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Migrants, Communities, and Culture

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Migrants, Communities, and Culture

Abstract

New immigrants have already changed Philadelphia's cultural scene—particularly in urban neighborhoods. This brief uses three types of evidence— a small-area database of cultural participation, a survey of residents of North Philadelphia and Camden, NJ, and a survey of artists living or working in the metropolitan area—to explore migrant cultural engagement. Taken together, SIAP's evidence on artists and cultural participants paints a portrait of migrants and foreign-born residents who are positively oriented toward cultural expression but frustrated by institutional, spatial, and socio-economic barriers. Can culture serve as a means of linking new Philadelphians to other social institutions?

Disciplines

Civic and Community Engagement | Social Policy | Urban Studies and Planning

Comments

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Migrants, Communities, and Culture

New immigrants have already changed Philadelphia's cultural scene. Can culture serve as a means of linking new Philadelphians to other social institutions?

Mark J. Stern, Susan C. Seifert, and Domenic Vitiello

The United States is currently experiencing an immigrant wave that rivals those of the 19th and early 20th centuries in size and duration. As in the past, immigrants experience many barriers to adapting to American society, including language differences.

“Translation” is an issue for the cultural world as well. Obviously, migrants bring with them different cultural traditions and forms of expression. Less obviously, the institutional language spoken by the American cultural sector—a language based on nonprofit organizations supported by philanthropy and government—does not square with immigrant artists’ and participants’ past or present. As a result, many immigrants experience the American cultural scene not as opportunities to be explored, but as a set of barriers to be overcome.

Immigrants are learning to adapt to these new realities, sometimes by “learning the language” of the American arts scene and sometimes by developing alternative dialects. As they do so, they build new institutions and change old ones. Immigrant cultural expression is changing how all of us understand and engage in the world of arts and culture.

Migrant cultural engagement is particularly important for urban neighborhoods. First, migrants are more likely to live in urban neighborhoods than in other metropolitan locations. Because community cultural scenes

are dominated by smaller, less-established organizations, new patterns of immigrant cultural expression have a greater impact on neighborhood arts. This means that if we are interested in the “next big thing” in American culture, it may be wiser to look to urban neighborhoods—including immigrant neighborhoods—than to focus on established downtown organizations.

Second, all immigrants are not alike. Obviously, there are group differences; Koreans are different from Salvadorans, Indians are different from Liberians. Less obviously, within-group differences affect how immigrants express themselves culturally, and what they have to say. Social class and generation, in particular, have a significant impact on how immigrants and the children of immigrants engage their own and other groups’ cultures.

Third, as immigrants gain a new prominence in urban cultural scenes, the sector offers a way to link them to other social institutions. A century ago, the settlement house movement used the arts and culture as one way of engaging immigrants and opening up new opportunities for them in education, employment, and health. In this brief, we use the Philadelphia experience to explore whether the arts can serve a similar role in the contemporary city.

THE CHANGING FACE OF PHILADELPHIA

Today’s immigrants are the latest wave of migrants to come to Philadelphia. During most of the 19th century, the city grew through streams of internal migrants from the North as well as immigrants from Europe. In the years after World War II, two groups moved to the city in increasing numbers: African Americans leaving the South and Puerto Ricans arriving from the island. However, as the “new immigrants” sparked by the 1965 Hart-Cellar Act began to arrive, Philadelphia was rarely their destination. As late as 1980, only two percent of the adult population of the region were post-1965 immigrants.

Philadelphia has suddenly become an immigrant region. While Philadelphia had previously lagged behind other major American cities in attracting immigrants; during the 1990s, the foreign-born as a proportion of the metropolitan area’s population increased from 6.8 to 8.6 percent. In the first five years of the 21st century, Philadelphia’s foreign-born increased to 9.4 percent of the metropolitan area’s population.

