

IMMIGRANT LIFE HISTORIES AS A HERITAGE RESOURCE FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

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Representations of the “Good” and the “Bad” Immigrant in U.S. History

It is a truism that, since its foundation, the United States has been a nation of immigrants (Brettell and Hollifield 2008:1; Cohen 2007: 33.). Thus, accounting for national history and the history of immigration have usually paralleled each other. What needs further explanation, however, is the valuation of immigration as national heritage. Behdad (2005) notes that historical amnesia plays a large part in the representation of the heritage of U.S. immigration. There has, in fact, been an historical discontinuity between the value ascribed by established populations to an immigrant cohort at its time of arrival, and at a point later in its settlement chronology (Brodkin 1998). Repeatedly in the nation’s history, some have been considered problematic to the idea of the nation at the time of their arrival (Behdad 2005:111-142), and later memorialized as model assets after their incorporation into the larger polity.

Heritage, or what is of positive value to the idea of nation, is clearly a social construction, one that, as issue editors Shackel and Gadsby assert, cloaks the past with connotations of integrity, authenticity and stability. Examples of historical changes in public reactions and policies towards immigrants are numerous but include, for example, the historical discrimination of the Irish (Ong 1999: 267), whose past is currently revered in public parades on St. Patrick’s Day around the nation (Cronin and Adair 2002), and the ridicule of the Chinese, who were ostracized, and even forbidden entry (Zhou 2006: 316) yet now often are viewed as model minorities along with the larger Asian immigrant population (Lee 1996; Takaki 1998: 474).

Whether more recent immigrant inflows, such as Mexicans, will experience similar reversals in the changing and often ambiguous role played by immigration in the construction of national ideology, remains to be seen. However, what seems to be a continuation of past practices is the influential role of the media in advancing the public perception of immigrants as monolithic—rather than attesting to their diversity in terms of national origin, religious affiliation, socio-economic background, and modes of incorporation into the larger society (Chávez 2008)—as well as the connotation of immigration as breeding social problems (Media Matters Action Network 2008; FAIR 2009). In contrast to these public perceptions, one of our informants who had come from Argentina focused on characteristics that are less obvious and usually not articulated:

For Latin American people it is who you are that is so important. It is important to get a degree, but it is more important in South America if you are honest...or if you are involved in your community and you participate... those kinds of things. Not so much if you get a certificate or a letter from the guy in charge.... So, that is why the richness of the immigrant community is not so much seen as you do not see so many certificates or degrees, but there are other things, silent, or that require a change of perspective to be valued” (Interview, April 22, 2008).

Immigration as a Heritage Resource in Contemporary US

We argue that anthropological research can be used to provide a more encompassing view of these changing representations of immigration so that

immigrants are valued in the present as well. To do this, anthropologists can help document and analyze how heritage is constructed in the present by individual immigrants, including giving voice to their experience through the exercise of life history interviews. Indeed, the immigrants we have interviewed also appreciate the value of such research as expressed in the words of an immigrant from Trinidad:

In the smallest way you can reach out to someone, reach out. Because just someone’s life history can make a difference in someone else’s life, that, my God, that person made it, that gave me hope (Interview, November 12, 2007).

While the conceptual framework of heritage prioritizes the relevance of time, in particular the value-laden gaze of present stakeholders into the past, we argue for an anchoring of such representations in both time and space—in the here-and-now—since it is through

...information expressed through daily routines and actions—and generally not put forth or sanctioned by any external authority—[that] the more private, culturally based sense of heritage ...can easily be overshadowed by more public expressions of heritage (Chambers 2006:4).

Contemporary immigration to the US represents the time variable, while the immigrant, low-income, urban enclaves close to the campus of the University of Maryland at College Park represent the spatial element. Here, space stands for the combination of built environment, neighborhood, and areas densely populated with “others” whose invisibility to the general polity including our students, is symbolic of exclusion in the American landscape, since

Understanding how and why some groups tend to remember a particular past, while others forget or ignore a past, is an important issue for critically evaluating and understanding the development and meaning of the American landscape (Shackel 2001:1).

Transitioning from private to public heritage—and from invisible to visible polity—is a political strategy (Fetzer 2000:100, 107), and one that has been ridden with problems throughout US history. As mentioned above, immigrants have often been shunned upon arrival, only to be revered with nostalgia a few generations later.

