

Assimilation in New Destinations

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Abstract: This article outlines a long-term research agenda on immigrant assimilation by calling on scholars to be more explicit about how we model and measure assimilation, and to move away from previously aspatial approaches to the topic. After briefly overviewing the field, I draw on original qualitative data from a new immigrant destination region to highlight several places where I believe we scholars can better clarify definitions of and assumptions about assimilation, as well as choices about and interpretations of our data, to foster transparency and facilitate scholarly discovery. I conclude by arguing that scholars working in new immigrant destinations are well poised to examine how legal status – a key structural feature of the context of reception in a host society or locale – shapes assimilation processes and outcomes.

The geographic dispersal of immigrants away from traditional immigrant settlement areas toward an array of new and nontraditional settlement areas has been one of the most surprising trends in recent American immigration patterns.¹ By definition, new destinations are places with little previous experience receiving immigrants. Some, especially in the West and Midwest, are more accurately classified as reemerging destinations, since they harbored large shares of immigrants in the early twentieth century, but saw those shares dwindle by the 1970s, before the forces of geographic dispersal again began to pick up. Other destinations, especially in the South, had little experience receiving European, Asian, or Mexican immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century, and so can be considered true emerging areas of immigrant settlement.²

This article is a discussion of both immigrant assimilation in these new destinations and the study of immigrant assimilation itself. For the twin purposes of encouraging transparency and developing a stronger spatial lens within the field, I highlight several areas where I believe we scholars can better clarify definitions of and assumptions about assimilation, as well as choices about and interpre-

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tations of our data. Of course, any discussion of immigrant assimilation in new destinations is to some degree speculative, because assimilation, whether considered a process or an outcome, occurs over too long a period of time to be assessed accurately today. Though some researchers have focused on the very young second-generation children of foreign-born immigrants,³ immigrants have not resided in new destinations long enough to allow for a definitive analysis of intergenerational assimilation. Such an analysis will not be possible until the contemporary second generation comes of age and produces a third and fourth generation.

This discussion is also tentative because, as sociologists Victor Zúñiga and Rubén Hernández-León note, new destinations exhibit remarkable diversity.⁴ They range from rural agricultural markets and small company towns to diverse inner-ring suburbs and rapidly developing exurbs, in all regions of the country. Thus, any single attempt to analyze the state of assimilation in new destinations runs an inevitable risk of overgeneralization and oversimplification. Clearly, new destinations have increased the variety of economic, social, cultural, political, and institutional contexts of reception greeting immigrant newcomers in the United States today. This is important to recognize because, when combined with immigrants' own skills and characteristics, contexts of reception shape different mobility paths for different groups over time.⁵ Nonetheless, this article outlines a long-term research agenda on immigrant assimilation in new immigrant destinations in two ways: first, by calling on scholars to be more explicit about how we model assimilation in our studies; and second, by calling on scholars to move away from our heretofore aspatial approaches to the topic.

In their recent resurrection of assimilation theory, sociologists Richard Alba and Victor Nee define *assimilation* as “the decline of an ethnic distinction and its corollary cultural and social differences.”⁶ According to them, assimilation is the state of having achieved “parity in life chances,” regardless of ethnic background, and they consider immigrants to have entered the American mainstream once their ethnic background ceases to determine their opportunities and life chances. However, Alba and Nee clarify that immigrants can still maintain an ethnic identity even once part of the mainstream, and that factors other than ethnicity (particularly social class) can influence life chances. Viewed this way, assimilation is not only an *outcome* reflecting some convergence to a mean—complete when there is no longer any discernible gap attributable to ethnicity between immigrants and their descendants and a mainstream reference group. It is also a *process* reflecting movement toward convergence to that mean—which may occur over time or over generations, even while immigrants and their descendants have not yet reached parity with, or become indistinguishable from, the members of the mainstream reference group.

