The exotic other: Latinos and the remaking of community identity in Perry, Iowa

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Latino immigration, often resulting from the restructuring of the meatpacking industry, is reshaping the cultural identity of rural small town America. We explore how local institutions in Perry, Iowa, deal with the emerging cultural diversity in their town. The key findings of the research support the proposition that Perry's adopted cultural pluralism in fact is a case of Eurocentric values reconstructed to accommodate an appreciation of cultural diversity and of recent immigrants' contributions to local growth and town revitalization. The town's civic organizations' formal focus on myth making and multiculturalism leaves class, race, gender, privilege, and local power relations essentially unchallenged.

We argue that the new multicultural praxis emerging in Perry reconstructs a model of local culture which maintains, and potentially reinforces, societal power disparities and leaves the town and its residents still grappling with questions and challenges of ethnic diversification. Assimilation through exoticization of the immigrant is a policy that is not conducive of equal treatment and leads to further marginalization of the immigrants. Community development multicultural policies should appreciate cultural diversity but not transform it into a museum curiosity for the locals. Indeed planners should valorize diversity to address issues of class, race, gender, privilege, and local power relations.

Keywords: small town Iowa; Latino migration; community multicultural policies

Introduction

Latino in-migrants from Texas and California, immigrants from Mexico, and Central America, refugees from war-torn Sudan and other African countries and non-white job-seekers from larger urban areas in the USA are changing and diversifying the ethnic landscape of many towns in Iowa. The growing cultural diversity arouses opposing feelings (Flora, Flora, & Tapp, 1999; Flora & Maldonado, 2006). Some current residents accept it with excitement, arguing passionately that immigrants’ values, beliefs, and lifestyles should be appreciated and fostered. While their stay may reflect Christian altruism, it also has a foundation in Midwestern pragmatism, because many of them recognize that recent in-migrants in general and Latino immigrants in particular have rescued some towns, factories, fields, and schools from financial crisis and business bankruptcy (Grey & Woodrick, 2005). On the other side are those who view the growth of multiculturalism with

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alarm and apprehension. In places such as Columbus Junction (pop. 1900), Lenox (pop. 1401), Perry (pop. 8800), and Marshalltown (pop. 26,009) towns experiencing rapid immigrant growth, some local residents have preferred to move rather than to share their neighborhoods with immigrant families. The future of Iowa’s multicultural society is thus complex and contradictory. In small towns throughout the Midwest, ethnic relations constitute an evolving issue that sparks and contributes to debates around assimilation and cultural pluralism (Millard & Chapa, 2004). Iowa’s small towns, with many of them caught between local and global forces shaping the new identities of small town America, provide many useful examples of contemporary developments and clashes in multicultural practices.

This paper analyzes how local institutions in Perry, Iowa, frame and practice the transition from mono- to multiculturalism. We have examined: a) setting-specific practices of cultural pluralism, b) their idealization as communal practices, and c) their historical relationship to other practices and histories of multiculturalism. Our fieldwork for this analysis included: 1) multicultural participant observation of contrasting types of cultural practices, including participant observation through an Iowa State University Planning Studio which developed a multicultural plan for Perry; 2) interviews, short ethnographies, literature review; and 3) local archival research. Our findings support the proposition that Perry’s cultural pluralism is a case of Eurocentric values reconstructed to accommodate an appreciation of cultural diversity and of recent immigrants’ contributions to local growth and town revitalization. We maintain that an excessive focus on multicultural concerns in Perry leaves class, race, privilege, and local power relations essentially unchallenged, and that the new multicultural discourse emerging in Perry reconstructs a model of culture and criteria of validity on which disempowering discourses can easily be based build. We argue that within multicultural theories the major theories regarding assimilation and cultural pluralism need to be rethought and revised.

Analyses and discussions of cases such as Perry’s are important to the community development field in various ways. Practitioners conducting or promoting community development in multicultural settings need to understand how their actions, policies and programs either oppose exoticizing cultures or reinforce structural ethnocentric relationships. If the underlying power relationships are not brought to light and dealt with, a fundamentally ethnocentric focus on multiculturalism can hamper community development efforts that could otherwise have the potential to change and empower diverse communities.

**Attitudes toward immigrants and in-migrants in Iowa**

As Wacker (1979, p. 9) reminds us “Americans have exhibited a wide range of attitudes toward immigrants and their descendants.” Since the mid-nineteenth century, those attitudes have been grouped into two broad categories: conservative/racist, and liberal/pluralist. Within the first category we find fin de siècle ideologies and practices such as eugenics, social Darwinism, and immigration restrictionism. According to Wacker (1979), in the nineteenth century such views were particularly common among the urbanized Protestant middle class afraid that unrestrained immigration would increase social corruption, urban disorganization and other social problems. At the same time, members of the professional and business elites, concerned about health issues including the spread of diseases, were discussing immigration in terms of assimilation (in Chicago) and cultural pluralism.
(in New York). Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, such positions or ideologies provided counterarguments that liberals used against what they perceived to be negative trends within American society and culture that were pushing the country toward political and cultural conformity and regional parochialism.

