Abstract: Spatial assimilation theory, the traditional framework for analyzing immigration and housing in U.S. cities, was deeply shaped by the historical-geographic contingencies of the 1950s and 1960s. Yet the most recent and forceful challenge to assimilationist research - transnational urbanism - was also influenced by distinctive contemporary circumstances and epistemological priorities, creating a tense and unproductive dichotomy. In this paper, I contend that apparently fundamental theoretical disputes are at least partially resolved through methodological pluralism: understanding continuity and change in immigrant settlement and housing patterns requires that we draw on the distinct, complementary merits of transnational urbanist and spatial assimilation models - while also recognizing the features of American urban development and race relations that create powerful incentives in the spatial trajectories of immigrant upward mobility. Brief empirical case studies examine the recent rise of homeownership among Hmong immigrants in St. Paul, Minnesota; the intensified linkages between immigration and housing stress among renters in New York City; and the neighborhood-level contradictions of national policies favoring low-wage immigration and heavily-mortgaged owner-occupancy.

Spatial Assimilation: Context, Contingency, and Ambivalence

The nexus between housing and immigration became a central element of American urban theory in the 1950s and 1960s, but historical context made for a paradoxical conventional wisdom that reflected the intersection of numerous historical-geographical contingencies. Low immigration levels and predictable source-country trends had been underway for many years, since the restrictive immigration laws of the 1920s. As more of the first- and second-generation European-born immigrants died or lost their strong connections to the 'Old Country,' once-sharp divisions began to melt into an undifferentiated American middle-class Whiteness.¹ A golden age of economic expansion, Keynesian urban policy, and rapid suburbanization - a troika that often involved the premature creative destruction of viable inner-city labor and housing markets - forged a strong connection between upward socioeconomic mobility and outward spatial mobility.² Markets and public policy opened the first and best opportunities to whites, with those lower

down the racial and ethnic hierarchy receiving lesser and later choice. And the rising African American challenge to the entrenched American Dilemma of the nation’s white-black racism inscribed stark dichotomies of inclusion and exclusion, creating a continuum with segregated inner-city black poverty at one end and a completely assimilated American middle-class suburban whiteness at the other; it became a routine sociological exercise to compare various immigrant groups according to their position on this continuum.

The resulting theoretical infrastructure of spatial assimilation, born in the crucible of mid-century Northern and Eastern industrial-but-deindustrializing cities, was never perfectly suited even for an understanding of its own urban laboratories. The model was persuasive and influential by virtue of its simplicity: immigrants arrive and settle in densely-packed inner-city ghettos that provide community resources and support; with time, adjustment to ‘American’ cultural traditions and economic institutions allows immigrants to move up the socioeconomic ladder, and out to the white, middle-class American suburbs. Almost as soon as the conventional wisdom could be identified as such, however, its exceptions and contingencies seemed to attract more interest than its valid predictions; only an epistemological and methodological commitment to generalization could sustain the line of inquiry. For more than a generation, then, spatial assimilation served as the anchor of urban research on the housing conditions of immigrants to America: a short tether kept interpretations manageable and in line with theoretical predictions, even as most urbanists recognized a far greater complexity in the social and spatial dimensions of race, ethnicity, and identity in America’s urban housing markets.

Recent years have brought an unmistakeable shift in this tense balance, such that spatial assimilation is now widely viewed as outdated, traditional, inaccurate, and unhelpful. Through the 1980s, spatial assimilation could be described with a minimum of qualifiers or caveats:

“...an important outcome of socioeconomic advancement for minorities is residential integration within mainstream society. A host of variables important to people’s social and economic well-being are determined by residential location. For example, health, quality of education, access to employment, exposure to crime, and, of course, social prestige all depend in part on where one lives. As social status rises, therefore, minorities attempt to convert their socioeconomic

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5 David Ward, in a retrospective summary of his research in the late 1960s, noted that “If diminished levels of residential segregation have been viewed as measures of suburban dispersal and, by inference, of assimilation, in many cities both the rates and the dimensions of these changes have been quite modest.” Ward also noted that other trends cited in support of the spatial assimilation model “do not necessarily record a simple trajectory from inner-city ghetto to integrated suburb.” David Ward (1987). “Population Growth, Migration, and Urbanization, 1860-1920.” In Robert D. Mitchell and Paul A. Groves, eds., North America: The Historical Geography of a Changing Continent. Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, pp. 299-320, quotes from p. 318.
achievements into an improved spatial position, which usually implies assimilation with majority members.”

Today the most prominent sociologists working in this tradition, John Logan and Richard Alba, replace the unitary focus on immigrant enclaves with a three-fold typology that also includes immigrant communities (sustained by immigrants who have sufficient resources to assimilate but choose not to do so), and minority ghettos (maintained by systematic exclusion of certain groups, regardless of individual choices and resources). They end their careful empirical analysis of spatial assimilation in New York and Los Angeles with an unambiguous call to recognize contingency and context:

“In any single neighborhood, whatever its overall qualities, we might find that some residents are trapped within it, others use it as a temporary base from which to rise, and others – those with the most choice – prefer it as a culturally agreeable environment.”

“The assimilation model is based on a conception of the ethnic neighborhood as a reception area for new arrivals and an entry point into the ethnic labor market. But the process in which both the neighborhood and the niche job are avoided or left behind by successful group members is not universal. The ethnic neighborhood for some groups is a springboard, but for others it is a destination. This is not a time, if ever there were a time, for a one-pattern-fits-all theory of residential location.”

What happened? In the 1990s, dramatic shifts in the empirical parameters of immigration certainly helped to return the topic to the leading edge of theoretical and methodological innovation, and also attracted intense policy interest. At the same time, the intense urbanization of immigration – fully one-quarter of the decade’s immigrants settled in New York City, Los

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Angeles, Chicago, and Houston, not even counting the suburbs – coincided with a thorough and interdisciplinary obsession with globalization. American cities and neighborhoods were increasingly portrayed as buffeted by forces from around the globe, and immigration was often viewed as simply one more aspect of locality remade by a global space of flows. Unfortunately, the distinctive context of the 1990s shaped contemporary urban inquiry as much as the unique circumstances of the 1950s and 1960s. By the end of the decade, then, a revised conventional wisdom had simply reversed the old dichotomies: the geographical melting pot of spatial assimilation theory had been replaced with a complex mosaic of ethnic-cities, ethnoburbs, majority-minority metropolises, and regions of parachuted plurality.⁹ One response to this new landscape of context and contingency is illustrated by the widespread popularity of William Frey’s interesting but dangerous metaphor of “demographic balkanization.”¹⁰ Another response is transnational urbanism.

