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Working Women, Entrepreneurs, and the Mexican Revolution

Heather Fowler-Salamini

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*Working Women,
Entrepreneurs,
and the Mexican
Revolution*

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*Working Women,
Entrepreneurs,
and the Mexican
Revolution*

The Coffee Culture of Córdoba, Veracruz

HEATHER FOWLER-SALAMINI

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Abbreviations

ANFER	Asociación Nacional Femenil Revolucionaria (Women's National Revolutionary Association)
BENEMEX	Beneficios Mexicanos del Café (Mexican State Coffee Agency)
BNCA	Banco Nacional de Crédito Agrícola (National Bank of Agricultural Credit)
BSAM	<i>Boletín de la Sociedad Agrícola Mexicana</i> (<i>Bulletin of the Mexican Agricultural Society</i>)
CEIMSA	Compañía Exportadora e Importadora Mexicana (Mexican Export and Import Company)
CGOCM	Confederación General de Obreros y Campesinos de México (Mexican General Confederation of Workers and Peasants)
CGT	Confederación General de Trabajadores (General Confederation of Workers)
CNT	Confederación Nacional de Trabajadores (National Confederation of Workers)
COM	Casa del Obrero Mundial (House of the World Worker)
CROC	Confederación Regional de Obreros y Campesinos (Regional Confederation of Workers and Peasants)
CROM	Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana (Mexican Regional Worker Confederation)

CSOCO	Confederación Sindicalista de Obreros y Campesinos de la Región de Orizaba (Confederation of Workers and Peasants of the Orizaba Region)
CSOCEV	Confederación Sindicalista de Obreros y Campesinos del Estado de Veracruz (Confederation of Workers and Peasants of the State of Veracruz)
CSORM	Confederación de los Sindicatos Obreros de la República Mexicana (Confederation of Labor Unions of the Mexican Republic)
CSUM	Confederación Sindical Unitaria de México (Mexican Unitary Union Confederation)
EXCAXA	Exportadores de Café de Xalapa (Xalapa Coffee Exporters)
FNTIC	Federación Nacional de Trabajadores de la Industria del Café (National Federation of Coffee-Industry Workers)
FROC	Federación Revolucionaria de Obreras y Campesinos (Revolutionary Federation of Workers and Peasants)
FSOCC	Federación de Sindicatos de Obreros y Campesinos de la Región de Córdoba (Federation of Worker and Peasant Unions of the Córdoba Region)
FSOCO	Federación Sindicalista de Obreros y Campesinos de la Región de Orizaba (Federation of Worker and Peasant Unions of the Orizaba Region)
CTM	Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos (Mexican Worker Confederation)
Peasant League	Liga de Comunidades Agrarias y Sindicatos Campesinos del Estado de Veracruz (League of Agrarian Communities and Peasant Unions of the State of Veracruz)
PCM	Partido Comunista Mexicano (Mexican Communist Party)
PNR	Partido Nacional Revolucionario (National Revolutionary Party)
PRD	Partido Revolucionario Democrático (Revolutionary Democratic Party)
PRI	Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutionalized Revolutionary Party)

- PT Partido del Trabajo (Labor Party)
- SDC Sindicato de Desmanchadoras de Café, Córdoba (Córdoba Coffee Sorters Union)
- SIOECC Sindicato Industrial de Obreras Escogedoras del Café del Distrito de Córdoba (Industrial Union of Coffee Sorters of Córdoba)
- SITCTAC Sindicato Industrial de Trabajadores de Café, Tabaco, Maderas, Destiladores de Aguardiente y Comercio del Distrito de Córdoba (Industrial Union of Coffee, Tobacco, Wood, Sugarcane Distillery, and Commercial Workers of Córdoba)
- SODCC Sindicato de Obreras Desmanchadoras del Café de Coatepec: “Union Libertadora” (Coffee-Sorter Union of Coatepec, “Liberating Union”)
- SOECC Sindicato de Obreras Escogedoras del Café de Córdoba (Union of Coffee Sorters of Córdoba)

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Introduction

In March 1965 the coffee exporters of Córdoba, Veracruz, laid off all the women workers who cleaned their green coffee, and replaced them with electronic sorting machines in their preparation plants (*beneficios*). This decision marked the conclusion of a seventy-year period of enormous expansion and gradual mechanization of the state's coffee agroindustry. As the *Diario de Xalapa* had noted at the onset of mechanization, it “would have repercussions throughout the country owing to the fact that Veracruz has more coffee workers and grows more coffee than any other state.”¹ For the coffee entrepreneurs, plant modernization and the success of the labor settlement would ensure future economic profits. For the women workers, it represented the elimination of a relatively secure form of employment and the failure of the labor movement to save their jobs. It also marked the end of an era in which global, national, and regional forces had come together in such a way as to create employment for thousands of working women, foster their unionization, and foment the development of a working women's culture.

