

# LATIN AMERICANS AT HOME ABROAD

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**Afro Central Americans in New York City: Garifuna Tales of Transnational Movements in Racialized Space.** By Sarah England. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006. Pp. 296. \$59.95 cloth.

**Haitians in New York City: Transnationalism and Hometown Associations.** By François Pierre-Louis Jr. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006. Pp. 160. \$55.00 cloth.

**Mexican New York: Transnational Lives of New Immigrants.** By Robert Courtney Smith. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. Pp. 385. \$55.00 hardcover, \$21.95 paper.

**Janitors, Street Vendors, and Activists: The Lives of Mexican Immigrants in Silicon Valley.** By Christian Zolniski. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006. Pp. 262. \$50.00 hardcover, \$18.95 paper.

The books reviewed here arrived under the heading of “Latinos in the United States”—a logical classification based on their titles—yet, singly and collectively, they underscore the inadequacy of an analytical focus limited to a single place or category of identity. While this observation is hardly novel, the cases presented in these four works refine and deepen our understanding of the transnational processes that have become a major focus of critical attention since the early 1990s. They demonstrate the interplay of global economic forces, states, and the unique circumstances found in each locality. Central to each account is an emphasis on agency: they detail how immigrants, migrants, their hometown kin, and fellow community members negotiate and at times transform general parameters, acting in accordance with cultural principles and community histories. Perhaps most noteworthy is that these studies vividly convey the complexity of the intertwining of peoples and processes in distinct national contexts. They leave no doubt that these “Latinos in the United States”—whether undocumented residents, naturalized citizens, or their second-generation children—are an integral part of America, not only in terms of their economic contributions but also, increasingly, through their political participation. Such assimilation may not be at odds with con-

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tinued attachment to a foreign homeland and participation in it; indeed, seemingly contradictory involvements may in fact enhance one another.

Christian Zlolniski's detailed ethnographic study of "Mexican immigrants employed in low-wage jobs in Silicon Valley" (3) provides a fruitful backdrop for understanding the dialectic between economic and political forces in the lives of immigrants and their agency in "the politics of resistance and contestation" (4), albeit within significant limitations and constraints. Drawing on intensive fieldwork conducted between 1991 and 1993, with follow-up research until 2004, Zlolniski examines "the paradox of poverty in the midst of affluence" (4) and challenges the common claim that the new high-tech economy has eliminated the need for unskilled workers. Instead, he contends that globalization has created a "bifurcated labor demand" (26), fomenting a new class of low-skilled immigrant workers drawn by jobs generated by the high-tech sector.

Targeting the increasingly common practice of subcontracting, Zlolniski traces the tribulations of janitorial workers who went from the frying pan into the fire when they successfully sought union support in protest of poor employment conditions at a small, nonunionized, Korean-owned cleaning company, only to be rehired by a huge, global, unionized corporation that increased their workload and exploited them in a different manner. This sequence of events demonstrates the flexible strategies used to achieve labor flexibility itself. Zlolniski astutely observes that workers blamed the subcontractors who were their immediate employers, rather than the corporation that replaced the in-house custodial staff to cut costs, yet retained control over these services through "indirect rule." His interesting conclusion is that "workers were not resisting incorporation into a disciplined proletarian workforce . . . but were instead protesting their transformation into a subclass of cheap and disposable workers at the hands of unscrupulous contractors," that is, their "subproletarianization" (70–71). Throwing the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) into this mix, Zlolniski highlights the "structural limits to political agency" that undermine many immigrants' faith in union activity and that ultimately maintain undocumented workers in a precarious and vulnerable state (72).

Not content to leave his investigation as merely an account of subcontracting, Zlolniski proceeds to argue that an "inevitable outcome when low-skilled occupations provide immigrant workers with only limited avenues for economic stability and mobility" is the expansion of activities that compose the informal economy (105). Chronicles of a self-employed street vendor of homemade food, of a *paletero* daily renting a pushcart to peddle fruit pops at a set price, and of a dentist offering his unlicensed services to poor immigrants illustrate the diversity of occupations and work conditions, as well as the risks and benefits commonly faced by those who choose such alternatives to unstable, poorly paid, highly regi-

mented jobs in the formal economy. Noting that these activities are often undertaken to supplement low wages, and thus subsidize workers in the formal economy, Zlolniski makes clear that what may appear to be competing employment strategies are two sides of the same coin; the growth in informal activities responds to the same economic forces that fuel the proliferation of service jobs in the formal sector.