The Urbanization of Transnationalism

Transnational urbanism, most closely associated with the work of Michael Peter Smith and several colleagues, began as an urbanization of Appaduri’s anthropological analysis of transnational global “ethnoscpaes;” it is a methodology and perspective that emphasizes inter-national interconnections while attempting to avoid the dangerous simplicity of a local-global binary.¹¹ It is incorrect and unhelpful, Smith argues, to portray globalization as an inexorable, amorphous, and disembodied planetary field of flows and forces, and then to juxtapose the resulting sterile abstraction against a rich, contextual description of cities and neighborhoods. Globalization, he contends, is constituted by the actions of individual agents who may indeed travel very far and cross many national borders; but they are always acting in place, and these places are almost always urban. Thus the ‘globalization’ confronted by any particular urban locale is determined by how the place

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is enmeshed in transnational but placed connections, travels, and interdependencies. For Smith, transnational urbanism is fundamentally about locating the discourse, methods, assumptions, and politics of an otherwise amorphous, inevitable, and abstract globalization. He advocates an agency-oriented approach that examines the intensely place-specific connections, interdependencies, and movements of all actors involved in globalizing processes—from undocumented immigrants and refugees to dual-citizen middle-class professionals to wealthy transnational investors.

Transnationalism in general, and transnational urbanism in particular, have been deeply influential across sociology, geography, and urban studies in the last few years. The approach seems perfectly suited to shed light on the new configurations of housing markets in American cities in an age of resurgent immigration, when even the most mundane and parochial of local-government functions are enmeshed in the national and transnational politics of immigration—when a county executive in a Long Island suburb dispatches police officers to shut down single-family homes where three or four dozen Latino day laborers rest at night after a long day’s work on the lawns, hedges, and gardens of their wealthy Anglo neighbors; when the mayor of Danbury, Connecticut gets national headlines by calling on the state troopers to enforce immigration laws, and begins sending inspectors to count cars parked in front of homes in the city’s immigrant neighborhoods; when suburbs and small towns are revising building codes to limit the square footage of driveway paving for single-family homes, and banning the use of any dwelling room other than a bedroom for the activity of sleeping. Yet transnational urbanism has been the target of considerable criticism, in part because this emergent research frontier has staked out numerous contradictory claims of method, meaning, and empirics. In some cases, transnational urbanism is portrayed as an emancipatory, bottom-up challenge to the inequalities of economic globalization, while others see it as the logical culmination of globalization; some analysts focus on the activities of a core group of transnational entrepreneurs, while others suggest that all immigrants can be considered transnational; and of course some present the process as genuinely new, while others appeal to a deep history of worldwide labor migration.

Reconciling Continuity and Change

As the transnational literature has blossomed over the last decade, it has opened a wide methodological gulf between the extensive, quantitative approach preferred by those working in the spatial-assimilation tradition, such as Waldinger, Clark, Alba and Logan, and the intensive,

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qualitative ethnographies used by Smith, Guarnizo, Glick-Schiller, and others.\textsuperscript{15} This dichotomy of methods and data, I believe, remains the single most important barrier to a reconciliation that might allow us to understand continuity and change in urban immigration. What appears to be a fundamental theoretical dispute between assimilationist and transnationalist perspectives actually boils down to a struggle over method and empirical extent. This struggle is too often couched in theoretical and political language that tends to ignore the steps we might take to sustain a productive engagement.\textsuperscript{16} Here, I think that the work of Alejandro Portes and his colleagues offers a genuine breakthrough. Portes applauds the new questions and connections documented by the rich qualitative ethnographies undertaken by many of those working in the transnational urban field; but he notes that many of the criticisms of transnationalism are attacks on exceptionality: “The skeptical position toward the transnational perspective invokes two key arguments: First, that these activities, although colorful, are exceptional .... The second argument simply asserts that there is nothing new in what is referred to as transnationalism.”\textsuperscript{17} The latter criticism can easily be evaluated on the basis of qualitative and theoretical considerations: absolute novelty is not necessary to demonstrate pragmatic or theoretical value.

The former criticism, however, is more serious – and transnational urbanists have offered no persuasive response. As Portes reminds us, even the most sophisticated ethnographies of urban transnationalism are useless in responding to the charge of exceptionality, because the cases are selected by sampling on the dependent variable. Evaluating the exceptionalist critique requires an explicit comparison of transnational and assimilationist practices, and this is the landmark contribution of the Comparative Immigrant Enterprise Project. Portes and his colleagues use cluster random sampling of census blocks in four large U.S. cities to identify immigrants from Colombia, the Dominican Republic, and El Salvador, and a chain-referral non-random sample of entrepreneurs identified by the first-stage cluster respondents. A battery of specific questions on

\textsuperscript{15} It should also be noted that the comparative transnational field-research methods advocated by Smith and his colleagues are extraordinarily labor-intensive, a consideration that imposes severe limitations on the pace at which collective and cumulative advances can be made in the literature. Much of the transnational urbanist literature, therefore, has adopted a highly synthetic methodology, replacing field-based interviews and ethnographies with analyses of immigrant and ‘mainstream’ newspapers and other archival resources; we might best describe this approach, most clearly exemplified by Smith’s fascinating and integrative chapter, “Reading Los Angeles from the Ground Up,” as open-source ethnography.