My purpose here is to write a history from below. This regional history of Córdoba's coffee economy shows first how it was shaped by national and international forces and how, in turn, it influenced the development of Mexico's coffee agroindustry. The study is about how

place matters, because it helps us understand the interrelationships between the region's entrepreneurs, workers, labor movements, gender relations, and culture on the one hand and Mexico's social revolution, immigration, modernization, and the Atlantic coffee market on the other hand. It contends that macrolevel processes helped to shape Córdoba's regional economy, which influenced the development of Mexico's coffee agroindustry and its labor movement.

Regional Coffee-Export Economies in an Atlantic Context

At least three theoretical approaches have influenced the study of the Latin American coffee economies over the past century. Each of them grapples with the constantly shifting interrelationship between macrolevel and microlevel social, economic, and political factors. First, nineteenth-century laissez-faire and certain forms of twentieth-century modernization theory that are based on classic economic theory support the idea that world trade was the engine of regional economic growth. Dependency theory offers an alternative approach, contending that this export model actually made Latin America more and more dependent on foreign capitalism for its markets and its financing and that most profits ended up in the pockets of foreign financiers and import companies rather than smaller native producers and the workers. They also argue that regional coffee elites were complicit in assisting foreign entrepreneurs in the penetration of the weaker underdeveloped coffee economies.² A third approach to the study of coffee focuses on commodity chains that "serve as a bidirectional link between producers and consumers worldwide." A modified form of the world systems theory, it argues that the production, financing, transport, preparation, financing, and marketing of coffee has been vertically and sometimes horizontally organized by global capitalism over the course of the last 150 years. It leaves open, however, a large range of possibilities on how the boom and bust cycles impact regional economies and cultures.³

Without denying the overall impact of the global market on Latin American coffee economies, I prefer to concentrate on the commer-

cialization of coffee and migration of people within the Atlantic world during the three major coffee booms that occurred between the 1880s and the 1950s. As one Colombian scholar noted, coffee needs to be seen within the context of growing demands for tropical products in industrializing nations of the North Atlantic basin.⁴ As Atlantic scholars are now making clear, Atlantic history is not only about “literal points of contact . . . but rather about explaining transformations, experiences, and events in one place in terms of conditions deriving from that place’s location in a large multifaceted, interconnected world.”⁵ Rachel Moore has shown this to be true for Xalapa, Veracruz, which became integrated into the Atlantic community in the eighteenth century. Although it lay forty miles from the coast, it emerged as the linchpin for internal Atlantic trade for the Spanish empire.⁶ I will argue that the region of Córdoba began evolving at the end of the nineteenth century from an inward-looking, sugar- and tobacco-producing, postcolonial economy into Mexico’s major center of coffee production, preparation, and commerce.

The Latin American coffee economies have largely been studied from the perspective of production and their relationship to land tenure, emerging rural elites, oppressive rural labor systems, and the growers’ relationships with merchants, the state, import houses, and the world market.⁷ Very few studies have focused specifically on the merchants and exporters who served as intermediaries between regional coffee growers and their domestic and foreign markets and as the preparers of export-grade coffee.⁸ Most scholars are in agreement, however, that the coffee merchants, preparers, and exporters served as the key financial brokers stimulating the development of Latin American coffee-export economies in the final decades of the nineteenth century,⁹ but what is less well understood is their relationship with coffee growers, the nature of their business and industrial operations, their ties with other regional coffee elites, and the composition of their labor force. William Roseberry argued that these coffee intermediaries occupied “nodal positions within a variety of hierarchical networks,” among exporters, foreign import-export companies,

and local merchants that varied from region to region.¹⁰ This study aims to explore the nature of these hierarchical networks, in particular between Atlantic import-export companies and local commercial entrepreneurs.

