

Chronicles of Change: Models of Mexican Immigrant Identity in Suburban Community Narratives

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ABSTRACT

In the past fifteen years, the town of New Marshall has experienced major changes that have influenced the ways its residents view each other. Mexican immigration to New Marshall, a suburb of 30,000 located outside a large Eastern metropolis, grew dramatically between 1990 and 2000. Where once Mexicans comprised less than 0.5% of the population, they now make up over 6% (in official census figures). But Mexican immigration has not been the only radical change the town has seen this century. Some fifty years ago, New Marshall was a prosperous middle-class suburb. It was a target for European immigrants, especially Italians, who came to work in local industry. Waves of African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and South Asians followed, and a sizable African American population remains. New Marshall also experienced an economic decline, and now faces pressing economic and social concerns including poverty, crime, and lower educational achievement than surrounding suburbs. New Marshall residents understand the transformation of their town by using various models to make sense of the characteristics and prospects of diverse groups of New Marshall residents. This paper explores the models of personhood applied to and used by Mexicans and other demographic groups in New Marshall, by examining narratives of the town's history. "Models of personhood" are characterizations of the dispositions, moral strengths and weaknesses, typical behaviors, and life prospects of a person or group. Residents of New Marshall, like all of us, rely on such models when they react to and characterize others. This study focuses on the models of personhood that circulate in this community, and the mechanisms, social domains, and timescales of their circulation. Narrative data are triangulated with observational data and analyses of documents such as media reports, minutes from town governance meetings, and community newsletters and bulletins. The data show that some residents identify Mexican immigrants as a strain on the already declining resources of the town, while others hail the immigrants as hard workers who will reverse the decline brought on by earlier groups. Our data reveal several contradictory models of personhood that are applied to Mexican immigrants in New Marshall. We claim that these models are important for young people, especially Mexican immigrant youth, because adolescents are attuned to questions of identity. An understanding of the models of personhood circulating in New Marshall brings us closer to an understanding of the ways in which these models may influence the experiences and aspirations of Mexican immigrant adolescents and come to bear upon their future paths.

Over the past several months, the editorial page of the New Marshall paper has articulated different attitudes toward immigration in America. Less than two weeks ago, the paper ran the following editorial.

Action must be taken on illegal immigration

The immigration debate is finally heating up on the national level. We have watched the immigrant population grow exponentially in New Marshall during the past several years, and while we know there are plenty of legal immigrants making a better life for themselves and their families, we also know there are many illegal aliens placing a strain on our social services. We have not seen such an influx of immigrants since the turn of the 20th Century. Now we are accommodating hundreds of thousands of immigrants, mostly from Mexico, and while we are a country of immigrants, we must begin to ask the tough questions and enforce the immigration laws we have on the books. Do we need new laws? Do we need a fence separating Mexico and the United States? Should we send every illegal immigrant back to his or her native country? These are the questions being debated right now in the United States Senate. While it would be easy to answer yes to all of the above, is this really what we want to do? Immigrants built this nation after the Industrial Revolution. Is it so far fetched to think they could re-build this country after the horrific events of Sept. 11 and Katrina? Or is it possible immigrants could make this country more competitive on the global stage where we are being out-performed by too many countries? Erecting a fence on the Mexican border seems far too expensive for us. Perhaps better border patrols are in order. Deporting illegal aliens in this country should be a matter of course. There shouldn't be any question. If residents of this country are required to live by the rules, why in the world would someone from another country be permitted to live outside of them? We must find a way for residents of Mexico who want to come to this country to do so legally. The operative word being, legally. However unfortunate or tragic the illegal population in this country finds our current laws simply should not matter. The hundreds of thousands of protesters who took to the streets this past weekend have shown their defiance. We cannot be swayed by their solidarity. Wrong is wrong. And while we certainly have some obligation to listen, we have no reason to wait until their emotions cool down before taking action on illegal immigration.

This editorial mentions the contributions that immigrants make to the United States, but it emphasizes the anti-immigrant rhetoric that has been circulating more widely in the media recently, as the U.S. Congress considers various immigration bills. The debate between critics and advocates of immigration contains many familiar characterizations of

immigrants: as being "a strain on our social services," as refusing "to live by the rules," as "re-build[ing] this country," as "mak[ing] this country more competitive," and so on. All of these characterizations are resources that both longstanding residents and immigrants themselves draw on as they make sense of Mexican immigrant residents who have appeared so quickly in Latino Diaspora locations across the country.

