

Immigrants, Tourism, and the Marketing of Metropolitan Boston

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Author's Note:

Please note that I have only recently launched this research project and hope to conduct key interviews and gather much of the demographic data during the next six months. Thus, while in this “proto-paper” (or should I say “proto-proto-paper”) I elucidate the parameters and overall framework of the study, since I am in such an early phase of the process, the actual analysis and interpretive commentary, of necessity, will have to be forthcoming.

The United States is often characterized as the quintessential immigrant nation. Indeed, more immigrants from the most diverse set of origins spanning the longest sustained period of time have made the US their home than any other nation in the history of the world. And presently, at 32.5 million, the foreign-born population has reached a record high, totaling more than at any other point in the country's history. But it's not just that the US is a nation of nations. Contemporary Americans are a nation of roots-seeking Americans as evidenced by the astounding response to the Ellis Island website that debuted two years ago, digitizing the museum's immigration records. The Foundation was completely taken by surprise by the magnitude of traffic seeking immigration information. It averaged more than 25,000 hits per *second*. And this with less than half of the current population who actually have relatives who passed through that particular gateway to the United States.

Thus, in addition to all the newcomers from other lands streaming into the country today, a full-blown, multi-faceted ethnic revival across a broad spectrum of the population has also been in motion in the United States, propelling American-born descendants of immigrants to actively re-identify with their respective ethnic heritages. The so-called “roots” phenomenon, a movement begun nearly three decades ago,

accounts for such developments as the growth of ethnic celebrations, a zeal for genealogy, and greater interest in ethnic artifacts, cuisine, music, literature, and language. Perhaps nothing better illustrates the extent to which the ethnic revival has permeated American culture than hearing the renowned baby and child care expert, Dr. T. Barry Brazelton, proclaim: “Every baby should get to know their heritage.” In the fundamentals of 21st century American child-rearing, roots training comes even before potty training.

Yet another manifestation of the contemporary preoccupation with tracing and celebrating roots has been the escalation of interest in ethnic tourism—traveling to sites either to explore one’s own ethnic history and identity or to learn more about the backgrounds of others. Tourism as a search for authenticity used to be associated with having to travel to faraway lands to experience the so-called exotic. Today the “exotic” is increasingly found much closer to home in the immigrant and ethnic neighborhoods of metropolitan areas.

Local identity, heritage and cultural difference have become integral features of post-industrial society in a rapidly globalizing world. As Sharon Zukin has emphasized in her research on urban landscapes, “culture is more and more the business of cities,” and as such ethnicity is playing a central role in the revitalization of urban centers. (Zukin 1996: 2) Thus, as more and more travelers and vacationers seek out ethno-cultural experiences, they find themselves gravitating to the centers of immigrant commerce. Whether it’s Chinatown or Little Havana, municipalities across the United States are showcasing their ethnic neighborhoods and touting the cultural diversity of their resident populations in a concerted effort to capture tourist dollars. Immigrant cultures thus become ethnic resources for metropolitan areas and key to the marketing of cities as sites

offering tourists a wealth of goods and services that appear colorful, exciting, unique and authentic. By opening and operating all kinds of tourist-oriented commercial ventures, immigrants become potential generators of urban socio-economic development.¹

This paper offers an ethnographic and theoretical analysis of the role of recent immigrants in the economic culture of the tourism industry in Boston Massachusetts, New England's largest city.² I examine the involvement of immigrants as producers of tourist attractions whether as entrepreneurs or workers as well as their interactions with other key actors in the industry such as local government, cultural mediators, and the consumers themselves. In many ways, Greater Boston stands as an ideal site for exploring these dynamics; the metropolis is a central player in the global service economy, receives significant numbers of immigrants, hosts numerous tourists, and is on the list of the world's most livable cities.

During the last two decades this traditional Yankee city, one of the oldest and most densely populated settlements in the United States, has been profoundly transformed from a largely white community of people of European descent to a variegated multicultural metropolis and from an old-fashioned mill-based economy to a highly diversified mind-based one. Indeed, Boston contains what is likely the world's largest concentration of academic and research institutions. Many foreign newcomers to

¹ Of course, the phenomenon of ethnic tourism has not been restricted to the United States alone. Immigrants initiated Bollywood film festivals in London and the Hague, Folklorama Pavilions in Winnipeg and Chinese Lunar New Year and traditional Tet celebrations almost everywhere. Similarly, Australian travel guidebooks such as *Cosmopolitan Sydney* covering sixty different ethnic groups invites visitors to see the 'world in one city.'