As Jenzer (1994) points out, there are substantial differences between the two discourses on multiculturalism. Assimilationists accepted the importance of understanding multiple beliefs within a framework which considered the primary goal to be the “amalgamation of all groups into the American mainstream.” The goal of cultural pluralists, on the other hand, was that “ethnic groups will remain intact and that their idiosyncratic ways of knowing and acting will be respected and continued” (Jenzer 1994, p.9). Today, a main point of contention continues to be the extent to which American society should allow multiple perspectives on issues such as religion, society, and politics and, if cultural pluralism were accepted, what its effect would be on issues such as national unity and equal interactions among individuals and groups (Helly, 2002; Hraba & Hoiberg, 2005)

Immigrant restrictionism

Social Darwinism and eugenics have not disappeared from public discourse. Rather, they have been recycled and now appear in the rhetoric of the “pro-law” arguments of populist rhetoric opposing (illegal) immigration, especially throughout the Midwest. Recent immigrant restrictionism, however, goes beyond anti-immigrant feeling and cannot be explained solely in terms of racial nativism (Sanchez, 1997). Contemporary local hostility towards new, non-white and non-Protestant immigrants responds also to contingent situations nested at different economic, social, and institutional scales. An example is the recent Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids in Postville (389 workers arrested in May 2008 at the Agriprocessor Kosherland in Marshalltown (1297 workers arrested in July 2006 at Swift & Company meat processing firm which led to the legal processing and deportation of hundreds of undocumented Mexicans and Guatemalans who had been employed in the local meat packing plants). The raids show that the tension between locals and immigrants, beyond historical attitudes towards the “other,” may have much to do with the concrete and opposing agendas of local employers and the federal government. Towns such as Perry have come to depend on global markets for pork products, with a transnational workforce settling in and immigrants now involved in local commercial markets, schools, and other previously culturally and racially homogenous institutions.

The meat packing industry seeks local solutions, such as cheap non-unionized labor, in a highly competitive business while federal regulators respond to national political pressures to find an answer to illegal immigration. These opposite agendas deepen interethnic tensions because, as Latino workers are arrested and repatriated, their contributions to local economies (including their immigrant niche markets) disappear, and many other aspects of ethnic relations deteriorate. Hence, the local community, dependent on its local but transnational labor markets, is caught between global trends and federal regulatory policies. These competing geopolitical and economic scales ferment immigrant restrictionism, contribute to multicultural conflict, and make community development efforts in such areas extremely difficult yet increasingly important. In the case of Postville, for example, Somali workers have moved to town from Minnesota, replacing Mexicans and Guatemalans in this
predominantly white, 2200-person town in northeast Iowa. When newcomers arrive, the informal cultural, economic, and institutional systems previously put in place to manage social relations among different ethnic groups needs to be re-elaborated. New informal support systems emerge, threatening to displace the previous ones. The discourse on immigration restriction involves both conflict-ridden political agendas and a multi-level, multi-scale process through which long-standing opinions on class and race and contemporary strategies for local economic survival, power and political consensus converge and explode.

Assimilationism and cultural pluralism

Two major theoretical approaches consider multiculturalism: assimilationism and cultural pluralism. Notwithstanding the fact that idealistic and optimistic views of assimilation have been contradicted by history and society, assimilationist models that anticipate the weakening and dissolution of original national and regional identities still strongly influence multi-ethnic relations at the local level in Iowa. Studies conducted in the early 1970s showed that the famous “melting pot” was not a reality, finding instead that immigrants held on to their national identities, resisting assimilation and therefore Americanization. The studies suggested that a better way to describe American society might be through cultural pluralism (Glazer & Moynihan, 1970; Novak, 1971).

Assimilation/non-assimilation is not solely an issue of national identity but also of class. Steinberg (1989) for example noted that in unequal pluralist societies such as the United States, there is little incentive for ethnic working poor to expose or to valorize their ethnic difference. Steinberg argued that when certain ethnic groups are associated with class disadvantage members “powerful inducements exist for the members of such groups to assimilate into the mainstream culture” (Steinberg 1989, cited in Davis, 1997, p. 33). However, the relationships among class disadvantage, ethnicity and the will to assimilate are more complex and less straightforward that what Steinberg proposes. Although he might have assumed that all immigrants have the legal status to pursue assimilation that is not the case for hundreds of thousands of undocumented workers—including many in Iowa. Steinberg may also have assumed that host communities provide incentives that encourage poor immigrants to assimilate when in many circumstances the opposite may be true. A recent survey of four small Iowa communities with the fastest-growing Latino populations found that the most common structural bottlenecks to the assimilation of Latinos into the local society seriously affect the working poor: housing, access to credit, education, health, and employers’ behaviors. Various host communities offer uneven and different opportunities for assimilation to members of various specific minority groups, thereby facilitating or impeding integration regardless of the individual immigrant’s or immigrant group’s will to assimilate (Clark, 1998; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996, 2001; Zhou, 1997).

