

ASSIMILATION REDUX

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RICHARD ALBA AND VICTOR NEE, *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003, 359 pages, ISBN: 067401040X, \$59.95.

EVELYN NAKANO GLENN, *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002, 306 pages, ISBN: 0674007328, \$42.00.

As somebody who closely studies as well as lives the Asian ethnic experience, I read with great interest Richard Alba and Victor Nee's new book, *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration*. Alba and Nee seek to make the case for re-establishing the primacy of the assimilation paradigm for understanding the settlement experiences of contemporary immigrants, most of whom are of Latin American or Asian descent. Once the dominant canon in accounting for the settlement experiences of newcomers and their descendants, today it competes with approaches stressing the centrality and persistence of racial inequality and stratification. Acknowledging from the outset that assimilation has become a dirty word in some circles, the authors provide an up-to-date definition and account of the concept, avoiding patronizing or normative prescriptions and other deficiencies that have come to characterize the paradigm. As a result, this is a carefully written book. Alba and Nee know they are treading into unpopular territory and take great pains to be clear about what they are and are not claiming.

Whether the book succeeds or fails in convincing readers, however, depends on whether the glass is half empty, half full, or somewhere in between. Skeptics will likely see this book as another example of what Blauner (1972) long ago characterized as "immigrant analogy" scholarship that assumes no fundamental or insurmountable differences between racial minorities and White ethnic groups. Optimists, in contrast, will find evidence to support a cautiously hopeful picture of immigrant inclusion into the American mainstream.

Alba and Nee begin by asking an essential question: Do differences in national origin and racial/ethnic background of contemporary immigrants fundamentally

Du Bois Review, 1:2 (2004) 389–392.

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DOI: 10.1017/S1742058X04042110

negate the assimilation pattern experienced by earlier European and East Asian groups? While they acknowledge that racial and ethnic inequality continue to be troubling features of the American landscape and that assimilation is unevenly experienced by different groups, ultimately their answer to this question is no—for them race and ethnicity are neither central nor necessarily persistent elements of American society. Those who insist otherwise have gone too far in painting an overly pessimistic picture of the future and in portraying contemporary immigrants as qualitatively different from earlier ones. Assimilation, they argue, has been and will continue to be the “master trend” for newcomers and their descendants.

So what exactly do Alba and Nee mean by assimilation and how are they updating it? They offer the following: “We define assimilation as the decline of an ethnic distinction and its corollary cultural and social differences. Individuals’ ethnic origins become less and less relevant in relation to the members of another ethnic group (typically, but not necessarily the ethnic majority group), and individuals on both sides of the boundary see themselves more and more as alike, assuming they are similar in terms of some other critical factors such as social class” (p. 11). Such a definition acknowledges that the mainstream itself is changed by immigration, eliminating the unnecessarily one-sided and normative assumption that only newcomers do the changing. Later Alba and Nee add, “We view assimilation as a contingent outcome stemming from the cumulative effect of individual choices and collective action in close-knit groups, occurring at different rates both within and across ethnic groups” (p. 65). In this sense, assimilation may either be a conscious strategy or an “unintended consequence” resulting from everyday decisions. This is another important distinction for Alba and Nee since they do not assume assimilation’s inevitability or even its desirability as a strategy in the eyes of newcomers. Lastly, assimilation does not require the absence of racial inequality. As they argue, “Assimilation, even if it expands to embrace non-Europeans, is unlikely to dissolve racial distinctions entirely in the United States and to end the inequalities rooted in them” (p. 292).

And what evidence do Alba and Nee offer to make the case for assimilation? In a chapter titled, “Assimilation in Practice: The Europeans and East Asians,” Alba and Nee review the record of each group’s settlement experiences using conventional measures such as language assimilation, socioeconomic attainment, residential integration, rising intermarriage, and ethnicity’s waning salience in people’s lives as evidence of assimilation. While they acknowledge that greater “vulnerability may make Asian Americans more attentive than White Americans to the continuing salience of ethnic identity” (p. 98), they conclude that both groups have assimilated and are now fundamental members of the American mainstream.

At its best, this book made me pause and take an honest look at my own resistance to embracing the paradigm and the authors’ revisions to it. Alba and Nee present a cautiously argued case that draws on an impressive body of data. More immediately for me, as a 1.5 generation Asian American who no longer speaks Chinese, is in an interracial relationship with mixed-race children, and lives/works in a predominantly White setting, it could certainly be said that my life trajectory fits neatly within assimilation theory. Why, then, do I persist in holding back?

