

## Chapter 2

# A Visual Approach to Multiculturalism<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

There are undoubtedly many ways by which one can approach multiculturalism and its many intersections at the local, national and global levels. Each different perspective on the subject adds another dimension to our understanding of this complex and changing phenomena. Offered here is a visual approach to one of its more ubiquitous versions, ethnic diversity, as it is expressed in the appearance of vernacular landscapes. It is argued that there is something about ethnic vernacular landscapes that can be best grasped via the use of image-based research. It is also suggested that such an approach might provide some needed focus to the inter- and intra-disciplinary debates over cultural diversity in its many scientific and related ideological forms.

The United States of America, because of its long history of immigration, has long been considered by many as a paradigmatic site for the study of multi-ethnic environments. Globalization in recent decades however has made that once unique experience almost commonplace today in many of the world's urban spaces. In this chapter, examples of how multiculturalism and other historical treatments of ethnic diversity are visually expressed in the United States, Europe and China will be shown and discussed. According to Roseman, Laux, and Thieme (1996), 'EthniCities' have emerged as a consequence of the political and economic restructuring that has increased and diversified labour and capital mobility. Major migration systems include 'internal migration; regional international migration; global migration; illegal migration; and refugee migration' (1996, p. xviii). For Sassen (2001; also 1998), place continues to be important in that contemporary cities display the contradictions of the globalization of capital. In them both the powerful and powerless are concentrated and diversity is increased by migration and immigration. Even marginalized groups can make claims on the city's 'contested terrains,' and despite the domination of corporate culture, indicators of

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‘otherness’ are present everywhere. Ethnic vernacular streetscapes are excellent examples of this clash between what Bourdieu (1984) might call expressions of tastes of necessity as opposed to tastes of luxury. Taste is a mechanism by which subtle distinctions between things take on much more resonance in terms of social class divisions (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 174–5). ‘As can be seen whenever a change in social position puts the *habitus* into new conditions, so that its specific efficacy can be isolated, it is taste – the taste of necessity or the taste of luxury – and not high or low income which commands the practices objectively adjusted to these resources. Through taste, an agent has what he likes because he likes what he has, that is, the properties actually given to him in the distributions and legitimately assigned to him in the classifications’ (1984, p. 175).

### **Assimilationism, Cultural Pluralism and Multiculturalism**

Before we can proceed to consider how multicultural environments might be visualized in different societies, some foundations must be established. The first regards terminology and its related theoretical groundings. In the American paradigm of ethnic diversity there have been three major themes: Assimilationism, Cultural Pluralism and Multiculturalism. These themes also conform in this temporal order and in gross terms to the historical experience of immigration and migration in the US. It is easy to overlook the fact that these themes are not only historical but ideological as well. As ideologies, Assimilationism and Multiculturalism are at opposite ends of a theoretical spectrum, whereas most of the real world falls somewhere in the middle – in Cultural Pluralism.

The systematic study of race and ethnicity has a very long tradition in American sociology. In the early twentieth century Chicago School of Sociology, Robert Ezra Park (Park et al. 1925) and Louis Wirth (1928) looked at how millions of poor and working-class, primarily European were adjusting to impacting on American society. This influx between 1880 and 1920 and their more or less assimilated descendants have made the United States perhaps the most diverse country in the world. The less numerous, but also much less white European, immigration of the late twentieth century has increased this cultural and racial diversity. As forcefully expressed by Ruben G. Rumbaut, the ‘unequal destinies of American racial and ethnic groups reflect their diverse origin’ (1996, p. xvi) and so the development of social and economic inequities based on race and ethnicity has been a central theme and dilemma in the history of America. I might add that it continues to be so.

