* builds on Arredondo’s work on racialization and *Mexicanidad* to explore how and why Mexicans in South Chicago were able to use their physical and cultural environment to develop organizations that started as sports and social clubs, and then became anchors in the community’s determination to survive and persist. I also build on Arredondo’s discussion of cross-community links throughout the area.
In addition, Lilia Fernández’s 2012 monograph, *Brown in the Windy City: Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Postwar Chicago*, is an extremely significant contribution to the study of the racialization of post–World War II Mexicans in the City of Chicago. Fernández comparatively examines the racialized Mexican and Puerto Rican struggle for “place” in a city that racialized them in an inconsistent and fluid manner throughout the second-half of the twentieth century. Further important scholarship includes John Henry Flores’s “On the Wings of the Revolution: Transnational Politics and the Making of Mexican American Identities,” which examines the development of political culture in Mexican Chicago, its links to political developments in Mexico, and how both shaped identity for Mexicans in Chicago. Mike Amezcua’s “The Second City Anew: Mexicans, Urban Culture, and Migration in the Transformation of Chicago, 1940–1965,” discusses the significance of cultural sites and sites of economic development as crafters of shifting ethnic politics and identity post-World War II Mexican Chicago.16

The first works published in the wake of the Chicano movement argued against the once dominant “ghetto model” of interpreting Mexican urban communities, which emphasized the negative aspects of the urban Mexican community life and characterized their neighborhoods as sources of an array of criminal activities. These works contributed to the development of the field by looking at urban areas as more than mere incubators for delinquency. Scholars argued that the ghetto model removed any agency from the Mexicans in their communities and perpetuated the idea of Mexicans’ victimization. The vast majority of these community studies focused on Southern California, with Texas a distant runner-up.

Historians argue that the interwar period, primarily the period surrounding the Great Depression, served as the critical period in the formation of a new ethnic Mexican-American identity in the United States. The economic hardships, repatriation campaigns, and intense harassment of Mexicans shaped a new cultural identity that worked in opposition to—or as resistance against—pressures to Americanize or repatriate. Mexicans in the United States viewed the retention of *Mexicanidad*, or a cultural Mexicanness, within an adapted ethnic Mexican cultural identity throughout and after the Great Depression as a crucial component to survival and resistance against pressures from the dominant society.17

The studies on outside effects on Mexicans in the United States tend to converge around the repatriation movements of the 1930s and 1950s and the post–World War II political, social, and educational forces that worked against the population. The organized repatriation movement during the Great Depression destabilized Mexican communities throughout the United
States and in Mexico. Mexicans in areas such as Los Angeles, Detroit, or Gary, Indiana, regardless of citizenship or immigration status, lived in fear of forced deportation of themselves or family members. Mexicans in Chicago did not experience a significant, organized forced repatriation drive, but they did live in fear of harassment and deportation.

A significant group of studies analyzes class tensions within Mexican communities. Among these are monographs that examine contributions to culture and community made by middle-class Mexican Americans, who did not experience the extent of the discriminatory practices that weighed heavily on new immigrants and working-class Mexicans. Because of the newness of Mexicans communities in Chicago, and because the vast majority of Mexican immigrants came to Chicago to work in low- or unskilled labor, no discernible “Mexican-American” middle class existed in the area during the 1920s and 1930s. Such was also the case in other Midwestern cities such as Detroit, Kansas City, and St. Paul. Although a very small Mexican intelligentsia did exist in Chicago, they maintained an elite Mexican identity, which provided them with a status that kept them from having to negotiate with the dominant society to avoid harassment or discrimination.

Zaragosa Vargas, in *Proletarians of the North: A History of Mexican Industrial Workers in Detroit and the Midwest, 1917–1933*, draws a complex portrait of post–World War I Mexican communities, job mobility, and the influx of workers who were lured away from seasonal railroad and agricultural jobs for high-paying ($5 a day) jobs at the Ford plant. As in other cities, Mexican immigrants in Chicago and Detroit were active agents within their community who built mutual aid societies, clubs, and fraternal organizations in order to function and adapt to the needs of the community while maintaining a cultural link to Mexico. Unlike the other scholars, Vargas uses a more worker-centered approach to argue that Mexican male workers adapted to an American industrial proletariat work ethic despite racial discrimination. Because of this, Vargas argues, members of the community were ambivalent with regard to the racial hierarchy that placed Anglo Americans and European immigrants above Mexicans while placing African-American workers below them in both the workplace and society. By contrast, I argue that Mexicans in Chicago were not ambivalent about their racialization and that much of their resistance was centered on this race-based harassment and discrimination.

