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BOOK REVIEW FORUM

Rural History, Urban Students

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As a faculty member with a teaching load of four classes per semester at a public university, my approach to reading from *Dust They Came* by Jonathan H. Ebel and *Sowing the Sacred* by Lloyd Daniel Barba is born of the necessity of trying to streamline my workload as a teacher-scholar and bring new material to my students. My institution frequently ranks highly on lists that measure social mobility, largely because the students we admit are often among the least affluent in the state. It also ranks highly for diversity, as a Hispanic Serving Institute, and as the state university that leads the way in graduating Black students. But these students are also thoroughly urban, often with little travel experience beyond the Los Angeles metropolitan area. Histories of the state's agricultural regions, places they often imagine as barren land, are a harder sell. Our majors, however, are curious both about the lives of people that have not been well-documented and about the world outside of our geographic region, and these books as a pair, can satisfy that curiosity if I can present related themes that resonate with the students. I have found that looking at the institutions in these works (the government camp and the church) as ones meant to serve as examples of an idealized way of American life, thinking about the way such institutions often regulate the poor, and looking at how geography impacts experience are all key components of these works that might be interesting to students.

In *From Dust They Came*, Jonathan Ebel references the city on the hill, a biblical concept from the Sermon on the Mount that symbolizes a society meant to serve as an example to outsiders. In Los Angeles County, my students are surrounded by factions striving to be the leaders in some aspect of American life from entertainment to aerospace, from politics to labor, each building their version of a city on a hill. It strikes me that this concept, popularized by American Puritans, could apply to the visions of the subjects in both the works. The city on the hill carries a moral component, requiring its residents to live in a certain way as exemplars for the greater good of society. For Ebel's subjects, these are Okies who may be tied to the land, but they are not supposed to reek of the dirt. They were to maintain basic sanitation and seek permanent and steady work, leaving the fields. In *Sowing the Sacred*, Lloyd Barba's subjects have a harder time forming their city on the hill. The moral high point to which they must look is the church, and they make each church or temple the center of their life while they can before they must move on to the next job. The church however might have been the first institution there for these farmworkers, filling a spot that the government and labor unions had failed to fill. There is less of an expectation that their migratory labor will ever end, but the church as a broader institution, if they can keep it in their sights, can serve as a relief from the deprivations of life.

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If the church and the federal farm labor camp represent aspirational cities on a hill, the notion is somewhat belied by the poverty that marks the city. My students are often first-generation, Pell Grant recipients, and we maintain a food bank on campus. One day, as I clicked play on Ken Burns' *The Dust Bowl* documentary, students were passing around pieces of bread from a loaf they had acquired from the campus food bank. These students have become the raw materials for many university programs, some of which require intrusive overwatch in attempts to make sure they graduate. I think they'd be fascinated by Ebel's discussion of the camps in this way. We might think about these institutions in terms of redemption and damnation. For the Okies, if one reformed and followed the rules, they could stay in the camp. To not reform, to not do the shared labor around the camp, the two hours a week required, they would be expelled from the camp, damned to a roadside shanty. In this case, the Okies were regulated and subjected to programs designed either to educate or to coerce them into a higher standard of living or at least into maintaining the appearance of one. Barba's faithful are not subject to government oversight in the same way, instead, the church assumes that role. Building, maintaining, and attending services and activities at the church take up many of the waking hours of the faithful. In addition, the strict moral and behavior codes adopted by the saints served much of the same purpose as that of the federal camp regulators. Redemption and damnation here are much more spiritual than economic.

Both the government and church leaders were trying to raise the standard of life for constituents who were often struggling. However much of this work was done by women who had much of the burden of keeping their peers in line. Okie women were often asked to mentor younger women in the camps and to enforce sanitary regulations. For Barba's subjects, this work too often falls on women, whom he describes as bearing a triple duty of tending to the church, work, and children. Sometimes they profited from it, particularly those who sold the veils that women wore to church services. As both authors indicate, women sometimes cooperated with institutional leaders, while at other times, they pushed the boundaries of what was asked of them.