These economic forces also penetrate the domestic sphere. Challenging romanticized and monolithic models of Mexican extended-family households, Zlolniski sees the frequency of such living arrangements as a "pragmatic response to the set of economic and legal constraints," rather than to a cultural ideal (176). Employing ethnographic details from a number of cases, Zlolniski shows the constant fluctuation of members in such households, as well as the range of residential patterns, degrees of mutual support and reciprocity, potential tensions, internal stratification, and gender subordination.

Returning to the issue of the politicization of immigrants, Zlolniski refutes the common assumption that immigrants are not only disenfranchised, but uninvolved and disinterested in local affairs. He follows the "political socialization" (163) of women in organizations focused on family and community, a largely unrecognized counterpart to the mostly male arena of labor-union activism. He traces their progress from an informal, loosely ordered membership to a more structured group of advocates who deploy strategies gained through their experience of interacting with government agents and more established political actors. Ever attentive to both gains and limitations in empowerment, Zlolniski demonstrates how increased political power and effectiveness came at the cost of full control over goals and decision-making processes, and of the ability to integrate political activities with family and social life.

Zlolniski effectively elucidates political, economic, and other structural constraints as well as the unexpected potential for political mobilization that (im)migrants encounter in countless settings even beyond Silicon Valley. He nonetheless rightly points out that "locality shapes the political opportunities to respond to structural forces, such as labor subcontracting, differently in different regions, and . . . the alignment of local political forces in each place plays a central role" (192). The remaining texts examined in this review also consider the dynamic between local experience and broader structural forces; however, unlike Zlolniski's work, they show how the events and processes of one locale are inextricably interconnected with those of other places and national contexts.

Of these studies, François Pierre-Louis Jr.'s *Haitians in New York City*, has the narrowest focus and methodology, examining Haitian hometown associations (HTAs) in New York City to shed light on tensions between Haitians' continued ties to their homeland and their increasing political participation and power in the United States. Whereas the other works

reviewed offer richly detailed ethnographies, Pierre-Louis paints with broad strokes, apparently basing his arguments on interviews and survey questionnaires, census data, visits to places where HTA projects were carried out, and, presumably, his own experiences as a "quintessential transnationalist" (4). Pierre-Louis first joined his parents in the United States in the early 1970s, moved back to Haiti after college in 1986 "to organize with the emerging democratic movement" following the ouster of Jean-Claude Duvalier (3), and worked with grassroots organizations as a member of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's private cabinet in 1991, finally returning to New York when Aristide was removed from office.

According to Pierre-Louis, HTAs were formed to fill the vacuum in leadership left when prominent political exiles, mainly concerned with the overthrow of the Duvalier dictatorship, returned to Haiti pursuant to the fall of that regime in 1986 (21). Increasing in number and prominence after Aristide's election in 1990, HTAs preserved the legacy of these exiles, sustaining interest in Haitian issues while refocusing attention on rebuilding Haiti. Pierre-Louis accounts for these developments primarily in functionalist terms, arguing that HTAs were created to cope with discrimination in the United States; they acted to maintain the status and prestige of their own members, who, though largely from the elite and middle classes, were frequently relegated to more menial employment and a more stigmatized racial identity than those to which they had been accustomed in Haiti. In addition to improving material conditions in Haitian hometowns, among the contributions of HTAs that Pierre-Louis identifies is that they helped to close historical gaps between city and country, and between Haitians in Haiti and abroad. He claims that HTAs thus promoted the "advancement of an equitable society in Haiti" (55). It is not quite clear how Pierre-Louis reconciles this assertion with his finding that most HTA leaders and members were highly educated professionals who tended to network and socialize primarily among themselves.