In this article we focus on low-income, immigrant enclaves to understand private heritage as localized culture and share an applied project, entitled *The Life Histories Project*, which began in 2007, and was designed to disseminate private experiences to the larger public as a tool to move beyond an exclusive understanding of both US culture and public heritage. The case clearly demonstrates that heritage statements can become controversial in the matter of immigration. On the one hand, there is not only one, but various histories of immigration, and numerous perspectives on how to tell the story depending on the immigrant's own positioning in the social structure. On the other hand, there can be histories that are accepted to account for the past but which are incongruous with the present.

Prince George's County (Maryland) as a New Immigration Gateway Area

Immigration is a population variable that designates those individuals born in a country other than that of residence. The continued role of the US as a major immigrant destination and a central actor in the globalization of the world economy increases both internal population diversity and the global circulation of capital (Wilson 2009). Immigrant remittances, or money sent back to countries of origin to be invested in long-term development projects or to

support daily needs of households, have decreased dramatically since the current recession took hold (Ratha 2008). The impact has varied in Mexico, India and China, the major remittance destinations. Mexico has been hardest hit because remittances, the second largest source of its foreign income (Littlefield 2009), are sent by workers in the unskilled labor market. The implications of conceptualizing immigration thus are twofold: one, that immigration is a social issue that affects the fabric of US society, not just the immigrants, and, second, that immigration can be more appropriately understood as not only a national but also an international issue, one that reveals the impact of the increasing entanglement of political economies on peoples' lives (Vertovec 2007: 962).

Immigrants accounted for about half of the growth in the US labor market during the last decade (Congressional Budget Office 2005), especially in new gateway areas in both urban and suburban sites (Godziak & Martin 2005). The Washington D.C. area, according to the American Community Survey (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2007), ranked seventh among entry sites, the first being New York. These regional changes attest to the relevance of immigration as a policy issue that needs understanding, an aim of *The Anthropology of the Immigrant Life Course Research Program*.

The Anthropology of the Immigrant Life Course Research Program

The campus of the University of Maryland at College Park is located in an area of Prince George's County containing a high proportion of immigrants in the state of Maryland and was, therefore, selected as a research site for program projects, including *The Life Histories Project* on which we report here. The study population is in itself diverse in terms of national origin (the majority were born in Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, and Africa, in that order), social class, ethnic affiliation, and religious belief, and new sources of diversity appear throughout the process of incorporation to the country.

Furthermore, the presence of immigrants, in all their diversity, is visible in these neighborhoods. There are a variety of ways in which the locality is inhabited and used. Some informants reside permanently there, such as the women originally from Ethiopia, Trinidad, and El Salvador, and the Indian couple who immigrated to the area to teach at the university, while others own commercial stores there, but reside in better-off localities, such as the Indian grocery owner, and the Vietnamese restaurant manager. These different uses of locality, themselves based on the perception of the social value of residence, have been, and continue to be, critical to the development of the commercial, social and cultural life of the immigrant neighborhoods. Ethnic products (see Figure 1 for examples of food, clothing, jewelry, and music), languages spoken, languages written (visible signage or local newspapers as shown in Figure 2), stores staffed by one immigrant population (for example, Vietnamese women in nail care salons; Korean men in electronic stores) or more than one (Indian restaurant owners with Mexican employees), Latin American male day laborers stationed around convenience stores or fast food restaurants, Latin American women selling food from trucks or stands are all material evidence of the diversity of the US social fabric in the area surrounding the University of Maryland College Park campus.

Despite this visible and obvious diversity, which has been further supported through the nineteen life history interviews conducted so far, a contradiction emerges in the ways the media, the political establishment, and the general public (including the university campus community) perceive this recent immigrant influx. It is seen as monolithic rather than diverse, and as a source of problems rather than of contributions. Perhaps because of negative representations by the media, the degree to which the public understands the value of this diverse population is uneven, as well as often negatively biased. This distortion is replicated among immigrants, who both internalize a devalued view of themselves as immigrants (Jaynes 2004)



Figure 1. A Diversity of Shops offer Goods from around the World, in Hyattsville and Langley Park, Prince George's County, Maryland

and often discriminate against immigrant groups (Lie 2004 and Camarillo 2004), resulting in competition for resources rather than solidarity.

