

Learning from Experience: Latin American Immigrants in Nova Scotia

Carole A. Hartzman. *"Not Yet Canadians . . .": The Latin American Immigrant Experience in Nova Scotia.* International Education Centre Issues in Ethnicity and Multiculturalism Series, No. 2. Halifax: Saint Mary's University, 1991 (ISBN 0-921793-03-0).

Review by Helen Vaughan Merrill

Edmund Fung's charming cover photograph of a group of Latin American children in Nova Scotia is an invitation to an interesting book about a previously unstudied group. Carole Hartzman calls her study "exploratory" (3) and notes that her subjects' collective experience is "a study in human cultural survival" (1). She claims no attempt to test models in this book nor hypothesize, but she does attempt to tell us something about the adaptation and integration of this group to Nova Scotia and how they came to be here.

The book is divided into three very distinct chapters. The first provides the background information about the study's inception, the demographic details of the respondents and the overall findings displayed in a variety of graph styles. Interspersed throughout the text are personal anecdotes and opinions gathered from the study participants. These help enliven an otherwise dull interpretation of each statistical figure.

The second chapter focuses exclusively on the establishment of the Spanish Speaking Association of Nova Scotia and the Spanish Heritage Language School in Halifax. Hartzman provides an intriguing and thorough documentation of the internal squabbles associated with the establishment of these entities by members of diverse ethno-cultural backgrounds whose common ground is the Spanish language. There is plenty of material here for another book about latent ethnic rivalry amongst immigrants to Canada.

Refugee and immigrant life experiences make Chapter 3 the most interesting of all. Here Hartzman provides information on the varied backgrounds of her subjects and how they arrived in Nova Scotia. Chilling quotes from survivors of torture and political oppression make the reality of these Latin Americans' adaptation and integration to life in Canada more poignant. For those unfamiliar with immigrant issues, this chapter lays the groundwork for understanding something of the processes and perils involved in leaving one's country of origin. This might have been a better introduction to the book than the current first chapter, which is more ponderous with data.

The forty study participants were from twelve countries in Latin America, but those readers looking for a book about Central Americans from Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua will not find anything here. Hartzman clearly points out in her conclusion that her interviews were conducted prior to the arrival of the larger groups from these countries in 1986 through 1988. The respondents represent Chile and Cuba and Peru primarily, with a few others from South America, the Latin American islands and Central America.

Only eight of the respondents came as refugees, while eleven came independently and twenty-one (more than 50 percent) came as Family Class or assisted relatives. These factors significantly impact on the interpretation of the integration versus isolation theme of the first chapter. Other studies, like Milly Charon's *Worlds Apart: New Immigrant Voices* (1989), Emily Nasrallah's novel about Lebanese immigrants in Prince Edward Island, *Flight against Time* (1987), and Catherine Warren's documentation of immigrant women's life histories, *Vignettes of Life: Experiences and Self Perceptions of New Canadian Women* (1986), show clear distinctions in the experiences of immigrants' adaptation according to age, gender, class, reasons for emigrating and presence of family or other relatives in Canada. Hartzman may generalize too much about her subjects in an attempt to keep her respondents as a single unit of study. She summarizes that most of the respondents emigrated for political or both political and economic reasons. But this is no surprise, since most immigrants come for these reasons. In fact, her finding that Latin Americans who had been in Nova Scotia more than five years felt more integrated than newcomers is a well researched fact about immigrant adaptation. For example, Carmelina Barwick's "Refugee Adaptation and Mental Health" (1986) shows five years as the turning point in immigrant adjustment towards a new period (the future) of reconstruction and a present characterized by feelings of acceptance and confidence.

Hartzman describes both the successes and failures of her subjects, but she uncovers the key to feeling

integrated and accepted—how immigrants are received by Canadians. The best example in the book is of the subtlety of racism and discrimination in the description of a Venezuelan woman's first day on the job: "They really made me feel like a foreigner . . . they didn't even want me to answer the phone. I felt so humiliated . . . I didn't stay" (21).

Throughout the ten years Hartzman has been preparing material for this book, she surely has developed an in-depth understanding of her subject. In an attempt to produce a sound logical base for this work, replete with charts and graphs, she may have failed to respond with the instinct and emotion her respondents' stories must have evoked. There is another logic inherent in the reality of refugee and immigrant experiences which are the direct result of socio-economic and political systems which do exist and even the politics and bureaucracy which guide immigration policies and selection procedures in Canada. Perhaps the original grant which started the research on the topic of Latin Americans and the Spanish language guided this book in a specific path rather than allowing the study to take on a life of its own.

There is plenty of validity in the quotations and anecdotes of the participants. However, the use of

Grace Anderson's theories ("Conflict, Cleavages and Consensus: Spanish-Speaking Immigrant Communities in Selected Metropolitan Areas," 1978) to discuss findings and themes in Chapters 2 and 3 complicates rather than enhances the text. This is at times clumsy and disjointed in the first two chapters, and there seems to be an imbalance between the study findings and the refugee experiences and the chapter on the Spanish Speaking Association and the Heritage Language School.

This is a valuable work, however. There is no other book specifically about Latin Americans in Nova Scotia and only a limited number of articles and books have been written about other ethnic groups. We hope that Carole Hartzman has hours of tape and reams of notes for use in future publications. These would be something to look forward to, if this valiant attempt is just a sample of what she has to offer.

Helen Vaughan Merrill is a graduate student in the Atlantic Canada Studies program at Saint Mary's University. She is the author of a 1985 study of immigrant women in Halifax-Dartmouth, and is currently working on an MA thesis on immigrant employment issues.