Other factors also influence assimilation. Rothenberg (1998) points out that for some immigrants finding better non-farm US jobs maybe a higher priority than assimilating into the mainstream, while Katz, Stern, and Fader (2007) argue that social mobility among Mexican and Mexican-Americans should be considered also in terms of gender and availability of public sector and publicly funded employment. Although assimilationism as an ideology opens the theoretical possibility for an equal dialogue between mutually respectful cultural communities, actual practice
reveals that ethnic minorities are expected to embrace and to conform to dominant norms and behavioral patterns that, notwithstanding declarations to the contrary, still discriminate against them and do not always—and perhaps only seldom—represent their needs and worldviews.

Cultural pluralism

The second approach to multiculturalism is cultural pluralism. As with assimilationism, cultural pluralism is not a new message, and neither is a unified theory. Horace Kallen formulated a version of it in 1915 in a series of articles in the journal *The Nation* when he argued that there are parallels between individual and group democracy (Gordon, 1964). Kallen’s concept of cultural pluralism asserted that each ethnic and cultural group in the United States had made equal contributions to American culture. Kallen’s approach to cultural diversity, although it did not deny the importance of a unified national experience, provided a rationale for groups that wished to maintain their cultural identity in the American “melting pot.” Perry’s approach to dealing with the influx of immigrants reveal elements of a cultural pluralist model, as do the community development efforts undertaken in the town. How these efforts are constructed and construed, and the difficulties they present for various community development approaches, is the topic of the remainder of this paper.

In the face of the current multicultural policies in Perry, IA, we argue that both of these multicultural models need to re-conceptualized if they are to be helpful in understanding the cultural dynamics present within rural towns experiencing ethnic conflicts throughout Iowa and other communities facing the arrival of migrants of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. The materialization of these theories directly shapes social interactions politically, economically, culturally, and shapes the types of community development efforts within the town.

Perry, Iowa

Perry is a blue-collar town of about 8800 people (2008) with a yearly median household income of $35,000. Thirty five percent of the population is Latino (from Mexico and Central America), the majority of whom work in the local meat packing plant owned by the food giant Tyson Foods. The Tyson plant employs approximately 1200 workers from 23 different nations; 55% of the workers are of Latin American heritage and 20% come from various African countries (mainly Sudan). The meat packing plant exports fresh pork products to Japan and other countries. Hence, although Perry in many ways represents the epitome of small town America, it is now a town at the confluence of global and transnational forces. The high percentage of Latinos in Perry is one result of economic and institutional changes that have undermined the town’s identity and indeed its very reason for existence. Putting these changes into perspective helps us to understand contemporary practices of cultural pluralism in Perry, and we believe that such understanding can increase the effectiveness of community development intended to help integrate their emerging Latino immigrant populations into host communities such as Perry.

Perry’s economic and cultural history is intrinsically linked, as are the histories of many other towns in the Midwest, to the arrival of railroads in 1866 (Cronon, 1991). In fact, Perry was established as a railroad town. Railroad yards attracted Germans,
Welsh, Swedes and other workers of North European ancestry and nationalities (Des Moines, Union Historical Co., 1879). The influx of non-German workers distinguishes the history of immigration in Perry from that of other towns in Dallas County where the majority of residents are of German descent. In other words, cultural pluralism and Perry grew together (Hastie, 1938).

As railroads established their operations, the town began servicing nearby farms, providing farmers with fertilizers, farm implements and other tools, some of them manufactured locally. By the turn of the twentieth century, Perry had become an agricultural and manufacturing town with an almost all white population. Northern Europeans, however, were not the only people in town. As in many other parts of the state, African Americans lived and worked amidst White Americans but for all practical purposes they were “invisible” to the majority (Barnes, 2001; Barnes & Bumpers, 2000). For example, in 1910 there were about 37 African Americans (0.9%) in Perry’s total population of 4000 people. Employment consisted of working in the yards, the factories, and in the countryside. The expansion of railroad yards and the opening of coal operations in Dallas County in the 1910s and 1920s provided more jobs and thereby further opened the local market to new immigrants. The total number of African-Americans in Perry during that period rose from 37 to 127 (3% of the total population) yet they were still invisible not only statistically, which is understandable, but also physically because the housing covenants of the time did not allow them to live in town. African American quarters were literally on the other side of the tracks in a place called Camp Lincoln, an Army drill camp outside the town used by Iowa regiments during the Civil War. There, African American families lived in boxcars or in shelters made with discarded lumber from old boxcars. Similar accommodations were reserved for Latino migrants, seasonal and not, in other towns in the state. Cultural pluralism in Perry was thus also already multicolored even if unevenly represented.

