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Mexicans as Model Minorities in the New Latino Diaspora

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Abstract

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Keywords

Mexican immigration, social identification, ethnic contrasts, minority students

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Mexicans as Model Minorities in the New Latino Diaspora

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Rapid Mexican immigration has challenged host communities to make sense of immigrants' place in New Latino Diaspora towns. We describe one town in which residents often characterize Mexican immigrants as model minorities with respect to work and civic life but not with respect to education. We trace how this stereotype is deployed, accepted, and rejected both by long-standing residents and by Mexican newcomers themselves. [Mexican immigration, social identification, ethnic contrasts, minority students]

[ep]In 20–25 years mostly all the business is gonna be Mexican. ... They're a little slow, but when you put them to work, they work. You employ the black people, the boss leaves, they sit down, they doesn't work, but these Mexicans, you put them to work and they work. They want to better themselves, you can see it. It's just like the Italian people. The Italian people when they come from Italy they just work like slaves because they want to better themselves. That's what it looks like the Mexicans are, but the black people they just want everything for free. Welfare, welfare, welfare. There's a lot of welfare in Marshall. You on welfare, they give you a house, they pay most of your rent. The Italian people won't stoop that low to get welfare, and the Mexican people are all like that too. They like to work, they like making money. In 20–25 years this area is going to be controlled

by Mexicans.”

[epc]—an Italian resident of Marshall

[ni]As Mexican immigrants move to areas of the United States that have not had Latino residents, many towns are experiencing rapid and unfamiliar changes (Durand et al. 2005; Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2005). Marshall, a suburb of 30,000 in the Northeastern United States, has gone from about 100 Mexican-origin residents in 1990 to 1,500 in 2000 to at least 6,000 in 2008. In the Marshall schools 20 percent of the students are now Mexican, with enrollments concentrated in the early grades. This rapid growth in the Mexican population challenges both long-standing residents and Mexican newcomers. Long-standing residents confront the question of who Mexican immigrants are, and the question of who they themselves are, as they struggle to make sense of their town’s history, its future, and their place in it. Mexican immigrants must also construe their own and others’ identities in this new context.

As the opening quote illustrates, long-standing residents often identify Mexicans by comparing and contrasting them with other minority and immigrant groups. In Marshall, Mexican immigrants are often identified as “model minorities”—as hardworking contributors to the community who do not expect special treatment and do not complain—Italian Americans, for instance, and allegedly unlike African Americans. Mexican immigrants are not seen as model minorities in all respects, however. Most saliently, long-standing residents often describe Mexicans as unsuccessful in school and as unlikely to improve themselves through education. Mexicans are identified in various ways, however, and Mexican immigrants do not react to others’ characterizations uniformly. We trace both the model minority stereotype and other accounts of Mexican

immigrants as these are deployed, accepted, and rejected in Marshall. We offer an empirical account of complex identity politics in a rapidly changing New Latino Diaspora town and its schools.

[h1]Identifying Immigrants in the New Latino Diaspora

[h2]*The New Latino Diaspora*

In what Murillo (2002) and Villenas (2002) describe as the “New Latino Diaspora”—areas without traditional Latino presence to which Latinos have increasingly moved over the past 15 years—more positive models of immigrant identity often have space to take hold. In areas of long-standing Latino settlement, negative stereotypes about immigrant groups have often become entrenched. Mexican immigrants in these areas often confront physical and symbolic segregation along ethnic and class lines, and long-standing residents often employ beliefs and practices that have supported unequal ethnic relations (Foley 1991). In areas of more recent migration, however, models of Mexican identity are normally less entrenched (Millard et al. 2004; Wortham et al. 2002). As Gouveia and colleagues argue, new destinations lack “the virulence of anti-immigrant sentiments and historical baggage of intense interethnic and interracial conflicts found in older destinations” (2005:45).

Such locations allow more flexible and sometimes more hopeful immigrant identities. Immigrants in the New Latino Diaspora face both more ignorance and more opportunity than in areas of traditional settlement. Host communities know less about Mexican cultures and have less expertise serving immigrant Mexican needs, and there are fewer bilinguals available as models and helpers, but towns also have fewer entrenched prejudices against Mexican newcomers. Some diaspora towns like Hazleton, PA are

known for anti-immigrant legislation, but others remain more open. These towns offer opportunities to develop productive and sometimes unexpected models about who immigrants can aspire to be and how communities can productively live together. We do not yet know how the emerging situations of Mexican immigrants in the United States will develop, but we must explore New Latino Diaspora locations to make sense of the historical changes and opportunities the country now faces (Millard et al. 2004; Rich and Miranda 2005).

Research on the New Latino Diaspora has shown negative, positive and hybrid ways that long-standing residents construe newcomers. Some emphasize immigrants' foreignness and cast them as racial others (Gouveia et al. 2005; Millard et al. 2004; Murillo 2002; Rich and Miranda 2005). Most researchers also note long-standing residents' ambivalence, however. Grey and Woodrick (2005) argue that over half the residents in typical diaspora towns are ambivalent, fearing immigrants but also hoping that they may bring improvements. Some residents welcome and help immigrants, imagining positive futures for old and new residents together (Shutika 2005; Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2005). At times these positive reactions take the form of "paternalistic concern" or "benevolent racism" (Rich and Miranda 2005; Villenas 2002), in which long-standing residents presuppose their own superior position, but at other times they do not. New Latino Diaspora towns thus offer flexibility for individuals and communities as they formulate sometimes-unexpected responses to Mexican immigration (Hamann 2003; Hamann et al. 2002; Gouveia et al. 2005; Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2005).

