

Anthropology Book Forum

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Immigrant spaces: experiences from Maryland

Review by Carlos G. Vélez-Ibáñez

Freidenberg, Judith. *Contemporary Conversations on Immigration in the United States: The View from Prince George's County, Maryland* (Lexington: 2016).

Judith Freidenberg's work, *Contemporary Conversations on Immigration in the United States: The View from Prince George's County, Maryland* may be more fully appreciated if the following statement is considered as the underlying medium through which and from which the full power of her work can be understood. She stated most recently in another book, "I suggest that it is access to valued scarce resources that prompts the erection of human differences that get solidified into borders, which divide and limit and which engender vulnerabilities and marginalize some. Borders, in short, are metaphors for power differences that result in mechanisms invisible to policy documents that stratify populations along an inclusion-exclusion continuum" (373).¹ This premise can certainly be applied to the 2000 mile U.S. Mexico bifurcation in which inequality is the central historical characteristic. In Freidenberg's book, her focus is in Maryland among immigrants from various cultural origins so that "the border" and its inequalities are part of the configuration of relations between populations of arrival and those established according to the dictums of citizenship. How this emerges is the core of her work.

The research was carried out between 1968 and 2009 and provides a richness of detail and process that is rarely part of most contemporary ethnographically-oriented fieldwork and spans immigrants from three continents. Using multiple methods including 70 ethnographic interviews, surveys, media, archival research, and population data of especially the Prince George's County area, the book is organized around three major parts. The first two chapters are dedicated to the

historical creation of Prince County and its “colonial” origins and as well provides us with well-grounded rationales for the emergence of ideas of rights of origins and their exclusive boundaries of difference. Part Two is divided into three chapters and is very rich in the ethnography and data of those interviewed and surveyed, and gives us a compelling framework of similarities and differences of experience and motivations. Part Three - in my opinion, very worthy of notice - is an explanation of how these varied and complex populations are made to fit within the slotted ideological premises of an “American Way” that requires homogeneity and not its opposite; that requires language and cultural erasure, not multiplicity; and requires singular identities but separated somehow from the reality of their class-based structures. But the populations are not easily made to fit as Freidenberg shows.

Freidenberg successfully negotiates her myriad sources of data and life histories to create what she terms “immigrant space”—that is, the voiced narratives of the multiple spaces and places in which these populations maneuver and live daily. She states that immigrant space is “thus, somebody not living in her place of birth [who] will forever inhabit a world peopled with experiences of present daily life mingled with a past lived in other nations” (147). Their space and time is an interstitial fusion between the local and extra-local, between the transnational and the national, and between the multilayered relations of kin, friendship, work, home, and public spaces which cannot be reduced to a single cultural or national identity. To expect so would be to arrogantly expect erasure and their lives of achievement, success, failure, and tragedy cannot be pigeonholed to a reductionist assimilationist “whiteness.” Theirs is a constant negotiation between the present and the future, between the possible and probable, and between themselves and the myriad networks in which they enter and exit as a matter of course and not predefined by monocultural expectations. Thus, to return to Freidenberg’s initial conceptual frame that began this discussion of the manner in which valued unequal resources prompt the erection of human differences, “immigration” as a single heuristic is by premise one that guarantees “otherness” and the creation of cognitive, political, social, cultural, and linguistic differences and their ensuing borders. These guarantee stereotypifications, intolerable toleration, and a kind of “seeing man” rationale in which the “immigrant” is expected to become reduced to a caricature guided by political policies guaranteeing this process. Freidenberg, provides us a deeply nuanced alternative vision.

Carlos G. Vélez-Ibáñez, a Tucson native, received his Ph.D. in Anthropology, USCD (1975). His intellectual interests are broadly comparative, and his publications include twelve books in English and Spanish with three others translated to Spanish as well as more than seventy-five articles and chapters. He was the founding director of Mexican American Studies at San Diego State, and later held professorships in anthropology at UCLA and the University of Arizona where he was also the founding director of the Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology. He became Dean in 1994 at the University of California, Riverside, of the College of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, and presently, he is Regents' Professor and Founding Director Emeritus of the School of Transborder Studies and Motorola Presidential Professor of Neighborhood Revitalization, and Professor, School of Human Evolution and Social Change at Arizona State University.



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ⁱ Carlos Vélez-Ibáñez and Josiah Heyman (2017) *The U.S.-Mexico Transborder Region: Cultural Dynamics and Historical Interactions*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.