In addition to railroads and manufacturing, another important industry, meat packing, was established in Perry in the early 1920s. The consolidation of the hog and corn complex, the development of regional railroads, and the invention of refrigerated cars allowed for the fast expansion of this industry not only in Perry but elsewhere in Iowa which, in the nine years from 1914 to 1923, went from tenth to fourth place in the country as a meat packing state. The Perry meat packing plant would provide secure jobs to the local population for over three generations, more jobs and over a longer period than any other industry. Mr Jim Olesen from the local union recently pointed out that the packing plant and Perry formed a close-knit community. That close-knit community functioned as a gatekeeper, with enough institutional and political power to control labor access to the plant and therefore entry to the local society. Another former meat packing worker recalls that throughout the 1970s the “labor family” in the Perry plant included only one black worker and one white woman, who were accepted because “he [the black worker] was one of the ‘guys,’ and [the woman] behaved as if she was male” (Swilky & Newman, 2006).

Deregulation: the race to the bottom of the packing industry

I was also pregnant while we lived there, and I have to say that the smell from the IBP packing plant just west of town was the primary reason I was miserable. Add that distinctive smell to an already queasy stomach and I was constantly sick, and blamed it all on living in Perry. (City-data.com, 2005)
In the early 1990s, the fat days of packing hogs in Perry came to an end (Fink, 1998; Stull & Broadway, 2003). To restore the competitiveness of their plants, upper management chose the low road of cutting labor costs (Stull, Broadway, & Griffith, 1995). Cutting labor costs, however, was possible only if the union agreed to it and, with little choice, they agreed. In 1983, the union accepted the so-called “concessions” which brought average hourly rates from $10.67 per hour down to $8.17 per hour, but this move protected workers only in the short term. During the summer of 1989, in fact, management refused to negotiate new labor agreements with the union, and began recruiting Latinos directly from Texas and California through emissaries sent to those states. The latter saw the Perry plant as an economic opportunity even if it meant going to work in a poorly regulated and possibly dangerous working environment. The aggressive out-of-state recruiting by management proved to be successful, and by 1992 Latinos and Asians represented 40% of the total labor force with the former employed in the heavier and labor-intensive tasks. Understandably, immigrants who accepted to work for less money in “their” plant angered union workers:

I grew up in Perry, Iowa. I don’t want to discourage anyone at all, but I don’t have a lot of good things to say about it. The town was at one time friendly to outsiders, but I think a lot of that attitude has changed in recent years with a lot of illegal immigrants coming into the town to work at the meat packing plant (the aforementioned IBP). I do not mean to come off as bigoted with that statement, but it did change the town dynamic drastically. The town does have an extremely diverse make-up for being so small, but some of the minorities are not very friendly at all. This is a generalization as you’ll find many friendly folks no matter of their origin, but the illegal/non-English speaking nature has rubbed folks the wrong way. (City-data.com, 2007)

Widespread opposition did not stop Latinos from coming. Perry had 47 Latino inhabitants in 1990, and 1004 in 1996, an increase from 1.1% of the total population to 25% in just six years. Some of the greatest impacts have been felt in Perry’s educational system, as 47% of Perry students are now Latinos. As of 2005, 55% of Perry’s kindergarten students were Latinos (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). Iowans take great pride in the quality of their public school education and these dramatic changes threatened to place new strains on their public education system. The stage was set for culture clash.

Today, Perry faces a nested series of crises: a cultural crisis because of the influx of Latino and other immigrants, a political crisis due to the loss of power and influence of the white working class, and an economic crisis due to a lack of territorial competitiveness. What are institutions in Perry doing to address these community development issues and find answers to the crises? As in many other small towns in Iowa and elsewhere in rural America, they are trying to reinvent their identity, to shift from being a place of production to being a place of consumption (Bascom, 2001; Galston & Baehler, 1995; Johnson & Beale, 2002; Reeder & Brown, 2005; Robertson, 1999). But what can Perry provide or sell to a hypothetical out-of-town visitor that is specific to Perry and can contribute to its economic and social rebirth? Some decided that Perry could offer a small-town feeling spiced with the multicultural flavors provided by the presence of immigrants. That is a community development strategy embedded within a cultural pluralist framework; a strategy and framework that we argue are limiting.
Reinventing Perry's identity: the myth of the small hometown