Pierre-Louis also finds that most HTA constituents were first-generation immigrants who took U.S. citizenship despite feeling themselves to be more Haitian than American (94). Considering their demographic make-up and insularity, it may not seem surprising that the Haitian immigrants in this study assert a distinct ethnic identity from African Americans while not denying their common African heritage and their pride that their motherland was the first black republic. This has resulted in "segmented assimilation," through which Haitians "maintain their cultural differences while enhancing their economic and social standing in relation to other ethnic groups that are discriminated against" (5). Nonetheless, given Haiti's chronic instability and inability to support and provide services for its citizens both at home and abroad, HTAs have increasingly encouraged their members to engage in U.S. electoral politics, ultimately situating Haitians in New York as an increasingly influential,

independent constituency, deemed worthy of courting by politicians both in their place of residence and in their homeland. This yields what I consider to be the most compelling and significant contribution of this book: the demonstration of Haitian immigrants' enhanced influence in both national contexts and the ways that these transnational involvements are interrelated.

The books by Sarah England and Robert Courtney Smith elaborate similar themes in a more comprehensive manner, developing nuanced arguments through multisited ethnographies of transnational communities. Since their expulsion from St. Vincent and resettlement along the northern coast of Central America in the 1790s, the Garifuna's experience has been, as England notes, one of "displacement, exile, and migration" (33). Wage labor outside their home villages has long been "a means of obtaining industrial goods to supplement an otherwise adequate subsistence economy" (33), making labor migration an integral component of Garifuna society and culture, and hence a particularly revealing case to study. Like Pierre-Louis, England analyzes transnational organizations; however, she situates this analysis within a "classic anthropological study" (6) that takes into account social structures and culture, and includes competing discourses, ideologies, and points of view among Garifuna in Limón, Honduras, and New York City. Based on fieldwork conducted between 1993 and 1997, her principal concern is how "Garifuna transnational social movements are informed and shaped by the experience of negotiating the multiple structures and ideologies of race, class, and nationalism their members encounter in the United States and Central America." She accounts for the diversity of opinions within this community by arguing that transnationalization "has greatly complicated the way Garifuna are positioned vis-à-vis these systems of inequality in two national contexts" (6).

True to the classic anthropological approach, England, like Zolniski, demonstrates the complexity and variation of household arrangements. However, England takes us further "by expanding the definition of household to include members who are not co-resident but who participate economically and through decision-making" (100). She argues that "households and families are not neatly bounded economic or residential units" and that "Garifuna may participate in multiple households simultaneously" (78). This enables her to effectively make the case that "it is impossible to analyze households in Honduras and New York as separate entities" (87). In contrast to Zolniski's functionalist explanation of extended family households among Mexican migrants, England stresses matrifocal kinship, which places women as mothers at the center of Garifuna households, extended kin networks, and familial and community rituals. Indeed, she asserts that matrifocality is "an organizing principle of the entire transnational community" (77). This principle and the pat-

terns it shapes are nonetheless “adapted to the different conditions Garifuna encounter in Central America and the United States, especially in terms of the gendered labor market and relations to the state” (68–69). A prime example is the effect of U.S. immigration law, which emphasizes family reunification, making formal marriage a prerequisite.

Elaborating this transnational perspective, England complements Zolniski’s elucidation of political economy in the United States by detailing how international and national economic trends and policies affect conditions in migrant homelands as well. Her account deepens the analysis of processes mentioned in Pierre-Louis’ discussion of Haiti, providing insights relevant to circumstances throughout Latin America. She argues that the embrace of neoliberalism in the 1980s, together with the Callejas administration’s adoption in 1990 of IMF-mandated economic adjustment programs, encouraged foreign investment in Honduras, especially in agro-industrial production of export commodities and tourism in the region where the Garifuna had long been settled. These developments undermined the local subsistence economy. In reaction, Limoneños revised their attitude toward transnational migration, going from viewing it as “one option among others” through the 1970s to seeing it in the 1980s and 1990s “as the only real option for economic improvement and, for many households receiving the remittances of those migrants, for basic survival” (63). This has yielded a “prevalent belief among Limoneños that as long as one stays in Limón . . . one is merely surviving, practicing *la cultura de la sobrevivencia*” (123). While many Garifuna thus feel compelled to migrate to the United States, they likewise feel drawn to return, insofar as the Garifuna version of “the ‘American dream’ is to work in the United States just long enough to generate enough capital to make them financially independent in Honduras” (130). Success must ultimately be achieved and displayed in their homeland, where returning migrants typically hold a higher class position than they can in the United States.

