

ATALIA SHRAGAI, *Cold War Paradise: Settlement, Culture, and Identity Making among U.S. Americans in Costa Rica, 1945-1980*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2022.

This work began as a doctoral dissertation in History at Tel Aviv University after a backpacker's experience of Costa Rica's beaches and their inhabitants. It also reinforces this reviewer's belief that theory is best introduced to students by texts such as this. Rather than assigning manuals on research methods, highly abstract theories, and esoteric terminology, readings as intriguing and accessible as this one deploy the tools of the trade, modeling not just methods and theories but serving as an introduction to the fields they inform as well. They are uniquely able to draw students into an academic enterprise, whether history or anthropology, both fields fundamentally grounded in "learning by doing."

Seeing oneself, sociologically speaking, in a research project or book can either disqualify or engage any potential reviewer. Readers will have to judge for themselves which applies in this case, since for much of the past half century I too have been an episodic, fringe member of that amorphous or even dubious category, the "community" of U.S. Americans in Costa Rica.

Professor Shragai studies a very concrete topic, one readers might imagine as relatively small-scale given the size of the community and the brief time period covered. Along the way, they are introduced to a series of central questions and theories shared by anthropology, history, literature, and memory studies worldwide. This refreshing analysis offers concrete examples and interpretations of concepts such as positionality, ideology, dialogue, self-representation, community, and coloniality, to mention but a few of our vexed contemporary terms.

The work consists of an introduction, six substantive chapters, and an epilogue. Chapters 1 and 2 tackle the issues of who, how, and when these U.S. citizens arrived, settled, and (more often than not) left Costa Rica. The author deftly characterizes the various sites (beaches, jungles, frontiers, central valley cities, etc.) her informants called home. She pays attention not only to the surrounding environments, but to her informants' idealized understandings of them, and how interactions with both Costa Rican citizens and their fellow U.S. sojourners were structured in different contexts.

Chapters 3-6 offer conceptual explorations of "identity work" by her informants. "From Cowboys to the Guardians of Eden" focuses on how, until the 1960s or later, nature was coded as inherently Costa Rican, wild and undeveloped or backward, compared to the U.S. they believed they knew (or had fled, feeling they knew it all too well). Thereafter, these same spaces would be reimagined by some as an edenic nature, fortuitously undeveloped if not untouched. No longer positioned as would-be modernizers and developers, they were involved

no less directly now in protecting and preserving a pristine nature they had been fortunate enough to witness and inhabit.

“Becoming a U.S. Woman in Costa Rica” makes full use of the author’s disproportionate access to female informants and to scarce print sources, principally the archives of the English-language weekly, *Tico Times*, and its female proprietors/editors of the Dyer family. Here, one learns of the various iterations of the Women’s Club, its organizational struggles, activities, and self-representations. However, the archival source and its editors allow the author to explore in greater detail how U.S. women dealt with the changes in gender role and ensuing challenges after the 1960s. “Material Culture on the Move” develops in greater depth the dichotomous tropes of nature (Costa Rica) and civilization (U.S.) previewed in “From Cowboys to Guardians of Eden.” Worthy of its subtitle “Talismans of Difference,” this chapter makes inventive use of many of the material objects her informants carried with them and ascribed meanings to. The author wisely takes seriously the idea that “things,” not just people, have a history.

“Looking Back in Amazement,” the last of the six substantive chapters, develops a novel topic only hinted at earlier: how and why informants often convert the decades of time elapsed since their arrival into an Alice-in-Wonderland tale in which they appear back then as children or child-like. Whether self-congratulatory or self-evasive, Biblical trope borrowings or swashbuckling explorer/discoverer character types, the author dissects her informants’ “privileged immigrant” status as neither expats nor candidates for Costa Rican citizenship, just people living their lives, “getting by,” or sojourners with no concrete plans for future travel. Most readers will have no difficulty recognizing the “coloniality” of such a convenient suspension or lack of self-awareness, not unlike that form of “willful ignorance” routinely deployed in our contemporary politics and public life. However, one might highlight equally the quite vivid depiction of individual, personal memory as just as malleable and subject to self-interested or self-protective reframing as is any collective “historical memory.”

A work this intriguing inevitably raises questions and doubts, two of which I explore below. Shragai reflects critically on the preponderance of female informants and testimony and on her own positionality. However, her reliance on the *Tico Times* archive, and access to the Dyer family, is at the root of a perhaps needless separation of informants into two groups: those whose testimony is rendered with pseudonyms to protect their privacy, versus those who have appeared prominently in the print or photographic record and retain their individual identities. In addition to the Dyers, several other individuals’ high profiles made disguising their identity impractical if not impossible, ranging from Henrietta Boggs (President Figueres’s U.S.-born first wife) and the vari-

ous officers of the Women's Club, to authors like Darryl Cole-Christensen, or local eccentrics and celebrities like Captain Tom (Clairmont).

