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Review Essay

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The 1970s marked the rise of the “new urban history” that promised to write the city from the bottom up. Allen Davis’s 1973 history of Philadelphia marked a watershed: it set out to illuminate the life of ordinary people rather than the elites and it traced mass behaviour rather than the fate of institutions. There was a correlating methodological shift in primary sources, from narrative and legislative sources to tax assessments, census schedules, voters lists and court dockets. Historians of urban immigration especially took up the gauntlet of the “new urban history”. Among the scores of such histories, John M. Allswang identified ethnic voting blocks (1971), Robert Harney the intersection of class and ethnicity (1975), Thomas Kessner the degrees of upward mobility (1977), June Alexander the patterns of secondary migrations (1980), Donna Gabaccia the redefinition of kinship networks (1983), and John Bodnar the lines of household economies (1985). These research projects led to the dismissal of old notions of “The Uprooted” and the embrace of concepts such as “The Transplanted.” The underlying theme in many of these works was that European immigrants successfully survived the force of a vibrant capitalistic, liberal American society and did so by employing complex strategies of survival.

Histories of urban immigration in the 1990s have built on these foundations. But arguably the great change that occurred in the 30 years between the publication of Oscar Handlin’s *The Uprooted* and John Bodnar’s *The Transplanted* has been the development of a new set of concerns. Here are four books, randomly chosen from among many others published on the same subject during the mid-1990s. They differ in significant ways. Their disparate subjects include Chicanos, Caribbeans, Chinese, Jews, Puerto Ricans and Italians — immigrants who live in distinct enclaves within the two largest metropolitan areas in the United States, New York, and greater Los Angeles. The books possess different foci: two are about specific ethnic groups, one about a polyethnic residential district and another about a single ethnic institution. Their authors write from different levels of experience: Sánchez and Watkins-Owens are junior scholars and their books are revised Ph.D. dissertations; Maffi and Chávez are well-established scholars, authors of other books. And the books exhibit different methodologies,

although even within this category there is a wide range of expertise: Maffi and Sánchez’s books are more carefully conceptualized and nuanced than the books by Chávez and Watkins-Owens. Yet, despite these differences there are commonalities that signal a change in the methodology of American urban immigration historiography.

First, the books shift the focus away from the Eurocentric migration enterprise with its Atlantic “salt water” divide, the Ellis Island filter and the destiny of the Frontier, either literal or symbolic. The immigrants here are Mexicans who came over at El Paso, headed northeast to southern Texas and western Kansas, before they turned west to Los Angeles. They are Caribbeans who headed west to Panama to work in the American zone and then came north to New York. They are Chinese who followed chain migration routes east from California to New York. Given these migration patterns, immigrants did not typically establish ethnic enclaves upon arrival in the United States; these were the products of second- and third-generation immigrants, who as members of a visible minority and the working class often found themselves shunted into specific residential districts. And because these immigrants came from places close to the United States — close either by virtue of geographical proximity as in the case of Mexico or close by virtue of faster twentieth-century transportation technology — they often had stronger links to their respective homeland than did earlier nineteenth-century immigrants. These links coupled with racial barriers ensured an even greater resistance to unilinear assimilation than that exercised by nineteenth-century European immigrants.

Despite these overarching characteristics, these histories do not portray a transplanted homogeneous ethnic community confronted by the assimilative forces of monolithic, liberal America. The immigrant community is fragmented, divided by class, gender, religion, profession, and time of arrival. (Reflective of a freshness in immigration history, each of the four works adeptly weaves in the variable of gender, citing how men and women experienced the immigration differently and aided the adaptation in particular ways). Just as the immigrant group is fragmented, so too, is “America”, the receiving society. It is comprised of forces of change that are circumscribed by class, ethnicity, profession, region, religion, ideology, technology, and level of government. Thus, unlike studies associated with the theme of transplantation a type of assimilation occurs, and unlike studies focussed on discontinuity, the assimilation here is not one measured by participation in the liberal dream of upward mobility or an imagined association with American nationalism. Immigrants assimilate to a fragment of America: Caribbeans adapt to the Black community of Harlem, Mexicans to the Spanish subculture of the Southwest, Chinese to the multiculturalism of New York’s Lower East Side. And unlike the process of “uprootedness” or “transplantation”, the cultural processes are unpredictable, comprised of an amorphous and constantly rearranging mix of assimilation, persistence, selective adaptation, reinvention, and following strategies that are

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based on shifting illusions, myths, hopes, and limited understandings. Signalling the wide reach of the "linguistic turn" each of the histories highlights or at least mentions the immigrant community mythmakers and literary representers. In each case, they are not the preservers and guardians of ethnic traits; they are its creators and producers.