² Although the Boston research is designed to stand on its own, it is also linked to a larger interdisciplinary and comparative study of the commodification of cultural resources in cosmopolitan cities that currently includes five European sites (Amsterdam, Berlin, Brussels, Birmingham and Lisbon) and two other non-European venues (Vancouver and Sydney). Many thanks to Jan Rath, Director of the Institute for Migration

the region today are just as likely to step off the plane sporting designer luggage and set to work as professionals in the universities, laboratories and research hospitals that comprise this sector and form the basis of the city's high-tech future, as they are to be carrying the requisite tattered bundles hoisted over their shoulders, desperate to join the ranks of low-skilled job seekers in the service economy. Thus, new immigrants to New England are arriving with an unprecedented range of educational and skill levels.

Totaling close to 600,000 residents of the city proper (or 3.5 million in the Greater Boston metropolitan area), Boston became a majority minority city in the 1990s for the first time, as Latinos, Asians and immigrant blacks arrived and as tens of thousands of whites left. Yet, unlike most US cities with large concentrations of the foreign-born, in Greater Boston no one ethnic group predominates. And while these centers of high-tech glitz and its networks of global communication at first appear to be worlds apart from the grime and grit of the inner-city neighborhoods that are oftentimes located just a few blocks away, there nevertheless are some striking similarities. Both are cosmopolitan in their ethnic makeup and both bustle with enterprise and vitality. Thus, highly skilled professionals, entry-level workers, and holiday travelers all gravitate to this multi-layered metropolis where international business, knowledge and consumption networks are intricately linked. The image of the staid, homogeneous city that Oscar Wilde once dubbed "the paradise of prigs" is being refashioned, almost overnight, as a dynamic urban center that dazzles with diversity.

As the most "old-world" of American cities, Greater Boston has long been marketed as the ultimate US destination for heritage tourism. At the same time, since the

and Ethnic Studies at the University of Amsterdam for initiating the project, inviting me to join in, and thereby triggering my own investigations into the Boston case.

country has been receiving foreign-born newcomers for so many decades with mass immigration into the Boston area dating back to the early nineteenth century, the municipality has become home to longstanding ethnic groups as well as new immigrant populations. Typically ethnic and heritage tourism are treated as quite different aspects of the larger industry. Yet given the particular contours of Boston's historical attractions as well as its demographic features, past and present, this study gives particular attention to how the city's ethnic tourism interfaces and overlaps with its already well-developed heritage tourism sector. In Massachusetts, tourism represents the Commonwealth's third largest industry. Of the 10 million domestic and close to 2 million international visitors to Greater Boston in the year 2000, visiting historical places and attending cultural events and festivals ranked second and third respectively (behind shopping) as the most frequently reported trip activities for travelers.

An urban setting already known for its vibrant enclaves of established ethnic concentrations such as the North End's Little Italy or Watertown's Little Armenia, Boston now includes equally bustling neighborhoods of new immigrant populations like Hyde Park's Latino district or Central Square's Caribbean community. Whether well-established or new ethnic settlements, the commercial sectors of these neighborhoods have become recognized as magnets for roots-seeking tourists looking for experiences that ring true, feel untainted and taste authentic.

Ethnic tourism is not a completely new phenomenon, however. As early as the beginning of the twentieth century, it had become fashionable for the white upper and middle classes to go slumming (or as it was called, 'rubbernecking') and to shop in New York and San Francisco's Chinatowns or Chicago's "Ghetto Market." Guidebooks were

even published illustrated with sketches of the unfamiliar terrain to help the excursionists navigate unknown streets (Cocks 2001). However, what *has* changed is that in the past, venturing into areas of the city where new immigrants and other minorities resided was automatically seen as a foray into the seamy side of life. Nowadays, the same types of neighborhoods are valorized and become objects of civic pride. In the process urban immigrant enclaves begin to take on the character of theme parks. Furthermore, whereas earlier in the twentieth century, the basis for attempts to refashion American cities to make ethnic enclaves more appealing to tourists was to look to the ideal of the European city and to recast immigrants as non-threatening old-world peasants, today, the situation is reversed. European municipalities see the metropolitan areas of the United States (Canada and Australia) with their long-standing immigrant communities and the resources of culturally diverse populations as models for their own initiatives to capitalize on the commercial potential of newly burgeoning ethnic precincts.