My answer is rooted in conclusions I have drawn from studying highly acculturated Asian American groups, an endeavor I began as a way to understand and frame my own personal experiences (Tuan 1998; Shiao and Tuan, forthcoming). Particularly for Asian ethnics, descendants of the earliest Chinese and Japanese settlers, there is no question that extensive acculturation has occurred. But to put them squarely in the same category with later generation White ethnics, as Alba and Nee do, is to overlook important distinctions in their life experiences both past and

present. As I have argued elsewhere, “Today, Asian ethnics exercise a great deal of personal choice regarding the elements of traditional ethnic culture they wish to incorporate or do away with [. . .]. But in another very real way, being ethnic remains a societal expectation for them. They have yet to be embraced as bona fide longtime Americans and to be accepted as the highly acculturated Americans they are” (Tuan 1998, p. 161). High levels of acculturation have not created the deep sense of belonging and inclusion for Asian ethnics as they have for White ethnics. Former Japanese American Citizens League director Ron Wakabayashi put it best when he said that Asian Americans are still seen as “guests in somebody else’s house, that we can never really relax and put our feet up on the table” (Moore 1988, p. 26).

Contrary to Alba and Nee then, I do not treat it as a given that Asian Americans are fundamental members of the American mainstream. This is no small point since much of their argument for reviving the assimilation paradigm and its contemporary relevance hinges on claiming that the paradigm is useful for explaining the experiences of racial minorities. Yet its effectiveness for capturing the experiences of Asian ethnics, I would argue, is incomplete.

Compare *Remaking the American Mainstream* to Evelyn Nakano Glenn’s *Unequal Freedom*, a book that starts from the premise that exclusion, particularly along racial and gender lines, has been a fundamental organizing principle of American governance and social life. While both books address the concept of belonging, they reach very different conclusions. Where Alba and Nee see the eventual and natural reduction of boundaries (ethnic, racial, social, and economic), Glenn sees consciously constructed and actively reinforced boundaries purposely privileging some segments of the population over others. Where Alba and Nee see assimilation as the master trend, Glenn sees inequality along racial, gender, and class lines as the master trend.

Using regional case studies of Blacks in the South, Mexican Americans in the Southwest, and Asian Americans in Hawaii in three historical periods, Glenn centers the book on three arguments. First, the United States has been and continues to be a society structured along racialized and gendered systems of control that privilege White men at the expense of racial minorities and women. Second, citizenship and labor have been crucial sites where racial and gender inequality have been reproduced as well as contested. Third, these systems of inequality operate and are reproduced at both the local and macro levels.

Take the case of the earliest Asian settlers who were brought in as low-wage laborers, but denied the right to become naturalized U.S. citizens. While they were entitled to labor (only at certain jobs and at depressed wages), citizenship was restricted to free White males. What Glenn accomplishes in this book is to show, in concrete terms, the relational and interdependent nature of inclusion and exclusion. To be defined as Asian meant to be constructed outside the boundary of inclusion, to be part of “them.” While Alba and Nee acknowledge this, they discount the effect this decision continues to have on contemporary Asian Americans, both newcomer and longtime Americans. Alba and Nee treat this fact as a disappointing and regrettable part of our past, not as an ongoing legacy that continues to impede full assimilation for Asian Americans.

Perhaps Alba and Nee would chide me for being overly pessimistic and call for a long view picture of assimilation as a process taking place over many generations. Fair enough. But at what point can we say that assimilation simply does not mean the same thing for one group that it does for another? Furthermore, in criticizing others for oversimplifying the hardships experienced by European Americans in the past, a parallel criticism can be leveled at Alba and Nee for discounting the obstacles to belonging that Asian ethnics still continue to experience.

Ultimately, I am left wondering what is gained by reviving a concept that has become so baggage-laden given that the updated definition offered by the authors is actually quite modest. After all, their discussion allows for the possibility of indefinitely being in a limbo state of conditional acceptance despite high levels of acculturation, a situation currently experienced by Asian ethnics. And while they acknowledge the paradigm's limitations, particularly that assimilation is not necessarily a remedy to racial inequality, most people's understanding of the term assumes otherwise. The problems with this assumption have been carefully dealt with elsewhere (Barthe 1969; Blauner 1972; Broom and Kitsuse, 1955; Feagin and Sikes, 1994; Gans 1993; Omi and Winant, 1986), but common wisdom still has it that this is the best strategy for eliminating racial stratification. In the end I remain unconvinced about reviving assimilation theory despite the authors' efforts to offer a more modest and restrained definition. Contemporary immigrants do profoundly change as a result of migration. But how they change is driven by processes of acculturation and the end results do not necessarily result in assimilation.

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