George Sánchez's *Becoming Mexican American* is a formidable example of this cultural studies informed social history of non-European urban immigration. Significantly, the book is a sophisticated immigration history; the Mexican Americans here are not simply a visible minority, repressed by an incipient barrio-level "internal-colonialism". They are immigrants who came to the United States between 1900 and 1945 from scores of places between Juarez in the north and Mexico City in the south. Usually, they came circuitously, through the western mid-west perhaps or a point in the southwest, back to Mexico a dozen times, and only later to Los Angeles. The book traces the conditions in the sending society and the evolution of the barrios in East and Central Los Angeles during the first two generations of sojourn. Thus, while Sánchez acknowledges the economic stagnation of Chicano people, he is adamant that they were culturally adaptive. Here "ethnicity, culture and identity" are interrelated in a process that is "contested, temporal and emergent." (8) The peculiar "back and forth" nature of Mexican immigration led to the existence of a culture of "circular" migration that placed little value on the "official boundary." Such migration patterns in turn led to "fragmented identities" that never ceased "becoming". Ironically, it was only when the Rio Grande became defined as a barrier in this century, making the Mexicans "interlopers on familiar land," and barring them from easy entry into the United States, that the migrants began contemplating permanent homes in places such as California.

Just as the migration led to an ambivalence in identity, so too did the dialectic between the immigrants' culture and the fragments of American culture they encountered in Los Angeles. The California Mexicans experienced both "uprootedness" and transplantation, but in most cases a cultural discontinuity led to a cultural reformulation, creating the Chicano society. American case workers who saw "clean slates" in need of Americanization, did help "assimilate" the newcomers, but to America's bottom segments of the working class, an act in which class bolstered ethnicity. Mexico government policies of luring home California Mexicans by instilling patriotism in them, worked only to ethnicise the immigrants, providing them with a sense of legitimacy in the American cultural landscape. Hollywood entrepreneurs successfully turned Chicano males into consumers of mass media, but only after filling the radio waves and movie screens with pop-Spanish culture. Irish Catholics made inroads into Mexican religious circles, but in ironic ways, such as joining the Virgin of Guadalupe processions to protest the secularization policies of Mexico's revolutionary government. The outcome was not assimilation, but encouragement for Los Angeles Mexicans to consider themselves "true" Mexicans. A majority of Mexicans may have sought home ownership, but this did not

mean that they experienced upward mobility; rather, home ownership reflected permanence in a working class barrio. The Depression, which forced about one third of Mexicans to leave Los Angeles, sent most others to minority group ghettos where they asserted left-wing politics, labour unionism and even street gang activities, such as the Zoot Suit riots. Ironically, after two generations, assimilative forces had created a dual identity that itself was continuing to develop; "cultural revival and re-creation were ever-present." (272)

Several of these themes are repeated in the book by Italian scholar Mario Maffi, *Gateway to the Promised Land*, first published in Italian in 1992. It examines the interaction of "ethnic cultures" in the Lower East Side of New York. As in Sánchez's study, the immigrant group here does not meet a monolithic American receiving society. "America" the nation is subsumed by the city and the city is the chief protagonist, forcing ethnic groups to relate to each other. In the Lower East Side Chinese, Puerto Ricans, Jews, and Italians existed in dialectical relationship and the enclaves — the *shtetln, paesi* and *Sam Yup* villages — stood side by side in creative tension. These relationships amongst ethnic groups were further fragmented in specific everyday interstices: work, play, residence, politics, and courtship. It was in this inter-ethnic everyday dialectic that "America" was found, a product of the immigrants themselves: Maffi concludes that "this was Americanization ... a basic modification of ethnic cultures and of America itself." (136) In this approach, metaphors of "uprootedness" and "transplantation" are replaced with those of "living organisms" that make their way "symbiotically" and "osmotically" between past and present, internal and external forces, decay and vitality. Ethnic identity is created, not preserved.