### **Assimilationism**

Perhaps the most important thinker about ethnic assimilation in the United States has been Milton Gordon (1964). An important aspect of his theory was that assimilation, or the absorption of new groups into the dominant society, has both

cultural as well as structural dimensions. For most groups cultural adjustments and adaptations, such as language, have been the easiest and most rapid. His theory helps to explain how people can take on American cultural values and behaviours and yet still remain outside the mainstream as represented in ethnic occupational niches and territorial ethnic enclaves. It is in this regard that physical or cultural difference with the dominant White Anglo Saxon society is crucial. For example, non-white and non-Protestant Christians have been especially likely to be seen as less assimilated members of ethnic (ethno-racial) collectivities. Assimilation theorists argue that when immigrants are no more likely to live and work with one another than with other 'Americans' then they have become another dissolved ingredient in the 'Melting Pot.' This implies that, for example, when ethnic enclaves are gone so is ethnicity itself. For Euro-Americans, Richard D. Alba (1985) has termed this process the 'Twilight of Ethnicity'. Assimilationism is also an ideology that argues that immigrant groups 'ought to' melt into, and become indistinguishable from the whole. In this regard Assimilation (sometimes referred to as Anglo conformity) and its metaphor, the amalgam-producing Melting Pot, is often misunderstood. Both the theory and the metaphor imply that the host, dominant society is also changed in degree by the process.

## **Cultural Pluralism**

Assimilation and Assimilationism are not value-neutral ideas. For example, the idea that hyphenated nineteenth and early twentieth century white European-Americans were indistinguishable from each other was vigorously attacked in and outside of academe by Michael Novak in 'The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics' (1971). He and others argued that although groups such as European-Americans had largely adopted general American values they were still unique and recognizable within a wide spectrum of relatively assimilated groups. This 'Cultural Pluralism' also became a social movement that became regarded by many in the social sciences and humanities as a 'defensive ethnicity.' 'White Ethnics' especially were viewed in the liberal mass media as hostile to a rising tide of Black nationalism and Afro-American cultural revival (Gans 1991). Ironically, a similar critique is made by Rumbaut about 'One size fits all pan ethnic labels – "Asian," "Hispanic," "Black," "White" are imposed by the society at large to pigeon hole people who hail from the Philippines, Vietnam, South Korea, India, Cambodia, China, Mexico, Cuba, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica, Nigeria, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Israel and scores of other nations and how differ widely in class origins, phenotypes, languages, cultures, generations, migration histories and modes of incorporation into the United States' (1996, p. xvi). As an ideology, Cultural Pluralism recognizes the positive value of diversity for democratic societies but only in tandem with overarching common values that connect the disparate groups. In America today, social commentators and researchers have been moved, because of the extreme generational, racial and cultural diversity, to distinguish

between ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ as opposed to ‘symbolic ethnicity.’ At its extreme, what is meant by real or authentic is that the ethnic identity makes a concrete and significant difference in the everyday life, and ultimately the life chances, of a group member as opposed to being merely a source of psychological satisfaction or nostalgia. As expected, such public observations have provoked much debate in the general society as well as in the various academic communities.

## **Multiculturalism**

On the other end of the spectrum from Assimilationism is Multiculturalism (and related transnationalism). This ideology argues that not only do distinct cultural groups exist in American society, but that their distinctiveness ‘ought to be’ preserved. George M. Fredrickson, commenting on race and citizenship in the US stated that: ‘The growth of ethnic consciousness among blacks and the desire of Latino and Asian immigrants to preserve aspects of their culture have made “multiculturalism”, rather than simple integrationism, the dominant anti-racist ideology in the United States today’ (Fredrickson 2002, p. 5). It is suggested that Frederickson should have used the term ‘assimilationism’ in this regard. One can easily argue that the rise of Multiculturalism as the *au courant* ideology is a response to what is referred to most often as ‘Post-1965’ immigration. At that time, and subsequently, new American immigrant laws have made possible the entry into the country of a spectrum of peoples that reflected the diversity of the world population. Prior to that time, quotas favoured immigrants who reflected the US population, with few exceptions, circa 1920. Other, practical, globalizing factors that favour retention of immigrant cultures are advanced communication and transportation technologies that make it possible to stay connected to places of origin. In this context the current dynamics of large-scale immigration and ethnic change in post-industrial Europe, as well as the US, can be noted.