This recent editorial contrasts with a series the New Marshall paper ran last summer, titled "Our Family Tree," in which the editor wrote that "the term melting pot could have been invented right here in the New Marshall area. People from all walks of life settled here to make a better life for themselves and their families, and most of them have done just that." He introduced the series as follows:

We want to pull back the curtains and let the sun shine on the rich history that is us. We want the story of your heritage to unfurl on our pages the way your lives have unfurled before your very eyes....What we really want to do is tell people where everyone came from and why. So let me know if you have a little insight on your heritage. I want a good portion of the stories to be told by you. I can think of a few people right off the top of my head who really know their heritage and have some terrific stories about how their ancestors arrived in this country and settled in the New Marshall area. With your help I think this will be a great series.

Here the editor encourages longstanding residents to recall their own immigrant origins, and he describes these immigrant histories approvingly. The contrast between these two editorials points out the sometimes-contradictory attitude of American attitudes toward immigration. As Suárez-Orozco (1998) has noted, Americans commonly employ both "pro-" and "anti-immigration scripts," and in doing so we often contradict ourselves.

The contrasting editorials also reveal the complex resources available to characterize Mexican immigrants in a place like New Marshall. When a community experiences rapid immigration of an unfamiliar group, both longstanding and immigrant residents must figure out what this immigration means for their town and each other.

One way they do this is to tell stories of how their town has developed and where it is going, and to imagine the role that new immigrants and other groups are playing in these stories (Wertsch, 2002). These stories allow people to make sense of who they and others are, and they influence both immigrants' and other residents' aspirations and actions. In creating these stories about where their town is going and who various residents are, people draw on resources that include the sort of ideas that appear in the national immigration debate and recur in the first editorial—about hardworking and contributing immigrants, and about parasitic and rule-breaking immigrants, for instance. People also draw on the immigration narratives of their own ethnic communities—the positive stories of many Eastern and Southern European immigrants who arrived a century ago and whose ancestors have often risen socially, the more proprietorial stories of many longstanding Anglo residents who often erase their immigrant origins, or the very different stories of enslavement and oppression told by many African Americans. In addition, people also characterize immigrants against their understandings of various longstanding groups—comparing or contrasting immigrants to "underclass" urban residents, to "model" Asian immigrants, and the like.

This paper explores how stories of New Marshall's history employ these various resources in different configurations, as longstanding residents make sense of their new Mexican neighbors. (Although we have gathered data from Mexican immigrants themselves, in this paper we focus on non-immigrant narratives). Some of the stories are simple and predictable, but many are not. We are concerned to uncover the diverse resources residents use as they characterize immigrants and how different types of narrators tend to combine resources into recognizable stories and models. By listening

carefully to their stories, we can hear the multiple types of positions that both longstanding and immigrant residents imagine for themselves and others.

Models of Personhood in the New Latino Diaspora

Mexicans are the oldest and largest immigrant group to the United States (Zúñiga & Hernández-León, 2005). In fact, the ancestors of many Mexican Americans arrived before the United States existed. Longstanding patterns of Mexican presence in the U.S. have changed dramatically in the past fifteen years, however. Large numbers of Mexican immigrants have settled in the Midwest, the South and the Northeast—often in rural and (increasingly) suburban areas where Mexican-origin people have not lived before. Between 1990 and 2000, the number of Latino immigrants (most of whom are Mexican) to “new settlement states” grew by 130%, as opposed to 50% growth in traditional settlement states (Suro & Tafoya, 2004; Therrien & Ramirez, 2000). Fast-growing “exurban” areas, beyond the suburbs of major metropolitan areas and traditionally attractive to white, middle-class families, are also an increasingly attractive destination for Latino immigrants, drawn by rapid expansion in retail, service, and construction employment opportunities (Frey, 2006). “First suburbs,” the zones of development first to develop outside cities and still located relatively close to the city center, are also home to a growing number of Latino immigrants. In 2000, as many Latinos lived in first suburbs as lived in their associated cities (Puentes & Warren, 2006). With a wider range of destinations, the character of Mexican immigration has also changed. A migration that was once mostly male and seasonal now often involves families settling more permanently (Durand & Massey, 2004).