The study of coffee has received far less attention in Mexico than in other parts of Latin America for a number of reasons. In Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, Central America, and the Caribbean, coffee production was the dominant economic sector. In spite of the fact that coffee remained Mexico's second most important agricultural export for many decades, the country's national economy was based on not one but a number of lucrative exports. As a consequence, the state did not play such a decisive role in its development as in other Latin American countries. What is more, a cohesive coffee elite with strong ties to the national political system did not begin to develop until the late-1940s in part because of the dispersed nature of the regional coffee economies and the lack of a centralized transportation and commercialization structure. For all these reasons, Mexican scholars displayed far greater interest in the multinational companies that invested heavily in more-lucrative export commodities, such as petroleum, minerals, henequen, sugarcane, and cotton.

I have chosen to employ the term "agroindustry" for the production, preparation, commercialization, and exportation of coffee beans, as Mexican scholars do. It is very difficult to disaggregate the producing, commercial, and agroindustrial stages; for they are dynamic, constantly changing constructs across time and place. Furthermore, the nature of this agroindustry varies so much from region to region and country to country in terms of the relationship between these different stages. Some argue that because the coffee beans are not transformed into another product during the preparation process, it should not be called an industry, and there is some merit in this argument. However, the *beneficio* relies on heavy machinery to prepare (*beneficiar*) the product, and it employs a disciplined workforce that follows a fixed work schedule just like any other consumer or export industry.¹¹

To place the evolution of Córdoba's export coffee economy in a broader comparative perspective, I have situated it within regional, state, national, and Atlantic historical contexts. Veracruz's coffee economy was primarily concentrated around five highland towns in Central Veracruz: Coatepec, Córdoba, Huatusco, Orizaba, and Xalapa. Each of their regional coffee economies had unique characteristics and developed at a slightly different pace, although Córdoba's was the most technologically advanced and outpaced the other regions of the state. At the national level, Veracruz dominated the coffee agroindustry through the 1940s. To understand why it was able to maintain this position for so long, I compare its coffee economy with that of Chiapas and Oaxaca. Finally, in the Americas, Mexico's coffee exports were tiny in comparison to those of Brazil, and they always lagged behind those of Colombia and several Central American countries. Yet Mexico's proximity and easy access to the constantly growing U.S. market gave it a distinct cost advantage over other coffee-exporting nations.

The emergence of Córdoba's coffee-export economy was closely tied to the role of transatlantic immigration and the creation of a vibrant Spanish commercial community in the first decades of the twentieth century. I approach immigrant entrepreneurship within the context of broad transatlantic migration patterns rather than Hispanic exceptionalism. Most studies on the Spanish immigrants in Mexico have attributed their economic success to unique Spanish qualities associated with the Hispanic privilege, ethnic superiority, chain migration, patriarchy, entrepreneurship, and family networking.¹² All these factors are important, but this view seems incomplete. José C. Moya's broader analytical framework emphasizes the "complex interplay between the premigration heritage and the host environment, between continuity and change" as they gradually integrated themselves into Buenos Aires society.¹³ This is to say, Spanish immigrants benefitted from a constantly shifting transatlantic bicultural and binational culture. Their experiences held much in common with those of members of other European and Middle Eastern immigrant communities in Latin America at this time.¹⁴

Studies on the predominantly female labor force employed in the coffee *beneficios* are even scarcer than those on their employers.¹⁵ Nevertheless, nineteenth-century coffee promoters, including Carlos Sartorius, Matías Romero, John Southworth, and Gabriel Gómez, all recognized the essential importance of women coffee sorters (*escogedoras* or *desmanchadoras*) to carry out the sorting, or cleaning, of the beans for export. Their conception of women's work was based on the common perception that rural domestic duties could simply be transferred into the dry preparation plants (*beneficios secos*). Thus, the meaning of women's work for these coffee promoters was always linked to manual, low-paying, and less prestigious work. However, for the subjects themselves, it meant a steady seasonal wage and the opportunity to penetrate previously masculinized public workplaces.