## **Understanding Vernacular Landscape**

Paying close attention to the wide array of vernacular ethnic landscapes that we find in our rapidly globalizing world is especially important for both the new and old urban sciences. The esteemed architectural historian John Brinckerhoff Jackson encourages us to look for what ‘...lies underneath below the symbols of permanent power expressed in the “Political Landscape”’ (1984, p. 6). His perceptive work neatly complements Sociology’s interest in how and why groups are where they are in the city, and how space affects their social interactions and opportunities. For example, writing about gentrification in eighteenth and nineteenth century England, he noted that ‘in brief, much of the traditional play, popular with working class citizens, located at the centre of town where the players lived and worded, was driven out, either by the shortage of space or by police

decisions to improve traffic circulation and promote order' (1984, p. 11). He also brings attention to new forms of the vernacular 'such as the factory, the shopping centre, the gas station, and so on' which are important for understanding social history, and I might add, contemporary society (1984, pp. 118–19). Of special value for the present discourse, Jackson drew attention to the visual competition of commercial streets that he believed represented 'a new and valid form of what can be called commercial vernacular' (1984, p. 246). David Harvey adds support for this micro-level scrutiny by arguing that: 'Different classes construct their sense of territory and community in radically different ways. This elemental fact is often overlooked by those theorists who presume a priori that there is some ideal-typical and universal tendency for all human beings to construct a human community of roughly similar sort, no matter what the political or economic circumstances' (1989, p. 265).

Another useful tool for deciphering the complex metropolis is 'spatial semiotics', defined by Mark Gottdiener as 'the study of culture which links symbols to objects' (1994, pp. 15–16). For Gottdiener, the streetscape of an immigrant neighbourhood reflects national and global systems having been '... built by people who have followed some meaningful plan for the purposes of containing economic, political, and cultural activities' (1994, p. 16). In conjunction with an understanding of vernacular landscapes, such socio-spatial analysis helps one to recognize even the least powerful urbanites as social 'agents' in the localized reproduction of regional, national and global affairs. Some think of migrant areas as 'Third Spaces' where ethnic identity are created and then negotiated, demonstrating in this way the agency of ordinary people (Gutiérrez 1999). Whereas much of Third Space as well as Hybrid discourses concern the negotiation of identities of persons within real and imagined spaces, my own special interest has been on how those identities change the meaning of the space in which the identity is acted out or practiced.

### **Visual Sociology and Anthropology**

For most, a visual approach in the Humanities and Social Sciences is taking or showing pictures as an adjunct to the 'regular' process of research. Visual Sociology is much more than that. In my own work it is both a theoretical and methodological practice for '...producing and decoding images which can be used to empirically investigate social organization, cultural meaning and psychological processes' (Grady 1996, 14). Here the techniques, methodologies and concerns of Visual Sociology are the best known and where the camera and other techniques of representation play crucial roles in the analytic process (Grady 1996, p. 14). Lyn H. Lofland adds another dimension of visualizing urban spaces by noting that: 'The city, because of its size, is the locus of a peculiar social situation: the people found within its boundaries at any given moment know nothing personally about the vast majority of others with whom they share this space' (1985, p. 3). Urban life is made

possible by ‘ordering’ the populace in terms of appearance and spatial location so that people ‘could know a great deal about one another by simply looking’ (1985, p. 22). Douglas Harper divided Visual Sociology into two types: ‘Visual Methods, where researchers “take” photographs in order to study social worlds’, and ‘Visual Studies’ in which researchers ‘analyze images that are produced by the culture’. In this second approach, ‘sociologists typically explore the semiotics, or sign systems, of different visual communication systems’ (Harper 1988).

According to Marcus Banks, ‘Visual anthropology is coming to be understood as the study of visible cultural form, regardless of who produced them or why. In one sense this throws open the floodgates – visual anthropologists are those who create film, photography, maps, drawings, diagrams, and those who study film, photography, cinema, television, the plastic arts – and could threaten to swamp the (sub)discipline’ (1988, p. 11). Significantly, Banks alerts us to some constraints in this subfield. He points out that,

the study of the visible cultural forms is only visual anthropology if it is informed by the concerns and understandings of anthropology more generally. If anthropology, defined very crudely, is an exercise in cross-cultural translation and interpretation that seeks to understand other cultural thought and action in its own terms before going on to render these in terms accessible to a (largely) Euro-American audience, if anthropology seeks to mediate the gap between the ‘big picture’ (global capitalism say) and local forms (small-town market trading, say), if anthropology takes long-term participant observation and local language proficiency as axiomatic prerequisites for ethnographic investigation, then visual studies must engage with this if they wish to be taken seriously as visual anthropology (1998, p. 11).

