Re-Thinking the 'Migrant Community'

A Study of Latin American Migrants and Refugees in Adelaide

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A thesis submitted for the award of Doctor of Philosophy
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7 November 2001
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ABSTRACT

What does it mean to be a Latin American in Adelaide? In what sense can we speak about Latin American migrants and refugees in Adelaide as members of an ‘ethnic/migrant community?’ These are the two fundamental questions that this ethnographic study attempts to answer and challenge in relation to the official multiculturalism discourse and popular representations of ‘migrants’ in Australia.

This thesis is based on 18-months of fieldwork conducted from 1997 to 1999 in various organisations, social clubs and radio programs that were constructed by participants and ‘outsiders’ as an expression of a local migrant community. The subjects of this dissertation are migrants and refugees from Latin America currently living in Adelaide.

This ethnographic study of the ‘Latin American community’ challenges the official view and representations of these migrants as ‘people of culture’ and as members of a homogenised ‘ethnic community’. The study looks at the different ways in which various social groups and individual migrants construct their localities and their particular identifications. Such processes are explained in relation to multicultural imageries and the ongoing relations with their homelands and the Latino diaspora.

Each chapter explores particular sites of communal performances and expressions that are central to the interpretation and experience of the local ‘community’. The analysis of such sites questions the official definitions of Latin Americans as members of a singular ‘ethnic/migrant community’ and looks at the ways in which such definitions are interpreted, negotiated and lived by these migrants. The notion of a ‘Latin American community’ and its cultural representations is not about maintaining ‘culture’. Rather it is about ‘culture’ and ‘identity’ being constructed as part of a migratory feeling of ‘being out of place’. What are often interpreted as nostalgic attempts by migrants to ‘stay the same’ need to be understood as part of the ongoing relations with the places of origin, reactions to multicultural images and policies, and the migratory desires for a ‘place’ and feeling of ‘home’ in the new context.