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DEBATING THE VIABILITY OF ETHNICITY

*Immigration and the Political Economy of Home: West Indian Brooklyn and American Indian Minneapolis, 1945-1992.* RACHEL BUFF. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. xv + 240 pp. (Paper US\$ 18.95)

*Black Cuban, Black American: A Memoir.* EVELIO GRILLO. Houston TX: Arte Público Press, 2000. xvi + 134 pp. (Paper US\$ 13.95)

*West Indian in the West: Self Representations in an Immigrant Community.* PERCY C. HINTZEN. New York: New York University Press, 2001. x + 200 pp. (Paper US\$ 18.50)

*Caribbean Families in Britain and the Transatlantic World.* HARRY GOULBOURNE & MARY CHAMBERLAIN (eds.). Oxford UK: Macmillan, 2001. xvi + 270 pp. (Paper £15.50)

*Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation.* ALEJANDRO PORTES & RUBÉN G. RUMBAUT. Berkeley: University of California Press/ New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2001. xxiv + 406 pp. (Paper US\$ 19.95)

“Ethnicity” and its meaning, both as an identity and as a resilient cultural influence, has dominated late twentieth-century social scientific analyses of the process of immigrant incorporation. Perhaps we may mark the crowning of the term with the publication of Glazer and Moynihan’s *The Melting Pot*, one famous tome that “explained” varying “assimilation” outcomes among the “new” (post-1965) newcomers by examining their ethnic culture for flaws or strengths that justified socioeconomic failure or success. Muddying the ensuing policy debate was the use of buzzwords, like mainstream, deviant, assimilated, minority, black matriarch, absent father, and underclass,

that were themselves categorizing and hierarchical. The tautology of hierarchically labeling groups and then asking why groups with different labels have different outcomes seems to be perpetually invisible to the parties in the assimilation debate, but the debate itself rages on. Newer scholarship has added a different voice to that debate, arguing that variance in “assimilation” is instead explained by incorporation into social hierarchies (like racially segmented societies). The books reviewed here all speak in some way or another to these themes. They also examine the web of complex relationships migrants construct when defining and creating support institutions like “home,” “community,” and “family.”

Rachel Buff's *Immigration and the Political Economy of Home* argues that while the assimilation model requires “[swapping] economic success for cultural identity,” American Indians and black Caribbean immigrants resisted assimilation defined in this way (p. 124). Indians fought termination policies (designed to “emancipate” them from reservations by terminating the federal trust relationship to allow exploitation of Indian lands) and, further, made new demands for rights of Indians largely coerced into urban migration. For their part, West Indians fought the enforcement of a monolithic and homogeneous “blackness” and sought empowerment instead. Buff insists scholars misread such resistance as “ethnic” assimilation, but their goal is neither to identify as separate ethnic groups based on national or tribal origins nor to assimilate. Instead, American Indians and West Indians learn to create alternative identities to resist racism's effects. Over time they create Pan-Caribbean and Pan-Indian identities, refusing to identify themselves as separate nationals. By celebrating powwow and carnival, and transmitting new forms of cultural representation to their youth, they commemorate their island and reservation homelands, and reshape their experience of “home” in the United States. Caribbean people move toward decolonized thinking and a new sense of self in postindependence years, as they also celebrate a new awareness of African roots. Among Indians a sense of nationalism prevails as well, and they forge new links between the urban spaces Indians begin to occupy and the reservations from which urban transplants come.

Buff argues for the comparative compatibility of the West Indian and North American natives' experience because the groups share a history of forced removal from their respective original homelands that required, after a period of re-migration to urban centers, a complete reconstruction of their sense of peoplehood and the rebuilding of cultural memory that is newly distilled in the performance of festivals. She spends the book's pages on two tasks: a history of im/migration, and a more ethnographic analysis of the performance of memory. Buff challenges us finally to open our eyes and our disciplines to new ways of comparative thinking. I wish that the book had a title exciting enough to match the ideas inside – because of its title, I might have overlooked the book myself had I not been asked to review it.

The immigrant's challenge to adopt a new identity in a context complicated by race is Grillo's own "assimilation" story, *Black Cuban, Black American: A Memoir*, a personal history of black incorporation in the fast-changing place and time that is the twentieth-century United States. Grillo is a good writer; he well details his continually negotiated reality in this easy read, juggling race, gender, nation, and language simultaneously. "*Es Negro, pero es Negro blanco*' (He is a black man, but he is a white black man) was an expression I heard often" (p. 7). Grillo agrees that ethnicity and assimilation are way off the mark in describing his experience, at least for him as a black Cuban: "Our choices became clear: to swim in black American society or drown in the Latin ghettos of New York City, never to be an integral part of American life ... Integration presented us with simple options: join the black American society, with its rich roots deep in this country, or have no American roots at all" (p. 12).