[h2]*The "Model Minority" Stereotype*

Marshall residents sometimes identify Mexican immigrants using the "model

minority” stereotype described by Lee and others (Lee 1994; Lee and Kumashiro 2005). A model minority is “the ‘good’ minority that seeks advancement through quiet diligence in study and work and by not making waves; the minority that other American minorities should seek to emulate” (National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education 2008:1). This stereotype initially appeared in two articles from 1966. One in *U.S. News & World Report*, entitled “Success Story of One Minority Group in the U.S.,” begins: “At a time when Americans are awash in worry over the plight of racial minorities—one such minority, the nation’s 300,000 Chinese-Americans, is winning wealth and respect by dint of its own hard work ... not a welfare check” (1966:73). The other appeared in the *New York Times* (Petterson 1966), arguing that Japanese Americans, despite discrimination—fears of “Yellow Peril,” denial of citizenship, antimiscegenation laws, internment, menial jobs—were doing better than whites in income and schooling and that they “have established this remarkable record ... by their own almost totally unaided effort” (1966:21), through schooling and hard work. Petterson describes Japanese Americans’ “avid” preparation and “determination to achieve” academically and how, “denied access to many urban jobs, both white collar and manual, [they] then undertook menial tasks with such perseverance that they achieved a modest success” (1966:21). As developed in the 1960s, then, the model minority stereotype presupposes that “Asian Americans had finally succeeded in becoming accepted into white, middle-class society through their hard work, uncomplaining perseverance and quiet accommodation” (Suzuki 1980:156). As it has developed, the stereotype foregrounds academic success, portraying Asian Americans as “successful in school because they work hard and come from cultures that believe in the

value of education” (Lee 1994:413).

Many have shown the inaccuracies and costs of the model minority stereotype (Lee 1994; Reyes 2007; Suzuki 1980; Wu 2002). Asian Americans are socially, culturally, economically, and psychologically diverse. The stereotype obscures these differences as well as the disadvantages and discrimination that many Asian Americans face (Sue 2003). The stereotype also pits Asian Americans against African Americans and others, using Asian Americans to show that minorities can succeed, while blaming other minorities for their failures (Wu 2002). Such comparisons “fuel competition and animosity between [Asian Americans] and other racial groups” (Lee and Kumashiro 2005:10). In addition, the stereotype obscures the pernicious social work through which African Americans and others are racialized as a dangerous “underclass” (Jaynes 2004; Urciuoli 1996). Despite its inaccuracies, however, the stereotype persists. Two recent reports on Asian Americans in education (Lee and Kumashiro 2005; National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education 2008) begin with descriptions and criticisms of the model minority stereotype, because these experts see it as the key lens through which Americans view Asian Americans and education.

We are not adopting the model minority stereotype ourselves as an account that accurately represents the world. Instead, we describe how residents of Marshall themselves use the stereotype to make sense of each other. Many long-standing residents identify Mexican immigrants as model minorities in some ways, as uncomplaining hard workers who contribute to civic life and who are different than African Americans. Residents sometimes characterize Mexicans in ways that do not fit the stereotype, however. Many residents do not think that Mexicans work hard in school, and they do not

expect Mexicans to succeed through education. The article also describes how Mexican immigrants themselves both accept and reject the stereotype. Before turning to this description, we clarify how categories like the model minority stereotype come to identify people in practice.

[h2]*The Process of Social Identification*

People are socially identified when they or others interpret signs that identify them. Signs of identity explicitly or tacitly point to certain characteristics of a group by drawing on images of people that we infer must apply in this instance (Gumperz 1982). A Mexican immigrant may ignore an insulting gesture, for example, and others may infer that the immigrant is passive and unwilling to defend himself. A young male immigrant may flash a hand sign and others may infer that he is an aspiring gang member. Signs of identity only have meaning as they are construed using shared images about social types (Goffman 1974). We refer to these images as “models of personhood,” characterizations of the dispositions, typical behaviors and life prospects of a person or group (Agha 2007). Such models circulate in a community and people rely on them to make sense of others and themselves as they interpret signs of identity.

Any sign of identity can be construed using various models of personhood. This may seem obvious, but it means that we must study both the social movement of various models that may be used to construe a sign and the uptake of those models in actual events (Agha 2007; Silverstein 1992; Wortham 2006). The model minority stereotype, for instance, is not always applied to people who belong to some group. Various models are available to identify any Asian American or Mexican, and different ones are used in different events. Available models also circulate through distinct networks of individuals,

with different people recognizing and habitually using different models. In Marshall, where cultural change has accelerated for both long-standing residents and newcomers, there is significant heterogeneity in available models.

Social identification thus involves two types of indeterminacy. First, any sign of identity (appearing phenotypically Asian, speaking Spanish, etc.) can be interpreted using various models of personhood, and we must examine how the sign is actually construed in practice (Erickson 2004). Second, the various models of personhood used to interpret signs of identity move across social space and time, and different models are recognized by different individuals and groups. Marshall, for example, has relatively dense circulation of model minority stereotypes because of long-standing immigrant groups and their children who see themselves in this way and often have sympathy for Mexicans and other immigrants. To study social identification we must explore how these indeterminacies are overcome in practice—how signs of identity are interpreted and how the heterogeneous models used to construe them are distributed across social locations (Holland and Lave 2001; Wortham 2006). This article traces how some aspects of the model minority stereotype are applied to Mexican immigrants in a New Latino Diaspora town. Because residents of diaspora towns often apply models of personhood more flexibly than in areas of traditional settlement, we must study social identification in local context. Our account illustrates both the flexibility and the constraints within which Mexican immigrants operate in one town and its schools.

