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Migration Narratives: Diverging Stories in Schools, Churches, and Civic Institutions

by Stanton Wortham, Briana Nichols, Katherine Clonan-Roy & Catherine Rhodes, London; New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, 270 pp., £81.00 (hb), ISBN: 978 1 350 18131 1

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Migration Narratives documents the findings of longitudinal ethnographic research over the course of eleven years in an American town referred to as 'Marshall'. Drawn to this town by its cyclical migration history over two hundred years, the authors focus on the most recent migrant group hailing from Mexico and illustrate the development of this community between the years 1995 and 2016. The book characterises Mexican migrants' personal accounts of their experiences in 'Marshall', focusing on interactions and participation with others and within places such as schools, churches, neighbourhoods and community organisations. Additionally, it provides detailed insights about the impact of Mexican migration to the town according to pre-existing residents, namely English, Irish, Italian and African Americans whose ancestors once completed a similar journey. The book aims to contribute a more nuanced understanding of typical migration stories, centring Mexican experiences in 'Marshall' to illustrate how 'migrant communities and individuals move along diverging historical pathways' (Wortham et al, 2020: viii).

The authors highlight the heterogeneity of the Mexican migrant community and thus experiences according to the year and age of arrival (or birth) in 'Marshall', gender, social class and origins in Mexico, noting that all of these attributes play a key role in the kinds of networks that can be created or accessed. Utilising Latour's (2005) 'actor-network theory', the authors frame their findings around the importance of networks which greatly increases the ease or difficulty experienced by migrants as they embark upon becoming part of the host society. This is because, as the authors explain, 'networks are configurations of diverse, contingent resources', (Wortham et al, 2020: 10) which shape the trajectories and experiences of groups and individuals. An example of the importance of networks is illustrated within the story of the educational pathway travelled by a young girl called Allie who arrived in 'Marshall' as a toddler in 2003 and entered the American school system in kindergarten. Unlike older Mexican migrants who arrived in 'Marshall', she was able to develop and gain access to contingent resources like 'fluency in English, her comfort in the American school system, her teachers' familiarity with Mexican students, and the relatively large population of Mexican migrants in the second decade of the community' which helped her to navigate with ease (Wortham et al, 2020: 10).

Intentionally or unintentionally, a key strength of this book is the author's acknowledgement of the power of whiteness and how it is a crucial component that greatly influences migration experiences within American contexts. This was a recurring theme throughout the book, but particularly when considering 'Intersecting Migrant Histories' in chapter one, where the authors summarised the previous migrant groups' positionings in 'Marshall'. For instance, whiteness can be seen to have helped the Irish and Italian Americans to achieve the classic

migrant success story, while African Americans were not able to achieve the same, “even though they began arriving only a decade or two after the Italians,” (Wortham et al, 2020: 7). These observations are exemplified further when the authors discuss different neighbourhoods in ‘Marshall’ which were often divided according to ethnic and racial differences. For example, ‘Italian migrants settled in the East end of town, which became known as the “ethnic” side, in contrast to the West and North, where the Irish- who had become “White” . . . -and the remaining White Protestant residents lived’, (Wortham et al, 2020: 23). This shows how the social construct of whiteness was expanded to first include Irish Americans and then Italian Americans who also as a group eventually gained inclusion within the same exclusive racial category- perhaps helped by the arrival of African American migrants after them, which aided in their upward mobility. Notably, some Mexicans already viewed themselves as white (Wortham et al, 2020: ix) and it is still to be seen whether they will also be accepted, in due course, like previous migrant groups. The power and influence of whiteness was also demonstrated in how the white residents influenced relationships between the other migrant groups, based on their higher socioeconomic status in ‘Marshall’ (Wortham et al, 2020: 110). In this way, there was an established ‘Marshall’ hierarchy which saw Black and Mexican groups scrambling to secure their positions, while the Whites had moved to the more affluent outskirts.

On the other hand, the key strength of the book contributes to one of the areas that could be improved, specifically the authors’ lack of reflection about their own positionalities. As four white-passing researchers, the book would have benefitted from an acknowledgement of the hegemony of whiteness and the power dynamics this created within the research process when navigating around ‘Marshall’, and within the intimate interactions that occurred with individuals and groups from different racialised communities. Additionally, while it was great to read about the positive ways in which the research team became very involved in the Mexican community, like one of the authors becoming a godparent to a family’s youngest children (Wortham et al, 2020: 64), or providing support and guidance around a legal dispute between a tenant and landlord (Wortham et al, 2020: 41), it would have been useful to understand the ethical considerations that prevailed when making these decisions.

Overall, this book was an insightful and compelling read which provided nuance to migration stories as a whole but specifically for the establishment of the Mexican community in ‘Marshall’. It illustrated the ways in which communities mix and merge over time and space and as a result of historical conditions. It also shows that there are many factors that hinder or strengthen migration ‘success’ stories, such as the power and influence of whiteness. In agreement with the authors, this book would be beneficial to policymakers, researchers and educators who wish to understand and better support migrant communities and their experiences of settling in new host societies.

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Southampton's Migrant Past and Present, by Tony Kushner,
Southampton, The Parkes Institute for the Study of Jewish/non-Jewish
Relations, University of Southampton, 2021, 114 pp., £10.00 (paperback),
ISBN 9781912431144

While London may have a unique history because of the longevity of migration towards it and the level of diversity within this metropolis (amongst other reasons), international population movement has shaped the evolution of all environments, especially urban centres both within Britain and throughout the world. Within the former, Southampton may not come to the fore within popular and academic conceptions of the main areas of migrant settlement within the country, which tend to focus not simply upon London, but, in the social science driven research focusing upon the years since the Second World War, the Midlands and Manchester, in particular. However, as this volume points out, about one in five of Southampton's current population have birthplaces outside the UK, encompassing 55 different nationalities and about 150 languages. While this may lie behind the level of diversity of London, in terms of the history of migration to Britain, these represent significant figures.

While numbers may act as one method of measuring the impact of migration, this volume uses them only incidentally, focusing, instead, upon stories told in a variety of different ways, especially in the core of the volume, which constitutes a walk through significant landmarks in Southampton's migrant past. Tony Kushner, descended, in academic terms, like myself, from Colin Holmes, the founding editor of this journal, and therefore, like all of those who come from this hub, has had a profound impact on the transformation of the understanding of the role of migration in British history, continuing the work of Colin Holmes. Kushner is the researcher, curator and writer of the volume, which also contains many illustrations and short contributions in the form of mini biographies and poems of people with migrant origins living in Southampton. However, the book is essentially a collaboration and has involved both the other individuals who contributed their stories and a series of local heritage organisations and places of worship, as well as the Parkes Institute at the University of Southampton, Kushner's academic home, and Southampton City Council.

Nevertheless, Kushner unquestionably acts as the driver behind this pamphlet and this shorter and, less academic piece, on the role of migrants in the development of Southampton, builds upon his previous work which foregrounded the