Social Revolution, the Coffee Agroindustry, and Organized Labor

The Mexican Revolution of 1910 brought new challenges to Mexico's coffee economy. Fortunately, the most important regional coffee economies in Veracruz, Oaxaca, and Chiapas were not the major theaters of wide-scale military operations. It will be shown that coffee production was more disrupted than its transportation, trade, preparation, and export. In fact, the collapse of political and economic control during the revolutionary chaos actually created a vacuum for commercial entrepreneurs to engage in windfall profit taking, as Jean Meyer has suggested occurred in many other export industries in Mexico.¹⁶

The relations between coffee elites and the modern Mexican state were not nearly so congenial as in other Latin American countries, for coffee never played such a predominant economic role.¹⁷ For many years, official Mexican historiography articulated an antiforeign and anticapitalist stance, which fostered the impression that the post-revolutionary Mexican state was more antibusiness than, in fact, it really was. This perception is now being revised.¹⁸ The federal government followed fiscal policies that assisted growers and exporters in weathering downturns in the market, but it did not directly intervene to prop up the coffee exporters until the Second World War. Not

until the late 1940s did coffee producers, preparers, and exporters finally take the initiative to organize a nationwide organization that served as a pressure group to lobby for state support. The state rather belatedly embraced their plans for full mechanization in the 1950s as part of its industrialization and modernization policies. Relations between the coffee workers and the postrevolutionary state were much more complex and contradictory.

Labor scholars have tended to view the Mexican state's support of organized labor as being based on the twin objectives of benevolence and control. It intervened and mediated prerevolutionary conflicts on numerous occasions beginning in the mid-nineteenth century with these goals in mind.¹⁹ Populists have tended to downplay the role of the state during the Revolution of 1910–17 in order to emphasize the spontaneity of worker mobilization. As a consequence, they have vilified the oppressive labor policies of both the prerevolutionary and postrevolutionary regimes.²⁰ On the other hand, revisionists have viewed the revolutionary state's role as manipulative, arguing that it co-opted the labor movement into a patron-client relationship to build a new authoritarian regime.²¹ More recently postrevisionists have sought to strike a balance between these two perspectives and to emphasize the importance of worker agency, where strikes and negotiations from below led to a broad range of sociocultural and economic concessions by the state and industry.²² My sources lead me to similar conclusions. Central Veracruz seasonal coffee workers, both women and men, were, on the whole, unusually successful in negotiating from below to obtain the same worker rights as permanent workers from 1915 on in the new labor institutions created by the revolutionary state.

The recent gender turn has led authors to reevaluate their views concerning the relationship between women workers and the revolutionary state. New studies have revealed that women activists organized women-dominated and mixed workshops with the wholehearted support of the anarchist movement and the revolutionary state during the early phases of revolution. In their struggle for survival,

women's economic demands were slightly different from those of men workers. What is more, political alliances forged between radical revolutionary military commanders, politicians, and labor organizers at the local level were as beneficial for working women as for working men.²³ In the states of Jalisco, Michoacán, Yucatán, Tamaulipas, and Veracruz, progressive governors responded to rising protests by all workers regardless of their gender for ideological and, more importantly, for political reasons to calm social unrest and to bolster their own power bases in the 1910s and 1920s.²⁴

The state of Veracruz was in the forefront of labor activism, legislation, and prolabor state governments during the revolution. The first municipal industrial-labor boards created in 1915, I contend, concerned themselves with economic rather than gender issues in their handling of grievances. Therefore, these boards became a major mechanism through which women coffee workers could air their demands and have their demands met. Owing to their large numbers and their relatively high level of mobilization, coffee sorters held a relatively strong bargaining position. Moreover, their ability to launch strikes and demonstrations forced state interventions from 1915 through the early 1930s to uphold coffee workers' rights. In short, Veracruz authorities realized that a peaceful workforce and a robust coffee-export sector were critical for the recovery of the state's economy.

The state's positive attitude toward organized women workers began to wane at end of the 1920s with the onset of economic depression, the institutionalization of the labor organization within the official party, and threats from the political right. It began to support social and political stability, endorsement of the family wage, and the denial of suffrage to women.²⁵ Moreover, the postrevolutionary state started to construct a nationalistic culture, incorporating what Mary Kay Vaughan has termed the "modernization of patriarchy" into its agrarian, labor, and educational projects. Thus, the objectives of the Mexican Revolution became in many respects a male project or patriarchal event.²⁶ Women workers were also increasingly marginalized by the men-dominated national trade union movements allied

with the official party that were determined to impose their control over their memberships.²⁷ However, the women-dominated coffee-sorter workshops retained some degree of union autonomy and a female leadership, while the formation of a women-dominated boss rule (*cacicazgo*) was not necessarily linked to masculinity.