\textsuperscript{16} In particular, qualitative ethnographic research that is joined to a social-constructionist epistemological commitment is often set off against quantitative survey and census-based research that involves sophisticated technical analysis of fairly straightforward demographic and geographical categories – variations among cities or across census tracts within a city according to divisions of race, ethnicity, income, age, etc. Productive debate is impossible when quantitative researchers perceive critical questions as part of an attempt to destabilize the entire methodological foundations of research infrastructures built up over the course of an entire career. It is also impossible when qualitative researchers perceive criticisms of their methods as grounded in a dismissive attitude and epithets of ‘anecdotal’ evidence. In my view, then, any longterm reconciliation of these two traditions requires a sensitivity to the history, politics, sociology, and geography of social statistics. To say (as so many analysts do) that census figures and all other social statistics are socially constructed is at once insightful and incomplete; this is the beginning of the conversation, not the end. Our view of immigrant housing ‘translocalities’ must be built on an understanding of how official statistics reflect and reproduce social and political decisions, even while these statistics provide essential yet partial measures on the effects of such social and political processes.

the extent, frequency, and type of home-country contacts yields a rare, systematic estimate of the extent of transnational practice: they find that the percentage of all workers engaged in significant transnational activity is quite low, only in the single digits. But transnational entrepreneurs comprise a much larger share — often an outright majority — of self-employed immigrants. The large economics and sociology literature on immigrant entrepreneurialism has generally ignored this issue.

A Hybrid Methodology for Housing Studies

These findings — and the methods used to obtain them — demonstrate the possibility for a productive engagement between seemingly contradictory elements of assimilationist and transnationalist research. Extensive-quantitative research continues to reveal substantial but contingent and sometimes weakening linkages between locational attainment and various measures of assimilation (income, education, English-language proficiency, citizenship, homeownership), even while qualitative-ethnographic methods demonstrate that intricate cross-border relations and individual strategies undermine any possibility of a “one-pattern-fits-all theory”18 so often associated with spatial assimilation. What I am suggesting, then, is that Logan’s emphasis on contingency in the neighborhood expression of immigration — traditional, transitional enclaves, communities of choice, ghettos of discrimination and constraint — helps to define a vector of conceptual interaction terms with transnational activities. Transnationalism, on the part of low-wage undocumented workers or wealthy entrepreneurs, represents the leading edge of contemporary strategies of adaptation, adjustment, or even resistance to aspects of life in urban America. But transnationalism has limited and gradual effects on the spatial expressions of deeply-entrenched cultural practices, political struggles, and economic institutions embedded in America’s urban housing markets. Transnational urbanists are entirely correct to insist that the coefficients and maps used by assimilation researchers conceal important transformations in the lives, perceptions, and intentions of immigrants living in, say, carefully-delineated “enclave” census tracts. Nevertheless, the broad suite of models used by housing demographers and assimilation researchers — ecologically-based dissimilarity indices, cross-sectional cohort analyses, micro-level locational attainment models — still fit reasonably well, because contemporary transnational activity takes place in the context of enduring and powerful institutions premised on the assumptions of spatial assimilation. If metropolitan transnationalism is the crucible for much of today’s immigrant experience, the context of remaining assimilationist currents in America provides the crucible without that shapes the crucible within.19

Three interlocking features of American urbanism have built this crucible of housing market conditions. First, the enduring ‘American Dilemma’ of pervasive racism against African

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19 I am borrowing here from Rumbaut’s pioneering work on ‘segmented assimilation.’ “Becoming American’ takes different forms, has different meanings, and is reached by different paths. ... the process is complex, conflictual, and stressful.... The process is also shaped within a much larger historical context of which the participants may be no more conscious than fish are of water, and in an American crucible that has been shaping identities since the origins of the nation. In the final analysis, it is the crucible without that shapes the crucible within.” Rubén G. Rumbaut (1994). “The Crucible Within: Ethnic Identity, Self-Esteem, and Segmented Assimilation Among Children of Immigrants.” International Migration Review 28(4), 748-794, quote from p. 790.
Americans continues to sustain deep black-white segregation. Recent slight declines in black-white dissimilarity indices do not signal a dramatic change in American bigotry: enormous and intergenerational investments have been made to build, protect, and enrich white privilege. Small proportions of the middle and upper classes of all racial and ethnic groups, including racially diverse immigrant populations, certainly do gain access to exclusive suburban housing markets and the associated benefits; these limited openings obviously vary with regional geographies of immigration, class, and race. Yet the entanglement of class with race/ethnicity has not altered the foundations of white privilege. Aiwha Ong argues convincingly that the white-black polarities of America are not outcomes, but processes: immigrants and native-born minorities are evaluated in relation to the ideal standards of assimilated whiteness forged out of mid-twentieth century European-origin identity. Whitening and blackening processes imposed on new immigrants are crucial in setting the parameters of residential choice and constraint. Second, the bedrock geographical principles of American urban development continue to strengthen the link between social and spatial mobility. A long cultural tradition of anti-urbanism goes hand-in-hand with an array of specific policies favoring new suburban housing construction: a partial list includes Euclidian zoning, marginal-cost pricing of water and sewer services, regressive mortgage-interest tax deductions, explicit and implicit subsidies to highways and automobiles at the expense of public transit, and Tieboutian-style competition amongst fragmented municipalities for lucrative property-tax generators. All upwardly-mobile households thus face powerful incentives to seek out new, large single family homes in suburban neighborhoods as their incomes and ambitions rise. These strong incentives are magnified by a third foundational commitment of American urbanism. Homeownership, and especially debt-burdened homeownership supported by an increasingly complex web of subsidies and what even the understated Alan Greenspan calls “exotic” financial instruments, is arguably the last remaining bipartisan policy consensus in Washington, DC. The 1990s brought an emphasis on homeownership opportunities in ‘new markets’ of ‘underserved’


21 In other words, Atlanta and Washington, DC have large middle-class Black suburbs, while Miami and Los Angeles have substantial high-income Latino communities.


23 Gentrification certainly does expand the supply of elite inner-city housing options, but it is extremely limited in quantitative terms when compared to the magnitude (measured in terms of housing units or geographic areas of expansion) of new suburban development.
racial and ethnic minorities, Native Americans, and recent immigrants; this neoliberal, new-democratic theme, born of an effort to harness market means to achieve traditional liberal ends, has continued with surprisingly few changes in the Bush years. Clinton’s talk of “new markets” paved the way for Bush’s vision of an “ownership society,” and the result under both administrations has been record-high rates of homeownership.