Though spread across the U.S. in places as geographically diverse as Iowa, Kentucky, and Pennsylvania, the small rural and suburban towns that have become new destination sites in the Latino Diaspora often have much in common, both in their attractiveness to immigrants and in the way residents react to the new arrivals. These communities are often home to agricultural or manufacturing industries with labor demands unmet by long-term residents (Hernández-León 2000; Grey & Woodrick 2005; Shutika 2005). And while the arrival of many young residents of working age sometimes brings revival to a struggling downtown (Grey & Woodrick 2005), the receiving communities also often react with hostility (Murillo 2002). Neighbors complain about too many young, single men living in overcrowded apartments and parking too many cars on crowded streets (Shutika 2005). The burgeoning Mexican community sometimes represents a “symbolic challenge” to other long-established minority communities (Rich & Miranda 2005: 203), and there can be a rise in African American on Latino crime. Sometimes the new immigrants are perceived as hard-working contributors to the town, and other times as undesirable neighbors who have brought with them the social ills of the big city (Murillo 2002; Hernández-León & Zúñiga 2005; Rich & Miranda 2005). In general, host communities are deeply ambivalent about the growth of the Mexican population in their midst, and internal conflicts over education, social services, local public policy and general neighborliness bubble to the surface of public discourse in newspapers, local government, businesses, schools, and community organizations.

Often manifested in these public debates are two competing accounts of who the Mexicans are. These accounts are what Suárez-Orozco (1998) calls the "pro-immigration" and "anti-immigration scripts." The pro-immigration script casts

immigrants as positive ideal-types: “humble, hard-working folk, killing themselves to become proud and loyal Americans” (290), people who, in their embodiment of the American Dream, reassure the general public that the U.S. is still young, determined, and limitless. In the anti-immigration script, however, immigrants are cast as menacing and predatory, criminals or even terrorists, who threaten to steal jobs and unravel the nation’s cultural integrity. Suárez-Orozco writes that, in these negative scripts, “immigration articulates powerful anxieties about ‘losing control’ or ‘losing boundaries’” (292) in a globalizing and increasingly unpredictable world.

While immigrant communities have long been part of the fabric of metropolitan areas, residents of most rural and suburban areas have had little experience with the incorporation of substantial numbers of immigrants. Long-time residents sometimes embrace their new neighbors as model citizens and other times reject them as challenges to established community ways. In either case, people draw upon the symbolic resources available to them, whether images of Horatio Alger or terrorist, to make sense of the new and different people in their midst. In New Marshall, we have found unexpected combinations and recombinations of both positive and negative portrayals of immigrants, narratives that draw upon images of a group’s own past as well as their past experiences of others, assembled in unique ways to produce a complex, often ambivalent portrait of Mexican immigrants. This study aims to further our understanding of how people use the symbolic resources available in their discursive environment to do this. We examine this process in a place where Mexican immigrants are not only new, but also where immigration is a prized part of recent local history and other groups’ stories are a fruitful source of models of who these new immigrants are or should be.

"Models of personhood" are one primary resource that narrators use to build their accounts of immigrants and other people. A "model of personhood" is a characterization of the dispositions, moral strengths and weaknesses, typical behaviors and life prospects of a person or group. In order to understand how New Marshall residents are making sense of the Mexican immigrants in town, it is necessary to examine the models of personhood that circulate in the discursive environment of the town. Residents of New Marshall, like all of us, rely on such models often in both institutional and everyday life, when reacting to and characterizing others.

Recent work in linguistic anthropology has described models of personhood more precisely and has begun to explain how they circulate (Agha, in press; Agha & Wortham, 2005; Silverstein, 1998; Urban, 2001; Wortham, 2005, 2006). Anthropologists and others have talked about such models for decades (e.g., Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998), but recent work has provided a fuller account of how people use signs to create models of personhood. Linguistic anthropological analyses allow us to trace how models of personhood move from event to event across time, by following the signs that index such models and explaining how signs evoke particular models in practice.

Social scientists used to conceive of a culture, including characteristic models of personhood, as containing relatively homogeneous beliefs and practices. More contemporary accounts speak instead of circulating signs, models and practices. Any model has had a certain extent of circulation and thus has what Agha (in press) calls a "social domain"—the group of people who recognize and can interpret experience using that model. The circulation of cultural signs and models can be traced empirically, so that we can determine the extent of a model's influence. In New Marshall, because of its

ethnic and economic heterogeneity, and because of the complex streams of cultural circulation that exist under “globalization” (Suárez-Orozco & Qin-Hilliard, 2004), various models of personhood are applied to Mexican immigrants, and often in complex and contradictory ways.

Contemporary work has also begun to explore the mechanisms that accomplish the circulation of cultural models, including media, educational institutions, folklore and other oral practices (Agha, in press; Spitulnik, 1996; Urban, 1996, 2001; Wortham, 2006). In order to understand the ideological environment that immigrant Mexican youth confront in a place like New Marshall, it will not suffice to identify a few models and attribute them to different cultural groups. We must instead trace empirically these models’ complex, heterogeneous paths and mechanisms of circulation, as the models appear in sometimes unexpected configurations within narratives about New Marshall's history and prospects and about the role of Mexican immigrants in those prospects.