At the forefront is a myth making civil organization called Hometown Perry. The civil organization reaffirms a pre-existing identity (that of the migrant small town) and set of myths or beliefs about Perry and its past. This myth creation worked to reaffirm Perry's history through a social history museum that among other activities conducted research, organized cultural programs and activities, and renovated buildings. The formal mission of the civic organization as stated on their web site is: “to study, understand, communicate, and celebrate the vital contribution small towns have made to American life as seen through the prism of the immigrant experience in Perry, Iowa, and other small towns across the Midwest. Through its buildings, artifacts, programs, images, and oral histories, Hometown Perry explores the story of one small midwestern town and its people. Together, the stories of individual lives form a larger pattern in which one can read the history of small towns in Iowa and the Midwest.” One key question within these efforts of historical re-creation, of course, is: Whose history, which immigrants, from what era or periods are the town celebrating? Let us briefly illustrate some of the practices used by Hometown Perry to discover or “invent” its own and the town’s traditions.

As a museum, Hometown Perry collects personal stories and memories of area residents, many of them illustrated with photographs provided by the informants or deemed relevant by staff members. The stories flow from the waves of immigrants who came to settle in Perry and focus on their migration story. Most of the stories focus on northern European immigrants who arrived in Perry between the 1860s and the 1920s, either directly from Europe or after having initially settled or worked in the Eastern US. The stories reveal five themes—education, work, faith, family, and loss—which formed the foundation of small-town life and which serve as the cornerstones for Hometown Perry. Hometown Perry prides itself on the openness of the town and the effort the town and its leaders and people are exerting to make the transition from mono- to multiculturalism as smooth as possible. While browsing the institution’s catalog of over 13,000 pictures, however, one thing becomes immediately apparent: apart from a few exceptional cases, Latino and African-Americans stories and memories are glaringly absent from the collection. Does that mean that African Americans and Latinos never worked or lived in Perry? Have all or almost all of Perry’s farm hands and railroad and manufacturing workers always been white and northern European? Because official records indicate the long-standing minority presence in and near Perry of African Americans and other nonwhites, the question arises again: What kind and whose history is Hometown Perry celebrating? Choosing oral history supplemented by photography and other visual means to recapture Perry’s history has meant that many voices remain in the background, in part because many African American and Latino families have moved out of Perry, taking with them their memories and their photographs. Without those missing voices the “vital contribution of the immigrant experience to small town America” becomes, consciously or unconsciously, another opportunity to celebrate the life and memories of white, northern European settlers.

A historical depiction of Perry was commissioned through Hometown Perry and published through the Fullhart-Carnegie trust as a book entitled *A Town Called Perry: Midwest Life in Small-town Iowa*. Myths are created through storytelling and hence the book nicely fits into these efforts of solidifying Perry's identity. The author, Marjorie Patterson, states in the preface that the book is “not intended to be a
history of Perry, just stories about Perry out of history” (Patterson, 1997, p. vii). The stories in the book, which Patterson selected from interviews and archival research represent various times and particular characters which the book’s author considered important to representing Perry’s small town life and its development. Stories relate to the jail, Perry’s schools, the fire department, various businesses in Perry, the influence of trains, and various clubs and social organizations. The earliest story is from the 1840s, and the latest is from the 2000s. Within this non-linear portrayal of Perry’s history, there is no mention of African Americans or Latino immigrants who have drastically shaped Perry’s current history. Yet the book does end with stories of contemporary history, what Patterson titles “The Final Four.” These final four are nothing less than the most prominent restored buildings that provide the main physical and architectural evidence for Perry’s reaffirmation of its historical identity: the Carnegie Library, the Security Savings Bank Building, the Pattee Home, and the Pattee Hotel. “They were all Perry show places in their time. They were built in what was then the heart of the business district. All are steeped in history. Not one will molder away, as so many others have—even though some have stood empty and neglected for a while. All will soon be show places again” (Patterson, 1997, p. 330).

Hometown Perry is the main myth making organization aiming to revitalize the town through historical physical preservation, economic development efforts, and civil institutional resources, all in the context of a multicultural celebration of the towns’ history. The program celebrates cultural pluralism by depicting the (northern European) immigrant experience and cultivating a nostalgic and insular hometown myth. The myth is updated through a cultural pluralists interpretation of the newest inhabitants shaping the town: Latino immigrants. This newest element to Perry’s cultural heritage is portrayed as a new layer to Perry’s cultural pluralists identity. It is one of the ingredients of the salad within a cultural pluralists model. In various ways, the reliance within this model contributes to exotization of Latino culture. A key example of this exotic cultural pluralism and physical representation is the restored Hotel Pattee. The Pattee Hotel is “one of the most elegant historic hotels in the Midwest offering full convention services, dining, spa and unique accommodations” (Hotel Pattee, 2009). The historic hotel’s revitalization aimed to bring more investment into Perry and celebrate Perry’s unique multicultural history. This history is “celebrated” through the hotel’s 40 individually decorated and carefully crafted themed rooms, such as: the Central American room, Italian Room, Irish Room, African Room, Japanese Room, South East Asian Room, the American Indian Room, Chinese Room, and the Mexican Room. The hotels’ web page explains the rationale for “celebrating” the Mexican room. “One of the largest recent groups of immigrants to Perry comes from Mexico. We enjoy their music, their food, and, in this room, their design” (Hotel Pattee, 2009).