In the closely related sub-disciplines of Visual Anthropology and Visual Sociology there is a pre- versus post-modernist dispute regarding not only the uses of images but the objective scientific status of the disciplines themselves. Douglas Harper (1988), commenting on Howard S. Becker (1974), John Grady (1996) and other seminal pieces in the establishment of the field of Visual Sociology, extends the vision of visual sociology taking into account post-modern and other critiques but at base he argues that visual sociology should begin with traditional assumptions of sociological field work and sociological analysis. The photograph can be thought of as ‘data’; in fact, the unique character of photographic images forces us to rethink many of our assumptions about how we move from observation to analysis in all forms of sociological research. But note that I suggested that in image making an analysis begins with these and other traditional assumptions and practices. It does not end there! (Krase 1997, pp. 34–35).

On the other hand, Sarah Pink, a leader in the field of Visual Ethnography, rejects this objective-scientific approach, and argues for greater attention to the reflexivity and experience by which visual and ethnographic materials are produced and interpreted. She states,

In this book I take the contrasting view, that to incorporate the visual appropriately, social science should, as MacDougall [1997] has suggested, ‘develop alternative objectives and methodologies’. This means abandoning the possibility of a purely objective social science and rejecting the idea that the written word is essentially a superior medium of ethnographic representation. While images should not necessarily replace words as the dominant mode of research or representation, they should be regarded as meaningful element of ethnographic work. Thus visual images, objects, descriptions should be incorporated when it is appropriate, opportune or enlightening to do so (2007, p. 6).

My own work falls on the pre-post modern side; therefore, the images I present are clearly connected to structural and cultural theorizing about society. In order for visual sociology or anthropology to be of value it must be securely embedded in the theories and methods of the disciplines themselves as well as not merely employing images as decorations for words.

### **Visualizing Theories and Ideologies of Ethnic Diversity**

We turn now to a consideration of images which show how ethnic diversity is visually expressed in ethnic vernacular landscapes in the United States, Europe and China. These images represent only a small, and ultimately inadequate, sample from within the broad spectrum of visual expressions explained or produced by the theories and ideologies of Assimilationism, Cultural Pluralism and Multiculturalism.

### **Litchfield and Torrington, Connecticut, The United States of America**

Assimilation is probably the most difficult of diversity outcomes to visualize as the consequence of total assimilation is the disappearance of original ethnic difference. Therefore I have chosen to use the image of a restaurant in Litchfield to represent assimilation. Litchfield is a town of about 9,000 residents located in the mostly rural northwest corner of Litchfield County in the state of Connecticut. It was founded in 1721 and has gone through several stages of economic development over the centuries. Today it is an affluent town in which 97 per cent of its generally affluent 9,000 residents are white. The dominant architecture of the town is American Colonial and Colonial Revival indicated for example by white paint and black shutters seen on most buildings. The town authorities also enforce strictly the requirement that buildings not be visibly out of character with this very American location. Below we see Francesco’s Restaurant and Pizzeria with little visible difference between its store front and all the other restaurants on the street which serve a varied but essentially ‘American’ menu. Also not visible is the fact that Francesco’s was owned and operated by immigrants from Italy. At the time



**Figure 2.1** Francesco's Restaurant and Pizzeria, Litchfield, Connecticut, 2007

the photograph was taken, all the numerous signs in Francesco's windows were in English and none announced Italian ethnic events or issues.