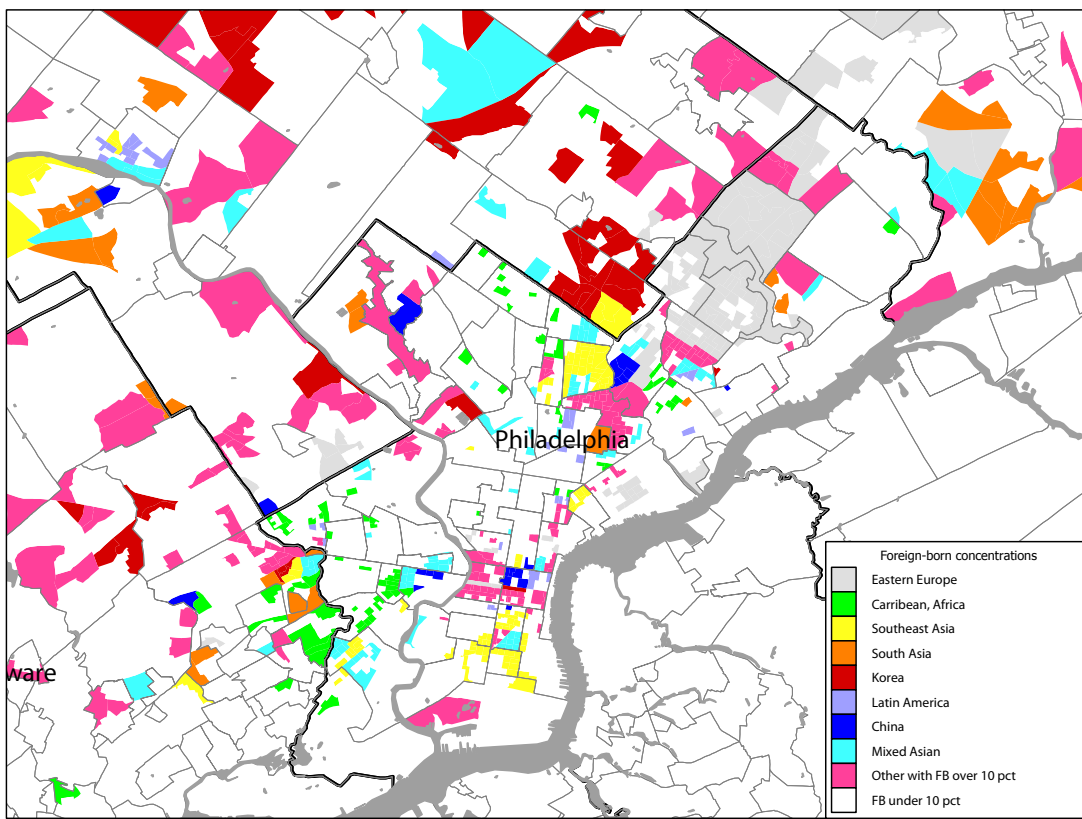
Immigration has increased across the metropolitan area. Before 2000, Center City was the strongest magnet for foreign-born residents, but in the last five years, other neighborhoods and communities have increased their immigrant population. In 2000, 14 percent of Center City adults, 11 percent of other Philadelphians, and 8 percent of suburban residents were foreign-born. Five years later, the foreign-born Center City population remained steady, while it increased to 14 percent of the rest of the city and to 9 percent of the rest of the metro area.

Immigrants are concentrated at both the top and the bottom of the economic ladder. For example, although Asian immigrants are more likely than the general public to have less than a high school degree, they are also more likely to have a college degree. Part of this diversity is a product of differences between groups. South Asians and East Asians, for example, are more likely to have a college education, while Southeast Asians are more likely not to have a

high school degree. But there is significant variation *within* groups as well. For example, 35 percent of Vietnamese immigrants did not complete high school, while 19 percent have at least a bachelor's degree.

At the same time, many immigrants have a hard time translating educational achievement into economic benefits. Their educational qualifications sometimes are "lost in translation," not serving as a gateway to better paying jobs. Command of English and discrimination also play a role. Although foreign-born Asians are much more likely to have a college degree and work in a professional or managerial occupation, they are slightly less likely than other college-educated groups to earn high incomes. African immigrants, another anomaly, have roughly the same percentage of college graduates as the population as a whole but are much more likely to have low-incomes and work in low-paying manual occupations.

Concentrations of foreign-born residents, metropolitan Philadelphia, 2005



As in other cities, immigrants have clustered throughout the region, a reflection of refugee resettlement services as well as labor market and housing conditions. Straddling the city's boundary with Montgomery County is one of the most diverse areas with Eastern Europeans, Asians, and Latin Americans living in proximity.

Source: SIAP

IMMIGRANT CULTURAL EXPRESSION FACES INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS

Immigrants often turn to the visual and performing arts to make sense of their changing environment. Some groups form organizations based on their cultural identity. In Philadelphia, for example, a Cambodian dance group was founded by a former refugee to keep alive a court dance tradition endangered by both Khmer and American societies. Other immigrant groups—often second-generation and U.S. educated—embrace cultural forms that merge old and new artistic forms. The Asian Arts Initiative, for example, combines an interest in traditional cultural forms with developing ways of expressing the challenges of Asian Americans in contemporary America.

Cultural expression is not a simple commodity. Through the process of cultural engagement, migrants define who they are. While for mainstream groups cultural participation means getting consumers to buy tickets and attend events, for migrants, culture is central to their need to define their place in a new society.