[h1]Research Site and Methods

Marshall is a suburban community of about 30,000 in a large Northeastern metropolitan area. Along with a shrinking white community, a large African American

community resides in Marshall. Immigrants are also central to Marshall's history. Irish immigration in the 1800s preceded Italian immigration throughout the first half of the 20th century. Smaller groups of Puerto Rican, South Asian and Caribbean newcomers settled as well. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the 1990 population was 70 percent white, 26 percent African American, and three percent Latino. The 2007 American Community Survey estimates the population as about 40 percent white, 40 percent African American, and 20 percent Latino. Marshall is poorer than surrounding suburbs: 17 percent of residents live below the poverty level, and it faces high crime and low educational achievement. African Americans and Mexicans live in the poorest neighborhoods and have less education than other groups. Marshall also has a long-standing Italian community. With some exceptions, Italian Americans are often more sympathetic to Mexican immigrants than other residents because they remember their own immigrant roots, because most belong to the Catholic church and because they share "Latin" cultures (e.g., using Romance languages and highly valuing family).

Our ongoing four year ethnographic study of Marshall has involved a diverse team of three faculty, eight doctoral, and two undergraduate students. We have done participant-observation and interviews at local schools and in the town. We have spent hundreds of hours observing and volunteering in local schools, hundreds more at community service agencies and community institutions ranging from the newspaper to the police department to many Mexican-owned businesses. We have also conducted dozens of formal recorded interviews with community members, teachers, administrators, and students from various ethnic groups (about one dozen blacks, two dozen Anglos, and two dozen Latinos). These interviews have been ethnographic, pursuing themes raised by

the interviewee and not following a formal protocol, although we have focused on long-standing residents' perceptions of Mexican immigrants and immigrants' views of hosts' reactions. Interviews were conducted in English, Italian, or Spanish, according to the language choice of the interviewee. Interviewers have been ethnically similar to the interviewee in about half of the cases. Most interviews have been recorded, transcribed and analyzed. We have also collected documents, including school materials, newspaper articles, essays written by students, copies of the ESL newsletter and minutes of Council meetings, and we have videotaped classes. In return for the welcome that we have received in Marshall, we have volunteered in the community and schools, translated at parent conferences and college nights, tutored at the local Latino advocacy organization and assisted teachers during classes.

[h1]Models of Mexican identity in Marshall

[h2]A *Model Minority*

The model minority stereotype, as it is applied to Mexicans in Marshall, has four main components: the group is different from allegedly less promising minorities (esp. African Americans), group members work hard and succeed, they do not want handouts and they do not complain. Long-standing residents of Marshall characterize Mexican immigrants in all of these ways. In the quote that opens this article, an Italian immigrant compared Mexicans to Italians: “you put them to work and they work. They want to better themselves. ... It’s just like the Italian people ... the Italian people won’t stoop that low to get welfare, and the Mexican people are all like that too. They like to work; they like making money.” Thus, he describes how Mexican immigrants work hard and do not want handouts. He also contrasts Mexicans and African Americans, who he says do not

work hard and “just want everything for free” through welfare.

The same Italian immigrant described how landlords like to rent to Mexicans because they pay rent reliably.

[ex]They're going to work to pay, so [landlords] always have somebody from Mexico. ... That's the way it used to be with the Italian people ... a lot of people lived together, and a lot of people used to have boarders, maybe have a house, five, six rooms and have five, six boarders in it and that's how they used to keep up and pay rent and everything because of the boarders, and that's what the Mexican people are doing.

[ni]Other residents also compared Mexican immigrants to previous successful immigrants. One man of Irish origin described Mexicans as “a hard working people ... very family-oriented and that's the key. ... I had a group of them working for me at Wal-Mart before I left, they would do cleaning, they do all the menial jobs. Like every immigrant group that came through, they took all the menial jobs that the more affluent people didn't want to do, and that's how they started. And the Spanish are there right now.” These Italian and Irish American residents identify with Mexican immigrants, seeing their ancestors' experiences in the Mexicans' current situation. Mexicans do whatever it takes to earn money, working hard and enduring hardship without complaining and without handouts. Long-standing residents thus borrow a model of personhood they use for their own ethnic groups and apply it to Mexicans.

On the streets of Marshall one hears similar assessments of the Mexican immigrants' character and prospects. In a local coffee shop one day we were embarrassed by a white resident who responded to our question about Mexican immigrants by

throwing his head back and exclaiming, “*I love the Mexicans.*” He went on to explain that they are “hardworking, decent people” who “bring life back to town.” The owner, an Eastern European immigrant, added that Mexicans are “very family oriented,” “don’t want crime” and “want the best for their children.” A policeman told us that “we rarely have problems with them. They’re a hardworking, hardworking people. [It’s] rare that you run into a Mexican or Latino that’s disrespectful. ... They drink, they get drunk, we can handle that. They don’t shoot each other.”

Many residents—Anglo, Italian, and Mexican—contrast Mexican immigrants with African Americans. One Anglo resident told us: “The Mexicans who come here work ... [they’re not] sitting on a stoop drinking beer with a Cadillac in the driveway ... [and] collecting welfare checks.” Another Anglo claimed that African Americans “hate Mexicans, they hate them because they are hard-working people. They work 16–18 hours a day. Blacks say, ‘these people have come to steal our jobs,’ but [it’s] not even comparable. [Mexicans] never call out sick.” This contrast between “hardworking Mexicans” and allegedly “lazy blacks” recurred in many interviews and observations. It was even echoed by an African American teacher and longtime resident, although he gave a more nuanced presentation: “We [the NAACP] think that a lot of folks will stand by and let other folks do things for them if they’re gonna do it for them, and they don’t really want to ... know how to do anything for themselves.” However, he contrasted this model of “lazy blacks” with his account of middle-class African Americans who work hard and have succeeded economically. Like other African Americans we interviewed, he identified with working-class African Americans’ feeling that they struggle to find work while the “Mexicans are being catered to,” but he also faulted many blacks for not being

willing to do some jobs that Mexicans succeed at and for succumbing to drugs and crime.