In this paper, we will explore one empirical site where models of personhood circulate—historical narratives of a town’s history and future. These narratives about where the town has been and where it is going apply models of personhood to different groups represented in the narrative. Whether told in everyday conversation or reproduced in media such as newspapers, these narratives represent one mechanism through which models of personhood circulate. Narratives provide a rich source for our analysis because they make sense of human action and become part of a "cultural tool kit" that people draw from as they make sense of themselves and others and choose among various courses of action (Wertsch 2002). Narratives are also one means of socializing new members into commonly held views of the town, its past, present, and

future (Wertsch 2002). They are a means of establishing coherence among current and historical events, as well as relationships among groups of people, as representations of those people are woven into a particular story. These stories take on a particular direction according to the ending a given narrator has in mind, sometimes heading downward, other times heading upward, and other times moving in various, less expected directions (Wertsch, 2002). They are useful in maintaining the collective consciousness of an imagined community (Anderson, 1991).

Methods

The data presented in this paper come from an ongoing, 15-month study in the high school and the town center of New Marshall. Once a mostly white suburban town, New Marshall is now home to an ethnically and racially diverse community of approximately 30,000. Along with a (shrinking) majority white community, a large African American community has long resided in New Marshall, descended from migrants who left the South in the early 1900s and came to work in local industry. Several waves of immigrants have also come to New Marshall. The Irish who migrated in the 1800s were followed by an Italian immigration that began in the early 1900s and blossomed in the 1950s. Smaller groups of Puerto Rican, South Asian, and Caribbean newcomers have settled as well. The distribution of racial groups changed dramatically between 1990 and 2000—from 70.8% white, 26.4% African-American, and 2.7% Latino to 54.3% white, 34.8% African-American, 10.5% Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Many white residents left for adjacent suburbs, while the Mexican population grew dramatically—going from under 0.5% of the local population to more than 6% (US

Census Bureau, 2000). These figures do not include undocumented immigrants, and there could be as many as four times the number of undocumented Mexican immigrants as there are documented Mexican residents (Passel, 2005).

Although it is located in one of the most affluent counties in the metropolitan region, New Marshall is significantly poorer than surrounding suburbs. About 17% of documented residents live below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000), but inclusion of the thousands of undocumented Mexican immigrants would raise this figure considerably. Historically a middle-class suburb, New Marshall now faces high rates of poverty, crime, and low educational achievement. In 2004-2005, the graduation rate for Latino students was 58%, compared to 82% for African Americans and 87% for whites. More than half of Latino students scored below basic on state tests, compared with a third of African American students and about 15% of white students. African Americans and Latinos live in the poorest neighborhoods in town.

We have done observations in New Marshall, mostly in the high school, weekly during the academic year. We have also visited churches, community events, restaurants and businesses along the main street, we have spoken with police officers and journalists, and we have spoken with residents while walking in town or taking public transportation. One of us (EA) also speaks Italian, and she has spoken with longstanding Italian immigrants and Italian Americans about their views of the town. To this point, we have recorded seventeen interviews with high school teachers, secretaries and counselors, clergy, longstanding Italian residents, local police and taxi drivers. In addition to interviews, we have collected newspapers, local ordinances and other documents, and we have taken fieldnotes describing our participation in various events across the 15 months.

Findings

Some of the narratives we heard in New Marshall were simple and familiar, involving either negative or positive characterizations of Mexican residents. Others were more complex, drawing on various models of identity to make sense of the town and the immigrants. We report the findings in four sections, ranging from more negative to more positive. First, we discuss the ubiquity of comparisons between the Mexican immigrants and other groups in town.

Comparisons between groups

Every one of our narratives contains comparisons and contrasts between Mexican immigrants and other groups in town. Instead of simply characterizing the Mexican immigrants in isolation, as hardworking, or lawbreaking, or in some other way, the narrators juxtapose them with other groups, characterizing the new immigrants with respect to prior immigrant groups or identifiable groups of current residents.

One Italian American narrator described how landlords like to rent to Mexicans because they pay rent reliably.

They're going to work to pay the house so [the landlords] always have somebody from Mexico. Four rooms to a house maybe they got ten people in there you don't know. Boarder as they used to call them. That's the way it used to be with the Italian people a hundred years ago...A lot of people lived together, and a lot of people used to have boarders, maybe have a, used to have a house, five six room and have five six borders in it and that's how they used to keep up and pay rent and everything because of the boarders, and that's what the Mexican people are doing right now.

As we will see below, this type of comparison between Italian immigrants in the past century and contemporary Mexican immigrants recurred in other narratives. Much of the

time these comparisons described the Mexicans favorably, as hardworking and likely to live out Suárez-Orozco's (1998) "pro-immigrant script."