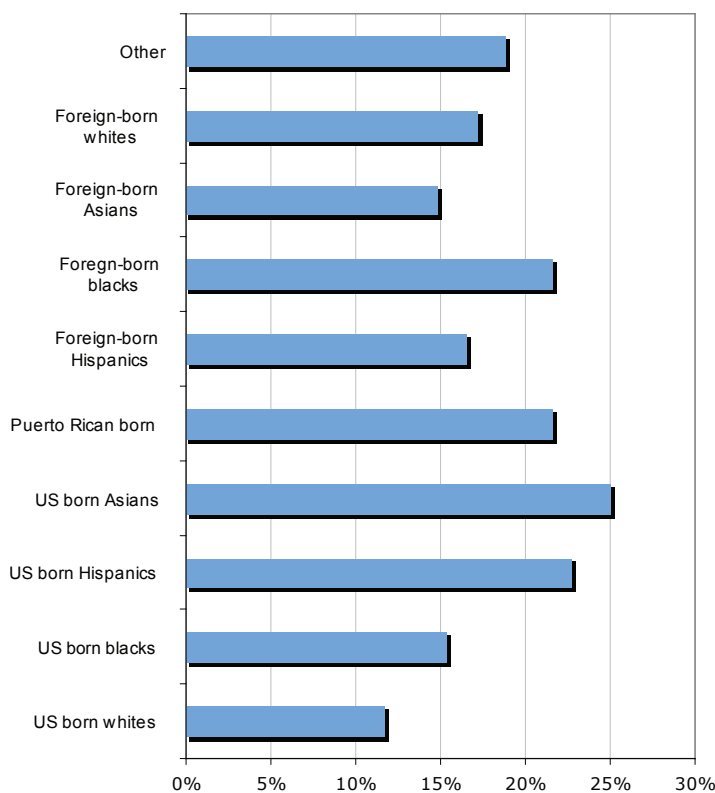
The centrality of the arts to migrants’ struggle for identity is itself a source of friction with the larger society. For migrants seeking to recapture a lost past or forge a new hybrid present, the arts are serious business. By contrast, for many members of the US-born mainstream, migrant cultures simply expand their consumer choices. Thai food, a Latino band, and an exhibit of African art provide them with new diversions for a Friday evening or Sunday afternoon.

Yet, the seriousness with which many migrants engage the arts presents an opportunity. Migrants face a host of institutional barriers, not only in the arts but in education, employment, and health care as well. The arts often serve as a “hook,” a place of connection between newcomers and mainstream institutions. Once these links are forged, the arts could also serve as a means of overcoming other barriers to access and assimilation.

Although the arts and culture are important to immigrants, many immigrant artists and practitioners face challenges in finding outlets and venues that embrace their concerns. Existing cultural organizations are often slow to respond to new populations, immigrants included. Most importantly, the unique institutional arrangements of the American cultural sector—based primarily on the link between private philanthropy and nonprofit organizations—are often unfamiliar and confusing to newcomers to the U.S. These two issues—the rigidity of existing organizations and the primacy of nonprofits—continue to define the cultural experience of immigrant communities.

While immigrants often engage in cultural expression that is central to their identity, they are less likely to take advantage of established cultural organizations. This pattern of high cultural engagement and low formal participation showed up in a 2004 survey undertaken by SIAP in collaboration with Alan S. Brown

Percent of college-educated persons with low income, by nativity, metropolitan Philadelphia, 2005

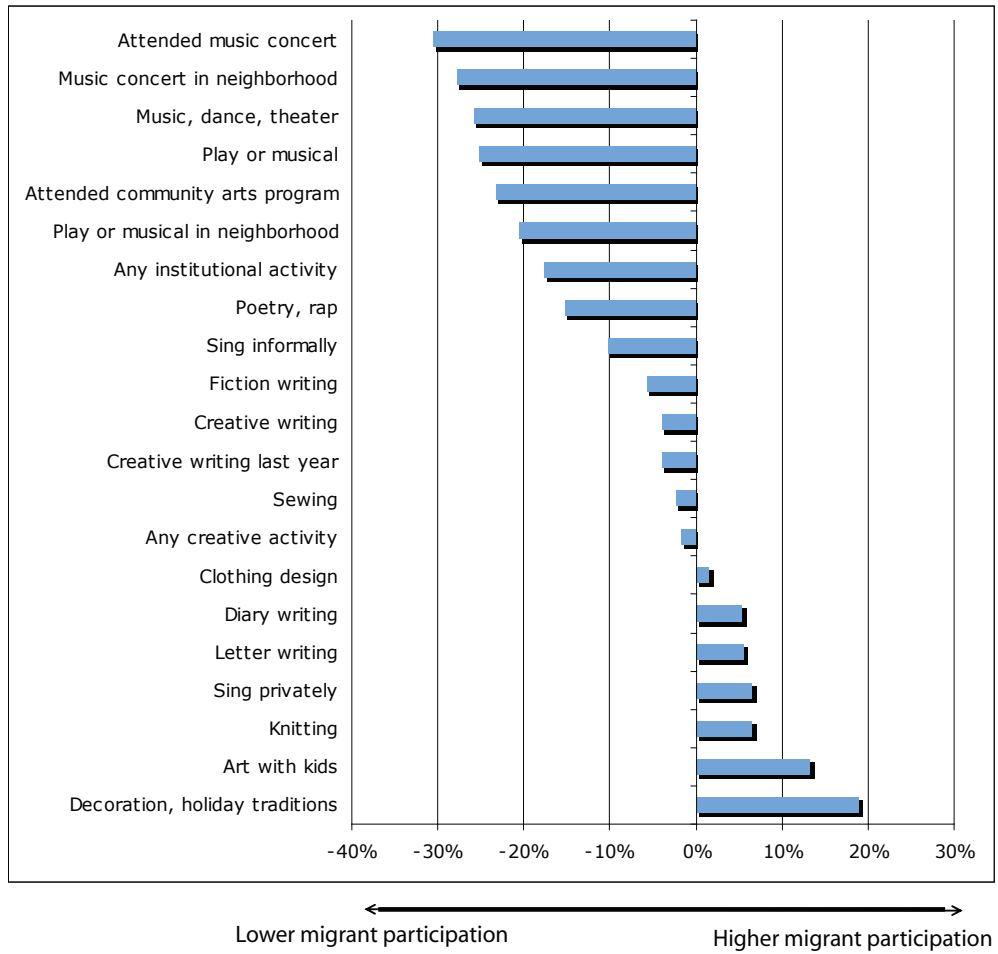


Many immigrants have difficulty translating their educational attainment into well-paying jobs.