[h2]*Rejuvenating the Town*

We have collected narratives of Marshall's history and imagined future from diverse residents. Many focus on a transition in Mexican immigration from male-only to family migration that occurred about five years ago. One Anglo resident said:

[ex]A lot of those [Mexicans] who were here [a decade ago] were contracted, brought here from New York by Chinese restaurants, given room and board and transportation. ... Now these people have created roots, now they have extended families. ... Back then it was primarily males. They didn't really bring wives or spouses or what have you. But it's changed now. It's more family oriented. They are going home less. There are a lot more families. Couples have had children, the children are now going to school. They don't want their children to go without, so this encourages them to stay here. They want a better life for their children.

[ni]As Mexican families have settled, they have focused on their children's futures and pursued the American Dream—working hard and not relying on others. This resident also described another way in which Mexicans are behaving like model minorities, as many of them “wised-up [and] went out on their own,” starting their own businesses.

New Mexican-owned businesses, long-term residents say, have revitalized some downtown areas. Many explicitly credit the Mexicans with this renewal. One described Marshall's downtown as a “ghost town” ten years ago, “completely deserted.” He noted that there are now several Korean stores, many Mexican restaurants and several other diverse shops, as well as flower boxes on the sidewalk. Another resident claimed that Mexican immigrants are “doing a lot as far as helping bring back a real vibrant part of the

town [that has been decrepit since] its heyday in the 50s and 60s.”

[ex]I don't think the revitalization actually took hold until you started seeing more of the businesses moving in and I think it is when many of the Mexican restaurants started up and many of those Mexican businesses. They tried revitalization here for a long time, and it's still only happening in certain areas. But [in Mexican] areas it really is happening. ... I've driven through the town on Saturday nights, and gone out and everything else and it's alive. I mean, there is stuff going on, you can hear the music, you can hear everybody; people are out on the street. Fifteen years ago I would have been more afraid to drive through Marshall.

[ni]A local priest told us that long-standing residents credit Mexican newcomers with the revitalization, describing how parishioners see “the positive side; I think they see it may be revitalizing the town a little bit. You'll see some Mexican restaurants, Mexican stores, and so they see that as a good thing.” As the President of the Town Council said at a public meeting:, “Revitalization is happening every day” in Marshall and “embracing the new wave of immigration will be a key to our long-term success.”

Mexican immigrants have also made clergy and churchgoing residents happy by rejuvenating declining congregations. One priest said:

[ex]It's wonderful. You can walk around Marshall and see the shops and the people walking through the neighborhood; a lot of them are Mexican. I've been here several years and my experience has generally been positive in that those who are long time parishioners ... they are very positive about the fact that the Mexicans are here. They identify them as Catholic, they see them as very pious

Catholics, they always talk about them as hard-working people, they're thrilled about the large numbers, they've even said it reminds them of years gone by when their Mass would be that crowded, so it's nice to see that vitality in the community.

[ni]Both in church and on the streets, then, many residents see Mexican immigrants bringing life back to the community. Long-standing residents who describe Mexicans in this way adopt important components of the model minority stereotype—casting the immigrants as hard working, uncomplaining people whose work and faith are rejuvenating the town.

[h2]*Contrasting Opinions*

Not everyone sees Mexicans as a model minority, however. Over the course of a cab ride one Anglo driver described how Marshall used to be a popular destination, hosting concerts and other events, with visitors coming from miles around into town. Then it “went way down” and has become “dangerous” and a “melting pot.” He explained the decline this way: “You can say what you want, but these ethnic groups bring a lot of hoodlums with them”—gang members and other criminals. Marshall has become an “easy place” for criminals to relocate, with the availability of welfare offices and the like. When we asked what he meant by “ethnic groups,” he cited both blacks and Mexicans: “People say it's the blacks but this town is becoming all Mexican.” When we asked directly whether Mexican immigrants contribute to crime he hesitated but assented, mentioning in particular that “they beat their wives.” Another Anglo resident claimed that Mexicans spread sexually transmitted diseases and argued that “a lot of them are also becoming trapped in American materialism. I don't know how this is going to work, but

they come up here to help feed their families and all of a sudden you see them driving around in SUV's, and I don't know what's happening with their families.”

Some Italians gave mixed characterizations of Mexicans as well. In one conversation at a local club, several agreed that Marshall has changed “a lot,” with some arguing that it “è diventata male” (*turned bad*). Most blamed African Americans: “I neri hanno cacciato fuori l'italiano” (*the blacks pushed the Italians out*). They compared and contrasted Mexican immigrants and Italian immigrants of earlier generations.

[begin ex]

A: *La laboriosità c'e l'hanno. Solo laboriosità.*

Work ethic (or industriousness) they have. Just work ethic.

B: *Lavoranno forte, eh!*

They work hard, eh!

A: *Non riesgono cambiare lavoro. C'e, fa questo lavoro e dopo due mesi fa un altro lavoro per fare—Loro rimangono a fare quel' lavoro là. Vogliono essere sicuri. Prendono cinquanta dollari e (vogliono) continuare e prendono cinquanta dollari. Noi cinquanta dollari e noi c'e ne andiamo dopo cinquanta poi noi vogliamo setanta, poi cento.*

They don't manage to change jobs. That is, do one job and then two months later do another to make—They stay doing that job there. They want to be secure. They make 50 dollars and (they want) to continue and make 50 dollars. Us—50 dollars and we leave, after 50 we want 70, and then 100.

[end ex]

[ni]Here the Italian residents grant that Mexicans work hard, just as they and their ancestors did. But they also characterize Mexicans as lacking ambition and as being content with working-class jobs. As one person said, “non vogliono responsabilità” (*they don't want responsibility*) and “lavora sì, ma non si sforzano!” (*he [the Mexican] works, but he doesn't push himself*).

[begin ex]

E: *Ci vorrà molto tempo per arrivare come siamo noi.*

It will take a long time for them to get where we are today

A: *Ci vorrà molti molti anni.*

It will take many years.

E: *Non arriveranno mai!*

They'll never get there!