These three principles – pervasive white-privilege racism against African Americans, low-density suburban residential development, and debt-driven homeownership policy – govern the incentives for housing choices amongst all upwardly-mobile Americans. These incentives are not invariant, uncontested, or absolute; but they set limits on the housing choices that can be used by immigrants working to improve their lives. Moreover, these incentives create spatial configurations that remain generally in line with the empirical predictions of spatial assimilation theory, even as it becomes clear that we cannot ignore the multi-ethnic and transnational contingency of many immigrants’ experiences as they follow these housing-space trajectories. It is also quite possible that immigrants’ struggles to achieve upward mobility in the crucible of housing inequality will reinforce divisions of homeownership, housing classes, and disenfranchisement of African Americans. To lend a bit of empirical specificity to these theoretical arguments, I now turn to three empirical vignettes on the links between immigration and transnational-assimilationist tendencies in U.S. housing markets.

**Whitening, Blackening, and the Properties of Place**

“...the white-black polarities emerging out of the history of European-American imperialism continue to shape attitudes and encode discourses directed at immigrants from the rest of the world that are associated with racial and cultural inferiority. This dynamic of racial othering emerges in a range of mechanisms that variously subject nonwhite immigrants to whitening or blackening processes that indicate the degree of their closeness to or distance from ideal white standards.”

My first empirical narrative comes from St. Paul, Minnesota. A few years ago, Deborah Martin and Steve Holloway began a mixed-methods research project, focusing on the ways that community organizers in the city’s district council system responded to neighborhood racial and ethnic change. I joined the collaboration after some of their interviews highlighted unexpected aspects of racialization in housing and neighborhood change, offering a fascinating local view of transnational constructions of Asian-American identities. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War and the arrival of Indochinese refugees to America, St. Paul became one of the most important destinations for Laotian Hmong. The French and later the CIA aggressively recruited thousands of Hmong in the remote mountains of Laos to fight communist forces and to rescue

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downed pilots in the secret bombing campaign; about 100,000 Hmong worked with the Americans, and a third died in military action.\textsuperscript{27} American withdrawal led to massive retaliation by the Pathet Lao against the Hmong, spurring an exodus to camps in Thailand and eventually to the United States. More than a million refugees came from across Indochina, but the comparatively small Hmong population was especially impoverished; thus, as Hmong enclaves emerged in Fresno, California, and St. Paul, Minnesota, local housing markets provided the setting for processes that alternately challenged and reinforced mainstream American stereotypes. On the one hand, the marginalization of Hmong in Laos meant that they arrived with little education or other assets beloved by human-capital theorists; extremely low incomes, high unemployment, large extended families, severe linguistic isolation, and heavy reliance on public housing and other welfare services stood in sharp contrast to the pervasive White ambivalence towards Asians as the “model minority.” On the other hand, their initial location in the public housing projects and the bottom tier of market rentals in the inner city fit perfectly with the logic of gateways and immigrant enclaves.

A generation later, broad increases in business enterprise, self-help organizations, and mainstream political participation coincided with dramatic gains in that other American yardstick of assimilation, homeownership.\textsuperscript{28} Statewide, Minnesota’s Hmong homeownership rate quadrupled in the 1990s, surpassing the fifty-percent mark by 2000.\textsuperscript{29} At the same time, dispersal from the initial inner-city enclave in St. Paul seemed to follow the trajectory predicted by spatial assimilation theory. And yet simple changes in geometry conceal a much more complicated geography. Chad Farrell, for example, evaluates Hmong residential patterns in relation to the triad of sociological models – immigrant enclaves, ethnic communities, and minority ghettos – proposed by Logan, Zhang, and Alba. Farrell notes that the declines in Hmong concentration measures predicted by the enclave model ignores crucial changes in destination communities, while persistent racialized constraints in the housing market violate the assumptions of choice inherent in the ethnic community model. “White populations are declining rapidly in most Hmong neighborhoods in concert with increasing black and Hispanic populations,”\textsuperscript{30} and increasing segregation and widespread evidence of discrimination\textsuperscript{31} offer strong support for the minority ghetto model – the interpretive opposite to spatial assimilation and enclave models.

The Hmong experience in St. Paul is sharply at odds with the simplest versions of spatial assimilation theory, which portray a monotonic process of socioeconomic advancement across a

\textsuperscript{29} Todd Nelson (2002). “Hmong are Moving into Mainstream.” \textit{St. Paul Pioneer Press}, April 10, 1A.
preconfigured tableau of spatial outcomes. Transnational connections interact with, and sometimes reinforce, longstanding structural inequalities of American housing and neighborhood life. Three facets of the Hmong experience are crucial in any evaluation of the balance between continuity and change. First, the localized demography and geography of Hmong entry into homeownership has redefined the presumed end-point of spatial assimilation theory. The Hmong have maintained traditional family structures woven from the fabric of an extended clan system, and indeed Hmong practices do not fit neatly into contemporary American categories of ‘household’ or ‘family.’ Kinship units that form the basis for collective action can include almost twenty families, while households (tsev neeg) consist of husband-wife couples along with sons and their wives and children; households can include families living in multiple homes, but all subject to the authority of a primary (almost always male) householder.\(^\text{32}\) As a result, Hmong spatial mobility out of the immigrant enclave involved the decisions of key leaders who, far from abandoning tradition, maintained it in the creation of a new immigrant community. Within a few years in the mid- to late-1990s, a large cohort of Hmong families had moved into neighborhoods on St. Paul’s aging, working-class East Side that had been nearly all-white. To the degree that this movement can be described as spatial assimilation, the process is remaking the presumed target (middle-class white communities outside the inner city). Interviews with district council neighborhood organizers certainly did reveal an interplay of previous immigrant identity and neighborhood solidarity that shaped the community politics of diversity; one organizer described the response of existing ‘White’ residents to the growing number of new Hmong neighbors:

“You know, the stubborn East-siders over here wanted to make damn sure that if you lived on the East side, you didn’t have to go to Frogtown to learn the [English] language. ...So those old Swedes just want to make damn certain that there were services in the community here and they were going to go out of their way to find a way to make sure that it’s available. If they were going to be East-siders, they were going to have the opportunity to learn to read in the neighborhood, that they weren’t going to have to get in their car and go someplace else.”