One of the most striking characteristics of this text is Grillo's humility. He describes himself as the beneficiary of so much help. He confesses that social mobility in the context of (nonwhite) racialization comes to those who have others who believe in them. "Had it not been for Mr. Martin and our black American teachers, it would have been very difficult for us to land places in black American life and, however limited, in the American society. They shoe-horned us in, the very few lucky ones among us" (p. 51). I feel a twinge of recognition as he recounts the subtle impact of progressive black teachers who insisted he and his classmates regularly sing the "black national anthem," *Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing* (and he reprints the lyrics in full to convey to the unfamiliar the song's pride and passion). His book describes a complex process of forging racial solidarity across ethnicities to gain the rewards of higher class status, a process in which it doesn't matter that he's Cuban and the teachers are not, for "mainstream" society treated them often enough as one and the same. This is not ethnicity at work but, instead, the story of identity construction by the racialized immigrant.

Buff and Grillo focus our eyes on the ways immigrants re-create home and identity against the thorny backdrop of the U.S. racial hierarchy. In Hintzen's *West Indian in the West*, the actors play at simultaneity in their identity formation. In their social lives, the West Indians with professional or otherwise high status "perform" that status by holding exclusive house and dinner parties, and socializing in clubs, associations, and university groups, while marginalizing those West Indians who don't have similar status. At the same time that they exclude African Americans in word (using stereotypical thinking), they still depend upon the strength of their political and organizational structures. When social connections with African Americans are advantageous, they use them. In the economic sphere, West Indians criticize the education system and way of American life, but seek for themselves economic success and academic achievement. Such duality allows them to

embrace and exploit the aspects of the United States they find beneficial while rejecting U.S. inequalities, particularly the U.S. racial hierarchy, in their process of identity construction.

Hintzen bases this duality in the localized nature of the identity he studies. This specific kind of duality is available to West Coast West Indians because of the peculiar environment in which they live. Due to the strength of their numbers in Silicon Valley and other good jobs, they can, and do, promote a professional-class image onto a desired collective identity, that of the “permanent foreigner with a legitimate claim of belonging” (p. 163). Permanent foreigners have little desire to become “American” (for, despite their aspirations, they maintain that America fares poorly compared to their memories of life back home) at the same time that they claim a foothold in American society as economic successes. West Indians in the West try to protect a space for themselves outside of the social spaces constrained by racial hierarchy. Like the first two authors reviewed here, Hintzen agrees that the “ethnic question” is not the relevant one when speaking of immigrant “success,” not only because there is no monolithic ethnicity that survives without the influence of the group’s locale, but because that localized ethnic difference is itself constructed in response to the oppression of racial structures. Thus, West Indian identity construction on the West Coast becomes another example of the (localized) importance of race in the immigrant incorporation process.

The introduction to Goulbourne and Chamberlain’s *Caribbean Families in Britain and the Transatlantic World* is addressed to the assimilationist who would make policy for black British Caribbean families using simplified racialized understandings about society’s “norms” and the “deviants” who don’t adhere to them. They argue that applying nuclear-family norms to Caribbean families makes one see dysfunction where it is not – Raymond Smith’s article in the book also tackles this subject – for historical Caribbean living arrangements work quite well and are successfully reproduced in Britain. Moreover, kin help one another, women are key, and transnational families retain strong ties to their members. Theoretical and empirical essays included in the volume help to make these points. For example, Trevor Noble’s description of Guyana-based kinship networks shows social support is broadly available (distributed across three generations in twenty-seven separate households, one-third of these in North America). Elsie Le Franc *et al.* found that the character and quality of relationships were more important determinants of abuse in Jamaica than family structure. And Tracey Reynolds’s article on fathering presents a corrective to stereotypic images of the absent (and therefore assumedly unsupportive) black father.

Together with Goulbourne’s chapter (where he situates the Caribbean family in a larger sociopolitical context) and Chamberlain’s own contribution (which reminds us that cultural and structural forces that influence inter-

national migration also shape family life), the book, though uneven, clearly shows how localized/nationalized racial policies (and not personal or collective ethnic construction) shape the immigrant experience for lower-class blacks in the First World.

*Legacies*, Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut's volume on the immigrant second generation, unlike the other texts in this review, does not constitute a racial analysis and critique of the ethnic assimilation tradition. Their book discusses the incorporation processes of the immigrant generation and their offspring. Immigrants, they argue, must contend with modes of incorporation (the degree to which society fails to accept them and the class in which the immigrant community fits), a sense of optimism/pessimism, and role reversal (when their children must literally translate American life for them) in their adjustment process. The offspring must choose among "reactive ethnicity" (becoming rebelliously "ethnic" when faced with systematic outsider status), immigrant identity, or other identity choices. (In re-interviews, it seems that young people often change their minds about the identity choices they once made.) Published jointly with an edited volume, this text presents the idea that, as the title to Chapter 3 puts it, "Not Everyone is Chosen" for success, but that "Making it in America" (Chapter 4) depends on these and other factors outlined in the first nine chapters.