Viewing assimilation as both an outcome of and a process moving toward convergence to a mean affects the reference groups that we choose to include in our studies of assimilation. For instance, when assessing assimilation as an outcome of some convergence to a mean, scholars typically analyze differences between immigrants and their descendants and a mainstream reference group, typically one that is composed of: (a) native-born whites of native parentage; (b) native-born Americans of the same race or Hispanic origin (usually African Americans, but sometimes mainland-born Puerto Ricans or later-generation Mexi-

can Americans); or (c) all native-born Americans.⁷

When assessing assimilation as a process moving toward a convergence, however, scholars typically analyze differences between immigrants located at differing points on a continuum of spatial and temporal distances from the immigrant starting point. They might analyze differences between first-generation immigrants and comparable non-migrants left behind (an approach borrowed from research on migrant selectivity); between second-generation children of immigrants born in the United States and their first-generation immigrant parents (remembering that the latter are typically a highly selected group); between third-generation grandchildren of immigrants and both their second-generation parents and first-generation immigrant grandparents; and even, in perhaps the most novel approach, between second-generation children of immigrants born in the United States and comparable children born to non-migrants in the first-generation immigrants' countries of origin.⁸ Some scholars have begun to break down these generational categories further, comparing them by birth cohort in order to account for variations in the historical circumstances under which people of similar generational groups enter the country and grow up.⁹

In this way, if we scholars are clearer about the various approaches that we take to study immigrant assimilation, and if we appreciate that these approaches influence our choices of reference groups, then we can better understand divergent outcomes and conclusions already apparent in the literature. For example, if we compare second-generation children of Dominican immigrants with native-born whites, we might conclude that the second-generation children have experienced less assimilation than if our reference

group is instead their first-generation immigrant parents. This is because the former comparison yields a continuing ethnic distinction in many standard outcome variables vis-à-vis native-born whites, while the latter comparison highlights a process of significant upward mobility from the starting point of their immigrant parents.¹⁰

Likewise, if we compare third-generation children of Mexican immigrants with native-born whites, we might conclude that they have experienced less assimilation than if we compared them with their second-generation parents. And we would certainly conclude that they have experienced less assimilation than if we compared them with children born in Mexico.¹¹ We might also conclude that second-generation children of Mexican immigrants in San Antonio and Los Angeles have experienced less assimilation if we analyze them according to their generation group alone, rather than distinguishing by historical birth cohort as well.¹² The former strategy lumps together different cohorts of second-generation Mexican Americans into a single second-generation category – combining, for instance, the children of Mexican immigrants who crossed the border in 1920 with the children of Mexican immigrants who crossed the border in 2000. Such a strategy glosses over important differences in the historical circumstances that have shaped each cohort's trajectory, including the rise in average level of education of incoming first-generation Mexican immigrants, a dramatic shift away from Jim Crow-style racism in the Southwest, and deepening forces of globalization and deindustrialization over the second half of the twentieth century.¹³

Regardless of approach and choice of reference groups, a standard set of objective measures is typically employed by all social scientists who study assimilation,

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especially by those who undertake quantitative studies. These measures include: (a) *socioeconomic status*, defined as educational attainment, occupational specialization, and earnings; (b) *spatial concentration*, defined in terms of suburbanization and dissimilarity in spatial distribution; (c) *language assimilation*, defined in terms of English language ability and loss of mother tongue; and (d) *intermarriage*, defined by race or Hispanic origin, and only occasionally by ethnicity and generation.¹⁴ Some of the literature also tracks the “softer” side of assimilation by measuring expressions of ethnic and racial identification or cultural attitudes and practices, though I do not focus on these measures here.

However, a few innovative scholars have recently developed a new way of looking at immigrant assimilation. Building on novel scholarship conducted among second-generation immigrant youth in southern Florida,¹⁵ sociologist Min Zhou and her colleagues have noted that very little research has focused on how immigrants and their descendants themselves define, experience, and perceive their mobility and success. Zhou has raised the important question of whether later-generation outcomes are characterized differently by the subjects of study than by the scholars doing the analysis.¹⁶ Indeed, most research on assimilation remains heavily scholar-centered. To address this lacuna, Zhou and her colleagues take what they call a “subject centered” stance in their analysis of second-generation assimilation and mobility in metropolitan Los Angeles – one that privileges the second generation’s own lived experiences and perceptions, definitions, and measures of mobility and success over the standard scholarly measures and analysis. To be sure, there are observable correlations between the subjective evaluations of these second-generation Los Ange-

lenos and our standard – and perhaps more objective – measures of assimilation. However, there are enough interesting departures to suggest that point of view is as important to our analyses of assimilation as are approach and choice of reference group.