Note: Low income is defined as a total personal income of less than half of the metropolitan area average.

Source: SIAP

Difference between cultural participation of foreign-born and U.S.-born residents, North Philadelphia and Camden, 2004



Compared to US-born residents, migrants are as or more likely to participate in informal creative activities but much less likely to attend formal cultural programs.

Source: SIAP with Alan S. Brown and Asso./Audience Insight

and Associates, in two low-income sections of metropolitan Philadelphia. The survey discovered that residents were heavily involved in creative activities ranging from doing arts with children to painting and writing to handicrafts. Indeed, across a range of informal creative activities, immigrants were often more involved than US-born respondents. During the previous year, the average immigrant had participated in 3.2 creative activities, significantly more than the figure for US-born respondents (2.8).

When we turn to organized cultural activities, however, it is a different story. Where 56 percent of US-born respondents had attended a concert in the previous year, only 25 percent of immigrants had done so. Two-thirds of US-born residents had attended a music, dance, or theatre performance, compared to only two-fifths of immigrants. Overall, immigrants attended just over half as many formal cultural events as residents born in the United States.

Immigrant artists, like participants, are more likely to engage in informal cultural settings. The informal cultural sector (including unincorporated groups and public settings) was the venue for just over 11 percent of all cultural projects included in a survey of metropolitan Philadelphia artists. Yet, among immigrant artists, fully a quarter (25%) of projects were in the informal sector, including festivals, performances in public places, and less formal settings.

Finally, formal cultural participation in immigrant neighborhoods is significantly lower than in similar but predominantly US-born neighborhoods. This is based on analysis of participant records of roughly 75 cultural organizations in metropolitan Philadelphia. Although masked to some extent by the clustering of many immigrants in Center City—the part of the region with the highest level of formal cultural participation, neighborhoods

Migrant cultural engagement in metropolitan Philadelphia

This brief uses three types of evidence—a small-area database of cultural participation, a survey of residents of North Philadelphia and Camden, and a survey of artists living or working in the metropolitan area—to explore immigrant cultural engagement.

Taken together, SIAP's evidence on artists and cultural participants paints a portrait of immigrants who are positively oriented toward cultural expression but frustrated by institutional, spatial, and socio-economic barriers.

Regional participation database

The primary source of data on migrant cultural engagement is SIAP's participation database of over 200,000 individuals associated with nonprofit cultural organizations in the Philadelphia region. By geo-coding and aggregating these data to the census block-group, we are able to examine the relationship between the concentration of foreign-born residents and other social indicators.

The analysis shows a significant relationship between a neighborhood's concentration of immigrants and its overall level of cultural participation. Whether we examine block groups in Center City, the rest of Philadelphia, or the suburbs, we find that an increase in the concentration of foreign-born is associated with a decline in formal cultural participation.

Neighborhood resident survey

In 2004, in collaboration with Alan S. Brown and Associates, SIAP conducted a survey of North Philadelphia and Camden, New Jersey, low-income communities with a high proportion of African American and Latin American residents. The survey asked approximately 600 residents how creative and cultural activities fit into their lives in these communities.

One important finding was that low-income urban residents are deeply involved in informal social interaction. Much of the local cultural life surrounds homes, public spaces, churches, and for-profit establishments such as nightclubs. Overall, informal social involvement was the typical way that North Philadelphia and Camden residents engage in the arts and culture.

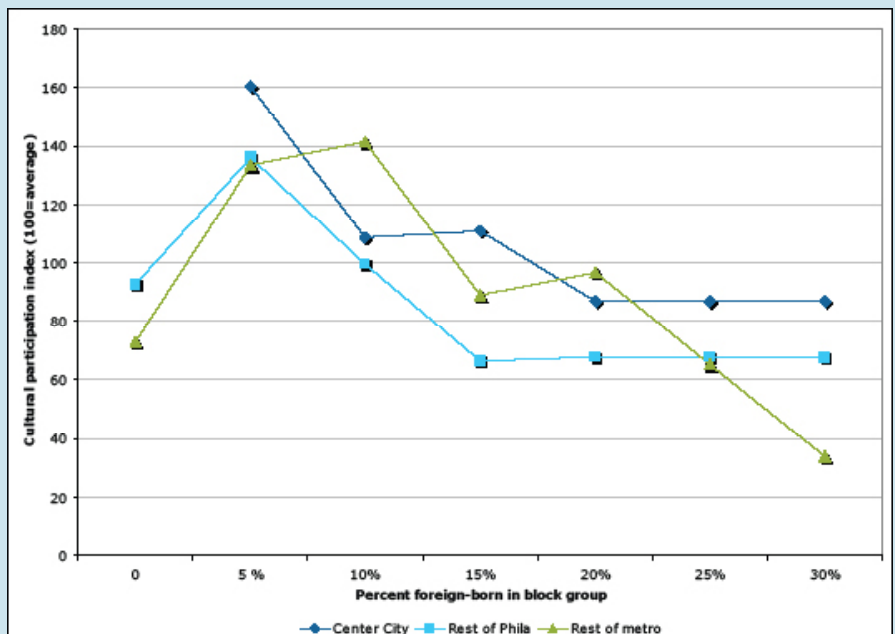
Generally speaking, migrants were at least as involved in informal social interaction as US-born residents. Migrants faced no disadvantage in pursuing informal creative and cultural activities. By contrast, newcomers in low-income neighborhoods were much less likely to participate in formal cultural activities.