Only a few miles east of the affluent town of Litchfield is the post-industrial city of Torrington. It is the largest city in Litchfield County with a population of about



**Figure 2.2** *El Rey de la Tijera #4, Barber Shop, Main Street, Torrington, Connecticut, 2007*

37,000. Torrington was also settled early in the eighteenth century but has been best known as a ‘mill town’. The city’s many factories once produced a variety of metal products that at first attracted English, Irish and German immigrants in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Between 1880 and 1920 the population was ethnically enhanced by numerous Polish, Czech, Slovak, Italian and Lebanese immigrants all of whom made vernacular imprints on the city. Today more than 90 per cent of the residents are of white European descent but there are a growing number of Latino migrants and immigrants who are filling the spaces left by white Europeans in the city’s struggling centre. There we can see expressions of both Multiculturalism and Cultural Pluralism in what has become a small hub of Latino entrepreneurship along Torrington’s Main Street. The multicultural is best represented by storefronts where virtually all of the signage is in Spanish and advertise Hispanic products, as well as services which help maintain connections to Latin American origins and also facilitate transnationalism. The transition to Cultural Pluralism is exemplified in Figure 2.2; the photograph of *El Rey de la Tijera #4, Barber Shop*. Less visible in this photo, in the adjacent grocery store window, is the signage mostly Spanish but also in English, which states: *Con toda clases de productos hispano y americano* (with all kinds of Hispanic and American products).



**Figure 2.3** Folk-style Korean house, Chinese folk villages, Shenzhen, China, 2005



Figure 2.4 Muslim-Chinese restaurant store front, Xi' An, China, 2005

## **Shenzhen and Xi'an, China**

For those, like myself, who are not expert in recognizing less than obvious ethnic differences within the vast population of China, providing examples of ethnic vernacular is a challenge. Therefore, this section will diverge somewhat from the previous one. In 2005 I was the guest of the government of Shenzhen on one leg of a project to conduct visual research in China. Shenzhen's population had exploded via internal, national migration from a few hundred thousand in 1980 to more than twelve million at the end of 2005. Among those, less than two million had legal residence while the rest were considered migrants. Officially, despite considerable genetic, linguistic and cultural diversity, China is home to only 56 recognized ethnic groups. The largest group, the Han, make up over 92 per cent of China's more than one and third billion people. It is this common core of Han culture that is the essence of 'Chinese culture.' We visited several 'ethnic' sites in this southern Chinese city which neighbours Hong Kong, but the centre of such attraction was 'Splendid China' where the history, culture, art, ancient architecture and customs and habits of various nationalities in China were on display. Figure 2.3 above of the interior of a Folk-style Korean house is drawn from a collection of 24 Chinese Folk Culture Villages 'inhabited by real ethnic people who present their traditional arts, customs, languages and cuisines. Traditional culture performances are held there every day' (Shenzhen Government 2007). The preservation, perhaps even ossification, of these ethnic differences is an example of official multiculturalism in Shenzhen.

More than 60,000 Muslims currently live in Xi'an. The city of almost nine million is at the end of the historical Silk Road in central China. The photo of the Muslim-Chinese Restaurant Store Front (Figure 2.4 above) is clearly in the hyphenated, cultural pluralism mode that is equally visible in the US and Europe. Even without understanding Chinese characters or Arabic for that matter, one can see the co-existence of two cultures in the ethnic vernacular landscape. These were taken in a commercial and residential neighbourhood which surrounds the Grand Mosque at Hua Jue which is also a major tourist attraction.

## **Rome, Italy**

As in many other major European urban centres, the area adjacent to the *Stazione Centrale*, which includes the well-know 'Chinatown' of *L'Esquilino*, has been for many years a multi-ethnic, if not multicultural centre in Rome. As I have written elsewhere (Krase and Hum 2006), the local administration has struggled unsuccessfully to prevent the development of visible ethnic immigrant districts. It is important to note in this discussion of ideologies about ethnic diversity that the motivation for preservation of the 'Eternal City' of Rome is similar to that of the small town of Litchfield, Connecticut that was previously discussed. Both seek to preserve the historical and cultural 'character' of the community by controlling the appearance of residences and businesses.