To illustrate, we scholars may view second-generation immigrant youths who pursue self-employment in the arts, entertainment, and even crime as evidence of some lack of assimilation with native-born whites. This judgment assumes that assimilation is an outcome-state dependent on immigrants’ convergence to standard, upper-middle-class measures of occupational specialization (for example, salaried white-collar employment), rather than the pursuit of occupations that these immigrants believe can afford them greater dignity, respect, independence, and self-sufficiency.¹⁷ Similarly, we may view second-generation Mexican immigrant youths who “only” graduate from high school or community college as evidence of some lack of assimilation with native-born whites. But this is because we consider assimilation to be an outcome-state dependent on immigrants’ convergence to a standard, upper-middle-class measure of educational achievement (such as four-year college completion), as opposed to completion of educational programs that immigrants believe constitute a worthy achievement and measurable progress relative to that achieved by their parents.¹⁸

Conversely, we may view second-generation West Indian and Filipino immigrant youths who achieve similar rates of educational attainment as native-born whites as confirmatory evidence of assimilation, even though these youths may have achieved *less* education than their immigrant parents.¹⁹ And we may also view second-generation Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, and Russian Jewish

immigrant youths who achieve similar rates of educational and occupational attainment as native-born whites as confirmatory evidence of assimilation, even though these youths often feel “unsuccessful” and as though they are not “living up” to the high expectations of their parents, siblings, and coethnic friends.²⁰

Any serious evaluation of immigrant assimilation must tackle all these conceptual and operational concerns simultaneously. First, what is the general approach to, and definition of, assimilation – is it viewed as an outcome of some convergence to a mean, or as a process toward some convergence to a mean? Second, what is the reference group being used to measure assimilation – some mainstream reference group (and if so, defined as what), or some other group situated at a different spot along the immigrant continuum (and if so, where)? Third and fourth, what are the measures of assimilation, and from whose viewpoints do they derive – from scholars’ purportedly objective views, or from subjects’ own perspectives?

Taken together, these concerns also underscore an important distinction scholars often fail to make between the concept of assimilation – which implies merely similarity, or convergence, with cultural or social behaviors and outcomes – and the concept of intergenerational mobility – which implies upward or downward socioeconomic movement.²¹ As sociologist Herbert Gans has noted, immigrants and their descendants can achieve upward mobility without becoming culturally or socially akin to mainstream native-born society.²² Likewise, immigrants and their children can become culturally or socially more akin to mainstream natives by being either upwardly or downwardly mobile. Indeed, many questions remain regarding the conditions

under which assimilation may cause or lead to socioeconomic mobility, or vice versa.²³ Thus, it is important not only to clearly identify our approaches, reference groups, viewpoints, and measures, but also to define our collective dependent variable of assimilation squarely in terms of (dis)similarity – not necessarily in terms of mobility, though the two concepts certainly intertwine.

Though solid evaluations of assimilation paths and processes will require time and longitudinal and intergenerational data, it can still be a useful analytical exercise to consider how new immigrant destinations might alter our understandings of the characteristics of both immigrants and their potential reference groups. It can also be useful to consider how replacing our scholar-centered points of view with new subject-centered perspectives might alter the interpretations we draw from our research. To engage creatively in both exercises, I draw on data that I collected between June 2003 and June 2004 in “Bedford” and “Wilcox” Counties, pseudonyms I have given to two new rural destination counties in eastern North Carolina. While not representative of all new destinations, rural Southern destinations are important because they are the farthest away, both geographically and symbolically, from the traditional immigrant gateways where most studies of immigrant assimilation have been based.

My data include systematic field notes I took while engaged in various forms of ethnographic fieldwork in these two counties, as well as transcripts derived from 129 individual semi-structured interviews that I conducted with foreign-born Latin American immigrants of varying nationalities, U.S.-born Hispanics, and key white and black native-born informants, in both Spanish and English.²⁴

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Most of the foreign-born respondents in the sample hailed from Mexico (55.7 percent); had migrated directly to North Carolina from abroad, rather than from another part of the United States; and lacked legal status (47.1 percent). This profile is consistent with the literature, which demonstrates that Mexicans predominate in North Carolina's foreign-born and Hispanic/Latino populations (at approximately two-fifths and two-thirds, respectively); that the internal migration of Hispanics from other parts of the country to North Carolina has gradually given way to direct international labor migration; and that as a new destination state, North Carolina has a high proportion of unauthorized immigrants.²⁵