A: *Forse non ci arriveranno. L'italiano ha quel' istinto di sempre andare avanti ... Siamo piu flessibile.*

Maybe they won't get there. The Italian has that instinct to always get ahead ...

We're more flexible.

[end ex]

[ni]Sometimes Italians describe differences like this between Mexican and Italian immigrants, and some suspect that the Mexicans may not do as well as they have done. Despite all the characterizations of Mexicans as hardworking and uncomplaining civic

contributors, then, long-standing residents also see them as not fully model minorities—in this respect as not enterprising enough.

[h2]*Mexicans as Quiet Victims*

Mexican immigrants are often characterized as victims of landlords and criminals. This fits with the model minority stereotype because hardworking, uncomplaining Mexicans are taken advantage of by criminals from other allegedly less desirable ethnic groups. As Wu (2002:28) says, with the model minority stereotype “one side becomes the villain, the other the victim.” Many townspeople criticize the way landlords exploit Mexican tenants, charging them by the head to pack into crowded, substandard housing. But the most common characterization of Mexicans as victims occurs in “payday mugging” narratives. These describe a Mexican victim, someone who carries cash because he is undocumented and cannot open a bank account, and criminals who take the Mexican’s money. Police claim that such muggings are less common than a few years ago because banks have arranged to accept Mexican identification cards and undocumented immigrants have been able to open bank accounts. Nonetheless, payday mugging stories circulate robustly in town, among whites, African Americans and Mexicans. Almost every Mexican resident that we have asked has been able to tell us a story of at least one friend or relative who has been a victim of a mugging. White residents also tell these stories eagerly and often.

One white school administrator told us that “[Mexicans] are walking around with pay packets and getting knocked over the head.” A white taxi driver said that criminals “prey on the Mexicans” and that Mexicans are a nice but a “gullible” and “naïve” people. The local newspaper has run several stories on payday muggings, including the following

typical characterization: “Problems associated with illegal immigrants include ... being targeted by robbers who know illegal immigrants often carry large amounts of cash, since they don’t have proper identification to open a bank account, and the reluctance of immigrants to cooperate with police as victims or witnesses due to fear of deportation.” A long-standing Latina resident who works for the police described how Mexicans are victimized every day because they carry cash, so they are “easy prey, easy targets.” “Eventually, people will wise up,” she said. A white police lieutenant gave a similar account, as described in this field note:

[ex]There is a lot of African American crime on Latinos. Latinos don’t have social security cards so they can’t get bank accounts and have to take their money with them wherever they go. “They know you’re out there with money.” It’s “like lions on lambs. Four to five African Americans on one Mexican.” I ask if the crimes generally turn violent and he says, yes, very violent. [MMMM DD, YYYY]

[ni]Like most others, this policeman identifies the perpetrators as African American. He also characterizes them as violent and predatory, describing Mexican victims as passive and as hopelessly outnumbered, as “lambs” soon to be eaten.

Longtime residents also describe Mexicans’ reactions to being victimized in ways that fit with the model minority stereotype. Mexicans are said to be uncomplaining, and they often do not report crimes. One African American resident told us that she witnessed African American men mugging a Mexican man and that the victim refused to call the police. She herself called the police and made the report. Another resident described a similar case:

[ex]They get taken advantage of quite a bit. They get mugged or whatever and they won't go to the police. We had a case recently where they had to put a Spanish person in *jail* just to keep them until they caught the person that did it and get him to court so he would testify. He was afraid to testify. He was afraid something would happen to him. But in the end ... they caught him and he was put away.

[ni]Many Mexican immigrants' reluctance to involve police surely results from fear of deportation, but long-standing residents present this reluctance in a way that characterizes Mexicans as passive, victimized, and uncomplaining.

African American narrators tell payday mugging stories differently. They acknowledge that blacks do mug Mexicans, but they distinguish between black criminals and other blacks, and they point out how Mexicans are encroaching into formerly African American areas. One narrator described how many perpetrators are drug addicts.

[diag]

N: A lot of blacks are robbing Mexicans because they figure they carry [money]. You see, Mexicans don't believe in going to the bank. They carry big lumps of money on them—they do have good lumps of money, but they ain't really been no real big [racial] conflict, not yet. I think sooner or later it might.

R: Okay, so do you think that it's young people that's doing the, that are robbing—

N: Of course it's young people—young people, crack heads, they ain't got ... they need money to get dope, sure, they not robbing—they robbing you, me, the

church, anybody; they don't care, they doing their business ...

R: So when you ... say, they they'll rob the Mexicans, that that's just trying to get what they think what the Mexicans are taking away from them—

N: Naw, it ain't that. It's for dope.

[end diag]

[ni]This black resident claims that drug addicted criminals do not single out Mexicans, arguing that they would rob anyone, even the church. At the end of the segment he also rejects the idea that racial tension is relevant to these crimes. A few black criminals just “need money to get dope.”

Apart from stories about crime, long-standing residents also characterize Mexicans as passive and uncomplaining in other contexts. When we asked about recently arrived Mexican students' behavior at a recent school pep rally, for instance, one teacher tucked in his shoulders and opened his eyes wide, looking bewildered and overwhelmed. Another teacher began a discussion with Mexican students by asking them to talk about how they had been treated as outsiders. When one student asserted that he would defend himself against ridicule, the teacher gave her account of the typical Mexican student's response.

[diag]

T: So if everyone else is laughing at you and you're by yourself, you don't just

[puts hands covering her face and crouches, inclining the top of her body towards the floor] quietly and hope that they stop? You would say something.

S: I'd tell 'em to stop, yo. If they keep doing it and I get mad then I smack 'em in the face and that's the—

T: Well that's not what I normally see. I see most times that we just, shhh
[crouches forward] get real quiet and hope that people stop looking at us.

