

BOOK REVIEW FORUM

Migrants and the Redemption of Space

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I am so grateful to have been able to think with these authors while reading their books, for both have challenged me to think differently about my previous work and my upbringing in the “Golden State.” Those of us who study religion in the American West know it is still relatively marginalized in our guild, but I see such great hope in these sorts of studies. Not only do these books reveal a great deal about California both as a site of religious coercion and resistance, but they bring to our attention methods, sources, and ways of thinking about the interpenetration of traditionally “religious” ideas and material objects with labor, capital, foodways, photography, office spaces, and domestic interiors.

Both authors self-consciously read history against the grain of previous literary and photographic representations of California during the Great Depression. Ebel uses as his foil John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, a novel that draws explicitly on the experiences of reformers and Dust Bowl migrants; Steinbeck’s characters derived from the narratives and experiences of civil servants dedicated to the uplift of whites in need of care and concern. Barba contrasts his archive with the iconic images of Dorothea Lange, photos that fixed the image of white migrant workers as the *deserving* poor, those “true Americans” who were forced to toil alongside Mexicans and others due to structural catastrophes beyond their control. Each author complicates these narratives, using a variety of sources and interpretive lenses to highlight the explicit and implicit ways that religious beliefs and practices figure in their retellings of this era.

Anglo-Californians in the first half of the 20th century were dedicated to modernity and committed to scientific progress as the means to build a superior society. They had great use for the bountiful crops of inland valleys that fueled their economy but much less use for the human tides arriving to harvest that bounty. Ebel’s study explores federal camps in California as missionary sites. These Depression-era innovations offered a modicum of comfortable living in exchange for service as participants in zealous social engineering, extended in the form of bureaucratic record keeping, enclosure within closed gates, and a studied reconfiguration of space in housing and sanitation facilities. The progressive modernist reformers running this human laboratory sought to uplift newly arrived Dust Bowl migrants from their “uncivilized” beliefs and practices. Their strategies included “uplifted” living conditions, orientation to a rational, scientifically based world, and an occasional frisson of revivalistic Protestantism. The migrants themselves, those down on their luck and fleeing economic ruin in Arkansas, Texas, Oklahoma, and other states beset by catastrophic agricultural conditions, agreed to participate with varying

degrees of desperation and enthusiasm. We know the type from the marvelous work of scholars like Alison Greene and Darren Dochuk, but here we see them in a new light as the objects of concern from zealous reformers who took them in as projects.

Ebel sketches these groups with nuance: neither is reducible to a type, try as many parties might to speak simplistically about the racist and controlling self-righteousness of the reformers or, on the other hand, the oppressed and victimized stubbornness of camp inhabitants. As Ebel points out, there is much more to be learned here. He sketches the spatial and experiential contours of the government camps in fine detail, peering into the filing cabinets of the bureaucrats in the front office, exploring the world-creating powers of a tent platform, and wrestling with the biopolitical practices of the sanitation units. That final inspection speaks most directly to the author's larger point about how the reconfiguring of what might be considered profane space, the toilets, reveals the most deeply embedded moral assumptions that the reformers shared about salvation through cleanliness. If privies can be sacralized, Ebel tells us with strenuous nods to Mary Douglas and Talal Asad, so too can railroad tracks, fences, and irrigation ditches. Becoming modern subjects, he notes, was filled with ironies, blind spots, and coercive mandates, not to mention a racialized desire that white migrants not imitate the polluted practices of Mexicans, blacks, and other "undesirables." In the camp community center, meanwhile, residents were instructed in the more obviously Protestant virtues of religion, recreation, and entertainment. This entailed curtailing some "social pathologies" such as drinking, gambling, and enthusiastic religious practice, and instilling a rationalized, ecumenical Protestant ethos.

How well did this project work? Ebel admits that the reformers, with their fastidious devotion to record-keeping, left much more information about their intentions than their results. What is left to the historian are imprints and fossils of the living things that once inhabited these spaces. He glimpses evidence of pushback from residents, notably from sectarians who eschewed the formless Protestantism of camp services and sought worship and consolation through a Scofield Reference Bible here and a visiting gospel-driven preacher there. Perhaps the richest source of pushback is found in the camp newspapers, publications that both *allowed* for residents' self-expression and *bounded* their worlds by framing them with bureaucratic reportage on council minutes and other news items. There is plenty of Protestantism found in these pages, but we are reminded to think carefully about how to interpret both the form and content of what we see there. We witness the clearest evidence of pushback in the number of residents evicted from camps. As a disciplinary practice, eviction specified what was behaviorally beyond the pale. Ebel suggests it was civic offenses, not behavioral ones, that were most apt to lead to eviction, sins such as not following the rules of keeping up with payments or work requirements. The point of modernization, in other words, was to make one fit to play by the social rules and to conform to the standards considered civilized.