The literature suggests that immigrants in rural new destinations like Bedford and Wilcox Counties are disadvantaged not only in terms of their own characteristics, but also by the social and political reception they receive from natives. These immigrants tend to be more heavily Mexican and rural in origin than their counterparts in urban destinations—even “new” gateways like Atlanta, Nashville, and Raleigh, where the national origins and socioeconomic statuses of incoming immigrants are more heterogeneous.²⁶ Consequently, these immigrants often have experience working in agriculture, yet are disadvantaged in terms of their formal levels of education, English-speaking ability, and experience participating in politics.²⁷ They also tend to be heavily concentrated in low-paying jobs in agriculture, food processing, and manufacturing and textiles—three rural industries that have increased their dependence on foreign-born labor since the 1980s, and that have seen their real wages, benefits, and internal mobility ladders erode since the mid-twentieth century.²⁸ Combined with their recency of arrival and high proportions of unauthorized

members, these factors correlate with low income levels and high poverty rates.

Finally, quantitative data show that rural American natives are generally less accepting of immigrants than are their urban and suburban counterparts²⁹—perhaps an unsurprising finding given the lingering associations between rurality and cultural isolation, parochialism, traditionalism, moral and political conservatism, and intolerance for diversity and ambiguity.³⁰ Regardless of whether we are assessing these immigrants' prospects for assimilation (to become similar to natives in their social and cultural behaviors and outcomes) or socioeconomic mobility, such data give us pause. Many of these immigrants start off in a position of severe socioeconomic disadvantage, with legal and political disadvantages layered on top, especially for those who lack legal status.

Immigrants in rural new destinations also, by definition, reside in rural communities where they lack the critical mass, at least initially, to develop their own economies, services, networks, and organizations. Plus, there are fewer community-based services and organizations in rural communities through which immigrants can claim government resources or access assistance and advocacy, compared to what is available in established and new metropolitan destinations.³¹ There is then a third layer of social and cultural difference between rural and urban new destinations: rural areas not only have fewer immigrant members than urban areas—in 2002, only 5.7 percent of immigrants lived in rural areas³²—but rural native inhabitants also, especially in the South, have weaker and more distant connections to their own immigrant histories.³³ Few Southerners, especially in rural areas, may recognize any substantive personal connection to the immigrant narrative at all.³⁴

Given these many disadvantages, what are the prospects for assimilation in rural new destinations? If we take an outcome-based approach that defines immigrants as assimilated once their opportunities are no longer differentially determined by their ethnicity relative to native-born whites (our most likely reference group), then our answer may well be bleak. It may be no less bleak if we adopt a scholar-centered point of view that privileges our own evaluations of these immigrants' experiences, and that relies on the standard objective measures defined in the literature. Concretely, we may see little reason for optimism about the life chances of Nadia, an unauthorized Mexican immigrant and divorced mother of one who toils, day in and day out, making repetitive-motion cuts on chickens in the cut-up department of a giant rural food processing plant in Wilcox County, for only \$8 an hour.

In 2003, Nadia netted \$16,640 in annual income, placing her only 30 percent above the then-official poverty line of \$12,490 for a family of two.³⁵ Nadia's ex-husband had moved back to Mexico, and she was supporting herself and her eight-year-old daughter on her own. As cultural anthropologist Donald Stull and social geographer Michael Broadway have observed, even though the typical range of hourly wages and gross annual salaries earned by American meat and poultry workers in the late 1990s – \$6.80 to \$11.20 per hour, and \$14,144 to \$23,296 annually – are among the highest wages in rural areas where food processing plants are typically located, they have also fallen substantially since the 1960s and remain below the level required for a family of four to participate in one or more federal assistance programs.³⁶ In this way, these industries fail to provide workers – many of whom are now foreign born – a living wage sufficient to feed, clothe, and shelter their families.

In this harsh economic context, and given her lack of a high school diploma, poor English-language skills, unauthorized legal status, and visibly “Hispanic” phenotype, we might see few prospects for personal or intergenerational economic assimilation for Nadia, her daughter, and their future descendants. However, changing our approach, choice of reference group, point of view, or measures might alter our interpretations – sometimes for the better and other times for the worse. Even if we kept our approach to immigrant assimilation outcome-oriented, altering our reference group would affect our interpretation of how closely Nadia and her daughter resemble the white American mainstream. That is, do we wish to compare Nadia's level of education and income against those of all white native-born Americans (using a national average or mean), against those of only rural native-born whites, or against only those of the rural native-born whites who live in Nadia's particular county or neighborhood?