Second, intensely localized experiences are bound up with significant and ongoing transnational linkages. The essence of such connections may not be new, but Smith’s framework provides an important reminder of their locality, specificity, and urbanization. Hmong transnationalism cannot be lumped into an undifferentiated Asian American or even “Southeast Asian” diaspora; much of the vitality of transnational identity comes directly from the knowledge that an estimated 10,000 impoverished Hmong are still living in refugee camps in Thailand, and a somewhat smaller number are still engaged in low-level guerrilla struggles with the Lao government. Lee Pao Xiong, president of the Urban Coalition in Minneapolis, summarizes the challenges of balancing this transnational identity with the local demands of urban life in the U.S.: “We’ve been consumed with trying to meet the basic needs of the community....We haven’t made much [headway in] the political arena; some are still fighting for political position in our homeland in a government that is nonexistent.”\(^\text{33}\) This past summer, two prominent Hmong American activists met with a group

\(^{32}\) Farrell, “Immigrant Enclaves,” pp. 6-7; see also Yang, “Hmong in America,” p. 166.

of the fugitive Hmong living on the Laotian side of the border who had decided to surrender after years of crushing poverty and military pursuit; the Lao government detained and deported the activists, and asked the U.S. government to stop similar trip by other Hmong Americans.\textsuperscript{34} The U.S. State Department still runs a relocation program for Hmong refugees that mirrors the efforts first established in the Carter years, and previous generations of Hmong arrivals who are now pastors in central California’s Christian churches have taken a prominent role in resettling about 2,000 new arrivals over the last year.\textsuperscript{35} In St. Paul, Choua Lee gained widespread attention as the first Hmong to be elected to public office in the United States when she joined the St. Paul board of education in the early 1990s;\textsuperscript{36} subsequent Hmong elections and rising civic participation have brought considerable mainstream recognition, culminating in a Hmong American’s invitation to a White House meeting with several Asian American leaders in June, 1999, and President Clinton’s transmission of a video message to participants at the Fifth Annual Hmong National Conference in late October, 1999.\textsuperscript{37} The Minnesota Legislature recently approved the concept for a Hmong American Veterans Memorial on the state capitol Mall, and Hmong community leaders are now raising private funds for a design that includes a soldier in a Lao Army uniform helping to rescue a downed American pilot.\textsuperscript{38} And in perhaps the most vivid image of transnational political significance in what has become the Hmong capital of the United States, St. Paul Mayor Randy Kelly recently led a delegation to a Hmong refugee camp in Thailand in preparation for a large-scale repatriation effort. A few months later, Kelly’s extensive outreach to the Hmong community was cited as one of the few bright spots in an otherwise dismal primary race as he faces an aggressive challenge from the left; Kelly has twice run without party endorsement, but the St. Paul Pioneer Press analyzed primary returns and found Kelly’s victories heavily concentrated “in areas where Hmong citizens voted heavily, particularly in the St. Paul Public Housing Authority’s three family housing developments.”\textsuperscript{39}

Third, the Hmong experience in St. Paul is interwoven with the distinctly American dilemmas of housing, property, and race; the Hmong struggle for upward mobility exacerbates these tensions at the local level. Local press coverage of the Hmong entry into the “mainstream” applauds the enthusiastic acceptance of the American dream of homeownership: Hmong Minnesotans are presented as “the area’s fastest growing group of homeowners,”\textsuperscript{40} and reporters dutifully transcribe the individual stories of hard work, sacrifice, and achievement involved in owning “a piece of America.”\textsuperscript{41} But Hmong homeownership is paradoxical and mixed – not a simple benchmark of


\textsuperscript{36} Yang, “Hmong in America,” p. 168.

\textsuperscript{37} Yang, “Hmong in America,” pp. 169-170.


\textsuperscript{40} Minneapolis Star-Tribune (2002). “The American Dream: Hmong Homeownership Rates Rising.” \textit{Star-Tribune}, April 13, 18A.

\textsuperscript{41} A front-page article in the \textit{St. Paul Pioneer-Press} in the spring of 2002 showcased a 37-year old computer programmer, Yia Thao, who recently bought a house that he wants “to stand as an example to his five children and to other Hmong
spatial assimilation or transnationalism from below. Cha Lee, executive director of the Southeast Asian Community Council in Minneapolis, observed that “Our community is buying a lot of leftover houses,” in part because an extremely tight rental market, which exacerbates the difficulty in finding apartments large enough for extended families, has “pushed poor Hmong into homeownership.” Lee goes on to note that many of these “leftover houses” “were rental before and not well-maintained, and the roof is leaking and the owner has little money to maintain them.” Many of the Hmong juggle multiple jobs trying to earn enough to meet mortgage payments, while white neighbors complain about the poor upkeep of the new homeowners.

It is this blurring of images, ideals, and stereotypes that makes for a bittersweet narrative. Hmong are now seen by many of the district council community organizers as a sign of positive change by virtue of their association with homeownership. They are welcomed as owners; one organizer described his approach to community development:

“I want to steal all the Hmong middle class and get them to live over here instead of somewhere else. ...If we do some of the things that become inviting or make it feel like the Hmong community’s part of the neighborhood, maybe we’re going to find a way to attract home ownership in the area.”