[end diag]

[ni]The teacher's gesture here was striking, involving her whole body in a cringing and self-effacing movement as she curled her torso and directed her gaze down. Even though several others encouraged the student's claim that he would "smack" his tormentors in the face, with supportive laughter, the teacher did not allow them to present themselves as assertive. Instead, she characterized them as passive, self-conscious, and uncomplaining.

Some residents also characterized Mexican immigrants as quiet by contrasting them with other Latino groups, as in the following interview with an Anglo clergyman.

[diag]

C: I have not heard African Americans complaining about the Hispanics. But I have heard Hispanics complaining about the African Americans, either saying that they get harassed by them or bothered by them, mugged by them. That they tend to be, um, a little bit noisier, I will say this at least, well I shouldn't, the Mexicans tend to be, at least in church, like a really quiet people.

E: Really?

C: They're very very quiet. When I worked with Puerto Ricans they tend to be ...
Well, you know, they're not the most, they're not like crazy wild at Mass. But

they tend to be more animated. You know, Mexicans, no.

E: Really! So you don't get all that clapping.

C: No, they don't understand that. There's a Cuban lady in the choir.

E: Uh huh.

C: Who, you know, she'll, I don't even know if she brings it anymore, but she would sometimes have her tambourine ... She would kind of sway a little, and the Mexicans are like, why is she doing that?

[end diag]

[ni]In several domains, then, long-standing residents characterize Mexican immigrants as quiet, passive, uncomplaining, and often victimized.

[h2]*Models of Mexicans in School*

Long-standing residents compared Asian immigrants and Mexicans, claiming that both groups worked hard, did not complain and revitalized the town. But when speaking about the two groups in school, educators contrasted them. After saying positive things about Mexicans one day, for instance, one teacher claimed that “the people who really progressed were the Koreans” because “they're big on education.” She was clearly contrasting Asian and Mexican immigrants, because her next comment was that Koreans “did so well because they all learned English,” even older people, while “older Mexicans are not learning English.” Another teacher told us that some of the Mexican students are “unmotivated, lazy and have no desire to do work.” She went on to sing the praises of Ming, a Chinese ESL student who is “ultra-motivated” and “uses a portable electronic dictionary.” Another educator described how, when the Spanish-speaking population

began to increase, a principal with both Asian and Mexican students “kept all the Asian students and sent all of the Spanish-speaking students to another school and . . . her reasoning was, who are the kids who are going to help me most on the test?”

Mexican immigrants, then, were often characterized as a model minority with respect to work and civic participation but not with respect to school. Some educators did contrast them favorably with African American students. After speaking of Mexican immigrant students as respectful and hardworking, if not always successful, one said that she had “worked in a mainly black school” and “the kids that I had, they were just not interested in school.” Despite this invidious contrast with blacks, however, Mexican students were not identified as model minorities with respect to education. In fact, teachers often used Mexicans’ success as hardworking to explain their lack of success in school: Because Mexican adolescents worked so hard at their jobs, they did not have time and motivation to succeed in school.

Within the schools, different groups of educators characterized Mexican students differently. Those that had little direct contact with Mexican students often used negative models. They told us that Mexican students are not academic, they come only to learn English, they don’t speak good Spanish, and they are wild and unsupervised. One administrator, for example, repeatedly characterized the Mexican ESL students as “overage” and “lacking in academic skill.” Both he and a school principal also compared the ESL students and special education students, saying that it was “unrealistic” for teachers to expect ESL students to “learn like everyone else.” The principal confirmed that they designed the ESL program using a special education model: “The model for upper functioning Special Ed. kids works for the upper functioning language kids.” Many

administrators—most of whom did not speak Spanish—described students as speaking substandard Spanish. The school principal lamented that they were trying to teach “English to kids who can’t read, write or speak their native language.” One educator described the students’ Spanish as “Tex–Mex.” Another claimed that most Mexicans in Mexico do not aspire to schooling beyond ninth grade and so it is unrealistic for American schools to expect high aspirations from them. Some educators also worried about declining academic standards. As a teacher said, “if you have a group who is highly unmotivated and they’re absent a lot and . . . you start giving them open book tests, or take-home tests, or projects instead of tests and replacing a lot of the harder curriculum . . . I think some teachers feel that we are starting to do that and we’re not holding our standards high enough.” Another teacher said that “there isn’t much hope” for older Mexican students who want to go to work. He described one student whose parents claimed falsely that he had moved out of town so that he could work and not be truant. A while later someone saw him in town “just sitting on some stoop.”

Teachers who had direct contact with Mexican immigrant students, however, had more positive views. They did not describe Mexican students as model minorities in school, but they characterized the students as model minorities with respect to their jobs and work aspirations, as people with adult responsibilities and hard lives. One teacher had a rule that repeated inattention and sleeping in class would result in detention. But she routinely asked students who had their heads down on desks or failed to turn in homework, “Did you work last night?” If the answer was “no” she gave them detention, but she considered jobs a valid excuse. Another teacher explained that she adapted her expectations because of students’ difficult situations. “The problem is: Do you say, well,

I know you have two kids, or I know you work 50 hours a week, so I'm gonna let that slide, or do you hold the same expectation for every student even though their situations vary drastically? ... It's never all or nothing." Many of these teachers recognized the importance of students' work in jobs outside of school, to the students and their families. Despite their sympathy for the Mexican immigrant students, teachers who worked directly with them were nonetheless frustrated by some students' behavior. One teacher introduced a student as the "charming one who does no work," then called across the room that she'd give us a dollar if we could get him to work. The students engaged in such joking, too—like on the day a teacher was scolding students, saying they would only get partial credit if homework was late and a student responded: "But it's the first time that we don't do it!" and everyone laughed.