In following this practice as authors, are we satisfying a bureaucratic imperative unique to the performance of our own status as academics, members of the intelligentsia, itself only thinly disguised by the claim to "privacy"? In several different projects over the decades I have offered informants the option of anonymity, an offer almost never taken up. Indeed, informants have more often been either perplexed or mildly offended. Whether a reaction to some sense of being infantilized or "mined" for data, rather than being treated as adults with their own story to tell, most often with abundant pride in their experience and accomplishments, routine anonymity seems somehow out of place here. With many of the key informants identified by name, owing to their longstanding existence "in print," they occupy a different position from those given pseudonyms, while readers are being asked to explore their shared "identity work" and its underlying social ideologies. One wonders if the implied status differential may not have unintended consequences in today's polarized context, with many readers all too given to seeing ideology as something "others" have or suffer from.

A second critique has to do with readers' likely understandings of the concept of the "privileged immigrant." Its origins in both shared white supremacist and imperialist logics are clearly documented throughout this study. However, it also has some less visible ties to broader State-formation patterns in both the U.S. and Costa Rica, particularly in how each society created systems that can best be understood as succeeding precisely while systematically failing to regulate. Clearly a before and after moment can be seen in the development after the 1980s, in an era not covered in this study, of dual citizenship as a newly recognized right, for the first time granted to those who are neither "jet-set celebrities" nor major investors.

Over a century and a half Costa Rican authorities developed a regional and eventually nation-wide system heavily reliant on non-citizen labor forces, first West Indians and later Nicaraguans. These "non-privileged" immigrants' experience mirrored, in reverse, that of their white U.S. American counterparts in the sense that their access to legal residency or citizenship by birth or naturalization was systematically denied, simply because these processes were so onerous, lacking in transparency, and politically sensitive as to dissuade would-be applicants. Conversely, prior to the acceptance of dual citizenship, the Costa Rican state recognized that exerting any pressure on U.S. Americans to formalize their status would undermine the overarching goal of attracting them to Costa Rica in the first place, not unlike U.S. policy toward northern European immigrants in the homesteading era.

It goes without saying that U.S. white supremacist immigration patterns and systems prior to 1965 offer many other parallels. However, as serial immigrants ourselves whose families (Icelandic immigrants in the U.S., Jamaican immigrants in Costa Rica) have repeatedly experienced these processes at home and abroad, we have come to see their intended success as most visible in their failures to either require or to allow status changes. The institutional nesting of immigration and citizenship processes in bureaucracies directly responsive to partisan political intervention was no accident in either nation. Even restricting the comparison to the late Cold-War era, similarities abound. Without well-placed immigration lawyers or, eventually, high-level political allies, in both nations, routine documents were momentarily lost, and then only rediscovered as having been misplaced in response to a politically powerful figure making the inquiry. “Weak Stateness” can be found not just in neocolonial contexts, but in many a nook and cranny of powerful, imperial sites, where ambiguity and arbitrary decision-making serve a whole variety of ever-changing State interests.

Readers of this study will learn a great deal about how U.S. Americans in Costa Rica adapted to a State-sponsored succession of tolerant grey areas regarding their status. However, their own thoughts and feelings can never fully reveal its underlying logic or causes. Readers might be left to think that their reluctance to seek green card status or citizenship simply reflected their own privileged decisions or imperial preferences. On the contrary, the Costa Rican state has a centuries-long history of highly successful failures to regulate immigrants and their status, rivaling that of the U.S. itself.

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MARA POLGOVSKY EZCURRA. *The New Public Art: Collectivity and Activism in Mexico since the 1980s*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2023.

This well-conceived edited volume uses the narrative arc of developments in art, activism, and politics in Mexico, bookended by two devastating earthquakes (1985 and 2017), to explore the changing nature of public art in Mexico and challenge broader perceptions of public art and the public sphere more generally. It is organized around four sections, “New Muralisms,” “Feminist Publics,” “Antimonuments and the Undercommons,” and, finally, “Migrant Poetics and Capitalist Landscapes.” Each section contains contributions by academics in various fields, primarily art history but also anthropology, literature, and architecture. Some of the participating academics are also practitioners, curators, architects, and novelists. In addition to these—often quite theory-based—aca-