Other narrators compared Mexicans unfavorably to earlier European immigrants, however, as in the following interview with an Irish American resident.

IA: If we can get them, get them to accept the language, learn to speak it, they'll do- it will go a lot faster. It went quicker for the Irish, at least, because they spoke English when they came here.

EA: Uh huh.

IA: But the Italians, the Italians spoke English a lot quicker than the Spanish are.

EA: Why?

IA: Uh, well, and I think, this is my opinion now, having been here and watching what's happened-

EA: Um hum

IA: Um, it seemed to me that the Spanish that came from the beginning were from Puerto Rico

EA: Uh huh

IA: Ah.

EA: What years was that? We heard about these Puerto Ricans coming here. I haven't really met any of them.

IA: That was in the sixties, I guess, sixties and early seventies. We have a parishioner here that's been here 35, I guess 40 years now, ah, that came from Puerto Rico. They seem to stay. But the Mexicans, at least in the beginning when they were coming and still, you can see it, they'd come up, they'd leave some of the family at home-

EA: Uh huh.

IA: And they send all of their money back and then eventually they would go back. So, they come, make a lot of money and then go back. They were transient, they didn't stay. And maybe, if they came back again, maybe they didn't come to New Marshall-

EA: Uh huh

IA: they'd go somewhere else.

EA: Is that changing?

IA: Yeah. I see a lot of them where they're staying here now.

EA: Mm. What years was that, when they were the transient-

IA: That was back, I'd say in the eighties, early nineties. And ah, like I said, when they first came, they would make the money and go back home. And they'd go back and, uh, of course, there was a lot more of them that were here illegally.

EA: Mm

IA: So, you didn't know how long they were going to stay. When they came they didn't know what to do or how to become naturalized.... unless they get

naturalized, uh, you know, become legal, get their papers, uh, I don't think they'll move up as fast as either the Irish or the Italians.

The section on Italian American narratives below contains more such contrasts between Mexican and Italian immigrants.

Many narrators also contrasted Mexican immigrants with African Americans. One Anglo resident put the most common stereotype succinctly: "the Mexicans who come here work...[they're not] sitting on a stoop drinking beer with a Cadillac in the driveway...[and] collecting welfare checks." Another Anglo remarked that African Americans "hate Mexicans, they hate them because they are hard-working people. They work 16-18 hours a day. Blacks say these people have come to steal our jobs, but [it's] not even comparable. They never call out sick, they go even when they're half-drunk.... Blacks don't like Mexicans, and therefore Mexicans don't like blacks. Mexicans stereotype, my friend got beaten up, [so] they think all Blacks are thieves." Anglo, Italian and Mexican narrators all repeated this contrast between hardworking Mexicans and lazy Blacks and described tensions between the two groups.

Some narrators also contrasted the Mexican immigrants with other Latino groups, as in the following interview with an Anglo clergyman.

C: Well, I'm gonna say that I have not heard African Americans complaining about the Hispanics. But I have heard Hispanics complaining about the African Americans, either saying that they get harassed by them or bothered by them, mugged by them. That they tend to be, um, a little bit noisier, I will say this at least, well I shouldn't, the Mexicans tend to be, at least in church, like a really quiet people.

EA: Really?

C: They're very very quiet. When I worked with Puerto Ricans they tend to be-

EA: Ha ha, very noisy.

C: Yeah.

EA: My mum's from Puerto Rico.

C: Your mum's from Puerto Rico, okay.

EA: Hah

C: Well, yeah, they're not calm. Well, you know, they're not the most, they're not like crazy wild at Mass. But they tend to be more animated. You know, Mexicans, no.

EA: Really! So you don't get all that clapping.

C: No, they don't understand that. There's a Cuban lady in the choir.

EA: Uh huh.

C: Who, you know, she'll, I don't even know if she brings it anymore, but she would sometimes have her tambourine.

EA: Ha ha, my mother brings her tambourine to Mass. So-

C: She would kind of sway a little, and the Mexicans are like, why is she doing that?

EA: Hee hee.

C: Why's she doing that in church?

E: Interesting!

After recovering from the awkward moment of discovering about the interviewer's own background, the clergyman goes on to give an anecdote about the contrast between Mexican and Caribbean tendencies.

Our narrators, then, did not apply discrete models of identity to Mexican immigrants in isolation. Instead, they employed models that characterize more than one group and the relations between them. Mexicans are similar to European immigrants of the past century, in being hardworking, family oriented and religious, but they are dissimilar in their slowness to learn English and their lack of ambition for upward mobility. They are gentle and passive, victims of crime perpetrated by African Americans and less assertive than other Latino groups. The next sections describe how narrators employed such models of identity to build narratives of New Marshall's history and Mexicans' likely place in it.