And yet the circumstances of the Hmong diaspora – and the family structures the require and enable movement into homeownership – generate caution and stereotyping by working-class whites and African Americans. One organizer summed up the tensions:

“The perception is that Hmong are so tightly knit, they’ve got such a strong community cultural structure, that they’re hoarding money and that the City is giving them extra help and that they’re going to work their way out of this neighborhood. And everyone else is going to get left behind. In the meantime, the African-American population and the White population suffer because of it and they’ll never get out of this community. They’ll always be poor and that the Hmong are stepping on their backs in order to get out, is the perception.”

people, who began arriving in Minnesota from Laos a quarter-century ago after their Southeast Asian homeland fell to communists.”  “We are the first generation growing up here,” Yia Thao told the reporter; “The opportunity is there, you just have to work for it and get it. This is the American dream, and I want to own a piece of America.” Thao’s optimism, however, might not be typical, even if it seems to present a textbook case of spatial assimilation. Thao bought a 2,900 square foot home on 10 acres for $370,000 in Forest Lake, a suburb northeast of St. Paul. But for the majority of Hmong owners who remain in the city’s Frogtown/Thomas-Dale and Greater East Side neighborhoods, census figures indicate a median owner household income of about $44,000 in 2000; this figure must be considered in light of the multiple-family structure of Hmong households. More than a quarter of Hmong owner households are in poverty. Todd Nelson (2002). “Hmong Are Moving Into Mainstream.”  St. Paul Pioneer-Press, April 10, 1A.


Associated Press, “Hmong in Minnesota.”

Cha Lee, quoted in Associated Press, “Hmong in Minnesota.”
In the worst-case scenario, ever-tighter social welfare policies and persistent poverty shape the local response of inner-city working-class whites and African Americans to Hmong upward (not ‘outward’) mobility:

“And it just kind of adds to the tension. Yeah, when I said the perception is that the Hmong are being treated better by the City or that they’ve got more businesses, it’s more of a financial stepping up. I’m not also saying it’s perceived that they’re going to leave the town, but they’re going to leave the poverty level that everyone else in this neighborhood is. They’re going to be a step above everybody else.”

A World in The City

“A city full of immigrants seeking to enter one civil society, to earn one set of civil rights, for variegated reasons, is precisely not a ‘global’ city; it brings the globe to the metropolis and redefines ‘the American.”

My second empirical narrative steps up to the city scale, to ask how immigration and transnational connections are interacting with the ongoing crisis in affordable housing in America. It is absolutely clear that immigration is gradually transnationalizing the demographic aggregates in housing: Dowell Myers and Cathy yang Liu found that immigrants comprised two-thirds of the net growth in rental housing nationwide in the 1990s, and fully 100 percent in California and New York State. What are the effects of these broad trends on the housing circumstances of new arrivals, and how do poor immigrants fare in competition with poor, native-born households? One of the best places to address this kind of question is New York City, which has historically been the leading destination for immigrants to America. On the one hand, the role of gateway, national metropolis, and gateway city makes New York an extraordinarily expensive and competitive housing market. On the other hand, the City is an American exception by virtue of its comparatively strong rent-regulation laws, and in fact these complex laws help to create a fascinating and unique laboratory. The New York State laws implementing rent regulation mandate a survey every three years to determine vacancy and housing characteristics, so that

47 Only in the last few years have the flows to New York City seen proportional declines – along with arrivals in the big cities of California, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, and Texas – due to the combined effects of expansion in alternative destinations and the tighter security rules and entry backlogs following September 11, 2001. In a study triangulating across several datasets, Passel and Clark estimated that 38.5 percent of New York City’s household heads in 1994 were foreign-born. Legal aliens accounted for 16.5 percent of the city’s household heads, while 15.3 percent were naturalized citizens; 4.3 percent were believed to be undocumented immigrants. Jeffrey S. Passel and Rebecca L. Clark (1998). Immigrants in New York: Their Legal Status, Incomes, and Taxes. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. In a national analysis released in September 2005, Passell documented a peak of about 168,000 immigrant arrivals to New York State annually in the early 1990s (the vast majority settling in the city), with a steady decline that continued after 2001 (to about 90,000 annual arrivals). Discussing the results with the New York Times, Passel cited estimates that four-fifths of New York’s immigrants are legal, compared to only half in other states; the disproportionate impact of post-September 11 restrictions and backlogs appears to have been a sharp reduction only in legal entries. Nina Bernstein (2005). “Decline is Seen in Immigration.” New York Times, September 28, A1, C19.
permissible rent increases may be calculated; over the years, this Housing and Vacancy Survey (the NYCHVS) has evolved into a unique and extremely valuable analytical tool. The survey provides detailed information on a sample of about 18,000 housing units selected from across the five boroughs, and a wide range of questions are asked of people living in occupied housing units. The sample design is longitudinal, but only with respect to housing units: every three years, we have a fresh snapshot of the same housing unit, regardless of who lives there. This makes it difficult to track individuals over time when they move, but it allows us to evaluate several questions about the nexus of housing and immigration. How does an urban housing market treat successive groups of arrivals? How do recent immigrants in a tight market fare in the competition with local households? Have these conditions changed in recent years?

My approach to these questions is to identify those households actively searching in the city’s intensely competitive rental market, and to compare immigrants with native-born residents. I drew samples of current renters from each of the four most recent surveys who moved into their homes in the prior three years: in 1993, for example, a weighted estimate of 650 thousand renters reported moving into their homes in 1991, 1992, or 1993. Corresponding figures were 915 thousand in 1996, just over a million in 1999, and 889 thousand in 2002. Unfortunately, the Census Bureau only added explicit questions on immigration in 1999; but for all years, it is possible to identify householders who were born outside the United States and who reported their immediately prior residence outside the U.S. This procedure involves considerable limitations associated with non-response; but the results are quite comparable to the non-response limitations for the later surveys that do include specific information in immigration status. Using these definitions, we can identify weighted estimates of 30 thousand recent immigrant households in 1993; nearly identical numbers in 1996 and 1999; and 24 thousand in 2002. These new arrivals comprise a very small share of renters, and this figure has declined steadily (from 4.6 percent in 1993 to only 2.7 percent in 2002).

But these new arrivals are distinctive in crucial ways. If we consider both crowding and affordability, recent immigrants are about twice as likely to experience severe housing stress compared to other rental movers. But this stress is a composite, of course, and we need to

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48 The sample is updated and supplemented with units selected from lists of certificates of occupancy, residential conversions, and the like.