More recent books on Mexicans in the Midwest more closely analyze culture and gender within the community. In *Barrios Norteños: St. Paul and Midwestern Mexican Communities in the Twentieth Century*, Dionicio Nodín Valdés acknowledges the important role gendered internal and external
power relationships had on the everyday lives of *Mexicanos* in Mexico and the Midwest. He examines how the dominant society affected power relationships, interpersonal relationships, and socially constructed roles within the Mexican community. Outside of work produced by a handful of authors who focus directly on urban and rural Mexican women, very few studies focusing on gender in Mexican communities exist. One study that does describe the ability of a community to survive while focusing on gender is Sara Deutsch's investigation of Mexican society in northern New Mexico and Colorado. Although the Mexican community there predates Anglo-American settlement in the area, *No Separate Refuge* is useful for the study of the Mexican community of Chicago because it provides an example of how a community that has been commonly characterized as “isolated, static, inflexible, paternalistic, and passive” was able to adjust. While Vicki Ruiz and Julia Blackwelder have focused on women's experiences in a multi-ethnic/multi-racial workplace, Donna Gabaccia's *From the Other Side* is a study of women and gender in immigrant communities that starts by looking at the experiences of immigrants before they leave for the United States and then examines the changes that occur inside and outside of the household once they are in the United States. She addresses migration, labor, family, class, and community activism while comparing the histories of migrants with those of Anglo and African Americans to understand how they construct their identities.

*C. Ruiz's* *Out of the Shadows* examines the conflicts between Mexican parents and their daughters in the Southwest caused by the girls’ “Americanization,” particularly in social activities.

*Steel Barrio* explores several themes within the community and community members' interactions with the environment. Community itself is one of these themes. Having a clear understanding of the concepts of community and a sense of belonging to a community is important to effectively examine how Mexicans in South Chicago came together to change their environment. When people share a culture, resources, and the use of physical spaces in a single geographical location, they form community not only through interacting with one another but also by considering themselves part of the group. In other words, people create a community when they have a sense of being in an environment where they share common experiences, norms, and cultural understanding; they must also believe that they share a common bond and concern for one another. That being said, communities are dynamic, and not all members will share all elements of the community. David Gutiérrez defined the zone of safety Mexicans in California tried to make for themselves to ameliorate their experiences of dislocation and discrimination as a “third space” within ethnic enclaves, whether urban barrios
or rural _colonias_. “Located in the interstices between the dominant national and cultural systems of both the United States and Mexico,” this “third” social space was where Mexicans “attempted to mediate the profound sense of displacement” and other pressures of being “members of a racialized and marginalized minority.”

_Steel Barrio_ focuses on Mexicans in South Chicago and examines the details of the third space that they created for themselves and with other Mexicans in the area. This third space in South Chicago included sites for celebrations, sports venues, mutual aid societies, and other alternative arenas where Mexicans could work against the effects of discrimination. I include celebrations in this space of resistance because when members of the community celebrated Mexican cultural holidays, they visibly represented and enacted their Mexican culture, looking to hold off the pressure to blend seamlessly into mainstream society. The assimilationist idea that Mexicans should seamlessly blend into the dominant society was unrealistic since Mexicans were racialized as less-than-white and therefore unable to become part of the dominant “white” society.

In examining how external pressures on Mexicans in South Chicago to assimilate, along with constant harassment and discrimination, played prominent roles in how Mexicans shaped their environment, their community, and a distinct culture, my work builds on studies of Los Angeles by early scholars who came out of the core of the Chicano movement. Among these, Ricardo Romo’s examination of the effects that a rapid economic boom and extensive Mexican migration had on the city’s Mexican community, as well as his study of how Americanization programs put significant social and cultural pressure on the Mexican enclaves, are useful as models for delineating the change over time in South Chicago’s Mexican community. Douglas Monroy’s attention to the ways in which the isolation of the Los Angeles Mexican population helped develop a culturally and socially independent community, a _Mexico de afuera_ (Mexico on the outside), demonstrates that prejudice and discrimination from the dominant society do not always have to lead to cultural assimilation.