**Figure 2.5** Ethnic diversity on the streets of *L'Esquilino*, Rome, Italy, 1998

### **London, England**

Due in large part to the extent of the once global British Empire, London has long been a multi-ethnic city. In recent years however that variety and size of the ethnically and religiously diverse population has greatly increased. One recent aspect of the change has been the development and enlargement of the European Union, which has made it possible for less economically developed, but still 'European' nations to export more easily their excess labour force. One country that has taken advantage of this has been Poland. Polish migrants seemed to have 'flooded' many parts of Great Britain. Indications of more and less recent Polish influence can be found on the streetscapes of several London neighbourhoods. For example, Hammersmith has long been the home of a well-established Polish population, where one finds many examples of hybrid Polish-English food purveyors and services on King Street in the middle of the neighbourhood near the Polish Cultural Centre. On the corner near an Underground station in ethnically diverse Islington is located a different kind of visible indicator of local cultural diversity. Figure 2.6 below shows a newspaper box for Polish newspapers. Underneath the *Polska Gazeta* is what might be an ideological multicultural dictum. There, written in English, is 'Polish language only. Don't bother if you can't read Polish.'



**Figure 2.6 Polish newspapers, Islington, London, England, 2007**

### **Frankfurt am Main, Germany**

The area adjacent to the *Hauptbahnhof* in Frankfurt am Main is a multi-ethnic residential and commercial centre that shares many social and physical characteristics with Rome's *L'Esquilino*. Both central city districts have undergone stages of abandonment, deterioration, immigrant influx and are today showing signs of gentrification and urban regeneration. Despite upscale change in and around Frankfurt's rail centre, a wide variety of immigrant or otherwise non indigenous 'German' groups live, work and shop. Signs in the vernacular landscape such as *Orientalische Lebensmittel* imply that here at least unique cultural food-ways of groups as varied as Pakistanis and Moroccans are subsumed as 'Asian Food' and are sold with German beer. German food-ways have also changed in response to immigration. Figure 2.7 shows a shop advertising both *Doener Kebap* and *Pizza* which are probably as popular in Germany as *bratwurst* as essential food for 'take away' (*auch zum mitnehmen*). Further in the background of the photograph one finds both signs for ethnically specific Turkish food as well as a multilingual directional sign for a Mosque.



**Figure 2.7** *Doener and Moschee, Frankfurt am Main, Germany, 2005*

## Conclusion

Anthony D. King (1996) speaks of cities as ‘text’ to be read. Ethnic Vernacular Landscapes are crucial, yet often ignored parts of that complex and rapidly changing text. In order to better appreciate and understand that which is taking place, often unseen, yet in plain sight, I have briefly discussed both the theories as well as the ideologies of Assimilationism, Cultural Pluralism and Multiculturalism. It has been strongly suggested that, despite significant intra-disciplinary disagreements, Visual Sociology and Visual Anthropology can help us to document how Vernacular Landscapes reflect these competing theories and ideologies of ethnic diversity in a variety of cities and towns. The images from the Muslims of Xi’an, China to the Latinos of Torrington, Connecticut have been chosen to show what they might have in common and how they might differ from the wide angle of the whole streetscape to the close-up of signs in windows. Some aspects were not possible to visualize here with images in black and white. Colours provide another visual cultural dimension such as the red and white stripes signifying Americanization on the Latino Barber shop in Torrington, the green of Islam in the Arabic symbols on shop signs in Xi’an, the prominence of red and gold on Chinese store signs in Rome, and the red and white of the *Polska Gazeta* in London.

This illustrated chapter on how one might visualize societal responses to ethnic diversity in the United States, Europe and China is based on the most recent research which I have conducted about how the meanings of spaces are changed by the agency of ordinary city dwellers (Krase 1993, 1997, 2002, 2004 and 2007). I have developed this approach over the course of a decade in the presentation and publication of a series of papers. In general, the Visual Sociology of the Vernacular Landscapes allows us to ‘see’ how people are both products and producers of space. Regardless of perspective, one cannot fail to recognize the agency and symbolic life of ordinary people, while at the same time see the greater power of others to determine their ultimate fate.

One final note must be made; the preponderance of images which imply the hegemony of Cultural Pluralism as opposed to either Assimilationism or the Multiculturalism presented here should not be taken as the result of a random or otherwise statistical sampling. Despite the argument presented here that most of the social and cultural reality experienced in ethnically diverse urban societies falls between the extremes of Assimilationism and Multiculturalism, these images are not presented as quantitative proof of that assertion. A much larger scale quantitative study would be necessary for such an effort.

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