Regional artist survey

Immigrant artists, like immigrant cultural participants, are less likely than US-born artists to engage in institutional settings. This finding is drawn from a 2004 survey of artists living in the Philadelphia metropolitan area. Of the over 1,000 projects with which respondent artists were involved during the previous year, 36 involved foreign-born artists.

Most of the projects reported by US-born artists were in the nonprofit sector (31%) or the commercial sector (29%). Only about 11% of their projects were in the "informal" sector—for example, using a public space or working with an unincorporated association or group. By contrast, 25% of immigrant artists' projects were in these informal settings. After nonprofit organizations, informal groups or settings were the most common host of foreign-born artists' projects.

Relationship of cultural participation to foreign-born representation in neighborhoods, metropolitan Philadelphia, 2004



Whether in Center City, elsewhere in Philadelphia, or the suburbs, as the concentration of foreign-born residents increases, a neighborhood's formal cultural participation declines.

Source: SIAP

Tour of the East Festival, Chinatown Philadelphia, 2007

Photo: Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia



The Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia integrates traditional culture and public programs with education, health, and social services for Cambodian-Americans.

with a significant concentration of immigrants have lower cultural participation rates than similar neighborhoods with few immigrants.

Taken together, what we know about the cultural engagement of artists and residents leads to a clear profile of migrant culture in Philadelphia. Migrants are deeply involved in culture, especially in informal social settings. But this involvement does not translate into higher rates of formal cultural participation. As a result, migrant artists and cultural participants often create their own institutions and venues at the edge of the established arts scene. In doing so, they have helped shift the balance between the nonprofit cultural sector and the commercial and informal sectors.

HOW IMMIGRANTS ARE CHANGING “MAINSTREAM” CULTURE

For immigrants, American mainstream culture presents a variety of barriers. As with any vocation, social networks are critical to success. Immigrant artists, in particular, upon moving to the United States leave behind a complicated set of connections developed over their entire professional lives.

What’s more, the “rules of the game” for the cultural sector are very different in the United States than they are in other places in the world. Finally, those “rules” are changing rapidly, so even as migrants learn rules, they are no longer what they once were.

The most puzzling part of the American cultural scene is the close link between organized philanthropy and nonprofit institutions. In many countries, government plays a more critical role in supporting creative expression. In other places, artists are essentially another kind of artisan, producing work and selling it to customers. In either case, the experience of creating art and supporting oneself is far different than in the United States.

In the U.S., during most of the years since World War II, nonprofits were at the center of cultural policy. Tax law required foundation support for the arts to flow to nonprofits, and government support was typically directed at the same organizations. As a result, within a few decades, the American arts scene was increasingly dominated by these institutions. In Paul DiMaggio’s memorable phrase, cultural policy was about “encouraging small organizations to become larger and large organizations to seek immortality.”

During the 1990s, this trend came to an end. First, the “culture wars” had a major impact on public support for the arts. The National Endowment for the Arts saw its budget cut in real terms and was subject to a new level of Congressional scrutiny. Philanthropies, meanwhile, found themselves constrained by their own success. As the number of established nonprofit cultural organizations grew, funders were facing more demands to sustain existing organizations while still investing in new ones. As a result, funders began to encourage a turn among nonprofits toward “marketization.” No longer was it enough to demonstrate a worthwhile purpose; a nonprofit needed to prove that it had a market for its services and could use its market to generate earned income.

The shift toward marketization encouraged major cultural organizations—which had the largest “markets” and greatest potential for generating earnings—to function more like for-profit firms. A Rand Corporation report, in fact, went so far as to suggest that the differences between large commercial and large nonprofit organizations has essentially disappeared.

At the other end of the spectrum, small, voluntary organizations that cater to local or specialized groups have proliferated. These groups—many of them part of the participatory, “informal” cultural sector—are motivated more by the interests and commitments of their members and less by

El Colobó garden with African Village and Story Telling Room, North Philadelphia



Photo Credit: Norris Square Neighborhood Project

El Colobó celebrates the African heritage of Puerto Rican culture. The community gardens cultivated by the Grupo Motivos of the Norris Square Neighborhood Project teach about the culture, agriculture, and culinary arts of Africa and the Caribbean.

conventional organizational concerns like the strength of their boards or the growth of their revenues. Thus a new “organizational ecology” is reshaping the cultural sector. Instead of the traditional distinction between a nonprofit sector producing “high arts” and a for-profit sector producing “mass entertainment,” the contemporary arts world appears to be divided into large vs. small organizations that cater to broad vs. niche markets. Mid-sized nonprofits which have neither the market reach of large organizations nor the flexibility of smaller ones, have suffered most from this new reality.