Another paradigmatic example of the difficulty embedded in projects such as Hometown Perry arises from the second mission of the institution, that of preserving the architectural history of the town. In the eighty-eight-page application to the National Register of Historic Places, William C. Page (1998), public historian with the Perry Historic Preservation Commission, creates and, in Anderson’s fashion “invents”, the foundational myth of the town. In the document, we learn about the kind of town and social community Perry purportedly was at the beginning of its history and is today. Three main themes constitute the framework of the myth upon which Perry is re-inventing itself: Building Downtown, Transportation, and
Commercial Architectural Resources. The boundaries of Perry do not and did not include the countryside, although most of the financial and other institutions that existed in town at the beginning of the century prospered to a great extent because of the local synergy between financial institutions, railroads, manufacturing plants and agricultural enterprises located in the surrounding territory, many of which employed Latinos, Latin-Americans, and African-Americans as well as Whites. The application to the National Register of Historical Places is limited, and reasonably so, to the historical district. However, the account of the historicity of downtown might have benefited from at least mention of the economic and financial connections of Downtown Perry with the immediate countryside, and perhaps also with regional, national and international business and financial networks. Restricting the description and history of downtown Perry to the physical boundaries of its urban district, although understandable given the purpose of the document, leaves out much that is important in today’s context, including some of the known multicultural aspects of the town’s earlier history that involved non-Europeans.

Framing the history of downtown Perry within its physical urban boundaries is also problematic from the point of view of architectural history. Memories of the barrios and other similar places, and of their locations, their forms, and their materiality that were inextricably connected to the everyday life of the non-white parts of the population is, we might understand, implicitly to be forgotten and not worthy of preservation. Social considerations crucially important to understanding the context of architecture and planning might thus remain unexplored, unless one day someone will analyze those aspects of the area’s history and bring it to the surface. In the meantime, the developing story and myth of Perry’s origins is supported, in material terms, mainly by the physical traces left by the financial, mercantile, and professional elite. Mrs Page describes that elite, in her document, as “not hidebound by the past and quite willing to try something new” (Page, 1998, p. 53). A sad, yet not surprising, result of such a one-sided historical reconstruction is observable in the George Soumas Court, a pocket park located adjacent Hometown Perry headquarters and named after a WWII son of Greek immigrants. The park’s objective is to honor the great contributors to the economic and social history of Perry. On the southeast corner of the park is the so-called “Wall of Witness” depicting the faces of well-known and beloved Perry men and women rendered in ceramic plaques. The faces are all of men and women of white European ancestry, apart from one African American. Louis Armstrong, the internationally famous Jazz musician.

Exoticizing the other

If the myth of the creation and growth of Perry is problematic because of the way historians select what they want from the dust of history, no less problematic is the way Hometown Perry represents contemporary Latino culture from a cultural pluralists’ perspective. In 2006, the organization sponsored an exhibition celebrating the culture and customs of Latinos in Perry. The exhibit was housed in the beautifully restored turn-of-the-century Carnegie Library Museum. The exhibits consisted of few traditional dresses, dolls, and musical instruments typical of Mexico’s Michoacán region. The curators of the exhibition enclosed the objects inside closed glass cases, with labels describing why, how and in what circumstances Mexicans use such items. The goals of the show were to represent Mexico’s rich folk
tradition and to familiarize white Iowans with some aspects of the culture of many of the Latino immigrants living in Perry. However, the objects were isolated from any sort of meaningful context, and the exhibition became an arena of discourse about the “other.”

As Sant Cassia (2000) and in particular Karp (1991, p. 10) remind us, “There are two main strategies museums use when representing other cultures or their works of art: the first is to make them strange by exotizing them; the other is to make them familiar by assimilating them. Exoticizing emphasizes the differences between the cultural group being displayed and the cultural group doing the viewing, while assimilating highlights the similarities.” In the case of Perry’s Carnegie Museum, the Latinos’ otherness was positively valued by romanticizing it, another risk with the cultural pluralist model. Among other cultural peculiarities, the main attribute the curators wanted to show about Mexican culture were simplistic, portraying the culture as joyful, peaceful, maintaining group-oriented attitudes toward social life. By assigning a positive value to the other, the curators appear to be reflective, culturally aware, and conscientious; however, those traits are not reflective of the Mexican culture. By simultaneously using language of difference and of similarities, the curators of the exhibition provided a key to help visitors grasp cultural, racial, and ethnic differences; however, rather than assimilating the aesthetic sense and life experiences of Mexican immigrants according to their own time and own traditions, the curators assimilated them into a particular moment of Perry’s own time and tradition. Had the curators inquired about how the users and makers of those objects valued them in the context of their creation, they could have produced a more textured and culturally diverse exhibition.