This question is important because, on average, rural Americans have a lower mean educational level, work in agriculture at a higher rate, work in high-skilled professional and technical jobs at a lower rate, earn lower wages, and live in poverty at a higher rate than do urban Americans. Consequently, comparing Nadia with only rural native-born whites produces a smaller observable ethnic gap in our standard measures of socioeconomic status, and thus a more optimistic interpretation of her prospects for assimilation, than does comparing her with all native-born whites. Further, comparing her with only rural native-born whites living in Wilcox County produces an even more optimistic interpretation, since according to U.S. census data, this population fares very poorly by standard measures of socioeconomic status compared to rural

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natives nationwide. Indeed, even research on assimilation in traditional destinations now emphasizes subnational – opposed to national – reference groups, including groups that can better account for patterns of selective geographic mobility into and out of selected subnational units.³⁷

Of course, narrowing our reference group to one that is both rural and local may have little substantive impact on Nadia's material well-being. Arguing that her level of education and socioeconomic status more closely resemble those of native-born whites living in rural Wilcox County than those of native-born whites who live in the city or suburbs of San Francisco (a traditional immigrant gateway) or nearby Charlotte (an emerging immigrant gateway) does not improve Nadia's life in material terms, nor does it ensure that her descendants will be better off. Nevertheless, it does reduce the educational and occupational distance that a low-skilled immigrant like Nadia and her descendants have to travel in order to gain entrée, and eventually assimilate, into what is considered the local economic norm or mainstream. Indeed, Nadia's tenth-grade education and \$16,640 annual income look much more economically normal in the context of rural Wilcox County than they would in that of a well-heeled Atlanta suburb or the middle of Manhattan; in 2000, only 10.5 percent of Wilcox County's population held a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 39.4 percent of all residents in the San Francisco-Oakland-Vallejo metropolitan area, and 32 percent in the Atlanta metropolitan area.³⁸

Altering our reference group to native-born blacks, native-born Americans of the same race or Hispanic origin as the incoming immigrants, or all native-born Americans (including racial minorities alongside whites) has additional implica-

tions for our analysis. Using each of these reference groups would allow us to compare how immigrants in rural new destinations are faring socioeconomically not just vis-à-vis whites, but also vis-à-vis the nation's historically disadvantaged and discriminated racial minority groups. To illustrate, we might view Nadia's tenth-grade education and \$16,640 annual income with less concern if our benchmarks were the comparable figures among native-born blacks living in Wilcox County.

We might also be more optimistic about Nadia's daughter's prospects for future economic assimilation if we observe a larger ethnic gap between the average educational levels of immigrant and black students, than between immigrant and white students. Indeed, in several elementary schools in Bedford and Wilcox Counties, respondents expressed concerns not about a persistent educational achievement gap between Hispanic-newcomer and white students, but about an emerging gap between Hispanic-newcomer and black students. According to them, some Hispanic students are making such rapid academic progress that local teachers and administrators have begun to wonder why African American students – their historical minority group – are not keeping pace with either native whites or high-achieving first- and second-generation Hispanic students.³⁹

Again, altering our reference group to one that includes racial minority groups may have little substantive impact on Nadia's material well-being, and if these reference groups are themselves socioeconomically disadvantaged, we might very well end up concerned about both groups' prospects for upward economic mobility. However, in terms of economic assimilation – a concept that denotes one group's similarity to another without also implying any improvement in its

material well-being – it is still important to know whether Nadia’s economic position looks more similar to that of native-born whites than that of native-born blacks. If it does, and if her daughter’s does as well, then our evaluations of their prospects for economic assimilation will look brighter than if we rely on comparisons to native-born whites alone.

