



## **Prairie Centre Regional Workshop**

### Workshop Presentation Abstract

#### **The Fragmented: Refashioning Western Canadian Urban Immigration History**

**Dr. Royden Loewen**  
University of Winnipeg

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Part of the project of our Metropolis History Research Group is to write a series of histories that will explore various aspects of the integration of immigrant groups to prairie cities. In the process we are currently envisioning a number of books. The project is still evolving but at this point it appears that they will mostly be case studies, focusing on specific groups - Jamaicans, Chileans, French Americans, Russian Germans, and Mennonites. Each case study however will focus on a particular theme. These include the following: spatial location, rural-urban migration, citizenship identity, inter-ethnic gender relations, political behaviour, industrial relations, conceptions of health. Several will be overtly comparative in nature: immigration policy in Germany and Canada, adaptation to capitalism in the countryside and the city, immigrant medical culture in Edmonton and Winnipeg. We envision a concluding volume, that will pull all of these strands together and seek to interpret in general ways the immigrant experience in prairie cities over the past century. This history will of course seek to be sensitive to the peculiar features of prairie cities - their relative sizes, their deeply rooted polyethnic natures, the growing aboriginal presence, their distances from the 'real' metropolises. It will be a history that will focus on the dialectic between human agency and state policy, each shaping the other. In order for this history to contribute to a wider conversation - national and international - it will need to place itself sensitively within the evolving immigration historiography.

In this paper I wish to examine briefly what we as prairie historians can learn from one corpus of immigration literature that lies outside of Canada; this, is the recent works in American urban history. The 1970s had marked the rise of the "new urban history" in the United States; it had promised to write the city from the bottom up. Allen Davis's 1973 history of Philadelphia marked a watershed. It set out to illuminate the life of ordinary people rather than of the elites and it traced mass behaviour rather than the fate of institutions. There was a correlating methodological shift in primary sources, from narrative and legislative sources to tax assessments, census schedules, voters lists and court dockets. Historians of urban immigration especially took up the gauntlet of the 'new urban history': among the scores of such histories John M. Allswang identified ethnic voting blocks (1971), Robert Harney the intersection of class and ethnicity (1975), Thomas Kessner the degrees of upward mobility (1977), June Alexander the patterns of secondary migrations (1980), Donna Gabaccia the redefinition of kinship networks (1983), and John Bodnar the lines of household economies (1985). These research

projects led to the dismissal of old notions of "The Uprooted" and the embracement of concepts such as "The Transplanted." The underlying themes in many of these works was that European immigrants successfully survived the force of a vibrant capitalistic, liberal American society and did so by employing complex strategies of survival. Histories of urban immigration in the 1990s have built on these foundations. But arguably the great change that occurred in the 30 years between the publication of Oscar Handlin's *The Uprooted* and John Bodnar's *The Transplanted* has already evolved into a new set of concerns. Four books reflect this shift: George J. Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Mario Maffi, *Gateway to the Promised Land: Ethnic Cultures in New York's Lower East Side* (New York: New York University Press, 1995); Irma Watkins-Owens, *Blood Relations: Caribbean Immigrants and the Harlem Community, 1900-1930* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996); John R. Chavez, *Eastside Landmark: A History of the East Los Angeles Community Union, 1968-1993* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). They are randomly chosen from amongst many others published on the same subject during the mid-1990s. They differ in some significant ways. Their disparate subjects include Chicanos, Caribbeans, Chinese, Jews, Puerto Ricans and Italians immigrants who live in distinct enclaves within the vast cities of the U.S.'s two largest metropolitan areas, New York and greater Los Angeles. The books possess different foci: two are about specific ethnic groups, one about a polyethnic residential district and another about a single ethnic institution. Their authors write from different levels of experience: Sanchez and Watkins-Owens are junior scholars and their books are revised Ph.D. dissertations; Maffi and Chavez are well-established scholars, authors of other books. And the books exhibit different methodologies. Yet despite these differences there are commonalities that signal a turn of methodology in American urban immigration historiography.

The four books above signal a distinct and evolving chapter in American urban immigrant historiography. In it the immigrant experience is marked by neither uprootedness nor transplantation, but by fragmentation. First, immigrant group strategies are seen to have diverged, marked by flexibility, pragmatism, creativity and contingency, all undergirded by a belief in human agency and its ability to make sense of new situations. No essential quality of immigrant culture is seen to have persisted. In these books ethnicity is invented as a mechanism

to provide meaning and control over an amorphous situation.. Second, the immigrant group itself is fragmented, divided internally by rifts of gender, class, education level and time of arrival; men and women in particular are shown to have had different immigration experiences. Third, the authors seem to agree that there was no overarching or existing Yankee reality that demanded a response from the immigrants. Ironically, although American society as an assimilative agent is placed in the background, the public institutions the federal, state and municipal authorities, the police, border patrol and welfare agents - are brought to foreground. But each is seen as pursuing a particular policy, offering unique mixes of restriction and opportunity to the immigrants. When American society is encountered by the immigrants, it is often one mediated by immigrant image makers who wrote "master narratives", outlining palatable ethnic group in the present pasts for people contesting an antagonistic America. Significantly, where an older historiography focussed on the unique experiences of ethnic groups, the studies above ascribe a surprising uniform experience on groups as divergent as the Chicano, Caribbeans, Chinese and Jews. All create cultures that link perception of past and present to confront both local and regional forces. Only the process, however, is shared; its outcome spells multiple fragmentation. Prairie Canada is a distinct host society. Yet, it too, is internally complex, comprised not only of many immigrant groups, but groups continually migrating, continually recreating identities, continually interacting with other groups, continually evaluating the opportunities and restrictions of an equally dynamic and amorphous host society. It is this dynamic relationship that must be the focus of a general prairie history of urban immigrant adaptation.