In a recent informal interview, the director of Hometown Perry described the current situation with respect to the Latino immigrants. In his view, apart from a few bumps in the road, local institutions have been able to integrate Latino immigrants into the local society with no particular frictions. Yet a walk through the town reveals clear ethnic and class fault lines. In their majority, Latinos live in the poorest working class neighborhood of the town.

Where are Perry’s Latinos? Apart from Sunday at the local Catholic Church, you see Latinos (as well as African Americans, Africans, and white workers) at the gates of packing plant when their shift changes. The Mexican restaurant on Main Street serves mostly white Iowans, and the young waiter tells me that Latinos youths do not hang out in town but in Des Moines at their favorite club “La Roca” – The Rock. Indeed, the only dance club frequented by Latinos in Perry was in an abandoned parking lot at the edge of town, but the owners closed it a few months ago. Latinos can also be found at the town clinic on Thursdays, the day when services there are free and a Spanish-speaking doctor is available; grandmothers, pregnant women and young children sit in the lobby and waiting room. Others can be found at the local tienda the grocery store on Main Street—that caters mainly to Latinos.

Perry has developed a Latino commercial niche market which directly caters to the emerging Latino community and has high potential as an opportunity for economic development in the town. Such an opportunity has important potential for community development strategies in a town that has recently seen an exodus of retail businesses and increased business property vacancies. Downtown Perry has an abundance of offices and service oriented businesses, but lacks retail development and food establishments that would help the town maintain a sense of vibrancy. In fact, the Latino businesses are the few businesses which offer retail and food services.
Physically, the Latino commercial niche centers on 2nd Street and Willis, in the historical center of downtown and adjacent to the new redevelopment represented by Hotel Pattee, the Museum, etc. Although the emerging Latino niche market presents a development opportunity, as it currently stands it is viewed as an eyesore by some Perry residents and by other business owners, as indicated by a few of our non-Latino interviewees’ mentions of blight and of possible facade improvements for the niche businesses. Although the town and many of its leaders do see these local commercial developments by Latinos as a possible opportunity, it seems likely that without a coherent community development strategy that specifically includes them it will be very difficult to better integrate the emerging niche businesses and markets and to help them thrive. Efforts by the Chamber of Commerce to reach out to the local Latino business owners have had only limited success, in part because many of them do not see how they might benefit from becoming involved in such institutions and their activities.

Although Perry’s elementary school does provide Spanish-speaking teachers, high turnover among them makes it very hard for Latino pupils to develop trusting relationship with them. Also, some of the many Mexican students might be put off by the standard curriculum, which requires that they learn early US history (which might not seem relevant to them although perhaps necessary if they aspire to US citizenship) and also, for example, about the later colonization of Iowa by North European settlers who “bought” the land from the American Indian tribes.

The exoticizing of Latinos now occurring in Perry takes an interesting turn when it comes to celebrating the cultural heritage of Latinos. Some leaders within the Latino community have taken initiatives to celebrate some of their cultural practices and gain some exposure and recognition within the town. Such exposure is limited because it has not been incorporated into a community development strategy that could harness potential available resources from the Latino community and from the broader Perry community. The Latino leaders’ efforts at self-empowerment have not, thus far, been built upon by the town. Although the efforts are celebrated as a form of multiculturalism under a cultural pluralist framework these efforts for cultural empowerment are limited. Latinos efforts at cultural empowerment can be discussed with regard to the two main Latino community events involved thus far, the Viva Latino Festival and Las Posadas.