Once the state launched its industrialization programs associated with the Economic Miracle of the 1940s and 1950s, organized labor found itself increasingly marginalized and even under attack.²⁸ When coffee exporters decided to fully mechanize their plants and lay off their manual women workers, the state supported their plans. Just as in the textile industry, tortilla shops, and tobacco workshops, women workers played a key role in the transition toward full mechanization, but they were also its first major victims.²⁹ Before the mechanization process was completed, however, Veracruz sorters had the opportunity to construct a workshop community and culture.

Engendering Working-Class Culture

Like other forms of popular culture, urban working-class culture has been referred to as “the symbols and meanings embedded in the day-to-day practices of subordinated groups.”³⁰ It encompasses the relationship between class and gender, constraint and agency, and contingency and conflict. It is also assumed that there is a continual tension between the subaltern and hegemonic culture.³¹ My approach to working-class culture seeks to balance the social historian’s focus on class or group formation with a cultural historian’s concern with experience and discourse. To uncover the experiences and voices of the workers who labored in the coffee preparation plants, I examine their everyday experiences in the local workplace, at home, and in the community. These work experiences become interwoven at the national and transnational level with the agroindustry, revolutionary politics, and the Atlantic coffee economy. Key to new gendered labor history is the assumption that the history of the everyday, which is implicitly linked to the notion of experience, must include discursive and ideological formations.³²

European social history has heavily influenced my approach to working people's everyday lives. Geof Eley argues that its practitioners have sought to probe everyday life "by investigating the material circumstances or daily existence at work, at home, at play," while at the same "entering the inner world of popular experience of the workplace, the family and household, the neighborhood, [and] the school."³³ Rather than focusing on the history of oppressed groups, everyday history shows how those who have remained nameless are agents of change by appropriating, while simultaneously transforming, their world.³⁴ Labor historians can construct a bridge from social to cultural history by conceptualizing worker culture as a social process emerging out of the individual and collective workplace and household experiences, resulting in the formation of a group consciousness to contest elite culture.³⁵ This interconnection can only be achieved, says Kathleen Canning, if experience is conceptualized as "more than the mere 'living through of events'; the term also encompasses the way in which 'people construed events as they were living through them.'"³⁶ However, she makes clear that "to historicize the category of experience itself," it must be situated in "distinct historical eras and processes of transformations."³⁷

To understand how workers construed their experience, one must turn to discourse, for it probes the meanings of work, gender, and workplace culture in the minds of the workers themselves. It is from this perspective that I approach the workplace in chapter 2 to show how coffee sorters shared a working experience that profoundly shaped their collective memories of their work, family, workplace, identity, and community.

Until recently, Latin American historians conceptualized workers' culture within a masculinized workplace that obscured or marginalized women workers; the family, workplace, and union culture were viewed through the lens of a masculine value system.³⁸ With the emergence of studies on gendered working people's culture, it is now being recognized that working women's culture can be quite distinct from that of working men's culture. Therefore, I believe it is important

to use the term “woman worker” (*obrero*) to juxtapose with the term “man worker” (*obrero*) to emphasize the gendered nature of workplaces and worker communities. As Susie Porter has pointed out, the term “obrero” is actually not a new one, for it was already being employed in the late nineteenth century to refer to a female wage laborer.³⁹ My decision to use this term is rooted in Joan Scott’s two interconnected propositions about gender; it is a “constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power.”⁴⁰

It was generally assumed that bourgeois gender norms and moral values more often than not trickled down or were imposed by industrialists, government officials, the press, and social reformers on the Latin American popular classes. The upper classes employed the cult of domesticity, moral respectability, and the idea of separate spheres to exercise sociocultural hegemony over working people. This constructed gender ideology sought to visualize the woman within a dichotomized paradigm of the “prostitute and the guardian angel.”⁴¹ This meant obreras had the impossible task of struggling to “square the circle,” or struggling to adapt to the masculinized workplace.⁴²

A new generation of scholars now is advancing the idea that working women exercised much more agency as individuals and created collectively their own working women’s culture. In certain respects, working women’s union culture was a variation of men’s union culture. Low-income women and men more often than not entered into the workplace for the same basic reasons: survival of the family. They shared similar rural origins, migration patterns, and working experiences in paternalist workplaces where exploitation was commonplace. Working men had a gremial and mutualist popular tradition dating back to the colonial period, but female cigarette workers and seamstresses had followed their lead and created their own mutualist societies during the nineteenth century.⁴³ These experiences had a singular effect of empowering women individually and collectively outside the home; and in so doing, it challenged gender norms.