Narratives of decline

As described above, data on crime and poverty show that New Marshall has in fact declined over recent decades, at least with respect to the socioeconomic position of

its residents. All narrators knew this, and no one told a story of unimpeded progress when describing the town's history. But narrators differed in whom they blamed for the decline, and in whether they saw the decline as continuing or reversing. This section describes narratives of continuing decline, which generally characterized Mexican immigrants as part of the problem.

Two of these narratives of decline came from working class Anglos. One described how New Marshall used to be a popular destination, hosting concerts and other events, with visitors coming from miles around into town. Then it "went way down" and has become "dangerous" and a "melting pot." He explains the decline this way: "you can say what you want, but these ethnic groups bring a lot of hoodlums with them," especially gang members and other criminals from the city center. New Marshall has become an "easy place" for criminals to relocate, with the availability of welfare offices and the like. By "ethnic groups," he explains, he means both blacks and Mexicans: "people say it's the blacks but this town is becoming all Mexican." When asked directly whether Mexican immigrants contribute to the crime, he hesitates but answers "yes," mentioning in particular that "they beat their wives."

Another working class Anglo narrator also focused on the increase in crime over her lifetime. She says, "I always tell people it's like a little New York"—that is, like a large urban area with lots of crime. She tells a story about how an adolescent recently threatened her friend, near her own house, wielding a gun. In order to explain this change, she says, "well, the dichotomy of the town has totally changed." There used to be the bad neighborhood where the blacks lived, "and there were white people in the rest." Now, there are only "worse areas of town." Around the time that Mexicans started

arriving, she claims, "crime started going up." Mexicans live "20 men to a house" and bring problems with them. She is quick to say "I don't want to sound prejudiced," and at one point blames the landlords for exploiting immigrants more than the Mexicans themselves. But she uses quite unflattering models of personhood to identify the Mexican immigrants.

One middle class narrator, a clergyman, also told a narrative of decline. He describes how economic opportunities drew Mexican immigrants: "people came up, found jobs, sent word back to towns and more people came up and found jobs; basically you can find a job with a company that's servicing the suburbs and it's worth it." With the arrival of the Mexican immigrants, however, came problems.

Problems are already happening and there will be more....OK, um you have a lot of young unmarried men or young men who may be married back home, um, they may be living 10 to an apartment, um the available women in the area um are not necessarily healthy, um...prostitutes...Um so you're gonna be seeing a lot of STD's and one of the STD's is going to be AIDS and no Mexican male is going to admit to it or get treatment because AIDS is not a macho thing, it's only passive homosexuals that have AIDS, um, that's one of the things. Um, a lot of them are also becoming trapped in American materialism. I don't know how this is going to work, but they come up here to help feed their families and all of a sudden you see them driving around in SUV's uh and I don't know what's happening with their families.

In addition to promiscuity, disease and materialism, he also claims that Mexican immigrants practice "cristo paganism," a corrupt form of religion. "I had a funeral not too long ago, and there were a couple of gravestones that had Spanish names on them; they also had roosters, you know little plastic roosters and other things on the gravestones. Uh, I didn't know what they were, I didn't want to ask, but my suspicion is that they were a very different kind of symbol than the crosses that were engraved in the stone." As in some other narratives of decline, this narrator also blames others besides

the Mexican immigrants for their condition—specifically landlords who "gouge" them and black criminals who mug them. "Latinos couldn't set up savings accounts because they were sure that that would get them shipped out so they carry cash, and as soon as the blacks realized that they relieved a lot of Mexicans of their cash."

As seen in this last quote, even the narratives of decline used some more positive models of personhood to identify Mexican immigrants—in this case as innocent victims of greedy (Anglo) landlords and predatory (black) criminals. But narratives of crime most often used negative models of personhood to characterize the immigrants, as dangerous, violent, unsanitary, promiscuous and materialistic. Almost all of the negative characterizations of Mexicans in our data came from these narratives of decline.

Italian American narratives

One of the unique aspects of New Marshall is a strong and longstanding Italian American community. Some members of this community have ancestors who came in the early part of the 20th century, but most Italian immigrants arrived after the Second World War. Most came from two towns in Italy, and people still identify with the town of their ancestors. There is an Italian Club in town, and many members in their 60s and 70s were born and raised in Italy. Many members of this community interact regularly with Mexican immigrants—often serving as their landlords and their employers.