Teachers' accounts of Mexican students as hardworking but not as promising as other minority students were in some ways similar to Italians' characterization of them as hardworking but not sufficiently entrepreneurial. One teacher told us: "What I like best is the fact that they're very respectful, and for the most part they are very motivated to succeed." She continued: "I'm trying to instill my conception of success, which is basically having a goal and trying to attain it. Their idea of success is doing what I'm told. ... I'll give them a worksheet and they'll work really, really hard at filling it out but I don't think that they understand that it's more than filling it out, that they actually have to understand" the content. She used one student as an example.

[diag]

T: I had a student, who was a senior, and he had been working at Chick-fil-A, and

they wanted to give him an assistant manager position. And, you know he was having some issues at home. So ... I went and spoke to the manager at Chick-fil-A, and she basically said, you know, until he gets his high school diploma I can't give him a promotion, and unfortunately he dropped out. I just don't know how else to instill in them that, the importance of getting that diploma, you know, and that all he had were six months [left to graduation].

R: What do you think that's about?

T: It's about the fact that, he's making enough money right now, that he doesn't see the big picture. And I think that when he sees counterparts getting promotions, and he doesn't because of the fact that he doesn't have an education, then you know, maybe he's gonna realize, I shoulda just finished the six months I had left. And unfortunately by then it'll be too late. It's a very sad situation, very sad.

[end diag]

[ni]Like most educators who worked directly with Mexican immigrant students, this teacher was sympathetic to the challenges they faced and she recognized their hard work and motivation to succeed. But she also felt that their aspirations and their standards were not high enough. Thus, the Mexicans were not model minorities in school.

[h2]*Mexicans' Acceptance and Rejection of Models*

Mexican immigrants identified themselves in various ways, sometimes accepting and sometimes rejecting long-standing residents' characterizations. Almost all Mexicans described themselves and their compatriots as striving to improve their lives through hard work. Many, however, did not accept the characterization of Mexicans as passive and

quiet. For instance, one day we spoke with a group of young Mexican men who claimed that they had to defend themselves aggressively against the subset of African American students who threaten them.

[ex]*Hace muchos problemas porque ellos no nos respetan y tampoco nosotros no los respetamos ¿me entiendes? so no se puede así no se puede hacer nada porque no tienen respeto contra nosotros y nosotros no tenemos respeto contra ellos ¿me entiendes? Y aunque hay muchas cosas que ellos dicen que de los Mexicanos que están aquí porque les quitan el trabajo y cualquier cosa y nosotros venimos aquí okay los que no tienen sus padres aquí venimos aquí para trabajar y para tener un mejor futuro, right? Porque nosotros en nuestro país no lo podemos tener. Pero ellos no piensan así, como yo en Marshall veo que hay muchos morenos que venden drogas, hace lo que quiere, anda robando a los Mexicanos.*

[ex]It causes a lot of problems because they don't respect us and we don't respect them either, you understand? And you can't like that you can't do anything about it because they don't have respect towards us and we don't have respect towards them, you understand? And even though there are a lot of things that they say about Mexicans, that they are here because they take jobs away from them and whatever and we came here—okay those who don't have their parents here, we came to work and to have a better future, right? Because we couldn't have it in our own country. But they don't think of it like that, like I see in Marshall that there are a lot of blacks who sell drugs, do whatever they want, who go around robbing Mexicans.

[ni]Another described how criminals victimize older Mexicans, not young men like

himself.

[ex]*Lo que pasa es que, okay, no a los chabos, no, porque los chabos saben defenderse y todo, me entiende, pero más siempre lo agarran los tíos. Agreden casi a la mayoría, pero a los señores más grandes, cuando recién recibe su cheque y todo eso; como an example, uno de mis amigos que vive en mi casa la otra vez casi le cortan la oreja. ¿Por qué? Porque le quería—lo querían asaltar y—*

[ex]No what happens—not to the young guys, no, because the young guys know how to defend themselves and all, you understand, but more often they grab the older guys. They assault almost the majority, but the older guys, when they’ve just received their check and all that; for an example, one of my friends who lives in my house the other day, they almost cut off his ear. Why? Because they wanted to assault him and—

[ni]He concludes that young Mexican men must aggressively defend themselves, even if that means being armed:

[ex]*ya sabemos que nosotros cuando nos ven por la calle, si va uno o dos nos van a agarrar ¿me entiendes? so nosotros tenemos que andar trayendo algo como knives, gun o something like that para defendernos, you know? It’s not good porque ellos luego take guns and everything so I mean*

[ex]we already know that we when they see us on the street, if it’s one or two of us they are going to grab us, you understand me? So we have to walk around carrying something like knives, gun or something like that to defend ourselves, you know? It’s not good because then they take guns and everything so I mean

[ni]These young men characterized themselves differently from long-standing residents who portray Mexicans as quietly enduring victimization. In another example of outspoken action, several Mexican students participated in proimmigrant demonstrations in 2006, during the national debate about immigration. One Mexican student appeared in a newspaper photo carrying a sign that said “We’re workers, not criminals,” and he presented the picture in the ESL classroom. Another student passed around photos of himself and several other Mexican students at a demonstration, proudly characterizing himself as willing to stand up for Mexicans’ rights.

We observed an incident at the high school one day in which a Mexican adolescent named Oscar refused to accept mistreatment in a striking way. We did not expect this behavior because he had consistently been a quiet, diligent student. Despite working 40 hours a week and sleeping little, we often observed him spending free time in classes doing homework, saying something like “hay que aprovechar entonces” [one has to make the best (of the opportunity to get work done)]. One day, however, he complained that Mexican students were being disciplined for infractions that would have earned other students only a warning. He proceeded to quarrel with a South Asian student, as described in the following field note.