A strength of England’s analysis is her consideration of critical discourses that compete with the dominant perspective to argue that dependence on remittances and the consumption they enable is debilitating and enslaving. These competing discourses also have a counterpart at the community level, particularly in critiques of ideologies and policies of progress and development manifested in neoliberalism and even in projects promoted by hometown organizations in New York City since the 1970s. Exemplary of these new community groups is the *Movimiento Negro Iseri Lidawamari* (Black Movement New Dawn), the grassroots organization that initially drew England to Limón before she came to appreciate the benefit of a transnational perspective. Such activists seek sustainable development, economic self-sufficiency, and cultural autonomy as the roots of a more viable and just society for the Garifuna. Informed in part by international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and discourses



of racial and ethnic rights, they and other Garifuna have increasingly criticized the governments of Honduras and the United States for discrimination. The Garifuna, who in Honduras are labeled a *pueblo autóctono* or *pueblo étnico* (terms used synonymously for peoples whose ties to the land predate the existence of the state), also self-identify as black. Iseri Lidawamari thus seeks to address the Garifuna's double marginalization vis-à-vis the officially mestizo nation of Honduras.

Groups like Iseri Lidawamari have made strides in pressuring the Honduran government to support their agenda. However, the concessions made are partial and internally contradictory, insofar as the government continues to enact policies cut from the cloth of neoliberalism and implements structural adjustment programs detrimental to Garifuna villages. Moreover, the government recognizes multiculturalism only within the bounds of Honduran nationalism. Deftly weaving together these various strands, England succeeds in illuminating a "prime example of how racial, ethnic, and national identities are constructed and negotiated" (223) by situating the Garifuna at the intersection of various regional and national economies and policies, social and cultural principles, and identity categories ranging from black to indigenous/autochthonous, Latino, Honduran, and, increasingly, the "Garifuna Nation."

Even more than England, Pierre-Louis, and Zlolniski, Smith puts transnationalism at the center of his analysis, conceptualizing *Mexican New York* as "a book about how the lives of many contemporary immigrants and their children are being lived transnationally" (3). He sites his account—especially the introductory and concluding chapters—squarely within recent literature of a transnational perspective, with the aim of legitimizing this approach (16), while critiquing and improving on earlier scholarship (278). Smith's "analytical strategy is dialectic, emphasizing how local and larger forces, structures, and actors influence each other over time in a generative historical process" (4); however, the forte of his book is its ability to take the reader into the intimate details of its subjects' lives and relationships, thanks to the close rapport developed by Smith in the course of fifteen years of ethnography, beginning in 1988. A preponderance of the text consists of details and anecdotes about individuals, families, and events drawn from fieldwork in New York and to a lesser extent in several visits to Ticuani, Puebla. This New York–Ticuani community is Smith's primary analytical unit and the framework of his subjects' lives.

Challenging the tendency to posit transnationalism as an alternative to assimilation, Smith persuasively demonstrates the interrelationship of these two processes, particularly in his discussions of Ticuani youth. To this end, he investigates three themes or spheres of life, noting that the search for recognition and respect is a common impetus in all three (277).

The first of these themes is "the formation of political community" (4), which Smith addresses by focusing on the committee that heads the Tic-

uani hometown association in New York City. This account adds an additional dimension to the findings of the authors previously discussed in that it explains how this committee, which “has been run by the same men for thirty years” (57), has helped to institutionalize transnational participation and has “created a sense of community among Ticuanenses in New York” (63). These developments have in turn impacted politics internal to the community and its relationship to broader political entities. Highlighting contestation between the New York committee on the one hand and local municipal authorities and informal power bosses (*caciques*) on the other, Smith elucidates the negotiation of membership, legitimate participation, and political power inherent in transnational communities. Analyzing the municipal elections of 1999, he concurs with others who found that “the movement toward democratization in Mexico creates opportunities for Mexican migrants to intervene” (78)—as also occurred in the case of Haiti, as Pierre-Louis notes—while reiterating “the larger point . . . that the institutions of the state and political parties, even on a local level, matter a great deal in the emergence of the larger forces of transnationalization and globalization” (90).