These Italian Americans might be expected to be more sympathetic to the Mexican immigrants than other residents, because they vividly remember their own immigrant roots, because most belong to the Catholic church, and because they share a link to "Latin" cultures (both speaking Romance languages and both highly valuing

family, for instance). On the other hand, assimilated Americans often turn against Mexican immigrants, despite their similarities (Murillo, 2002). We were interested to see how the Italian Americans in New Marshall were reacting.

Some Italian American narrators did indeed see similarities between their own ancestors' experiences and those being faced by the Mexicans.

And you know, [the Mexicans] look like the Italian people too. Because they're good workers...In twenty- twenty-five years mostly all the business is gonna be Mexican. Because right now they work with, all work with the contractors. They all learning the trade, because the way they work in Mexico they don't work- you know- so, they're a little slow, but when you put them to work, they work. The black people- you employ the black people, the boss leaves they sit down, they doesn't work, but these Mexicans, you put them to work and they work. They want to better themselves, you can see it, it's just like the Italian people. The Italian people when they come from Italy they just work like slaves because they want to better themselves, that's what it looks like the Mexicans are, but the black people they just want everything for free. Welfare, welfare, welfare...There's a lot of welfare in New Marshall, you on welfare they give you a house they pay most of your rent, I mean the Italian people won't stoop that low to get welfare, and the Mexican people are all like that too, they like to work, they like making money. In 20-25 years this area like New Marshall is all going to be controlled by Mexicans.

This narrator borrows a model of personhood from his own ethnic group's story about itself: Italian immigrants came and worked very hard; unlike the blacks, they refused handouts and worked their way up; now they own property and businesses throughout New Marshall, reaping the rewards of their labor. He applies it relatively unchanged to the Mexican immigrants, expecting that they have similar characteristics and will experience a similar upward course over their time in America.

Other Italian Americans, however, gave more mixed characterizations of the Mexican immigrants. In one conversation at the Italian Club, several people agreed that New Marshall has changed "a lot, a lot," that it "è diventata male" (turned bad). Most blamed the blacks: "I neri hanno cacciato fuori l'italiano" (the blacks pushed the Italians

out). Into this declining situation have come the Mexicans. In the following exchange people discuss similarities and differences between the Mexican immigrants and Italian immigrants of earlier generations.

A: La laboriosità c'è l'hanno. Solo laboriosità.

Work ethic (or industriousness) they have. Just work ethic.

B: Lavorano forte, eh!

They work hard, eh!

A: Non riescono cambiare lavoro. C'è, fa questo lavoro e dopo due mesi fa un altro lavoro per fare-. Loro rimangono a fare quel' lavoro là. Vogliono essere sicuri. Prendono cinquanta dollari e (vogliono) continuare e prendono cinquanta dollari. Noi cinquanta dollari e noi c'è ne andiamo dopo cinquanta poi noi vogliamo setanta,[poi cento

They don't manage to change jobs. That is, do one job and then two months later do another to make- They stay doing that job there. They want to be secure. They make fifty dollars and (they want) to continue and make fifty dollars. Us- fifty dollars and we leave, after fifty we want seventy, and then one hundred

C: [() com'è: novanta percento, ripeto, non sono venuti in America

(Let me tell you?) how it is. Ninety percent, I repeat, haven't come to America

A: Legale

Legal

C: Legale

Legal

A: Sì sì è diverso.

Yes, yes it's different.

C: Ecco per ciò penso(no)- non vogliono cambiare. L'italiano è differente a ()
That's the reason why (they) think- they don't want to change. The Italians are different.

D: Sì, non puoi comparare [sic] l'italiano con il messicano.

Yeah, you can't compare the Italian with the Mexican.

A: Sì, però, non vogliono migliorare, proprio perché non si () imparare inglese. Sono giovani i ragazzi e non si parlano inglese. Qual è sempre il motivo di non imparare?

Yeah, but they don't want to better themselves. That just the reason they don't () learn English. They're young, these guys, and they don't speak English. What is the reason for not learning?

C: Forse vogliono ritornare in patria.

Maybe they want to return to the (native) country.

A: Ma perché non si impara la lingua? Perché non si impara la lingua?

But why not learn the language? Why not learn the language?

B: Perché oggi la cultura- la cultura è tutta spagnola quando vai a New Marshall. Vai tu () a Main Street. Tutti quelli business, tutti spagnoli sono

Because today the culture- the culture is all Spanish when you go to New Marshall. You go () to Main Street. All of those businesses, all of them are Spanish.

E: Tutti spagnoli.

All Spanish

A: Che cosa ci perdono loro imparare?

What do they have to lose learning [English]?

B: Tu fai una telefonata, dice: si parli spagnolo *push* uno, si parli americano, *push* due. Quando tu venivi dal Italia tutte queste cose non c'era. Tu ti dovevi sforzare imparare la lingua, invece per loro e piu facile adesso. Tutto spagnolo.

