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Review Essays

MEXICAN IMMIGRATION AND MEXICAN AMERICAN IDENTITIES

Replenished Ethnicity: Mexican Americans, Immigration, and Identity. By

Tomás R. Jiménez. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010. 366 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$55 (cloth); \$24.95 (paper).

Mexican Americans across Generations: Immigrant Families, Racial Realities.

By Jessica M. Vasquez. New York: New York University Press, 2011. 314 pp. \$24 (paper).

The growing Mexican American population in the United States continues to attract scholarly attention across a variety of disciplines. As of the 2010 census, 32 million people identify themselves as being of Mexican descent, making up two-thirds of the larger Latino/a population of over 50 million people. Debates over whether/how Mexican and other Latin American immigrants assimilate, integrate into the nation's fabric, and contribute to American society saturate contemporary media, the political arena, and the academy. Sociologists Tomás Jiménez and Jessica M. Vasquez offer two very insightful studies that are useful in understanding Mexican American ethnic/racial identity. Broadly speaking, both challenge traditional models of assimilation in demonstrating that Mexican Americans are indeed distinct as a social group in the United States. Both draw on ethnographic interviews and fieldwork to understand how Mexican Americans form a sense of self, particularly in relation to Mexican immigrants. These texts build upon and extend the germinal scholarship of David Gutiérrez on Mexican American intra-ethnic relations (*Walls and Mirrors*, 1995) and that of Gilda Ochoa (*Becoming Neighbors in a Mexican American Community*, 2004).¹ Jiménez and Vasquez reveal the tremendous variability across individuals' racial and ethnic identification, a fact that has rendered it so difficult to make conclusive, definitive statements about Mexican Americans.

In *Replenished Ethnicity*, Tomás Jiménez examines how ongoing immigration has an impact on the ethnic identity and racialization of older-generation Mexican Americans and their descendants, particularly those who by most standards have "assimilated" (i.e., achieved middle-class status, intermarried, and "Americanized").

Jiménez rejects two contrasting propositions—that Mexican Americans experience assimilation just like European immigrants and that they are a colonized and aggrieved minority—and instead marks a path down the middle describing them as “a permanent immigrant group” (p. 142). He focuses on two Mexican American communities—one in Garden City, Kansas, which had a long immigration hiatus and, thus, a sharper distinction between older generation immigrants and more recent Mexican immigrants, and one in Santa Maria, California, which has witnessed relatively continuous immigration throughout the twentieth century. He aims to determine if and how recent Mexican immigrants influence identity formation for long-standing Mexican Americans.

Jiménez uses the term “ethnic replenishment” to describe how ongoing contemporary Mexican immigrants continuously provide “raw materials” for strengthening and rejuvenating Mexican American ethnicity. “Immigrant replenishment provides the means by which Mexican Americans come to feel more positively attached to their ethnic roots. But it also provokes a predominating view of Mexicans as foreigners, making Mexican Americans seem like less a part of the U.S. mainstream than their social and economic integration and later-generation status might suggest” (p. 5). Jiménez thus demonstrates the complicated position in which Mexican Americans find themselves—both benefiting from but also paying the price for ongoing Mexican immigration in their social lives. The presence of recent immigrants, he argues, plays a central role in not only how Mexican Americans understand and identify themselves but also how other Americans perceive them. Because Mexican immigration has continued nearly unabated for decades now, Americans’ perceptions and racialization of older generation immigrants are inherently influenced by the negative characteristics attributed to more recent (and especially undocumented) immigrants. Mexican Americans’ assimilation and acceptance by mainstream American society, in other words, would look quite different if large-scale Mexican immigration had ceased at some point as it did for Europeans.

This formulation is not entirely new. Historian Louise Año Nuevo Kerr made this observation in her foundational 1976 study of Mexican Americans in Chicago.² Exploring the history of Mexicans (or “Chicanos” as she referred to them) in this Midwestern metropolis, she noted that the initial generation of immigrants who arrived during the Mexican Revolution and into the 1920s witnessed an immigration hiatus during the Great Depression. As a result, Chicago’s Mexican immigrant and second-generation community was well on its way to becoming Americanized or assimilated. Mexican Americans were derailed, however, by the renewed influx of Mexican immigrants in the World War II era and after. Año Nuevo Kerr thus describes this phenomenon as “aborted assimilation.” Put another way, were it not for the ongoing presence of Mexican immigrants, older generation migrants would have assimilated much like European immigrants historically had and would have become part of the American white ethnic population. Jiménez echoes this conclusion, though he extends it, explaining that significant numbers of ongoing Mexican

immigrants in the late twentieth century have continued to “brighten” ethnicity and racialization for Mexican Americans who otherwise might have become less noticeable as a distinct ethnic or racial group in the United States.

Replenished Ethnicity raises some questions, however. One of the things that makes Mexican immigration so powerful in shaping Mexican American identity, according to Jiménez, is immigration’s salience to the Mexican American historical narrative. While indeed most Mexican Americans trace their family roots back to an original migration, this is true of most Americans—European Americans, in particular, who trace an “origins” story of migration from Europe. Why is a family’s immigration story more salient for Mexican Americans than for European Americans? Jiménez suggests that the presence of recent immigrants makes it more relevant and that such migration figures prominently in how Mexican Americans identify themselves.

In *Mexican Americans across Generations*, Jessica Vasquez also explores Mexican American identity but takes a slightly different focus, examining Mexican American families across three generations. She too presents some very useful concepts for understanding Mexican American assimilation and identity formation, such as “thinned attachment” and “cultural maintenance” as two poles on a spectrum of ethno-racial identity. Vasquez critiques the long-accepted models of European immigrant assimilation and characterizes the experience of Mexican Americans instead as “bumpy assimilation.” Mexican Americans do not follow a smooth trajectory of “immigrant”-to-“American” that Europeans historically have traced but instead have encountered a number of variables that complicate what is assumed to be a seamless pathway to “Americanization.” Moreover, Vasquez joins a long line of scholars who have insisted that we must broaden what “American” means exactly and who gets included under that umbrella.