One of the earliest examples of emphasizing the ethnic heritage of a particular locale to stimulate tourism and commerce occurred in Frankenmuth, Michigan in the late 1950's. Originally settled a century earlier by German immigrants from the region of Bavaria, the town fell victim to Eisenhower-era interstate highway construction. Traveling salesmen and other visitors, who would usually make stopovers, often to dine at the restaurant in the Fischer Hotel known for its "all you can eat" chicken dinners, were passing right by. In 1958, the owners of the Fischer decided to remodel and adopt a Bavarian look. They changed the name of the hotel to the Bavarian Inn leading the way to the revitalization of the local economy. Soon the entire downtown business community had reinvented itself as a German village with the aromas of strudel and schnitzel from

bakeries and restaurants, Bavarian music piped into the streets and a glockenspiel that chimes every hour, buildings adorned with gingerbread towers and Bavaria flags, even bilingual street signs. Now Frankenmuth, a veritable Bavarian theme park, is one of the biggest tourist attractions in the state with three million visitors a year.

Such levels of commercialization raise important questions concerning the extent to which the marketing of sites for ethnic tourism is a beneficial trend or can only lead to what David Harvey in his examination of urbanization and capitalism has termed, “creative destruction” (Harvey 1985: 150). Does commodification of experience render it meaningless? Furthermore, in what ways does ethnic tourism serve to combat ethnocentrism and promote an appreciation of diversity or is it, instead, simply another vehicle to accentuate cultural stereotypes and such inauthentic experience that it comprises yet one more example of the Disneyfication of American society and culture? [more on the above in subsequent drafts]

Most importantly, just how economically viable is immigrant involvement in the tourist industry? Is it fueling the job machine, creating steady employment with decent wages for more marginal citizens, and creating small business opportunities? [These questions and the particulars of how many immigrants are currently employed or running businesses in the tourist economy, from which populations, and in what sectors of the tourist industry (as well as data from the past, if I can find such information) will all be forthcoming].

Sometimes the marketplace can actually serve to foster greater awareness of ethnic identity and can even act as an agent of change in that process. Consider the case of Cajun identity, the heritage of those French-speaking descendants of Acadians who

had settled along the chilly Bay of Fundy in the early seventeenth century and who, by the late eighteenth century, had been exiled south to semitropical Louisiana bayou country. After more than two centuries of adaptation to American society, the contemporary Louisiana Cajun community had lost much of its distinctive cultural features. But in the mid-1970s a steady stream of tourists began to arrive to the area looking for an “authentic” Cajun experience. They came especially from Francophone regions such as Quebec, France and Belgium, inspiring the largely assimilated local population to probe its own cultural uniqueness. Indeed, many of the Francophone tourists evinced a stronger interest in Cajun culture than natives did. Because of these tourists, Cajun identity was re-awakened in Louisiana. A full-fledged cultural revival has occurred, and visitors can now find restaurants serving traditional and reinvented Cajun fare, ethnic festivals featuring Cajun music, exhibits that carefully trace the history of migration and settlement, and a renewed attention to distinctive language use. Given how sweeping the ethnic renaissance has been nationally over the last three decades, Louisiana Cajuns might have eventually moved in this direction on their own initiative but, in fact, tourism played a significant part in accelerating the renewal of ethnic consciousness (Esman 1984).

The Ethnic Festival Marketplace

In the early 1970s, after the old vegetable market had closed down, James Rouse, a developer of shopping malls was brought into the city of Boston to redevelop the Faneuil Hall-Quincy Market area. With the restoration and transformation of the crumbling historic site to a bustling urban plaza that combines specialty shopping, eating, drinking and entertainment, Rouse pioneered his concept of the festival marketplace.

Opened in 1976, it not only became an immediate success, but the approach was copied over and over again in the United States—by the late 1990s, there were 25 festival marketplace—with such well-known developments as New York’s South Street Seaport, and Baltimore’s Harbor Place. It even caught on across the Atlantic as London modeled Covent Garden after Quincy Market while Liverpool designed its trendy Albert Dock with Rouse’s formula in mind. The Rouse Company continues today to market its services with the slogan, “Owner/Operator of Travelers’ ‘Must-See/Must-Shop’ Retail Destinations Nationwide.” It promotes the success of its specialty marketplaces by highlighting the ways that its retail centers are “destinations in themselves, steeped in the flavor of their respective cities and often rich with historical or cultural significance.” With the current interest in the specialized marketing of ethnicity, Boston is poised to follow a similar trajectory as the Faneuil Hall experiment in developing the attraction of ethnic neighborhoods to city visitors, especially through the appeal of ethnic festivals and walking tours.

Whether tracing their family trees, contributing to ethnic cookbooks, or creating new ethnic organizations, individuals are intent upon finding ways to personally express their ethnic identities. Perhaps the most common public display of this romance with ethnicity, however, has been the increasing popularity of the ethnic festival. At the nexus of commerce and culture, such activities are typically the outcome of a combination of commercial, civic and cultural resources; in recent times, they have become paradigmatic events to celebrate cultural diversity. In the market world of the ethnic festival, it is not at all unusual for corporate, small business, penny capitalist and non-profit interests to be brought together for the enjoyment of locals and tourists alike. They are an opportunity

for co-ethnics to celebrate their own cultural heritage, to raise public awareness of their group and to open a window to outsiders into another culture. At their best they function to simultaneously raise money and multiethnic consciousness.

