Stephanie Lewthwaite. *Race, Place and Reform in Mexican Los Angeles. A Transnational Perspective, 1890–1940.*

Chrysavgi Papagianni
Stephanie Lewthwaite. Race, Place and Reform in Mexican Los Angeles. A Transnational Perspective, 1890–1940.

Chrysavgi Papagianni

REFERENCES


1 Stephanie Lewthwaite’s Race, Place and Reform in Mexican Los Angeles is an interesting and thought provoking book focusing on the growth of the Mexican community within Los Angeles from 1890 to 1940. Thoroughly researched, the book is enhanced with interesting demographical and historical information that manage to call into question previous “assumptions about the linearity of reform and Americanization” (5). The problematization of such assumptions represents most definitely an important contribution to the study of race and reform in the early twentieth century. The polyphony of the book is also an asset since it adds vividness and depth to the arguments. Perhaps the most important point the study makes is that the Los Angeles reform has been a transnational phenomenon since reformists were influenced, according to Lewthwaite (10), by ideas on both sides of the border. Indeed, many reformers actually traveled to Mexico and were hence influenced by their experience with “Patria Chica,” to use Lewthwaite’s phrase.

2 A recurring argument in the first part of the book is that Mexicans were viewed as “assimilable yet racialized subjects,” a view that obviously compromised the reform effort, even the most progressive aspects of it. With this in mind, Lewthwaite examines reformist projects such as slum clearance and Mexican education in order to reveal the
very antithesis lying at the heart of these projects that is the interplay of both assimilation and segregation policies regarding the treatment of Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles.

3 The first chapter focuses on Sonoratown and the attempt of settlement women to preserve, on the one hand, Mexican culture and to promote, on the other, assimilation. Thus, at the turn of the 20th century the reformation projects in Sonoratown “testify,” according to the author, “that the politics of reform, race and spatial appropriation had already began” (25). Events such as the Fiesta de Los Angeles and the establishment of the College Settlement or else the Casa de Castelar underline how cultural preservation attitudes coexisted alongside assimilation trends, as Lewthwaite makes clear. This ambiguity is further explored in the second chapter through an analysis of literature and more specifically through an examination of two anthologies by women who paint portraits of Sonoratown and its Mexican inhabitants. Vivid though these portraits may be, yet they also reveal Sonoratown as “a vanishing rural Arcadia-cum-urban slum” (49) endorsing thus “reform and rehabilitation” (58).

4 Slum ideology provided a fertile ground for further exploitation masked behind reformation campaigns as we see in the third chapter. The slum lay at the heart of the so-called “Mexican Problem,” and slum clearance became a priority of the Progressive agenda replete with racialized and gendered assumptions concerning the slum dweller who had to be both removed and rehabilitated in order for “the Better City” (69) to become feasible. All in all, as Lewthwaite correctly points out, for Progressives the housing reform did not simply concern the buildings but rather the behaviors of “slum dwellers.” From this perspective both the slum and the “cholo-colony” (the term “cholo” suggesting the urbanized, deracinated and racially impure Mexican) were not simply “environments distorted by uncontrollable economic forces” but “physical manifestations of racial difference, (male) deviance, and Mexican’s inability to ‘resist… modern urban life’” (90).

5 In the second part of her book, Lewthwaite continues her critical exploration by focusing on the move from assimilation to exclusion as events such as the establishment of the California Commission of Immigration, discussions about Mexican restriction as well as the Mexican repatriation of the 1930s loomed large in public life. Assimilation and Americanization, as we see in the fourth chapter, was the driving force behind immigrant education that was still plagued by the same “contradictory, racialized, and transnational impulses” (95) that characterized settlement and housing agendas up to that point. Lewthwaite cites Gilbert Gonzalez’s notion of the schizophrenic nature of Americanization that simultaneously sought to preserve and assimilate, to “devalue and elevate” (101) Mexican culture. Within such a context, Mexicans were encouraged to assimilate yet only “within the segregated spaces of ethnic and cultural difference” (115) as is the case with vocational education that was encouraged among Mexicans. Leonel Magana’s school is a very eloquent example since, according to Lewthwaite, students were punished if they spoke Spanish in class yet, at the same time they were allowed to celebrate Cinco de Mayo. The next chapter discusses the 1924 pneumonic-bubonic plague and the participation of photography in the racialized discourse about reformation and clearance of the slums. For instance, the Board of Health shots connected the district of Vernon with the dangers of Mexican primitivism thus ignoring the role of financial abandonment and lack of investment in the area. Finally, chapter six focuses on the
involvement of employers in the housing campaign as they attempted to create model worker colonias by adopting once again “paternalistic and racialized policies (134).

The third part of the book explores the era of the New Deal and the Good Neighbor Policy under Theodore Roosevelt’s leadership during which an attempt for a more pluralistic Americanism became focal. Despite such attempts exclusion remained very much alive as we see in chapter seven that discusses the creation of model Mexican villages that once again revealed the simultaneous tendency to preserve and assimilate rural life through a “racialized division of labor” (181). In the same way, the revival of racialized slum clearance practices examined in chapter eight is an example of assimilation and segregation. According to Lewthwaite, this contradiction, similar to the ambiguities of the Progressing housing reform, lay also at the heart of the New Deal housing campaign that failed to answer whether Mexican houses were in need of rehabilitation or removal. As Lewthwaite explains in the final chapter, these ambiguities “punctuated the voice of Mexican Americans” (229) who were forced to get more actively involved in the struggle for citizenship. El Congresso and people like Bustos Jefferson exploited the limits and potentialities of the reform and the New Deal in order to “reposition people of Mexican descent...as thoroughly modern American citizens” (228).

The quest for citizenship emerging from the pages of the present study is still very much alive not only among Mexican Americans but also among all immigrants who are caught in the struggle of negotiating their role and place within contemporary multicultural communities. In this struggle the notions of preservation and assimilation, paternalism and cultural appropriation, racialization and segregation raised by the book are pivotal as is the case of Mexican Americans and more specifically of people like Bustos Jefferson who thus become an inspiration for people wanting “to assert their own sense of place and their own landscapes of citizenship and belonging” (234).

---

AUTHOR

CHRYSAVGI PAPAGIANNI

Ph.D University of Athens.