Vasquez focuses on middle-class, successful Mexican American families and identifies a dynamic she calls “racialization despite assimilation” (p. 7). Like Jiménez’s subjects, Vasquez’s interviewees have largely adopted American mainstream culture, many have intermarried with white Americans and gone to college, and most live in ethnically diverse communities. By these measures, they have successfully assimilated like many other immigrants. The rich qualitative data she collected through her interviews, however, reveals the way that some Mexican Americans continually struggle with a sense of their ethnic/racial identity not only because of their own cultural preferences but also as a result of how others racialize them.

The concepts of “thinned attachment” and “cultural maintenance” aim to capture what are rather complex and oftentimes contradictory conceptions of identity for many Mexican Americans. Perhaps in the interest of making some broader distinctions *between* immigrant generations, Vasquez at times overgeneralizes her characterization of the three distinct generations in her study. She sometimes glosses over the vast variability that she herself documents, to make broader conclusions about each generation’s experience. Still, her interviewees’ words reveal a tremendous

diversity among Mexican American individuals both *within* and *between* generations. Some Mexicans Americans cling to their ancestral ethnicity, culture, and heritage much more readily (“cultural maintenance”) than others, who truly see their ethnicity as optional (“thinned attachment”). Historians and other scholars alike would benefit from viewing identity, culture, and assimilation in much more complex terms, as Vasquez suggests.

Some methodologic questions emerge in both of these studies. First, neither scholar fully addresses his/her own subjectivity as a Mexican American scholar. While the fact that both identify in some fashion as Mexican American does not discredit the validity of their findings in any way, as a reader, one wonders how their interviewees’ responses were influenced or framed by speaking to someone whom they might have identified as ethnically Mexican, at least based on surname. There is certainly an element of “insider” knowledge that interviewees might have assumed about the researchers and an ostensible degree of performativity of ethnic identity that the reader might infer. In contrast, had these two researchers identified themselves as “Anglo” or “white,” we might expect that interviewees may have offered different responses to questions about their identity, assimilation, and acculturation. Since the authors do not explicitly discuss their subject position or reflect on how it may have influenced their interviewees’ responses, we are left wondering about this.

Questions also arise about the potential biases of their selected interviewees and the ways in which they may be performing their own ethnicity. The fact that both scholars selected many of their interviewees through local Hispanic or Mexican American Chambers of Commerce deserves a closer look. While such organizations provide an excellent source for interviewees, one must wonder again to what extent interview subjects shaped their reflections on their ethnicity and identity based on what is at stake—their reputations as community leaders, their perceived “authenticity” or lack thereof as representatives of an ethnic group. Reading respondents’ own words, we can only guess if some answers reflect the concerns and privileges of respectable, middle-class leaders in local communities rather than those of more typical anonymous community residents. Such subjective elements are, of course, part and parcel of qualitative research and do not diminish the legitimacy or utility of the research findings. Still, it would have been helpful had these authors elaborated on these issues more fully.

Jiménez also seems to overstate the influence of ongoing (working class, undocumented) Mexican immigration on Americans’ negative racialization of older-generation Mexican Americans. While certainly the renewed (or new) presence of recent Mexican immigrants in a given region of the country may shape perceptions about any Mexican-origin people, the negative characterizations of Mexicans and Mexico more generally are long-standing and historically rooted. Ideas about Mexican racial inferiority, the subordinate status of Mexico as a country, and the superiority of the United States date back even before the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe

Hidalgo and persisted into the twentieth century before the Mexican Revolution spurred the twentieth century's first large migration wave. Moreover, these ideas exist in parts of the country that have been little touched by Mexican immigration or where other Americans have had little contact with recent immigrants. While Jiménez acknowledges the persistent racial stereotypes of Mexicans, he downplays the significance of race and racism and emphasizes a much more positive view of multiculturalism in the United States (p. 102).

We might test Jiménez's claim about the role of ongoing immigration by examining the experience of European immigrant groups historically. Large numbers of Irish, Italian, and Polish immigrants lived in the United States for decades while their later-arriving co-nationals/co-ethnics continued migrating en masse, eliciting a great deal of xenophobic or nativist hostility. It does not seem, however, that early-generation Irish, Italian, or Polish immigrants (to name just a few examples) bore the same burdens for their unassimilated, working-class brothers and sisters as Mexican Americans seem to bear for their Mexican co-ethnics. Moreover, Poles and Russians provide good examples of contemporary immigrant groups who have not had such negative consequences for older-generation immigrants. Chicago has a large Polish immigrant population (including many who are undocumented) while New York is home to a large number of recent Russian arrivals. Why do these two groups not draw the same attention to their Polish and Russian American communities as Mexican immigrants do for Mexican Americans? Surely ideas about race, particular strains of xenophobia, and other factors such as skin color and phenotype must play a larger role than Jiménez suggests.

Despite these few critiques, both of these two books expand our knowledge on the complexities of racial and ethnic identities in the United States. Both studies provide some useful lessons for understanding how unique Mexican Americans are as an immigrant group but also how quintessentially "American" and ordinary they are as well. The authors leave a solid path for much more research to come.

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NOTES

1. David G. Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley, CA, 1995); Gilda L. Ochoa, *Becoming Neighbors in a Mexican American Community: Power, Conflict, and Solidarity* (Austin, TX, 2004).

2. Louise Año Nuevo Kerr, "The Chicano Experience in Chicago: 1920–1970" (PhD diss., University of Illinois, 1976).