Susie Porter suggests that women workers developed their own

culture in Mexico City's mixed-gendered workplace by negotiating within a masculinized worker culture and a dichotomized virgin/prostitute discourse to legitimize themselves as honorable working women from Porfirian times. Working women learned to operate "within a discourse of female honor" while still adhering to existing norms of female virtue by the early decades of the twentieth century.⁴⁴ For the postrevolutionary period, Teresa Fernández-Aceves goes further by showing the ways in which women workers and teachers took on active leadership roles to confront and create alternative organizations to the male-dominated Guadalajara labor movement.⁴⁵

What I propose to explore here is how work experience and discourse in women-dominated workshops in postrevolutionary Mexico created gender-specific worker communities that developed relatively unhampered from continual male intrusion in Central Veracruz. Women became the real originators of their workplace culture, and their culture seeped out into the streets, union halls, and homes. It was quite distinct from obrero culture not only in terms of how women perceived their work and their work experience but also insofar as how it shaped gender and work identities, social networks, and their worker community.

Sorter culture was gender specific in other respects because these women shared experiences that were different from those of men workers. Their treatment as second-class persons socialized them to have low self-esteem. This everyday experience had economic consequences as they searched for employment. Yet in their all-women workshops, unions, and communities, their individual and collective experiences helped them build a collective sense of community and memory. They continually sought to resist the gender marker that placed them on the lowest rung of provincial society as women of the streets.

Strong women leaders in Córdoba, as well as in Coatepec, were also critical to the development of an alternative working women's community and culture. Leaders were able to build effective patron-client relationships within the rank and file. They also served as ef-

fective intermediaries between the rank and file and the national labor confederations. Continuity in leadership, which paralleled patterns in Mexican men's unions, was rooted in strong charismatic personalities, rotation of power within a collective leadership, and the eventual emergence of women's boss rule. While men's trade unionism was based on physical prowess, violence, and authoritarianism, these traits were more muted in women's trade unionism, as we shall see in chapter 4. Sorter leaders became political brokers between the labor movement and the public at large. By courting the neighboring Orizaba labor confederation and remaining loyal official party adherents, they strengthened their legitimacy. These leaders also participated in the body politic as labor officials, municipal councilwomen, and active suffragettes.

They also served as cultural brokers, organizing union dances and theatrical and band performances to create a more cohesive sorter community, while solidifying their own legitimacy. These cultural activities were part of what James C. Scott has called the "hidden transcript," played out offstage with the purpose of resisting official transcripts and regulations.⁴⁶ In so doing, they enabled obreras to participate in liberating forms of behavior outside the confines of the household. Sorters could express themselves as actresses, dancers, and musicians in public performances. This alternative culture displayed an amazing amount of variation and ambiguity, at same time supporting and subverting provincial gender norms.

Oral History and Everyday Experience

Oral history is one tool that social historians employ to uncover the hidden transcript, or the voices and experiences of subalterns.⁴⁷ It provides us with greater workplace specificity as well as greater understanding of the complexities of experience, whether we are speaking of the textile mills of Brazil or Colombia, the meatpacking plants of Argentina, or the beer breweries of Mexico.⁴⁸ It assists us in engendering private and public spaces and revealing how they are interconnected. Early oral histories of obreras were often framed within op-

pression theory that was premised on the idea that the workplace was simply an extension of the patriarchal household into the workplace.⁴⁹ This supposition tends to permeate oral histories exploring masculinity in the workplace, where masculine values and paternalism permeate the workshops, the union halls, strike lines, and the communities.⁵⁰