Perry’s Viva Latino festival takes place in mid-September and aims to celebrate Latin American culture through music and food. It is organized by Hispanics United for Perry, an informal network of the emerging Latino leadership in town. An impressive array of vendors (especially for a small town like Perry) attends the event, selling tacos and burritos from Mexico, tamales from Guatemala and pupusas from El Salvador. Bands from throughout the region play both traditional Mexican music and more contemporary Rock En Español. Unfortunately, this opportunity to showcase Latino culture in Perry is relegated to the background, because the venue of the festival has been a dilapidated park rather than the recently redeveloped central square of downtown Perry which is next to the Carnegie Library and Hotel Pattee. Some Perry officials are working to bring the festival to the center of town which would bring more exposure to the event. As it stands, Latinos attending the festival in 2008 seemed to want to remain in the background and in the shadows as they huddled together near the food vendors and listened to the music from a distance. Many Latinos were present, but very few persons from the Anglo community.
Latino leader’s other efforts at gaining more cultural recognition relates to Perry’s annual Latino cultural event—Las Posadas. Hometown Perry’s web page provides a clear description of the event. Las Posadas is “a Latin American tradition that commemorates the journey of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem . . . the Posada is a re-enactment of the couple’s search to find shelter for the birth of baby Jesus.” A singing procession through Perry’s downtown knocks on doors, asking the owners for a place to rest. Although they are refused repeatedly, the master of one house ultimately allows entry . . . everyone is invited to celebrate Las Posadas” the web site claims. “Tickets are $4 for adults and $2 for children 10 and under. Tickets are on sale now at the Carnegie Library Museum and will also be available at the door.” Not surprisingly, participants end their journey by being greeted at Hotel Pattee, as the newly restored grand hotel opens its doors to symbolically give birth to Baby Jesus.

Conclusion and new openings

Iowa has a long history of minority immigration and in-migration. The changing nature of the agricultural sector in Iowa has changed the immigrant labor force from being seasonal (including an immigrant guest workers program with Mexico) to more permanent labor based on the meat packing industry. This change is transforming Iowa society because Latinos no longer simply work together with persons of north European ancestry on a temporary basis, but rather now live with them in the same communities and share the same public resources. Sharing the same streets, plazas, parks, schools, hospitals, clinics, libraries and secondhand and other stores with Mexicans, Sudanese and Central Americans presents an immediate challenge for a population that has long been accustomed to and indeed proud of its cultural and religious homogeneity. These drastic cultural challenges and changes make Iowa an important state for considering contemporary developments and clashes in multicultural practices. Iowa today provides a perhaps-unique multicultural environment in which to re-evaluate the theories and implications of assimilation and cultural pluralism as they pertain to community development efforts and strategies. Even as local companies actively seek to hire immigrant and in-migrant workers amid Iowa’s low wage labor shortage, some local residents have demanded crackdowns on illegal immigrants. Often, the anxiety and hostility that result also affect Latinos who are legally present, legally working, and even US citizens. “The police used to ask us when we were going back home,” said Eligio Sanchez, who was one of the early Hispanic residents in Marshalltown, Iowa when he came in 1991. “They said, ‘We don’t want you here.’ People looked at us like we were exotic animals.”

From the point of view of exoticization of the immigrant population in Perry, we argue that both assimilationism and cultural pluralism need major rethinking. Assimilationism is for the most part not occurring in Iowa, in part because many immigrants are undocumented but also because even legal immigrants do not seem willing to “assimilate.” And cultural pluralism, in places such as Perry, is taking the form of exoticism. Latinos, it seems, are carving out their own cultural spaces, independently of the Anglo culture and yet subordinated to it. The implications of these finding for both assimilationist and cultural pluralist models are particularly important within the field of community development, whose practitioners and academics work within these diverse environments and are often called on for advice regarding multicultural relations, integration and adaptation.
A Mexican woman refers to Perry as a place that is both “calm and tense” and where she feels free but not comfortable (“me siento libre pero no comoda”). More so than in the past, the fate of immigrants in Iowa (Latino and non), depends largely on their particular mode of integration into various segments of society. As Fernandez-Kelly (1995) points out, such integration “in turn, appears related more to their membership in specific interpersonal networks and their ability to use group identity to gain access to material, social and political resources than to efforts made by local institutions.” Latinos are far from being absorbed culturally. When first devised, the assimilationist model in the US was based on a very different socioeconomic and cultural context: European-origin immigration, US economic expansion tied to a demand for low-wage labor, and a monocultural society. Today the context has changed, and Latinos, as well as other cultural groups (from Asians to Africans), are transnational actors, many of whom are retaining their languages and their personal, social, cultural, economic, political interests and relations with and in their countries of origin well into the second and third generation (Darder & Torres, 1998; Jarolimek, 1979). Another process, “reactive ethnicity” —in which second and third-generation immigrants undergo a revival in ethnic pride and awareness— is a potent source of anti-assimilation feeling within US communities (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996, 2001). On the other hand, the theory of cultural pluralism is consistent with a focus on electoral politics, advocacy for social programs, growth-oriented economic policies, support for political and cultural rights, and increased Latino representation (Schlesinger, 1991). Implicit in that theory is an abiding faith in the state’s capacity to remedy social and economic inequality. However, it is exactly in that capacity that local institutions in Iowa are facing difficulties in effectively supporting Iowa’s recently arrived population of Latinos and other non-Europeans.

References
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