I also focus on the expected and actual processes of assimilation for Mexicans in South Chicago. Whiteness required assimilation. Assimilation was crucial in order for immigrants to become productive members of society—that was, at least, the predominant attitude of local and federal governments, immigrant advocacy groups, and anti-immigrant forces. Nativists viewed assimilation as a way to absorb a threatening population. The more liberal view within the dominant culture regarded assimilation as democratic and egalitarian since Americanized Mexican immigrants had greater
employment and social opportunities. For nativists, the only alternative to assimilation was deportation; for immigrant advocates, the lack of assimilation would lead to a segregated society where those who did not assimilate would remain at the bottom of the social ladder. For the last thirty-five years, Chicano scholars have debated the reasons for the maintenance of distinct Mexican cultures in the shadow of Americanization programs. Richard Griswold del Castillo endorses a nationalist position that emphasizes that the maintenance of Mexican culture was not a conscious act of resistance but a result of the barrioization of the community. In other words, Mexican culture thrived because of the creation of Mexican barrios and not because of external pressures. George Sánchez argues that early Chicano historians focused on the constraints on assimilation instead of concentrating on the “symbolic and transformative significance of culture.”

As a study of an emerging urban Mexican community in the United States, this book explores the techniques and strategies Mexicans used selectively to resist assimilationists’ efforts to eliminate Mexican cultural practices and celebration, food, and the use of Spanish. Arnoldo de León describes the Mexican American middle-class community of Houston as a group that, beginning in the 1930s, “lived in a world where they could voluntarily select from ‘lo americano’ and ‘lo mexicano,’” easily transitioning from one identity to the other whenever they perceived it to be in their best interest. In Becoming Mexican American, George J. Sánchez explores the role continuous immigration to the Los Angeles area played in the type of assimilation Mexicans experienced in culture and politics and the extent to which these immigrants became “assimilated” Mexican Americans. Starting with the political economy in Mexico that pushed the immigrant out, and following through to the “emergent ethnicity” of the Mexican immigrant in the United States, Sánchez combines a new borderlands framework with a cultural and social study of Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans. By doing this, Sánchez defines an evolving space inhabited by a heterogeneous community of Mexicans, dispelling the dichotomous notion of independent “Mexican” or “American” cultures. Sánchez argues that Mexicans frequently redefined themselves through resistance and acculturation in relation to changing conditions and daily experiences in and around their communities.

Steel Barrio is divided into three parts. The first examines the reasons for and routes related to Mexican migration to South Chicago starting in 1916. Work, enganchistas (labor agents), revolution, riots, and legislation all contributed to the significant influx of Mexicans that started with the railroads in 1916 and expanded to the steel mills by 1919. Once the initial wave of immigrants established themselves in South Chicago, new migrants used
chain and circular migration patterns to grow the community physically and culturally.

In the second part I argue that Mexicans who came to South Chicago confined themselves to clearly demarcated everyday-life and workplace niches that aided the creation of a community where members changed their environment to help those in the community survive, persevere, and sometimes thrive. They entered a preexisting, ethnic, working-class neighborhood where Mexicans were the newest in a seemingly endless stream of ethnic immigrants and African-American migrants from the American South. I examine the physical and cultural sites where a distinctive shared identity is formed—the neighborhood and the community. Two factors that set the Mexican immigrants of South Chicago apart from previous immigrant groups are: 1) the proximity of Mexico to the United States, which allowed for a circular migration that culturally refreshed the community through the contact many immigrants kept with those in their sending communities; and 2) the view held by most Mexicans in South Chicago that they were sojourners who would eventually return to Mexico financially secure and able to provide a comfortable life for themselves and their family. Most in the Mexican community did not see this sojourner attitude as making them a drain on the United States. After all, they were contributing to the industrial economy at a time when steel mills were in desperate need of workers.