Although Maffi makes this point with reference to residential patterns, working conditions, labour strikes, and political action, he is most vigorous in describing literary expressions of ethnic creation. He argues that the novels, magazines, paintings, songs, histories, photograph collections, even graffiti and especially the multi-lingual worker-patronized theatres revealed that neither linear assimilation nor static continuity occurred. To make this point Maffi relentlessly and impressionistically strings together metaphors of interaction and synonyms for dynamism. A single, randomly chosen paragraph yields the following phrases: "cultural vitality", "contiguity ... of cultures", "cross cultural", "multi-ethnic", "epitomes ... of quest," "intense ghetto life", "dramatic battle", "raw-edged," "embittered rethinking", and "cultural fragmentation." (43) Usually, this dynamism linked a younger generation with an older one. It was the young who through these media and in this fashion sought to "wring their own past from generalized amnesia" (24) and write a "useable history" that asserted their traditional identity and "reinforce[d] group solidarity" within the multicultural context of the Lower East Side. The young did this in social units that other historians who focus on the family, mutual-aid society and parish have ignored. Maffi's book documents art associations, youth gangs, theatre troops and even collages of people, gathered at the

street corner, the shop and the basement stairs to gossip and argue and "remember" the past. In this account equilibrium was never reached: interaction, conflict, and cultural creation continued and continue unceasingly.

Irma Watkins-Owens, *Blood Relations*, is also about a New York district, Harlem, and an immigrant group in that community. The book tells the story of 40,000 African-Caribbean immigrants who came to the city between 1900 and 1930, eventually to comprise twenty-five percent of Harlem's Black community. Like Sánchez's work, this is a full immigration history, analysing the socioeconomic conditions of the sending society (labour unrest set in a context of discriminatory land tenure systems), tracing the round-about migration patterns of immigrants (often coming to New York via the American zone in Panama), and describing the institutional patterns of the immigrants in the new land with microanalysis (in this instance, the 131st block). Like the works of both Sánchez and Maffi, this book seeks to understand how immigrants adapted to a particular facet of American society. The Caribbeans experienced America through the dynamic relationship with African Americans who were arriving in New York from the southern states. In this book official white America lies in the background; its nativism, racism and class structure are filtered by native blacks and only then experienced by the newcomers. In other words, the Caribbeans found their place in a Harlem that was already being divided by race, and they found work in the service sector — as porters, waiters, elevator operators, domestics, musicians, street car cleaners — in a pre-cast, racially determined labour market. When they faced nativism, as all immigrants did, it came not from New York's white communities, but from the likes of W.E. Du Bois of the NAACP, the "National Association for the Advancement of *Certain People*", according to some of the Caribbeans. When the immigrants were lured from Jamaican-based Anglicanism into American Protestantism, it was to the specifically black denominations like the emotionally charged Metropolitan Baptists.

The adaptation by the Caribbeans to the African American segment of U.S. society, however, is not a simple unilinear assimilation. Like the authors above, Owens-Watkins, argues the case of cultural creativity. The Caribbeans brought change to Harlem, helping to turn "one of Manhattan's 'residential heavens' ... black." (42) But it was heterogeneously black with an indelible Caribbean imprint. Caribbean women asserted female status as they helped "create ... migration streams," ran boarding houses and became noted street speakers. The Caribbeans of both sexes "perpetuate[d] island traditions" within the American churches and through "homeland societies" kept those traditions alive in the streets as well. And well-toned, self-educated, radical immigrant step-ladder, street speakers like Marcus Garvey of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, delineated concepts of class and colonialism, thus drawing large followings of native blacks. The Caribbeans initiated particular businesses, especially a range of pseudo-banking enterprises, including the informal rotating credit system and the illegal lot-

tery known as the Numbers Game. The immigrants took leadership in literature, journalism and artistic expression, often gearing their works to the "recovery of pride and racial self-esteem through exploration of the black experience ..." (161) They contested injustices within the black community, especially the collusion of native blacks with discrimination on the basis of colour shade, dark-skinned Caribbeans feeling first hand the handicap of this "colour-class system." While much of this may sound like contribution history, it is in fact more than that. Harlem, concludes Watkins-Owens, evolved in the context not only of a racial dialectic, but an ethnic dynamic as well. The native black and the immigrant black cultures interrelated to create Harlem society.