Going further, we could also switch to a process-oriented approach to assimilation, opening up a host of other possibilities. To measure Nadia’s prospects for economic assimilation, we could compare her educational level, occupational status, and annual income not only against those of native-born reference groups, but also against those of her parents in Mexico, in order to derive an intergenerational measure of the socioeconomic mobility that she has experienced by virtue of migration. Similarly, we could compare her socioeconomic and educational characteristics against those of her siblings in Mexico, or against those of all non-migrant Mexicans in her birth cohort, to derive a familial or more general measure of her dissimilation from the positions of similarly situated people in Mexico.⁴⁰ Within the United States, we could compare these measures against those of: (a) first-generation Mexican immigrants who have settled in traditional immigrant gateways or other metropolitan areas; (b) first-generation Mexican immigrants who originally settled in traditional immigrant gateways but then moved on, in a secondary process of internal migration, to rural new destinations; or even (c) first-generation Mexican immigrants who have immigrated to Wilcox County either before or after Nadia. Each comparison would provide a different perspective on Nadia’s socioeconomic position in Wilcox County.

For example, if we compare Nadia to native-born whites – even those in rural new destinations or in Wilcox County

alone – she might appear less socioeconomically well-off than if we compared her to her parents in Mexico, or even to her siblings or all Mexicans her age in Mexico. She would likely also appear less well-off than if we compared her to first-generation Mexican immigrants who have settled in East Los Angeles. In fact, the latter two comparisons – both of which involve other immigrants situated at different spatial and temporal points on the immigrant continuum – might provide evidence that Nadia and her daughter are dissimilating away from not only the positions of their family members and other Mexicans in Mexico, but also the positions of Mexican-origin populations who have settled in the poverty-stricken, inner-city ghettos of traditional immigrant gateways. In this process-oriented approach, such findings are promising, even though from an outcome-oriented approach, scholars would still focus concern on the observable ethnic differentials in life chances between Nadia and native-born whites.

Finally, we could make a dramatic change in our point of view, adopting a subject-centered perspective in place of a scholar-centered one. Notably, we could make this change with regard to any of the above comparisons, and in terms of sociocultural as well as economic assimilation, even though I have focused primarily on the latter so far. By doing this, we are not only likely to reach new conclusions using similar data, but also to stumble upon novel measures of assimilation and success as defined by our subjects themselves. Again, consider Nadia’s situation. In economic terms, she might not look very similar to native-born whites, even those living in rural Wilcox County, and scholars might be correct to worry about her future prospects for upward economic mobility, given her lack of human capital and the increasingly unforgiving structure of the low-skilled

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American labor market. Yet she and many other low-skilled immigrants in my field research viewed their economic positions quite differently. They saw themselves not simply in situations of economic disadvantage relative to native-born whites, but also in situations of economic *advantage* compared to their family members and friends back in Latin America, and even to their fellow coethnics living in traditional immigrant gateways.

Such interpretations reflect not only different reference groups, but different measures and interpretations of their economic well-being. Early on I found that several of my subjects evoked different measures of socioeconomic achievement than those on which we scholars typically rely. Because jobs in their home countries, the American agriculture industry, and the low-skilled American service sector can be more precarious by comparison, many immigrants viewed having a year-round and full-time poultry processing job as evidence of economic success, not disadvantage. Many also viewed living in a trailer, even in an increasingly concentrated Hispanic mobile home park, as evidence of economic and social achievement, not segregation from the typical Americans' residential condition. Indeed, many immigrants viewed manufactured homes as economic assets, not liabilities, in part because many local native-born whites and blacks in eastern North Carolina live in them, too.⁴¹ And many immigrants who hailed from rural areas in Latin America viewed acquiring a plot of land, not necessarily income or homeownership, as the ultimate marker of economic success – because a plot of land offers them emotional comfort and serves as a symbol of their economic independence and self-sufficiency.⁴²

It might be easy for scholar-centered analyses of assimilation in new destinations to integrate new measures into

their studies, alongside standard measures like education and income levels. But a subject-centered approach provides a fuller appreciation of what such measures *mean* to immigrants and their descendants, and perhaps to natives as well. This is important when an immigrant like Nadia imbues one of these measures (such as residence in a rural trailer park) with a different meaning than scholars typically would. It is also important when a group of natives, such as rural Southerners in Bedford County, see economic and educational activities like working in agriculture, getting a GED, or attending a local community college as symbols of moral competence, dedication, and success, not as failure to have “done better” or “gone farther,” as middle-class suburbanites may be more apt to do. Consequently, using a subject-centered approach, we may see new measures of what immigrants, not to mention natives, define as successful or unsuccessful in their own terms. In the above example (owning a plot of land), we might even stumble upon a key element of what it means to settle in a rural new destination versus a traditional metropolitan gateway.