The works of Barba and Ebel here carefully examine how their subjects exercised agency and sought to limit institutional control in both obvious and subtle ways. For Ebel's subjects, this is particularly evident among the Pentecostals. If one belongs to a marginalized group, a church full of people with the same background means that they can be in leadership, be on the church board, be a deacon, etc. It gives the marginalized a measure of control over their own lives. In Black churches, this was training grounds for the long hard work of civil rights movements where folks began reading their town budgets like they did their church ones. For Ebel's subjects, it means challenging camp authority and continuing to attend Pentecostal services. One of the ironies of Ebel's history is that the camp managers of the federal labor camps did not figure out how to leverage Pentecostal morality codes to enforce camp ones. Camp managers were not fond of Pentecostal groups, partly because Pentecostal moral codes limited Okie's participation in camp activities like community dances. Barba discusses similar prohibitions for his Hispanic subjects but makes the point that such strict moral codes protected the women in the fields from what we'd now call sexual harassment. John Steinbeck's image of the Okies has, as James Gregory points out in *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (1989), set us up to think of the Okie in terms of crude sexuality. I have to wonder whether Okie Pentecostal women similarly sought to use holiness codes as a shield. For Barba's subjects, the challenge to authority is most evident in the women, who, kept out of the pulpit and most church leadership positions, created

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their own auxiliaries, such as the *Dorcas*, which allowed them to promote projects like missions as they saw fit.

Although these books are focused on institutional practices, both make clear that geography shaped the experiences. Here is where these works might shape some of my students' preconceived notions about California's Central Valley. Agriculture is key there, but as Ebel's work demonstrates, it is a land of corporate agriculture, not a land of small family farms. These farms require large numbers of workers during harvest time, but not so much the rest of the year. There is no incentive to build permanent dwellings and even less to create permanent institutional structures like schools and churches. Both the Okie and Latino farmworkers lived and worshiped in tents, with the farmworkers developing the term *carpa* to describe the partial tent structure used as a temporary facility for worship. This lack of permanent structures is not part of a barren landscape as my students might imagine, but rather of a landscape that is ever-shifting and changing as the next group of itinerant labor moves into the region.

For these people, water was a constant concern, and the issue of water access is a recurring theme for both authors. The 1920s and 30s were an interesting time for water access in California. Engineers in Southern California channelized the rivers so that they maintained their course. Irrigation systems were expanding, funded by federal dollars. Politicians in both the Northern and Southern parts of the states were funding damns for both farming and drinking water. The Spring Valley company damned up the Hetch Hetchy in Yosemite National Park for San Francisco, and not too long before that, William Mulholland had cried out "There it is! Take it!" as Los Angeles began to drain the Owens Valley to support unprecedented city growth. For Barba's subjects, this impacted baptismal practices. Pentecostals believe in adult baptism by immersion. Given the paucity of natural sites, it was perhaps only to be expected that they used irrigation ditches. Not perhaps the most physically cleansing of experiences, whatever the spiritual implications. These events, in public, due to the necessity of finding a deep enough body of water, allowed the church to stake its claim to the souls of the Latino farmworkers and made them visible in a way they may not have been otherwise. Ebel's focus on water is directed more toward its access within the camps. To have a sanitary unit with showers and toilets, and for a laundry facility to function properly, one needed water. One also had to control where that water went to avoid a mess in the camps. However, not all residents of the camp may have been familiar with these particular uses of water. In the long run, there were conflicts over the water these sites used, a matter that would later foreshadow the fight over building the World War II War Relocation Center of Manzanar on land Los Angles owned in the Owens Valley.

I should note that many of my students would find the religious aspects of these works interesting. Here, the focus on the Pentecostal faith is particularly key. Barba's book would be of interest to many because it challenges the traditional narrative of Latinos as predominately Catholic. Many of my students are very aware that the evangelicals among them are underrepresented in public life. Ebel's work shows how the government and evangelical religion have not always marched hand-in-hand, and illustrates why a church, even one with strict definitions of holiness, can be attractive to a marginalized population. In an era where Pentecostals and other evangelicals have support from the Republican party, this is something of a novel look at the history of religion for some of my students.

My students, curious and looking to learn more about under-represented groups, have sometimes complained about what I call deficit history: history where people of color and people in poverty make appearances in the historical narrative largely because of

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something they lack such as freedom, rights, and secure incomes. All too often, such histories focus on a lack of agency rather than on accomplishments. The works of Ebel and Barba here take two populations, both lacking privilege to some degree, and make clear that they worked to make the lives they wanted and that their Pentecostal faith was a key part of that experience.

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