The last part focuses on everyday Mexican life in South Chicago during the Great Depression. I argue that distinct events during the crisis in the Chicago area were critical in the evolution of a strong Mexican community. High unemployment, repatriation, and the development of organized sports contributed to a more physically and culturally entrenched community that endured. Although involuntary repatriation programs were not as prevalent in Chicago as compared to other cities, depression-era unemployment affected South Chicago Mexicans at least to the same degree that it affected Mexicans in other parts of the United States. I also examine how South Chicago Mexicans used recreation, primarily organized sports, not only to persist and persevere, but as a vehicle to create organizations that promoted positive cultural and physical environments that in turn improved everyday life for members of the community.

This book is about much more than baseball or one single type of organization. It is about how community members used the discrimination against them, a sojourner attitude, organized sports, mutual aid organizations, and other groups to bring together a diverse community of Mexicans and Mexican Americans—some educated, most not—to find ways to change their physical and cultural environment in order to survive. I examine how
the fortunes of Mexicans in South Chicago were linked to the built environment, their access to green space, and to their ability to change their physical and cultural surroundings. While examining how and why Mexicans acted on the industrial landscape by creating physical and cultural communities, I link their use of the urban environment to their ability to create, survive, and at times thrive. The South Chicago empty lots, baseball fields, and parks that Gilbert Martínez and his teammates preferred to use instead of having to travel out of the neighborhood must be juxtaposed with the industrial furnaces and chimneys that dominated the landscape between the homes and the shores of Lake Michigan. These chimneys spewed pollutants that invaded Mexicans’ homes, their lungs, their eyes, and their very cells. Changing attitudes by government and business leaders toward the land and definitions of acceptable levels of pollution were sometimes couched in racialized terms. On the other hand, those resistant to stricter standards of cleanliness of the air, water, and land sometimes blamed governmental inactivity on the people living in the space and their unenlightened “traditions.” Thus, this micro-study of a particular community in South Chicago is linked to broad issues in twentieth-century United States history, including urban growth and death, segregation within cities, and the relationship of urban immigrants to their natural and built environment. Through its focus on individual lives and the environment, this study of Mexican experiences—important in their own right—provides a lens to identify what happens to an urban neighborhood when industry, government, and social agencies battle for influence and control of a racialized immigrant workforce and their environment.

Scholars agree that labels are fraught with problems. We will not all agree on the proper term for a specific group of people or on the specific borders of a neighborhood or a section within a neighborhood. We can, however, stave off some confusion by defining our terms. In Steel Barrio the ones identifying those of Mexican descent are among the most important. Thus, “Mexican” and “Mexicano” identify Mexican immigrants and Americans of Mexican descent who preferred to identify as Mexican. These were the most common terms used by the community’s mostly working-class population, and here, they function interchangeably. When it becomes necessary to differentiate between those born in the United States and those born in Mexico, I use the term “Mexican American” to identify naturalized or U.S.-born Americans of Mexican descent. However, in this context “Mexican American” does not necessarily denote cultural assimilation into the dominant society. “Mexican immigrant” refers to those who immigrated to the United States from Mexico. The terms “Anglo” and “Anglo-American” describe non-Mexican, white residents of the United States. While Southern
and Eastern European immigrants could sometimes be included in the "white" category, especially when the context emphasized Mexicans against all non-Mexicans, Mexicans in Chicago routinely distinguished between non-Mexicans they considered ethnic Europeans and those who were “American.” In Chicago, using “Anglo” for the latter category was less common than it was in Texas or the Southwest, but it was a familiar term.

This book focuses on the neighborhood of South Chicago, an area officially incorporated into the City of Chicago and much further south than the area commonly referred to as Chicago’s South Side. Mexicans in South Chicago were not isolated in their neighborhood and traveled to other parts of the city and to steel-mill towns in Northwest Indiana. I use the term “Chicago” when referring to the city as a whole or multiple city neighborhoods, and I use the term “Chicago-area” to include communities in Chicago and in Northwest Indiana. The cluster of neighborhoods that include South Chicago, East Side, South Deering, and Hegewisch is commonly referred to as the Southeast Side of Chicago and at times as the Far Southeast Side of Chicago. Mexican residents during the period of this study considered themselves part of the South Chicago Mexican community if they lived in any of these Southeast Side neighborhoods. For example, South Deering was home to Wisconsin Steel and a vibrant part of what many Mexicanos considered the South Chicago Mexican community. In addition, neighborhoods were further subdivided into areas such as the Bush and Millgate in South Chicago and Irondale in South Deering.