The popularity of St. Patrick's Day Parades, West Indian Carnivals, Dragon Boat Regattas, and similar events has become immense, and mainstream corporations have become a party to this development. For example, the Mexican holiday of *Cinco de Mayo* has become widely recognized in the United States—celebrated much more here than in Mexico itself—largely because of corporate sponsorship (think beer and salty snacks). These corporations, interestingly enough, have followed the example of small innovative ethnic businesses to become part of the market for cultural diversity. Looking at the strategies that traditional immigrant enterprises have always used to cater to a co-ethnic clientele—whether conducting business in their native language, utilizing the ethnic press, taking advantage of advertising possibilities within the compatriot community's calendar of special events, specializing in indigenous merchandise and culturally-specific services or making a point of getting to know their customers' distinctive consumer preferences—it's evident that corporate target marketing specialists are simply attempting to master the approach upon which local ethnic entrepreneurs have always based their business ventures, only the big companies have to try to adapt these techniques to work on a much broader scale. At the same time, this demonstrates that the tourist industry—possibly more than most other parts of the knowledge economy—has the potential to allow small entrepreneurs to make an impact, even if they lack specialized knowledge or large capital resources.

The short film on Boston's Ethnic Festivals that runs continuously at the city's Dreams of Freedom immigration museum located in the heart of the historic downtown area entreats visitors to "Learn about Old World Culture and enjoy New World shopping and cuisine." Indeed, from Boston's St. Patrick's Day extravaganza and Greek Independence Day festivities in the springtime to Portuguese feasts and Caribbean carnivals throughout the month of August along with Italian Saints Days celebrations all summer long, tourists have a myriad of opportunities to participate in such events.

In addition to the ethnic festival, organized tours of ethnic neighborhoods have also become increasingly popular. By taking such excursions, the new urban tourists are fueled by the same nostalgic sentiments and sense of contemporary displacement that characterize other aspects of the ethnic revival. They hope to get a glimpse of an idealized past when everyday life seemed more colorful, connected and meaningful because it was carried out within the context of ethnic communities. In New York City, walkers can select an eclectic excursion "From Naples to Bialystock to Beijing," through "Immigrant New York," or take the popular "Multi-Ethnic Eating Tour." Chicago also offers programs for those interested in exploring the metropolitan area from an ethnic perspective on foot. And, by pressing a button at Philadelphia's official Visitors' Center, individuals can select any ethnic identity and receive a computerized itinerary to guide them through the streets and sites.

Multi-ethnic marketing within the domestic tourist industry has not been limited to the big cosmopolitan cities known for their rich immigrant histories and still vibrant ethnic communities, however. It may not be surprising that there are organized walking tours of the ethnic neighborhoods of New York City; more remarkable is to find the exact

same type of pitch being used by the tourism board of the state of Missouri, right in the middle of America's supposedly bland heartland – an indication of just how pervasive the ethnic appeal has become. At every major hotel and at the tourist bureaus throughout the state, the visitor can find “The Multi-Cultural Travel and Tour Guide” promoting their “Ethnic Enrichment Festival.” Indeed, in this way, tourists simultaneously “enrich” both their cultural understandings and Missouri's local coffers.

Whether well-established or new ethnic settlements, the commercial sectors of these neighborhoods have become recognized as magnets for roots-seeking tourists looking for experiences that ring true, feel untainted and taste authentic. For example, last year the Boston Irish Tourism Association inaugurated the Irish Heritage Trail; modeled after the renowned Freedom Trail, this is a walking tour of the city that it has dubbed ‘The Capital of Irish America.’ Three years ago, the *Boston Globe* began publishing an annual guide to the panoply of ethnic festivals and feasts available to the summertime visitor as well as devoting regular features to the diverse cultural attractions of the city like the recent Calendar section cover story on the marketplace possibilities that the African diaspora offers, (proclaiming ‘you can taste, hear, even feel the continent without ever leaving Boston’) or the piece titled “Waking Up to the World” highlighting suggestions for where to eat ethnic for breakfast (ever start your day with Taiwanese jellyfish salad or Haitian cornmeal porridge?) Similarly, new publications such as *Boston's Neighborhoods: A Food Lover's Walking, Eating, and Shopping Guide to Ethnic Enclaves in and around Boston* attest to the growing appeal of ethnic tourism and its promise of invigorating the local economy.

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