By the early 21st century, the cultural sector had a new ecology. As nonprofit cultural organizations lost their centrality, new institutions gained in significance. Commercial cultural firms—ranging from large regional presenting groups to small community dance schools—are now more numerous than their nonprofit equivalents. At the same time, informal or amateur groups and associations play a significant part in the cultural scene. Individual artists—who in the new cultural labor market are less likely to secure full-time positions—now may work for a nonprofit in the morning, a for-profit in the evening, and balance a nonarts job to pay the rent. This new ecosystem places greater value on connections between institutions—partnerships, collaborations,

and resource pooling—in the production and consumption of the arts and culture.

Because immigrant culture tends to be embedded in other social concerns, community centers that don’t do arts exclusively are often central to cultural expression in immigrant neighborhoods. Mutual aid associations and multi-purpose agencies provide social support and access to services as well as a venue for cultural expression. For some groups, like Grupo Motivos, this may lead mainstream cultural organizations and funders not to recognize their role in the cultural life of their communities. Immigrant-serving groups that view culture as entwined with daily life and its challenges may be seen as “just” a social service agency.

These translation problems prevent migrants from engaging mainstream cultural forms. Instead, immigrants often develop their own institutions, relying on self-help and markets to sustain them. The stories of African and Latino artists discussed here (see boxes on pages 9-10) provide examples of how immigrants have adapted to these realities, often by developing informal cultural organizations.

Immigrant arts have accelerated the growth of the informal sector. Studies of immigrant arts in Chicago and Silicon Valley reinforce the findings from research on Philadelphia about the importance of the informal sector to immigrant cultural expression. The Chicago study found that informal settings serve a bridging role between the private world of culture at home and the formal cultural institutions. In a recent study, the Field Museum team examined the role of the arts and culture in building social networks and redefining the identities of Mexican immigrants in Chicago as well as transnationally. An earlier Silicon Valley study had discovered that informal culture both contributed to community self-identity *and* linked immigrant communities to the wider social structure. Chicago and Silicon Valley immigrants not only made use of the informal cultural sector but were critical to its expansion.

Immigrants—because of their social marginality—look to informal culture more than residents born and raised in the United States. Yet, by doing so, immigrants are changing the content and forms of cultural expression for us all.

Summer Fest 2006, African Cultural Alliance of North America (ACANA)



Photo: African Cultural Alliance of North America

The African Cultural Alliance of North America (ACANA) in Southwest Philadelphia supports African artists and artisans and provides social and cultural services to help immigrants and refugees adapt to their new community.

The best example of this strategy is the settlement house movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Founded by upper-class men and women, the settlement house ideal was to provide a space within working class immigrant communities where differences of class and culture could be overcome through personal contact.

Settlements frequently fell short of their

IMMIGRANT ARTS AND COMMUNITY WELL-BEING

Immigrants face a variety of challenges when relocating to the United States. Everyday concerns—employment, housing, education, and health care—of course are on their minds. For low-income migrants who in the past relied on informal social networks to secure these necessities, daily life can pose overwhelming challenges. In a broader sense, how immigrants redefine themselves and their relationship to their family, current community, and country of origin is central to their ability to function successfully in their new home, whatever their long-term intentions.

These two elements of adaptation—everyday necessities and self-identity—feed off one another. Difficulties in pursuing the basics of life—finding a job, enrolling kids in a good school—often gnaw away at the self-confidence of immigrants, causing them to question their competence.

The arts can help bridge these two spheres of adaptation. The cultural world that migrants have made provides a lens through which they make sense of the world around them. Mutual aid associations that spring up in immigrant communities almost always use cultural programs as one means of attracting clients and highlighting their wider range of services.

Indeed, the arts have served as a hook for connecting immigrants throughout American history.

ideals. Many who ran them saw immigrants not just as different but as coarse and ignorant. Efforts to provide opportunities often turned into campaigns to “improve” immigrants by “Americanizing” them. Yet, the shortcomings of settlement houses should not obscure their important role in the adaptation of an earlier generation of immigrants to life in the United States.

Located in big cities’ receiving neighborhoods, settlements provided immigrant families with concrete health, housing, educational, and employment services. Virtually every settlement house ran a “recreational” program that included cultural opportunities. Settlement Music School and Fleisher Art Memorial in Philadelphia, for example, grew out of the cultural programs offered by settlement houses.