Feminist anthropologists and historians working in the field of gender studies in the 1980s began altering their oral history methodology to assist them in engendering experience and uncovering hidden transcripts. They embraced an “egalitarian research process characterized by authenticity, reciprocity, and intersubjectivity between the researcher and her ‘subjects’” to end the treatment of working women as objects.⁵¹ Employing this equalizing approach, they sought to find a sense of shared empathy for the women’s cause. In particular, Ruth Behar, Lynn Stephen, and Florencia Mallon placed individual peasant women center stage in their testimonials, while they themselves served as mediators of the life histories.⁵² This empathetic approach and the claim that “horizontal affinity” could actually be achieved has been criticized by Daniel James, among others. He suggests that “unmediated access to subjective historical discourse” cannot be represented “except in terms of the dominant male discourse.” The stories of working women, he argues, are really being told with tension and ambiguity “out on the borderlands,” where disruption of the central narrative is possible but not available for everyday use.⁵³ This study tries to show that this is not always the case. I do believe that oral history is still the best tool we have to bring to light women’s experience and discourse and to show their centrality in the agro-industrial workplace.

Researching in archives does not provide the necessary information on the everyday experiences of coffee workers or their Spanish employers. In the case of the commercial entrepreneurs, there was little if no official correspondence between them and state authorities because they networked within their immigrant communities. Although I did locate a handful of the immigrants’ descendants, many of them showed little inclination to speak with a foreign scholar who

wanted to question them about their family businesses. Therefore, I found interviewing elites more difficult than interviewing workers. I also located a small number of *beneficio* workers who were still alive, although all of them were women. Since all the important leaders had died or were quite aged, most of my information comes from interviews with rank and file workers, whose knowledge about union power was rather limited. Men workers were even more difficult to track down because they seemed to have moved back and forth across urban and rural landscapes as seasonal workers. Cecilia Sheridan Prieto's classic ethnographic case study of Coatepec's *escogedoras* inspired me to follow a life-history approach in my interviews of their Córdoba counterparts.⁵⁴

Rereading my field notes and interview transcripts, it gradually became clear to me that these life histories were not simply individual histories but parts of a collective history of coffee sorters, for they shared so many common everyday experiences. In short, I envisaged my role as a socially committed scholar, as Susan Crane has suggested, not as “remembering lived experience but rather as witnessing the experiences of others through their testimony, . . . and then speaking of this evidence.”⁵⁵

Needless to say, the interviewees had their own agendas several decades after they had stopped working: to cover up the dark side of their daily existence, downplay bitter disputes among rival patron-client groups, and de-emphasize their real lack of economic security. On the whole, they wanted to represent themselves as proud workers and mothers. Their alteration of reality came from their view of the past through the prism of their own experiences as well as the selective memory of the person. Reconstructing their past assisted them in legitimizing it for the interviewer as well as making it more meaningful for themselves.⁵⁶

Organization and Scope

This study analyzes the complex interconnectedness between the entrepreneurial and labor sectors of a regional agro-export economy in

the midst of revolution and modernization within the Atlantic community. It is organized into six chapters. The first chapter focuses specifically on how a small group of immigrant entrepreneurs, in large part of Spanish origin, captured control of the financing, preparation, and commercialization of export-grade coffee in the Córdoba region and, in so doing, came to dominate the nation's coffee-export agro-industry. It emphasizes the interplay between external market forces, social revolution, and regional factors from the 1890s through the 1930s. Chapters 2 through 5 focus on the women and men workers in the semimechanized coffee *beneficios* of Córdoba during the first half of the twentieth century. Chapter 2 presents a broad survey of the nature of the workforce in the coffee plants and the complex interrelationship between gender, work, and workplace in five Central Veracruz towns. Chapter 3 analyzes the ways in which coffee sorters mobilized and unionized into gender-segregated unions to meet the challenges of spiraling inflation and job insecurity during the revolutionary and postrevolutionary periods under the guidance of anarchosyndicalist, tenant, and Peasant League activists. The construction of a collective women's boss rule (*cacicazgo*) that served as an effective mechanism to fight for worker's rights from the 1930s is the subject of chapter 4. Chapter 5 explores the everyday experiences through the collective memory of a working-class women's community during the Mexican Miracle. The final chapter examines the events leading up to the mechanization of the Veracruz coffee *beneficios* in the 1950s and 1960s and the ways in which the sorter community collectively remembered these events and resisted the harsh reality.