49 The specific question on place of former residence is: “Where was the most recent place [reference person] lived for six months or more before moving into this apartment (house)?” My use of these criteria have the effect of excluding from the count of recent immigrants, for instance, Mexican migrants to California or Texas who stay in those states for more than six months before moving to New York. Comparing non-response rates for the immigration and combined birthplace-prior residence questions is encouraging. In 2002, 96 percent of those who refused to report their prior place of residence also did not respond to the explicit immigration question; conversely, 83 percent of those who declined the immigration question also refused the place-of-residence question. Non-response rates for the place-of-birth and recent-residence questions are also similar, providing further corroboration for the inference that these respondents are recent immigrants. But the fluctuation of rates over time is deeply troubling, although unavoidable: about 8 percent of recent renters in 1993 refused the place-of-birth and prior-residence questions, compared with 17 percent in 1993, 22 percent in 1999, and 12 percent in 2002. It is also crucial to recognize that my approach does not capture recent immigrants who double up with friends or relatives upon arrival (regardless of the tenure status of the host); these individuals only surface in our sample if an immigrant householder stays in such an arrangement for less than six months and then moves to a separate rental unit.
consider its two distinct dimensions. First, immigrants share the burden of high cost with all lower-income renters, as the City’s market becomes ever more viciously competitive. Andy Beveridge has calculated that New York ranks first among all large cities in terms of the share of low-income households paying more than half their income on rent; slightly more than half of all New York City households are classified as low-income, and 38 percent of them pay more than fifty percent of their income for housing. But the second component of housing stress involves differences in the willingness to double up or endure crowded situations. To shed light on these differences, I estimated a series of logistic regressions to measure contrasts between recent immigrant renters and all other recent mover-renters. These models included a detailed array of controls for householder age and education, family type, type of housing unit, and race/ethnicity. Even after controlling for all of these factors, households in poverty are between two and three times as likely to be recent immigrants. But immigrants are no more likely than other renters to face high rent burdens after we consider poverty and all other factors. And although rent stabilization plays a crucial role in cushioning the worst excesses of the market, it does not seem to play a consistently different role for immigrants compared to other lower-income renters. What does matter, however, is a willingness to endure crowding. Crowded housing units are at least twice as likely to be occupied by recent immigrants.

But going to such pains to separate the two components of housing-market stress – crowding and affordability – may not be reasonable. Crowded living arrangements can reflect family decisions and cultural preferences, as well as a willingness to economize and build up savings; crowded households paying more than half of their income on rent, however, have very few options. I estimated another suite of models, predicting the incidence of severe housing stress (crowded households paying more than half their income for rent) as a function of human-capital and demographic characteristics. The background variables even include an indicator for households in poverty. Even after controlling for poverty and all other factors, however, recent immigrants were 1.7 times more likely than other renters to end up in severe housing stress in 1993; this effect moderated slightly for those arriving in the next few years, but worsened in the late 1990s. In 2002, recent immigrants were almost three times as likely as other renters to end up in severe housing stress. Stress has declined somewhat among Asians, but seems to have worsened among Latinos. Rent stabilized units are crucial for those in housing stress, but these protections have been substantially weakened in recent years. All of these findings, of course, ignore the enormous variation of neighborhood context across New York City. In this regard, the findings of Emily Rosenbaum and Michael Schill are sobering, and suggest that even as immigration transnationalizes the city as a whole, it is not altering American housing segregation. Using the NYCHVS, Rosenbaum and Schill examine turnover of a matched sample of housing units between 1991 and 1996 according to the racial composition of the neighborhood, and find an enduring high degree of racial and ethnic segmentation. In particular, their evidence confirms Zubrinski and Bobo’s findings on a “racial hierarchy,” with the greatest access enjoyed by Whites,

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followed by Asians, Hispanics, and finally Blacks. They find that racial divisions continue to separate white from Black and Hispanic households regardless of immigrant status: “the market barriers that constrain minority household choices do not differentiate households born in the United States from those born elsewhere.”

The Spatial Assimilation of Transnational Capital

Despite the barriers of immigration policy, dysfunctional low-wage labor markets, and overheated city housing markets, many new immigrants very quickly achieve the ultimate signal of American assimilation, homeownership. And so my third empirical narrative considers the effect of immigration on what is becoming a more pronounced axis of inequality in America’s housing market.

According to one recent estimate, immigration was responsible for half of the net growth in owner-occupied housing in California and New York State, and the demographer Dowell Myers has long been encouraged by census data showing a steep upward trajectories into ownership as immigrants stay longer in the U.S. Quantitative data cannot tell us whether it is a benchmark of traditional assimilation, or a more complex, temporary intersection of transnational-urban relations. Indeed, Doug Massey’s long-running Mexican Migration Project reminds us that measurements of homeownership rates in the United States ignore the opposite—ownership in the source country made possible by rental sacrifices in the United States. In a remarkable analysis, Massey and his colleagues find that the relationship between young household formation and migration to the United States differs systematically for urban and rural areas in Mexico: “Whereas newly formed urban couples simply enter the local market for rental housing to establish and independent residence, in rural communities rental markets do not exist, and recently married husbands become migrants to self-finance the construction of a home and free themselves from parental households.”

Nevertheless, it is clear that immigration will be decisive in homeownership in the coming years, just as it is now a “dominant force” in the rental market. A few years ago, I worked with David Listokin on a study of the effects of mortgage instruments devised in recent years, and one of our simulations based on data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation revealed a target population of more than 700 thousand potential homebuyers among recent immigrants; relaxed underwriting criteria were expanding the purchasing potential of this market by at least 30 percent, to approximately $15 billion. As Demetreios Papademetreiou and Brian Ray have shown, there

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53 Myers and Liu, “The Emerging Dominance.”


55 Myers and Liu, “The Emerging Dominance.”

is a persistent spatial mismatch between the large gateways of immigrant arrival and the affordability of homeownership: in a logistic analysis of cross-sectional data, they find location outside of a traditional gateway to be among the strongest predictors of immigrant ownership.\footnote{Demetrios Papademetriou and Brian Ray (2004). \textit{From Homeland to a Home: Immigrants and Homeownership in Urban America}. Washington, DC: Fannie Mae Foundation. Unfortunately, their analysis remains vulnerable to the effects of self-selection bias: those immigrants most likely to be able to move into homeownership may have chosen destinations outside the traditional gateway cities; without corrections for this possibility, we cannot know what the locational variables are measuring.} They also find that the primary barrier to ownership for recent immigrants is precisely the same as that facing all moderate- and lower-income households: a scarcity of affordable units.