In today’s Philadelphia, the challenge of forging links between immigrant communities and existing institutions can be seen in the lack of fit between the distribution of social services and where immigrants live. The current social service system was structured during the 1960s and 1970s in response to the needs of US-born consumers. Even today, social service agencies are disproportionately located in Center City and North and West Philadelphia. Yet, these service concentrations fit poorly with the neighborhoods where the city’s newest migrants have settled—notably Northeast, East, South and Southwest Philadelphia as well as the suburban counties (see map on page 2). *Continued on page 11.*

African and Caribbean culture and community in Philadelphia

The rise of a significant Caribbean and African community in Philadelphia has created a complicated dynamic within the city's large African American community. Four decades of interest in African culture among many US-born blacks created a market for black immigrant artists and facilitated immigrant integration into the African American community. The rise of hip-hop culture, however, has increased tensions between US-born and immigrant youth. Meanwhile, a generation of black cultural institutions—and those they employ—struggle with declining markets and a precarious future.

Since the 1960s the rediscovery of black Americans' African roots laid the foundation for many cultural organizations. Two early Philadelphia artists were drummer Robert Crowder and dancer-choreographer Arthur Hall. Crowder, "searching for our lost heritage," studied Haitian, Brazilian, and African drumming from the 1940s to the '60s and in the 1970s founded the Kulu Mele African American Dance Ensemble. Now nationally known, its performances "are authentically costumed and choreographed to convey ... the meanings of dancing and drumming in the African societies from which these traditions come." Philadelphia practitioners of African arts continue to apprentice with West African, Brazilian, and Caribbean artists.

During the 1950s and '60s, Arthur Hall trained and performed with Ghanaian Saka Acquaye and other dancers including Lone Nash. In 1969 Hall founded the Ile Ife Center in North Philadelphia. He offered classes for residents of all ages in dance, percussion, and stilt-walking and started a company that performed across the US, Europe, and Africa. In the early 1980s Hall and colleagues developed a plan for an "African Village," a grassroots community and economic development agenda. Civic leaders, however, viewed Ile Ife with suspicion. Compounded by Hall's personal troubles, the center closed in 1985.

The most visible continuity of Philadelphia's Africanists is the annual June ODUNDE festival to celebrate the Yoruba New Year. Founded in 1975 by South Philadelphian Lois Fernandez, ODUNDE starts with a procession to the Schuylkill River where a Yoruba-initiated priest makes an offering of flowers and fruit to the river goddess Oshun. Following the ceremony is a street festival that annually attracts many thousands of people with music, dance, and vendors from West Africa, the Caribbean, and Brazil.

ODUNDE, where many African artists perform, has served as a bridge between African Americans and artists who arrived in the West African migrations to Philadelphia in the 1990s. The Philadelphia Folklore Project too has played a significant role in forging connections between foreign-born and native artists and between immigrant artists and local communities through initiatives like Philly Dance Africa, Artists in Exile exhibitions, and an African refugee oral history project.

Still, class and generational differences have complicated the relationship of US- and foreign-born blacks. The rise of hip-hop culture has eclipsed the search for African roots as a central theme of black cultural expression. By the same token, although immigrants do engage in hip-hop, many Africans devoted to traditional cultural forms see it only as commercial art.

While an older generation might look to African immigrants as bearers of a treasured cultural legacy, urban youth tend to view black immigrants as competitors, resulting in tensions and even violence. Low-income African Americans, in particular, resent the newcomers for the special services and job opportunities they perceive afforded to immigrants and refugees.

Cultural and identity politics are likewise fraught with tension. Despite a generation dedicated to teaching African and African American history, black youths accept mainstream views of Africa. "Africa is looked at as a destitute continent where people are not supposed to know anything," explains one South African artist. "People assume that you are primitive."

Philadelphia's African American cultural institutions reflect these demographic and cultural changes. The African legacy and the story of enslavement, endurance, and liberation were the mainstays of the major institutions. Without reliable support by young Philadelphians, however, facilities like the African American Museum in Philadelphia and the New Freedom Theatre have struggled for audience and solid financial footing. These established organizations — joined by new settings like Art Sanctuary, Scribe Video Center, and the African Cultural Alliance of North America and a younger generation of black artists — may bring a new vitality to Philadelphia's black cultural scene.

Latin American culture and community in Philadelphia

Philadelphia's Latin American community illustrates the gap between broad cultural engagement and narrow institutional connections. The Latino community of Philadelphia has been predominantly Puerto Rican since World War II. In the 2000 census, three-fourths of the city's Latinos identified as Puerto Rican. Recently, however, the community has become more diverse. Between 2000 and 2005, using official figures, Mexicans doubled from 6,000 to 12,000. A growing number of newcomers are Central and South Americans. Many have settled along Fifth Street in North Philadelphia.

The barrio along North Fifth Street has created the opportunity for a distinctive form of Latino cultural expression, the transformation of public space. One element of this transformation is the use of murals in the built environment. The city's active Mural Arts Program has produced over 2,000 murals during the past two decades. But mural making in Philadelphia's Latin American neighborhoods has spilled out from the confines of the city program. Murals have played a role in political mobilization—as in many Latin American countries—as well as in a booming commercial mural industry that often memorializes young men killed in gang and drug violence.

