

The New Immigration and New Urban Cultures in the Making

By R. S. Bryce-Laporte

The United States is a nation of nations. Historically, its peopling has been due, in large part, to waves and waves of immigrants. Even its oldest inhabitants, Native Americans, are believed to have migrated from Asia to this then uninhabited continent. It is more likely that they, rather than Columbus, discovered this "New" World. Since then, Africans, Europeans, and other Asians have been settling in the United States of (North) America and its overseas territories. For its size and age, this country has experienced, and continues to experience, the greatest variety and volume of immigration in the world.

A Personal Commentary

I happen to be one of these immigrants. Born in the Republic of Panama of a varied Caribbean ancestry, I lived, studied, and worked in the administered Canal Zone for much of my younger life. I belong to a group of West Indian immigrants who were recruited as the mainstay of the labor force for construction, cultivation, canal, and colonial company towns that were being established by the United States in Panama and along the Central and South American coastlands.

I came to the United States as an advanced foreign student, intending to complete my first degree, then either return home or send for my family. However, the lack of funds and other extenuating circumstances requiring expedient decisions resulted in my continued stay in the United States. And while I have enjoyed relative success in the achievement of my goals, I have also suffered a feeling of being "braindrained" and some degree of frustration, alienation, powerlessness, despair, and nostalgia for my "old" country, as have other immigrants.

Panama is host to an abundance of ethnicities, a variety of cultures, and intense interactions among the people and communities that comprise it. Its pluralism is observable, especially in the larger cities, at times of celebration and other public events. Just a few months ago, there was an unprecedented display of cultural and ethnic diversity when Panama hosted the Second Congress of Black Culture in the Americas, and featured the full panorama of its Black folk culture. This latter included traditions of rural and urban colonial Blacks, West Indian canal workers and their descendants, and new developments resulting from recent African and North American influences. And while in New York City, older Panamanian and Costa Rican *emigrés* dance the quadrille and other West Indian folkdances, in Washington, D.C., their descendants dance Tamborito and other Panamanian folk dances.

As to the larger Caribbean, it is a region in transition made up of immigrants, tourists, and others in transit, and is characterized by modernizing states and people in nationalist ferment. Its culture is not simply plural but creole, consisting of segments of various old and new world traditions that are in continuous evolution and multiple stages of blending. This culture attempts to reconcile old world traditions, new world influences, and the exigencies of modernization.

The Caribbean is also a region of emigrants. Externally induced labor displacement, low wages, unemployment, high population growth rate, heavy emigration, and an emigrant ethos have characterized its history since the mid 19th century. Not only the United States and Latin America, but Canada, Europe, Africa, and even the Pacific have been recruiters or recipients of Caribbean emigrants. Today many people of West Indian ancestry are resettled

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Photo by Akmal for Festivals Magazine.

in the United States. While our roots are drawn from more cultural backgrounds than perhaps most other immigrant groups, our routes have provided us with unusually extensive transnational kin-networks, linkages, identities, cosmopolitan views, and cultures. Much of our presence involves adopting, confronting, negotiating, sharing, and shaping the ways of life, and contributing to the local cultures of the communities and work-places in which we operate as minorities, a reversal in status for many Caribbean immigrants.

1 Crowds seized by the Carnival spirit in *Mas* in Brooklyn, New York, 1979.

The New Immigrants and the Cities

In 1965, the United States Congress passed its most comprehensive reform in immigration laws. Compared to its predecessors, the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act was categorically less exclusive, restrictive, or racist. Together with the policies and preference guidelines that were simultaneously implemented with it, the 1965 Act represented a parallel effort to equalize opportunity—this time for immigrants to the United States and its territories from (almost) all the independent countries of the world without favoring the traditional Western-Northern European or Western Hemispheric source countries.

This New Immigration, as we call it, is characterized in part by its non-European provenience. The new immigrants tend to be largely urban located and oriented. Because of their visibility and the discrimination against visible minorities, they suffer multiple levels of disregard by the larger population. The life styles, cultures, and languages of the new immigrants are little known, appreciated, or regarded by the general American public. American cities are the frontiers of the new immigrants; the arenas where the wills, interests, and cultures of each group come into contest with those of other ethnic groups; and the settings where competition or coalescence take place among them. It is in the cities that we see the scenes of confrontation between traditions and of adjustments from both sides—natives and immigrants. The cities are also the sites of the celebrations and the contributions of most new immigrants.



2 Celebrating the Latin American Festival with Colombian Coastal dancers, Washington, D.C. 1979.

3 Urban folk and foreign tourists at a downtown street theatre, Curacao, The Netherlands Antilles.

Suggested Readings

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Caribbean and Southeast Asian Festivals—New Urban Celebrations

Every year another great city of Canada and the United States witnesses efforts by its growing Latin American and Caribbean populations to restore the tradition of Carnival. Depending on scale and style, these vary from radio programs, private parties, club dances, and school projects to magnificent parades with mounted steelband platforms and prancing masqueraders. In New York City two specific cases are the Caribbean Carnival (*Mas* in Brooklyn) and the Columbus Day (*Día de la Raza*). In Washington, D.C. there are the weekends of the Caribbean, Latin American, and African Liberation Day Festivals. Already the Caribbean Carnivals of the United States and Canada are more Caribbean than the prestigious Trinidad and Tobago prototype in the sense that they draw participants and spectators from a wider range of West Indian cultures—Haiti, Jamaica, the Virgin Islands, etc.; those of West Indian ancestry from the off-shore islands and Latin American rimland such as Costa Rica, Panama, Columbia, and Venezuela; and others from mainland countries with intense Carnival traditions such as Brazil and Peru.

The United States is currently undergoing another wave of immigration, this one from Southeast Asia. The people of Southeast Asia have a very ancient tradition compared to the United States, the Caribbean, or other societies. As refugees, Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians, as well as the various ethnic groups such as the Hmong, came to this country under conditions tainted by desperation and disillusion both for them and for their American hosts.

Southeast Asian people of all nationalities, classes, ethnicities, and statuses report special problems of adjustment and dislocation—language, home, generation, identity, education, and job status. But they have been acquiring their immigrant epics and their success stories as well. Despite their recent arrival and the revolutionary shifts they have experienced in life styles, the Southeast Asian immigrants have been able to make noticeable contributions to American culture and to its tradition of festivals and celebrations. Once graced annually by the celebration of Chinese New Year in Chinatown, this year the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area enjoyed a Vietnamese New Year celebration as well.

In summary, even when forced to migrate, people do not do so totally denuded; that is, they do not migrate without their culture. Sometimes they manage to migrate with great resources of materials; other times only with a limited repertoire of memories. Whether publicly or privately, immigrants do perpetuate their old culture. Done publicly, on a grand scale and with high visibility, others cannot help but observe and even participate in these festivals and carnivals. Thus, it is not surprising that the United States has such a rich and cosmopolitan culture. Even though it has been undergoing constant change, it also demonstrates continuity and cross-fertilization.