To summarize, as with past immigrant flows, the contemporary influx of immigrants in the research site is not portrayed in all its diversity, perhaps because of the ease of homogenizing populations different from those doing the “othering”. This representation of homogeneity, the relative invisibility of the immigrant, and a distrusting stereotype of the “other,” despite the proximity of immigrants, are perceptions shared by many of the students at the University of Maryland we train.

To provide a counterpoint to these representations, *The Life Histories Project* creates an alternative source of knowledge. It serves as an intervention tool for rendering a more inclusive version of national history, and as a pedagogy to educate students as a civically-minded future workforce.

The Immigrant Life History Project and Its Uses

Each phase of the project was planned to accomplish the major aim. The first one, documenting the immigrants’ own memories and experiences, seeks to add

unheard personal voices to the public discourse on immigration. The second phase involves the preservation of materials to be exhibited as heritage resources. Finally, the third phase focuses on dissemination of these resources to trigger civic engagement through dialogue.

To document the immigrants’ own memories and experience, the main method has been to conduct life histories on a convenience sample of immigrants selected to fit the profile presented in the last population census (2002). Life histories are personal documents based on biography and, thus, provide an exceptional medium to understand the universal meaning of human experience through the personal realm. The process of telling a life story is by itself a means to order one’s experiences and thoughts—perhaps ironing over, or making sense of the fragmented or painful moments, and in this way, clarifying the suffering and joy of the path traveled. By reflecting on the life course, life histories assist in making better sense of the present.

Because the life history interviews are videotaped, we can include the material culture around the informant in his or her home. These personal items can provide a further dimension to one’s expression of identity and belonging. Moreover, these artifacts of personal heritage are often utilized to elicit

memories during the interview. With permission, they can also be included in the historic record and will be incorporated into a future exhibit.

To use this exercise as a learning experience for our students in applied anthropology, we trained them in conducting life histories (as well as transcribing and coding them). In some cases, these students participated through a course on immigration within *The Anthropology of the Immigrant Life Course Research Program*. This has accounted for a total of seven students. In another case, the training occurred through a semester-long, weekly *voluntary* workshop, whereby nine students participated in the training. Finally, three students had individual training, having expressed an eagerness to participate due to contact with others already involved in the project.

For members of a public audience, this very personal point-of-view provides an intimate connection to another person that may be otherwise depersonalized and distanced within the monolithic category of “immigrant”. Consequently, life histories, as a heritage resource, have the powerful potential to enable a humane understanding of what until then, for the audience, may have been a rather abstract dynamic easily dismissed, denied, or ignored. This becomes even more evident as the life histories are transcribed and coded for use in thematic analyses.

Using life histories to trigger dialogue that promotes civic engagement constitutes an important phase of the project. We started this by educating students—the first public we wanted to engage—that the campus is far from being representative of U.S. society in general and of Prince George’s County in particular. By eliciting and listening to how newcomers frame their experiences, the students learned to question their own assumptions, and see the U.S. as known and foreign at the same time. They also learned, through this civic engagement, to integrate similarities and differences while reflecting upon U.S. culture; to appreciate the access to resources available to those living in the U.S. as well as to empathize with

immigrant struggles to help their extended family networks adapt with minimal disruption to their known culture. As an immigrant from Vietnam expressed:

Once when the family decided to stay with you, that's their issue. How do you maintain the same thing that they had in Vietnam, so that the kids can go to school in the same way, and the parents will feel like it is not a strange land and they can't understand, and these are no longer the sons they had in Vietnam? It's tough to tell them that. You can learn some things by osmosis, but you can't just know it overnight. They have to realize it themselves. I never told them that, you know (Interview, April 26, 2007).

While transcribing, coding and analyzing their interviews afterwards, the closer lens through which the students scrutinized the interviews allowed them further insight into the overall meaning of membership in U.S. society. More particularly, many students gained a more realistic understanding of discrimination and other hardships immigrants face in their determination to obtain mobility for the betterment of their families. For example, one immigrant from Ethiopia who came to the U.S. on her own with her daughter, stated:

They leave the children to me in the morning. It was in Davidsonfield, now I know. I take the two children to their school. Bring the baby with me. Feed her and all that, clean the house, make the food. When they come in the evening, I feed them. Put the children in bed. I did it all.