This crossing of established boundaries—such as the merging of official, commercial, and informal approaches to murals—is a defining characteristic of the Latin American cultural community. It has led to some striking “public-private partnerships,” as described by an artist employed by a local community development corporation. Commenting on the lack of galleries for a monthly evening arts walk, he noted:

So, we have been setting up exhibits within the businesses themselves. For example, in [a] Gym, a beautiful old factory space, they put art on the walls and along the perimeters of the gym. In the same building on the first floor, where we used to have a bakery, the sitting area was turned into a gallery. ... Even [a local politician] has turned his reception area into a venue for exhibition. Now a new neighbor, [a] Health Clinic, has physically designed its lobby area to be a host, sponsor, and community partner for [the event].

Taller Puertorriqueno was founded in 1974 as part of the emerging expression of Puerto Rican cultural identity. Since its beginning, Taller has defied simple nonprofit categories. As a community arts center, Taller offers children's and youth's arts classes and amateur performances. Yet, with its gallery, bookstore, and theater, Taller is also an intellectual and cultural center for the region's Hispanic community. Its annual symposium on race and class in the Latin American community and sponsorship of mind-bending avant garde events (like a Chino-Latino exhibition of Latin American arts influenced by Asian cultural forms or Naylamp's performance of the Sufi classic, *The Conference of Birds*, performed in Spanish) take it well beyond easy classification. Taller serves as conduit for artists and informal cultural groups that cannot receive funding on their own. Taller's diverse programming and partnerships draw participants from throughout the region, over three-fourths coming from outside the neighborhood.

Grupo Motivos, a program of the Norris Square Neighborhood Project, is typical of the lack of fit between migrant cultural expression and local cultural institutions. The women of Grupo Motivos enlisted the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society to help establish community gardens growing chiles, yucca, and pigeon peas. To teach second and third generation Puerto Ricans about their Island as well as their African heritage, they run environmental education and cooking classes. They have built a replica of a rural home from 1940s Puerto Rico as a mini-museum furnished with objects from that era. They have also built an “African Village” with stucco huts, an outdoor kitchen, and a garden of vegetables native to Africa.

Despite international recognition by environmental and women's groups, Grupo Motivos remains a grassroots organization for which women's rights, cultural preservation, and social justice remain central. The group's resistance to American market models of neighborhood engagement and its integration of culture with gardening, anti-drug campaigns, and political action makes it difficult to classify. Indeed, despite the centrality of culture to its program, Grupo Motivos has generally been overlooked by community arts funders.

Whether it is place-making, creating venues for artists, or cultural programming, Latin Americans have found ways to bring their culture to the work of community building that defy convention and outsiders' expectations of “disadvantaged” communities.

Certainly, location is not the only barrier to linking migrants with the services they need. It is simply one more hurdle to cross in remaking their lives in a new home.

Cultural programs continue to offer a unique means of helping immigrants connect to services. In contrast to orthodox social services, which are usually associated with some problem or deficit, cultural opportunities tap talents and nurture strengths, something of which both the provider and the recipient can be proud. Cultural engagement can promote an assets-based strategy for expanding opportunities for immigrant communities to link to a wider range of services.

CONCLUSION

The connections between immigrants, culture, and social services have important implications for residents throughout the city and region. Immigrant adaptation to institutional barriers has already affected the structure and composition of the cultural sector. At the same time, emerging cultural organizations have helped connect immigrants to other services they need. Generally however, existing social service providers are poorly positioned to reach immigrant consumers.

Philadelphia is only beginning to consider how it might better attract and retain new residents. As government and philanthropy rethink their policies toward immigrants, they need to keep in mind the connections between migrants, culture, and communities. Investments in cultural engagement that ignore the profound impact of migrants on this sector are likely to reduce their effectiveness. The city's social service system needs better data and assessment of how to serve its newest residents. Part of that solution will rest on understanding the central role of cultural expression in the collective lives of immigrant communities.

"Liberty Forsaken," Philadelphia



Photo: Domenic Vitello

This "permission piece" painted by a team of graffiti muralists from North Philadelphia, Europe, and the Caribbean critiques U.S. treatment of immigrants, people of color, and graffiti artists.

St. Augustine Church, Old City Philadelphia



Photo: Scribe Video Center

Philadelphia's Filipino-Americans—those whose ancestors have been in the U.S. for generations as well as immigrants—have played a key role in the rebirth of 18th century St. Augustine's, a story told in a documentary by the Filipino American National Historical Society with Scribe Video Center.

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For a full literature review, see “Culture and Urban Revitalization: A Harvest Document” (SIAP, January 2007).

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About The Reinvestment Fund

TRF is a national leader in the financing of neighborhood revitalization. A development financial corporation with a wealth building agenda for low- and moderate-income people and places, TRF uses its assets to finance housing, community facilities, commercial real estate and businesses and public policy research across the Mid-Atlantic. TRF conducts research and analysis on policy issues that influence neighborhood revitalization and economic growth both to help it identify opportunities to invest its own resources and to help public sector and private clients with their own strategies to preserve and rebuild vulnerable communities.



About Social Impact of the Arts Project

SIAP is a policy research group at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy & Practice. Since 1994 SIAP has conducted research on metropolitan Philadelphia to explore the structure of the creative sector, the dynamics of cultural participation, and the relationship of the arts to community well-being. SIAP leads the field in the development of empirical methods for studying links between cultural engagement, community-building, and neighborhood revitalization.