The first chapter and mid-text photographs paint poignant and verily anti-stereotypical portraits of immigrant parents and their offspring. Interview material is mainly used to illustrate points developed in the statistical analyses. The authors do not conclude their book with a formula immigrant parents could employ to ensure their children's success. Instead, they advocate recognizing the effect of globalization on our society and preserving our gift of a generation of multilingual and multicultural youth who can breach lingual differences and generational barriers (i.e., national origin differences between themselves and their parents) if they are allowed to express the best of their blended selves.

The lack of assimilability of the second generation is addressed when the authors project (in the preface) the specter of an impending "rainbow underclass" with the potential to negatively transform American society on a level akin to the ways the "implosion of the inner city, the demise of the traditional family, [and] the drug epidemic" have done (p. xvii). Portes and Rumbaut say they critique assimilationist thinking, but they actually build on its theoretical foundations, explaining the failure to enter the higher classes by reintroducing concepts developed in other writings like downward assimilation, segmented assimilation, and modes of incorporation. When they do discuss the relevance of race to second-generation chances, their writing indicates a rejection of common theoretical articulations of race as socially constructed and consisting of deliberate strategies to exclude regardless of the motivations and aspirations of those racialized as "other."

They have an understanding of race as a concept based on phenotype, not as one that wields the weight of a system on nonwhite aspirations – in their analysis, it’s what you look like that matters, for they do not consider that phenotype is a trope for a racializing process replete with enforcement mechanisms and unequal consequences for groups in varied hierarchical positions. Some examples should illustrate. They write that the nonwhite second generation suffers because

their enduring physical differences from whites and the equally persistent practice of discrimination based on those differences, especially against black persons, throws a barrier in the path of occupational mobility and social acceptance. Immigrant children’s perceptions of discrimination in American society, their ethnic identities and self-esteem, their aspirations, and their patterns of school behavior are affected accordingly. (pp. 55-56)

There is an awkward circular logic here. If upward occupational mobility – the main avenue to the social mobility the authors claim to study – depends upon being hired and retaining or being promoted from a job, and if white employers are discriminating against workers of color (Moss & Tilly 2001), then blaming the failure to become mobile, even in part, on “their enduring physical difference” is just plain wrong. One’s phenotype does not cause one’s failure to become gainfully employed. This is only the *mechanism* that white employers use to block that gainful employment. That the second generation’s economic aspirations are higher than those of the parents (p. 58) only increases the contrast between their frustrated ambition and the stark reality of the discriminatory power of labor market.

In another example, they present an osmosis theory of racial identification for black children (who differ in this process from other youth): West Indians learn to call themselves black because they are socialized by “native-born peers, who, in inner-city schools, are mostly other minorities. These learning effects combined lead predictably to heightened awareness of a racial minority status” (p. 188). Presumably, then, either these children would not be (or know they were) black if they were in all-white schools in the suburbs, or that somehow their white counterparts would have no investment in educating their black classmates about their racial difference.

Similarly strange is the authors’ suggestion that the successes of the “Irish, Italian, Polish, and other early immigrants [who] were originally defined as separate races and subjected to extensive discrimination” ended when (or because) “their phenotypical similarity with members of the mainstream American population eventually asserted itself” (p. 55). Who is that “mainstream” if not the whites they are supposed to already be? Only now do we think of these groups as phenotypically similar, as disused stereotypes about Jewish noses, Irish ruddiness, and Polish swarthyness attest. (See Waters 1990 for a brief historical summary of stereotypes of this kind.) Rather than

recognizing formerly invisible sameness, the “white” label was broadened to include these groups previously deemed “unassimilable.”<sup>1</sup> Many other scholars read the U.S. history of racial incorporation quite differently from these authors, opposing such a passive understanding of the means by which distinct “ethnicities” were placed on their various trajectories of cultural, political, and economic acceptance.<sup>2</sup>

Read together, these texts lead to the conclusion that there is a need to privilege race in the discussion of immigrant incorporation, and signal a move away from the social scientific application of the ideals of ethnic assimilation. The texts recast light upon assimilation as a process based on the European “model” in ways that highlight the importance of race (and the local practices in racial differentiation) in immigrant identity construction processes in a racialized First World. This scholarship continues a tradition of newer research that redraws immigrant incorporation along racialized lines.

1. Ignatiev 1995, Haney López 1996, Brodtkin 1998.
2. Steinberg 1989, Zinn 1990, Takaki 1993, Omi & Winant 1994, Marx 1998, Winant 2001, Glenn 2002.

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VILNA BASHI  
Department of Sociology  
Rutgers University  
New Brunswick NJ 08854-8045, U.S.A.  
<vbashi@rci.rutgers.edu>