[ex]Manish and Oscar get into a little fight. Manish says “shut the f—” to Oscar, and Oscar says “f— you” back. Mr. Cortez gives Manish a warning and Oscar says “when it’s us you always send us downstairs! But Manish you only gave a warning! All the Mexicans you send downstairs!” Then Oscar tells Manish to say it again. He wants to see if Manish gets sent downstairs [he tells the researcher]. During a break Oscar tells me that it always happens to the Mexicans, they send

us down, but the others, no. Oscar has been sent twice for talking. He says, if it's Javier or one of "them," referring to the handful of "bad" Mexican students from whom he normally distinguishes himself, they get sent right away. I say it's injusto (*unfair*), and Oscar agrees: Es injusto, pero él es el maestro y puede mandar a quien quiere (*it's unfair but he is the teacher and he can send who he wants*). ... When class resumes, Oscar tests his theory. He provokes Manish into an argument. A minute later, Manish says to Oscar, "N—, that's mine." Mr. Cortez scolds, "Mani:sh" in a mildly reproachful tone. Oscar gets mad and Mr. Cortez threatens to send him downstairs. Oscar makes a show of getting his books together, moving abruptly as if he is angry, almost seeming like he wants to go.

[MMMM DD, YYYY]

[ni]In this incident Oscar complicated the models of personhood normally applied to him. He used "we" to indicate his affiliation with Javier and other Mexican students who are frequently sent to the office, even though he usually distanced himself from these unstudious peers. He identified himself and these unstudious peers as all Mexicans, in opposition to "the others," which in this class session was only Manish. He then tested his theory of discriminatory treatment by provoking Manish.

So sometimes Mexicans acted against the stereotypes used by long-standing residents and by teachers. At other times, however, they did not. Many immigrants emphasized the danger of Marshall and their own inability to do anything except hide.

[ex]*Bueno para mi Marshall no es el mejor lugar para vivir. Es peligroso—yo pienso que para mi es peligroso porque a mi papá lo han asaltado. Igualmente a mi; me han quitado la cartera, mi celular una vez, me pusieron una pistola en la*

cabeza y me dijeron que les diera yo el dinero. Si, a él también le pusieron una pistola en la cabeza le pegaron, a él sí le pegaron. Le quitaron tres mil dolares que, el dinero era para pagar a sus trabajadores sí, y de él—para él.

[ex]Well for me Marshall isn't the best place to live. It's dangerous—I think that for me it's dangerous because they've assaulted my father. The same with me; they took my wallet, my cell phone one time, they put a gun to my head and they told me to give them the money. Yeah they put a gun to his head too. They beat him, they sure beat him. They took three thousand dollars that, the money was to pay his workers, it was, and it was his—for him.

Many other Mexicans talked about crime and emphasized danger, like one woman described in the following field note: “She says that she lives with constant fear of the black people in Marshall. When she used to get a ride home from work, the person who gave her a ride always waited until she got in the door before leaving, because it's dangerous” (MMMM DD, YYYY). In many class discussions, Mexican students described being mistreated by African Americans in town. “Black people tell us that if you don't have papers [legal immigration status], you cannot ride the bus.” Other students described being forced to give up seats on the bus to African American girls. When the teacher asked how they could change tense relations between Mexicans and blacks, they said they couldn't. “You can't change others ... Tenemos que estar juntos pero no podemos. Los mexicanos no están unidos; pelean.” [*We have to be together but we can't. Mexicans are not united; they fight*]. Many were resigned to discrimination and mistreatment, a reaction that fits with the quiet suffering and perseverance portrayed in the model minority stereotype. But, as we have shown above, at other times some young

Mexicans expressed an intention to fight back. Many Mexican youth also characterized their own relations with African American peers as good, citing instances of interracial dating and friendships, but they nonetheless feared and sometimes aggressively responded to blacks who threatened them.

[h1]Conclusions

In response to the rapid immigration of Mexicans over the past 15 years, New Latino Diaspora towns are struggling to make sense of the newcomers and their own future. Long-standing residents tend to identify Mexican immigrants using models of personhood that also characterize other minorities. Mexicans in Marshall are often seen as hardworking, uncomplaining and a positive civic influence, like Italian and Asian immigrants. Long-standing residents contrast them with African Americans, who allegedly do not work hard, complain, and expect handouts. Mexicans are also cast as uncomplaining victims of African American criminals and others who exploit them. In these respects, Mexicans fit the model minority stereotype: they are “ethnicized,” constructed as positive contributors, and contrasted with “racialized” minorities who are constructed as dangerous (Urciuoli 1996). But in school Mexicans do not fit the model minority stereotype at all. They may work hard on the job and reap some rewards, but long-standing residents do not expect Mexicans to better themselves through education in the same way as Asian Americans.

Educators in New Latino Diaspora towns face a challenge. They already struggle to meet the needs of rapidly growing numbers of Mexican students, in settings with limited expertise at serving such students (Wortham et al. 2002). If our account of Mexicans as model minorities applies to other towns, New Latino Diaspora educators

also work in environments where Mexican students may be expected to be hard workers and be solid contributors but not good students. Given the flexibility of social identification in the New Latino Diaspora, might educators have opportunities to identify Mexican students not only as hardworking but also as academically promising? In a place like Marshall, which is also home to African Americans, can this flexibility also allow Anglos and Mexicans to racialize blacks less? We do not know the answers yet, but we will continue to work with educators in Marshall toward these ends.

Because of the rapid pace of change in the New Latino Diaspora, and because of the inevitable indeterminacies of social identification, Mexicans are not identified in simple and predictable ways in Marshall. We must attend to local variation in towns like this, avoiding overgeneralizations about the social identities applied to and adopted by immigrant groups. We must also acknowledge that the rapid change in diaspora towns makes further developments likely. As the children of Mexican immigrants are born in Marshall and move through the school system over the next decade, the profile of Mexican students will undoubtedly change. In a few years Mexican immigrants in Marshall could be seen as model minorities in all respects, they could continue as partly model minorities, they could become “bad” immigrants, or there may be other possibilities. Continuing work on New Latino Diaspora communities will be required to understand how this important new group of Americans comes to be identified, and identifies themselves, as they settle in towns like Marshall all across the country.

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