In terms of linguistic, residential, and social assimilation, Nadia also might not look very similar to native-born whites, even those living in rural Wilcox County; and again, scholars might be correct to worry about her future prospects for social integration, given rural white Southerners' historical reputation for enforcing both formal and informal racial boundaries. But here, too, Nadia and many other low-skilled immigrants in my field research viewed their social positions differently. For example, several immigrants viewed their prospects for learning English to be better in sparsely populated rural new destinations than in traditional immigrant gateways: without large coethnic communities, they felt rural life com-

pelled them to learn English more quickly. As Armando, a naturalized citizen from Monterrey, Mexico, illustrates below, a few immigrants even reported being identified as “southern Hispanics” when they traveled to more Hispanic-heavy regions of the United States. This is a sure sign of successful local and regional – even if not national – linguistic and cultural assimilation:

Armando: I know [Southerners] call the ones from New York “Yankees.” I know that they speak differently. I’ve been to New York, and when I talk to people there they can automatically know where I’m from. But I can’t tell a difference. They’re like, “You’re from the South.” I’m like, “Yeah?” And I think that the, the ones from the North, they seem to think that they’re better than the ones from the South, maybe. I don’t know.

Interviewer: Did you get that feeling when you went up there?

Armando: Um . . . no. I get it from several people here that are from up there, and that have lived down here.

Interviewer: Why do you think they feel this way?

Armando: Gosh! I don’t know. I guess the slang that we use here is, like, not proper to them. *[long pause]* They criticize a lot the way that we talk here and the slang. *[laughs]*

In this way, adopting a subject-centered approach offers novel insights about linguistic assimilation that we cannot glean from the standard measures (usually close-ended survey questions measuring self-reported rates of English-language ability). It not only highlights the roles that accent and dialect might play in signaling simultaneous cultural assimilation toward one mainstream reference group (rural Southerners) and cultural dissimilation away from another

(“Yankees”). It also highlights an unexpected yardstick that mainstream rural Southerners may be using to evaluate different groups of immigrants in their midst. In fact, Isabel, an immigrant from Buenos Aires, Argentina, reports that she was surprised to learn that rural natives of eastern North Carolina consider Hispanics/Latinos to be more culturally similar to them than the “Yankees” who migrate internally from the American Northeast.

Thus, despite the fact that standard measures of socioeconomic status and race often lead us to judge “Yankees” as much better economically and racially assimilated to the mainstream in eastern North Carolina than Hispanic newcomers, a subject-centered approach might suggest the opposite:

Isabel: And something else that surprised me is that people from the South are still resentful to the people from the North, and they are calling them “Yankees.”

Interviewer: What do you think about that?

Isabel: That I couldn’t believe! *[laughs]* One day I was with a good friend from North Carolina, and she said, “This Yankee’s from New Jersey.” And I said, “But they are your same culture.” And she said, “No way.” She said, “You [being from Argentina] have more in common with me than a person from New Jersey.” And that’s when I really realized. And I thought, “How can you say that?” And she said, “Yeah, [Yankees] are nasty. They are rude. They yell.” *[laughs]*

Even in terms of racial assimilation, Nadia’s visibly Hispanic phenotype and physical appearance might look distinctive vis-à-vis whiteness in the context of rural new destinations; and once again, scholars might be correct to worry about her ability to successfully avoid and overcome racial discrimination from the white

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natives. However, even in this context, Nadia and many other low-skilled immigrants in my field research viewed their racial identities and experiences differently. All but one of my subjects self-identified racially using some nonblack identifier – usually “Hispanic,” “Latino,” “white,” or by national origin – and all but two also reported being identified by rural Southern natives as something non-black. Even more important, many of these respondents perceived that blacks discriminate against them more than whites do.