More analysis of the framing of these government camps as mission sites would have further nuanced this discussion. Ebel contextualizes the labor of Tom Collins and other New Deal camp reformers in a long history of New World missionary labor, including John Eliot's Praying Towns and Spanish colonizing missions. I was persuaded by his description of the beliefs and practices of the bureaucrat, which is very much in keeping with the work of Kathryn Lofton and others who trace Protestant fervor in office cubicles and soap advertisements. These men evince a progressive, rationalized faith in a God that is itself deeply wedded to the salvific power of scientific progress. Bureaucracy, in this respect, can be every bit as all-controlling as the Puritan's Calvinist God—just less visible to us today unless we are alerted to the epistemological webs in which we are entangled.

But precisely how does this transformation occur? At times it is referred to as *rehabilitation*, connoting a return from a previous state of social or metaphysical health that has been temporarily lost. Conversion, on the other hand, is typically ascribed to born sinners who must be transformed to experience redemption. I assumed that Tom Collins and others saw the plight of the migrants as a structural issue, one in which residents, set in the right environment, would behave correctly and their dignity would be restored. Yet the suggestion that Collins was a “mission priest” who led “a community of redemption for a wayward people” left me wondering if they could be saved by changing the environment. How is structural change an answer to inherent immorality? This is a debate as old as missions themselves, of course. Mission theorists constantly disagreed about their primary task: was it to change the heart of an individual sinner or bring her first into civilization, an effort that in itself would effect a transformation? Who were these people before they had gone astray? Why did they have to prove that they wanted redemption first, and was an inherently disordered person capable of wanting it? Rehabilitation and conversion, in short, do not necessarily describe the same process. Perhaps the reformers themselves were fuzzy on the details here. Still, it would be useful to hold up those questions in the same light in which the author investigates so much else in this book.

If Ebel’s book analyzes the spatial assertion of righteousness by white reformers, Lloyd Barba’s study explores resistance and sacralization in the spaces of Mexican Pentecostal agricultural workers, racialized others who were, presumably, unfit for the sort of redemption available to white migrants. Barba calls our attention to how people make meaning and, therefore, make religion through activities not deemed traditionally religious. Mexicans on California farms had no reformist foils intent on structuring their lives; instead, they faced the task of imbuing meaning alone on an “otherwise vertiginous world.” They resided at the bottom of the civic heap by almost anyone’s measure: not white, not wealthy, not settled, not Catholic, and not even the right sort of Pentecostal with their Oneness doctrines. Even so, Barba offers a remarkable set of sources, including oral histories and rich photographic evidence from the migrants themselves, that reveal layers of religious ritual and connection. Some elements are readily legible as religious: baptizing, building churches, and wearing garments that set them apart as a community. Others are surprising, such as the tamale-making enterprises of migrant women or their sewing of lace veils. More than a snapshot, this study provides a longer trajectory of a network of churches throughout the state between the 1910s and the 1960s. We see both physical growth on the material landscape, as the *Apostolicos* transitioned from baptisms in irrigation ditches and canals to the building of temples, and the creation of a sacred history, a scripturalized narrative in words and photographs. Despite the desire of California citizens to maintain the transiency of Mexican laborers, migrants placed themselves and sanctified that emplacement.

One crucial aspect of this process was women’s labor, work that is often left out of church histories. Barba demonstrates that women’s work was vital to the stability and continuity of congregational life. Moreover, even though they could not preach or hold church offices, they understood their work as sanctified. The sections on tamale-making are a delightful and fitting counterpoint to Ebel’s chapter on sanitation units, an area in which labor was just as critical to human thriving as cooking if less enjoyable. Grinding corn, kneading dough, steaming husks, and selling tamales were not only vital for life, but the churches could not have been built without the revenue they generated. As the author acknowledges, this is an old story not limited to Mexican Pentecostals. Evangelical outreach during the California Gold Rush relied on women to raise money through bake

sales and raffles and even to sew the canvas that covered makeshift church structures. Mormon women in Nauvoo, Illinois, stitched clothing for those working on the temple in the early 1840s and baked the bricks themselves. Barba's ability to chart the cooking and presentation of tamales in detail, to relate it to the foodways of other marginalized communities, and to follow these congregations through time lends an added salience to this labor and punctuates female abundance in the pews and their simultaneous absence in the pulpit.

Like Ebel, Barba employs photography as a rich primary source. He underscores its multi-valences by interviewing participants about what images help them remember, thereby offering a vivid portrait of the role of nostalgia in shaping these communities. Photos of musical bands spark stories of what it meant to play and sing; renderings of female dress provoke conversations regarding modesty codes within the church and the various ways that women negotiated those requirements; images of congregations prompt recollections of tight-knit community structures. The photos tempt the viewer to think in terms of collective coherence and uniformity—arguably, precisely the intention of the photographer and his subjects. I wonder, though, if more could be said about church disagreements. I would love to hear about the potential for rupture and discord that are occluded by still photography. Where were the fault lines, and are there ways to see them?

In like manner, the steady gaze of easterners toward the West Coast has, for too long, obscured the richness of its religious history. These excellent studies help to recalibrate our awareness.