John R. Chávez's *Eastside Landmark* focuses even more narrowly than does Watkins-Owens's study. This is a history of the "East Los Angeles Community Union", known by its acronym, TELACU. It was established in 1968 by the Chicano community in Los Angeles to achieve economic growth and social stability through co-operative action. Unlike the studies above, *Eastside Landmark* is an institutional history. Thus the author weighs successes against failures: he describes the political processes by which union efforts secured the election of Mexican-Americans to public office; he enumerates the residential projects and industrial parks that rejuvenated slums and crumbling commercial districts; he defends the strategy of tapping into capitalism that allowed the community to "recover its land collectively"; he cites TELACU's \$300 million list of assets and payroll of 1500 people that made it the "second largest minority firm" in Los Angeles. He also offers evidence of its inability to turn around "unemployment, crowded housing, low educational attainment, residential blight ... [that] persisted in many barrios." (254) And as the biographer of an institution he is partial and given to defence: in describing a 1982 scandal in which the media charged TELACU with ostentatiousness, financial mismanagement, and poor job-creation programs, Chávez defends the union, refuting each of these charges.

Like the three studies above, however, Chávez's book wrestles with concepts of fragmentation and it, too, asserts the idea of cultural creativity. Chávez uses the community union to focus on themes of ethnic separatism, self-determination, and political power. He argues that TELACU, was an example by which an ethnic group secured both cultural self-determination and socioeconomic "reconciliation with the 'system.'" The irony in this history is that for most of its short history TELACU was federally funded as a "community development corporation," but at the same time asserted its legitimacy in American society as a Chicano institution. The organizers of TELACU, for example, made no secret about their Mexican and Spanish ties; indeed a ceramic mural at the union site depicts Cortéz and Cuatémoc as conquerors of Mexico and it highlights the Spanish Franciscan missionaries in pre-conquest California. The founders of the union, thus, saw California as their "native land, rather than simply a land to which Mexicans have immigrated." (6) And they viewed TELACU as much more than an anti-poverty agent; it

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was a mythopoeic mechanism that recreated Chicano identity by creating mythologies set in the past and reasserting the legitimacy and power of a distinctive ethnic group in the present.

The four books above signal a distinct and evolving chapter in American urban immigrant historiography. In it the immigrant experience is marked by neither "uprootedness" nor transplantation, but by fragmentation. First, immigrant group strategies are seen to have diverged, marked by flexibility, pragmatism, creativity and contingency, all undergirded by a belief in human agency and its ability to make sense of new situations. No essential quality of immigrant culture is seen to have persisted. In these books ethnicity is invented as a mechanism to provide meaning and control over an amorphous situation. Second, the immigrant group itself is fragmented, divided internally by rifts of gender, class, education level and time of arrival; men and women in particular are shown to have had different immigration experiences. Third, the authors seem to agree that there was no overarching or existing Yankee reality that demanded a

response from the immigrants. Ironically, although American society as an assimilative agent is placed in the background, the public institutions — the federal, state and municipal authorities, the police, border patrol and welfare agents — are brought to the foreground. But each is seen as pursuing a particular policy, offering unique mixes of restriction and opportunity to the immigrants. When American society is encountered by the immigrants, it is often one mediated by immigrant image makers who wrote "master narratives", outlining palatable pasts for people contesting an antagonistic America. Significantly, where an older historiography focussed on the unique experiences of ethnic groups, the studies above ascribe a surprising uniform experience on groups as divergent as the Chicano, Caribbeans, Chinese and Jews. All create cultures that link perception of past and present to confront both local and regional forces. Only the process, however, is shared; its outcome spells multiple fragmentation.