This is where the American exceptionalism of culture, history, and policy have mutually-reinforcing effects. A century-long commitment to the American Dream has quite literally capitalized housing, turning the use-values of home and community into the exchange-values of mortgage debt ratios, tax deductions, and ever-rising resale values. Consider a particularly optimistic interpretation of homeownership trends and immigration, recently offered by Greulich, Quigley, and Raphael:

> “our results concerning the evolution of immigrant housing patterns with time in the U.S. indicate a fair degree of mobility upward through the housing quality hierarchy. Our findings also indicate a greater degree of assimilation relative to natives along these housing dimensions than is commonly reported in the labor market assimilation research. These findings suggest that immigrant wealth accumulation with time in the U.S., while not converging fully with the native path, increases at a fairly rapid rate. ...the accumulation of wealth among first generation immigrants is likely to foster the intergenerational mobility of second and higher generations.”\footnote{Erica Greulich, John M. Quigley, and Steven Raphael (2003). \textit{The Anatomy of Rent Burdens: Immigration, Growth, and Rental Housing}. Working Paper W03-004. Berkeley: University of California, Program on Housing and Urban Policy. Quote from p. 34.}

It is hard to challenge the symbolic, material, and practical benefits of the American Dream, especially for working-class immigrants. Yet a synthesis of assimilation and transnational urbanist methods should remind us that new Americans are assimilating towards a moving target of inequality. This creates two severe transnational tensions. First, the integration of neighborhood housing markets with transnational capital markets has lubricated enormous speculation, and has turned the home into a powerful circuit. The national homeownership rate in the last few years has been at its highest recorded levels, and so has housing market appreciation. In contrast to the pattern of prior recessions, housing markets boomed between 2001 and 2003 as the Federal Reserve chopped interest rates and as many middle- and upper-class homeowners burned by the collapse in speculative equity markets turned to housing as a new investment opportunity. The total national residential mortgage balance now compounds at half a trillion dollars each year, and the total owed is now equivalent to more than two-thirds of the entire American economy. Even the perpetually understated Alan Greenspan has become concerned about irrational exuberance in the housing market, although he tries to soften the tone by using the word ‘froth.’ From the end
of 1999 through the first quarter of 2001 total household wealth in equities and mutual funds dipped from $12.3 trillion to $8.7 trillion, while housing equity jumped from $5.4 trillion to $6.2 trillion. Financial analysts who had spent the late nineties warning of a stock market bubble turned their attention to housing, and within a few years the quick-sell, same-day resale of homes was being called “an early-21st-century version of day trading. Buying stocks on margin has morphed into buying homes with no money down.”

What goes unstated is that even the most red-meat, red-state Republican white nativist homeowners in America’s suburbs are now thoroughly transnationalized: their healthy house-price appreciation, and the near record-low borrowing costs they enjoy, will last as long as the Chinese Central Bank is willing to buy U.S. Treasuries to finance the mammoth Federal deficit, and as long as OPEC postpones its inevitable move to price oil in Euros. Trying to predict the time when the automatic teller machine of the American mortgaged house is beside the point. The crucial point is that housing has been capitalized to a level scarcely imaginable to housing experts twenty years ago:

“In the twighlight of materialism, the meaning of housing will be simplified and clarified, with a renewed interest on shelter and neighborhood. The false hope that everyone can get rich from real estate investment will be laid to rest for another fifty years, or perhaps for all time.”

This is now becoming a fully transnational urban story, with the Bank of America and Citigroup both competing aggressively for fee income from the estimated $10 billion of remittances sent every year by Mexican and Mexican-American customers in the U.S. to their home communities. But homeownership is a positional and exclusional good: its value is sustained by the fact that not everyone can have it. And so even in the most optimistic versions of spatial assimilation, immigrants moving quickly into homeownership will either find the meaning of ownership diluted by such things as predatory mortgage lending, or the impossibility of reaping wealth accumulation after buying at today’s grossly inflated prices – or the lives of renters will have to be made even more difficult in order to finance the increased wealth of the homeowning class. And so this brings us to a final image. Home Depot, the icon of a mortgage-interest tax deduction that allows homeowners to deduct all interest costs on mortgages up to $1 million, and one of the leading destinations for home “owners” who yanked out a total of $59 billion in cash-out refinancings in the second quarter of 2005. But now Abel Valenzuela, Jr., a professor of Urban Studies at UCLA, suggests that a significant number of the 1,700 Home Depots have become

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62 A staff writer for the Los Angeles Times dryly observed that “People are cashing out so quickly that the term ‘homeowner’ may soon be inaccurate. Fifty years ago, Americans owned, on average, three-quarters of their house and the lender owned the rest. These days, it’s approaching an even split.” David Streitfeld (2005). “Equity is Altering Spending Habits and Views of Debt.” Los Angeles Times, August 28, p. 1.
hiring sites for the nation’s estimated 100,000 day laborers.\footnote{Quoted in Steven Greenhouse (2005). “Day Laborer Battle Runs Outside Home Depot.” \textit{New York Times}, October 10, p. A1.} This is perhaps the most vivid, and yet painful, image of what a transnational housing market looks like in an age of roll-out neoliberalism and pervasive market discipline. In California, a group calling itself Save Our State is holding protests against Home Depot, arguing that the company is helping illegal immigration. In Illinois, more than three dozen day laborers have been arrested in recent months and accused of criminal trespass as they looked for customers who might hire them in the parking lot of a Home Depot in Cicero.\footnote{Greenhouse, “Day Laborer Battle.”} And so even the most optimistic take on transnational urbanism and spatial assimilation presents us with a bittersweet question: what does it mean for housing inequality when a few more recent immigrants become homeowners, work their way up the ladder, and then join the stream of white, native-born customers driving up in their SUVs and deciding which undocumented day-laborer to hire for the day’s backbreaking work on the McMansion?