Going by standard measures of socioeconomic status, this latter finding makes little sense; there is a much larger gap separating the material positions of Hispanic immigrants from whites than from blacks in the South, and rural black Southerners are so economically disadvantaged that they lack the material resources to truly discriminate against other groups. Thus, only by taking a subject-centered point of view did I learn that my immigrant respondents conceived of the discrimination and exclusion they felt not just in racial terms – wherein white natives can mark them as racial inferiors – but also by language ability, citizenship, and legal status – wherein both white and black natives can mark and ostracize them as undeserving civic and cultural outsiders.⁴³

Here again, despite the fact that standard measures of socioeconomic status and race might lead us to view Hispanic immigrants as economically and racially more similar to native-born blacks than to native-born whites in rural Southern new destinations, a subject-centered approach might suggest the opposite. Indeed, coupling such an approach with novel measures of residential and interpersonal assimilation – ones showing, for example, that Hispanics more frequently live among, date, get married to, and even get

buried alongside whites than blacks in Southern new immigrant destinations⁴⁴ – can produce a more optimistic evaluation of immigrant prospects for racial convergence with the local white mainstream than studies based on traditional viewpoints and measures.

Rather than serving as a “state of the field” or as an expert endorsement of any one approach, reference group, viewpoint, or outcome measure, this discussion is intended primarily as a thought exercise – a way to illustrate how changing any one of the above elements has the potential to alter our interpretations and conclusions about assimilation in new destinations. In this sense, what I am advocating is not novel. The varying approaches and assumptions identified here already exist in the literature but are rarely made explicit. Consequently, early research in new destinations has already begun to exhibit some of the same trappings of disputes and clashes evident in studies of traditional destinations. While some of these are necessary for stimulating intellectual debate, others could be avoided to facilitate scholarly discovery and consensus. Indeed, because we are still at an early point in the study of new immigrant destinations, making our assumptions and choices more transparent now will help us make better sense of presently incongruous findings, and, more important, develop a more coherent sense of the field as we move forward. Moreover, in doing so it is vital to give greater attention to spatial variation.

Within this agenda, several areas deserve our attention. First, I have focused primarily on the “hard” side of assimilation. But we also need to be more explicit and transparent about our assumptions and choices as we address aspects of the “softer” side of assimilation in new destinations, including identity and cultural

practices.⁴⁵ Second, as do most studies, I have focused primarily on assimilation as it plays out among immigrants and their descendants. But we also need to pay more attention to what is happening among new destinations' host populations and their descendants, in order to build a better knowledge base about the two-way nature of assimilation in such locales moving forward.⁴⁶ Third, as scholars, we need to heed and build into our research designs the new insights from our colleagues in the larger literature, as they identify improved methods and data for assessing assimilation – for example, among immigrants and their actual descendents using longitudinal data, among appropriate cohorts of immigrant generations compared at similar ages and points in the life course, or between immigrants and natives taking into account subnational patterns of in- and out-migration that can significantly alter notions of our study populations and their appropriate reference groups.⁴⁷

Finally, scholars of new destinations are well poised to focus greater attention on how legal status – a key structural feature of the context of reception in a host society or locale – shapes assimilation processes and outcomes. Indeed, given recent spatial-temporal correlations between immigrants' period of entry, legal status, and settlement in new destinations, especially among Mexicans, new destinations have higher proportions of undocumented immigrants among their foreign-born populations than do traditional destinations.⁴⁸ This fundamentally changes immigrants' starting points for achieving economic success, social inclusion, and political representation over time and generations in new, compared to traditional, destinations. In the words of neo-assimilation scholars Alba and Nee, it not only changes the *proximal* causal mechanisms underlying assimila-

tion, by weakening immigrants' available forms of human, financial, social, and cultural capital⁴⁹; it also changes the *distal* causal mechanisms underlying assimilation, by hardening the formal rules and laws under which immigrants make their everyday decisions about work, education, and civic activity.

Thus, perhaps we will come to learn that assimilation works differently for post-1965 immigrants and their descendants who have settled in new destinations than for their counterparts who have settled in traditional destinations, simply because a higher proportion of the former immigrants lack legal status. Of course, there may well turn out to be similarities in how undocumented immigrants experience American workplaces, bureaucracies, and public life across traditional and new destinations.⁵⁰ There may also turn out to be similarities in the intergenerational transfer of the disadvantages of illegal status across both types of locales. But larger proportions of undocumented immigrants in new destinations, coupled with extremely sharp negative turns in many new destinations' social, institutional, and political contexts of reception after 2005,⁵¹ suggest that scholars working in new destinations can play a leading role in developing a more thorough understanding of how assimilation works for undocumented immigrants – depending on exactly when they arrive and precisely where they settle.

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