Negotiation, heterogeneity, and the coexistence of various models or images that one may draw upon in life is also central to the book’s second main theme—gender—which Smith examines both in first-generation Ticuanense migrants and in their second-generation immigrant children. Like his analysis of the formation of political community, Smith’s insights into gender are enlightening. His most novel contribution, however, is perhaps his approach to the book’s third main subject: Ticuani youth, especially the second generation. He argues that, although the novelty of many transnational phenomena is contestable, “the transnationalization of second-generation adolescence seems to be historically new” (283). Similarly new is its treatment in Smith’s account, for here he most vividly makes a case for the mutual implication of transnationalization and assimilation. Noting that “return has become a key ritual in second-generation adolescence” (127), especially so that these youths can take part in the fiesta and the *Antorcha* (torch run) of Ticuani’s patron *Padre Jesus*, or fulfill *promesas* to him, Smith sees these safe, shared “embodied practices” and “social proprioception” (178, 242) as promoting a more assured sense of self, offering highly valued models of Mexican culture and ethnicity. Contrary to its assessment by many others, transnationalization may in this respect actually enhance the positive assimilation of second-generation Ticuanense immigrants as upwardly mobile Mexican American New Yorkers who contest their positioning as a racialized subclass.

Attentive to possible disparities in any community, Smith counterpoises this optimistic trajectory to that of gangs, made up primarily of teen migrants whose numbers surged with family reunification after the immi-



gration reforms of 1986. Frustrations and resentment that accompanied living with their parents, often for the first time, coupled with constant targeting by blacks and Puerto Ricans, who perceived their neighborhood and schools as being overrun by these recent arrivals, challenged their sense of security, physical safety, and masculinity. Forming gangs, they claimed, helped them to defend themselves and functioned, in Smith's words, "as an institution of migrant reception and recruitment" (218). Their stigmatization, both during visits to Ticuani and in New York, led to a more negative outcome of the intertwining of transnationalization and assimilation for these youths, while the "pressures of assimilation and migration combine in New York and the Mixteca to transnationalize gang life" (241).

Smith wraps up his ethnographic epic with some reflections on change. He notes that immigrants' involvement in their homeland may change over the course of their lives. In particular, he observes that, as New York-born Ticuanenses reached adulthood, "the aspirations, lack of time, and autonomous ambition in the second generation that enabled them to keep the immigrant bargain with their parents conflicted with the demands of their previous level of transnational activity" (194). With a nod to the "darker side" (274) of transnational life, Smith expresses concern about some of the changes he observed during his visit to Ticuani in 1998, after a five-year absence: the prevalence and influence of gangs had increased palpably, affecting life in Ticuani and potentially compromising the positive experiences of second-generation adolescents. These and other problems notwithstanding, Smith concludes that transnational life will endure.

As Smith himself notes, he approached his topic of study by "going where the ducks are," following Howard Becker's prescription to "closely follow the action for a long time, tell stories accurately, and examine more and not less of the thing under study" (277). It is interesting to speculate what would have been the outcome if each of the authors in this review had followed the ducks pursued by others. Would Zlolniski have been drawn to a transnational perspective had he landed in a business staffed by Ticuanenses? Would Smith have delved further into economic structures or political processes in New York had he not encountered ducks so involved with their hometown association and close-knit transnational community? Might he or England have detailed a greater range of transnational entailments among the Haitians discussed by Pierre-Louis? Might England have given greater emphasis to the racialization and ethnicization of Mexicans in Silicon Valley? The answers to these questions are far from clear. Nonetheless, viewing the reviewed works as a group indicates how transnationalism and globalization, like a crystal, change appearance in accord with one's vantage point and as common forces are refracted through local circumstances and cultures. What is clear is

that each of these studies, like many others beyond the scope of this review, elucidates the workings of global and transnational processes. They make us ever more attentive to the range of possible entanglements, structures, forces, and outcomes, pointing us toward deeper complexities of the contemporary world and challenging us to expand the scope of Latin American and Latino studies.