But what hurts me to all these was my child...I don't want to cry, I'll cry. Whenever I think about this it just makes me... I didn't have time for my child, which I will never forget either. When she comes home from school she was walking in the woods by herself. She could be scared in the woods because she



Figure 2. An Example of Diverse Newspapers and Promotional Leaflets Available in Prince George's County, Maryland

had never seen this type of life. But like I said before, you know what, all this will pass. I am building something for my children where a woman can be what they want to be, and these are women (Interview, October 7, 2007).

The diverse, difficult and hurtful situations that almost every immigrant encountered revealed a harsh reality to the students about the degrees of difficulty some citizens face in functioning in society and how, when compared to others, all our difficulties are quite relative.

Other students have been exposed to additional situations where the immigrants' legitimacy as citizens has been undermined. In analysis of the media for her honors thesis, Jenna Hall suggested that frequently used terms of classification such as 'illegal' and 'alien' generalize diverse populations into an entire group of people, placing doubt about their status as citizens, and fueling the fires of enduring prejudice against immigrant communities. Lillian Torres Peña concurred, noting in her master's paper that "the bias and anti-immigrant language is apparent to anyone who is willing to notice. Just take the awful terms 'illegal' that is often used in headlines while immigrants may be used in the body of an article".

To a wider public, the documentation, preservation, and accessibility of life histories can provide a very

important heritage resource that reaches beyond the particular group concerned. Depending upon how they are used (i.e. culturally sensitive to their presentation, impact, etc.) the histories can contribute towards very responsible, positive, developments, including giving voice to, and representation of, the different immigrant groups of the area, encouraging dialogue between individuals from different immigrant groupings revealing experiences and goals that may be shared, and supporting collaboration. These histories provide the opportunity for different groups to unify for support in reaching common objectives.

To promote access to this precious resource in our particular project the individual life histories collected were edited together into a single film. This short, three-minute version was utilized within three different types of contexts. First of all, it was shown as an elicitation tool in educational venues such as a workshop on immigration organized by Freidenberg for teachers in Montgomery and Prince George's Counties and in presentations given by both authors at the 2008 SFAA and 2008 SANA Annual meetings. A later, twelve-minute version containing a larger sample of interviews was shown at several University of Maryland events during 2008-2009, including the Conference on Immigrant Incorporation and Civil Society, the Working Group in Immigration at the Maryland

Population Center, at Maryland Day 2009, and in courses both in the Department of Anthropology and the School of Journalism. Finally, the film will comprise one element among several of a permanent community museum exhibit at the Museum of the Immigrant Experience which is in its planning stages.

The museum exhibit also is expected to be mobile, and thus travel beyond the area selected for study as well. The life histories, along with the overall exhibit that provides a context to the stories, will then have the potential to communicate links to the public, between what may otherwise appear as separate, personal and public concerns, and local and global dynamics. The appreciation for the existence of these relationships, and understanding their ever-present dialogic impact, can challenge the bias so often communicated by individual sources, and contribute to a more well-rounded understanding of immigrants and immigration—an issue that reaches around the world and impacts us all. Through these various means, this project seeks to illustrate the interplay between practicing, applied, and public interest anthropology.

Concluding Remarks

Immigration is a highly politicized issue in the contemporary United States, one that relates to the immigrants themselves but also to current controversies about the idea of nation. And yet the contemporary immigrants and the neighborhoods where they concentrate are outside the current heritage discourse, particularly in its public dimension. In contrast to private heritage, public heritage results from the assignment of cultural value to a site, object or practice by stakeholders who are legitimized by the nation-state. Does this act of legitimization imply that public heritage is more about the past than about the present? Does overlooking the immigrant in the process of making heritage limit the value of immigrant culture to private heritage alone?

These questions press us to argue for firmer collaborations of ethnographers with archaeologists and public

historians to better understand the *process* of heritage development, rather than just focus on heritage as *product*. For, surely, what needs more attention is the *process* of political negotiation among stakeholders to achieve consensus on value since, like culture, heritage is a dynamic construct that changes as it is being communicated.

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