You make a telephone call, it says: If you speak Spanish, push one, if you speak American push two. When you came from Italy all these things weren't around. You had to push yourself to learn the language. Instead for them it's easier now. Everything Spanish.

A: Non ci provano proprio parlare

They don't even try to speak.

Here the Italian Americans grant that Mexicans work hard, just as their ancestors did.

But they also characterize the Mexicans as lacking ambition, as being content with working class jobs, and as refusing to learn English and assimilate. As one person says, "non vogliono responsabilità" (They don't want responsibility) and "si, lavora' lavora si, ma non si sforzano!" (yes, he [the Mexican] works, he works, but he doesn't push himself).

E: Ci vorrà molto tempo per arrivare come siamo noi.

It will take a long time for them to get where we are today

A: Ci vorrà molti molti anni.

It will take many years.

E: Non arriveranno mai!

They'll never get there!

A: Forse non ci arriveranno. L'italiano ha quel' istinto di sempre andare avanti...Siamo piu flessibile.

Maybe they won't get there. The Italian has that instinct to always get ahead... We're more flexible.

So there are similarities and differences between Mexican and Italian immigrants, and these Italian Americans suspect that the Mexicans may not do as well as they themselves have done.

Narratives of renewal

In addition to the narratives of decline and to the mixed accounts given by Italian Americans, several narrators spoke of improvements in the town and the Mexican immigrants lives. In these stories Mexicans were often, though not always, credited with helping the town's renewal.

Many of these stories describe a shift from an immigrant population composed mainly of *solteros* (bachelors) to a Mexican community that included many families.

A lot of those who were here at that time [when she first arrived] were contracted, brought here from NY by Chinese [or other] restaurants, given room and board and transportation; [their] wages were very low but they didn't have any additional expenses. Some landscaping companies contracted them from Mexico. The restaurant workers were in a more long-term situation, but the landscapers were just seasonal. They went home after 8 months. That was about 10 years ago. Now these people have created roots, now they have extended families....Back then it was primarily males, they didn't really bring wives or spouses or what have you. But it's changed now. It's more family oriented. They are going home less. There are a lot more families. Couples have had children, the children are now going to school, they don't want their children to go without, so this encourages them to say here, they want a better life for their children.

As the Mexicans have brought families and settled in New Marshall, they have visibly focused on their children's futures. This narrator also describes another way in which the Mexicans are behaving like good immigrants, as many of them "wised-up [and] went out on their own"—starting their own businesses instead of accepting low wages.

These narratives of renewal talk about how New Marshall has "come up a lot." There are new shops and restaurants, new vitality on the streets. Some narrators explicitly credit the Mexicans with driving this renewal, with one praising them as "clean, neat, and they work hard." Another described New Marshall's downtown as a "ghost

town" ten years ago and noted that there are now several Korean stores, a choice of Mexican restaurants and several other diverse shops, as well as flower boxes on the sidewalk of the main street. As the President of the Town Council said at a public meeting, "revitalization is happening every day" in New Marshall and "embracing the new wave of immigration will be a key to our long-term success."

Mexican immigrants have also made some of the clergy and churchgoing residents happy by rejuvenating declining congregations.

It's wonderful. You can walk around New Marshall and see the shops and the people walking thru the neighborhood; a lot of them are Mexican. So anyway I've been here several years and my experience has generally been positive in that those who are long time parishioners—many of whom not necessarily technically live within our boundaries anymore but still come because they have an affiliation with the parish. And some who still live within the boundaries. But they're all—I shouldn't say all—they is probably some that aren't—they are very positive about the fact that the Mexicans are here—they identify them as Catholic—they see them as very pious Catholics, they always talk about them as hard-working people—they're thrilled about the large numbers—they've even said it reminds them of years gone by when their Mass would be that crowded so it's nice to see that vitality in the community.

Both in the church and on the streets, then, New Marshall is improving because the Mexican immigrants are following Suárez-Orozco's "pro-immigration" script and bringing life back to the community.

Conclusions

In narrating the place of Mexican immigrants in their town, residents of New Marshall draw on various resources—widely circulating stories about immigrants from the media, stories that they tell themselves about their own ethnic group's history, and widely circulating accounts of other groups who are compared to or contrasted with the immigrants. Sometimes they put these resources together in familiar ways, creating

stories that are easily recognized. At other times they combine resources in less familiar ways, using unusual models of personhood to characterize both immigrants and other residents. Study of such narratives can help us understand the environments that Mexican immigrants face as they begin to make their way in a new society.

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