

2015

Ethnic Historians and the Mainstream: Shaping America's Immigration Story

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Repository Citation

Zanoni, Elizabeth, "Ethnic Historians and the Mainstream: Shaping America's Immigration Story" (2015). *History Faculty Publications*. 30.

https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/history_fac_pubs/30

Original Publication Citation

Zanoni, E. (2015). Ethnic Historians and the Mainstream: Shaping America's Immigration Story. By Alan M. Kraut and David A. Gerber. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013. *International Migration Review*, 49(3), e31-e32.



Book Review

Ethnic Historians and the Mainstream: Shaping America's Immigration Story. By Alan M. Kraut and David A. Gerber. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013. 208 pages. \$28.95 paperback.

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Historians rarely reflect publicly on how lived experiences in families and communities influence academic trajectories. For this reason, *Ethnic Historians and the Mainstream: Shaping America's Immigration Story* is a welcome and invaluable collection for scholars and students of immigration and US history. Editors Alan Kraut and David Gerber recognize that “historians often seem to write their autobiographies with the subjects they address in their books and articles” (189). This speaks especially to immigration historians writing about their own ethnic communities; for them, concerns about navigating the rich, but oftentimes difficult, terrain of family life and identity politics are particularly pronounced.

The contributors to this excellent collection are first-generation academics, situated mainly in history or ethnic studies, who began academic careers between the late 1960s and the early 1990s. As their life stories demonstrate, these authors revolutionized the discipline of history by enlarging the subjects and peoples considered worthy of historical inquiry, and by expanding academia itself, as scholars from diverse backgrounds entered the profession. The intellectually and politically vibrant 1960s and 1970s set the stage against which they asserted their desire to write histories of their immigrant communities and to reconfigure US history more generally. Armed with the methods and perspectives of the then-novel New Social History, these authors pioneered “bottom-up” histories of

migrant and ethnic groups either absent from or on the fringes of traditional historical narratives.

Essays by Virginia Yans, John Bodnar, Dominic Pacyga, and Deborah Dash Moore explain how their family histories contradicted prevailing depictions of Southern and Eastern European migrants as hopeless victims of capitalism. Survival, agency, and dignity, for example, were central motifs in the lives of Bodnar's Slovak immigrant grandparents in their small Pennsylvania coal town and in Pacyga's Polish quarter abutting the Chicago Union Stock Yards. Authors in this collection remember their neighborhoods, not as spaces of disorganization and misery, but as familiar — if sometimes confining — worlds where major themes in twentieth century US history emanated from churches, synagogues, workplaces, markets, and homes. Indeed, a powerful sense of place pervades the essays, especially those of Yans and Dash Moore, who describe small town Mamaroneck, New York, and bustling Greenwich Village, respectively, as sites where ethnic, racial, and gender hierarchies were both concretized and challenged.

For these academics who entered the academy before 1990, ethnicity, religion, and class loomed central in their lives and in the questions they raised as historians interested in unraveling the slow and complicated process through which immigrants incorporated into US society. Timothy Meagher, for example, argues that despite his family's forgetting of its Irish origins, a Catholic identity inspired his academic work three generations later. Eileen Tamura's scholarship on the Nisei, second-generation Japanese Americans, stemmed from her upbringing as a Japanese American in the ethnically diverse Hawaiian island of Maui and led to her interest in how the Nisei's upward mobility over time produced new tensions with post-1965 Asian arrivals.

For female contributors of color, gender and race intersected to shape their

personal and professional lives, as well as the lives of the immigrants they study. Barbara Posadas, the daughter of a Polish-American mother and Filipino father, examined the experiences of Filipino workers like her father, an employee for the Pullman Company in Chicago, and the lives of interracial families like her own, in part to show how racial prejudices impinged upon their lives. The battles fought by Judy Young, the daughter of an illegal Chinese immigrant, against both gendered expectations within her family and racism outside her San Francisco Chinatown community moved her to uncover the histories, documents, and voices of the Chinese immigrant community, first as a community activist and librarian and later as a historian.

The lives and research of the final three essayists — Violet M. Showers Johnson, Theresa Alfaro-Velcamp, and María Cristina García — exemplify how historians' own border-crossing experiences have opened up the field to more global perspectives. Showers Johnson's essay shows how her identity, formed within the diasporic and colonial context of West Africa, equipped her to study the West Indian community in Boston as part of a larger Black diaspora. Alfaro-Velcamp's

intellectual journey began as a search for information about her great grandfather, a Lebanese Muslim who migrated to Mexico, and his son, who entered the United States as a Bracero worker in the 1950s. This journey ultimately took Alfaro-Velcamp to Mexico and Lebanon to understand her identity, her family history, and the history of migration to Mexico and the United States.

These final essays may leave readers wondering whether *ethnic historian*, as used in the collection's title, best captures recent transformations both in the personal experiences of scholars and in the histories of immigration they write. In her essay, García notes her hesitancy to identify as an ethnic historian; as a Cuban refugee who arrived in the United States as a young girl and who returns to Latin America regularly for research on refugees, she finds the label's emphasis on immigrant incorporation within a domestic context unable to embody the transnational framework in which she and the immigrants she studies operate. This question over labels, however, opens up exactly the type of productive discussion about links between personal history and historiography that this thought-provoking collection invites.