

From the beginning, open admission delivered on its stated goal. Young people who would typically have been denied admission to college enrolled and succeeded. The fraction of the cohorts who left with a BA was eleven percentage points higher than it would have been if admission required a B-minus or better high-school grade point average. African-American students gained the most, “Only 18 percent of the African American men and only 26 percent of the African American women who actually attended would have been admitted” (p. 188). You cannot earn the degree if you cannot get into the university; opening admission boosted BA attainment from 19 to 41 percent for African-American women in the study.

Employers did not discount CUNY degrees. Attewell and Lavin compare the returns to CUNY education with returns to college education nationwide as revealed in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY). For women with comparable high school records, the pay gap between those who completed the BA and those who dropped out was just as big in the CUNY data as in the NLSY data. Nor were CUNY degrees dismissed by other universities; nearly all CUNY women who went on for MAs and other advanced degrees got them at universities other than CUNY. Both the meaning and the value of a college education survived CUNY’s practice of taking all applicants.

Passing the Torch moves beyond the immediate goals of open admission to explore outcomes in the second generation. Most CUNY women went on to have children—some as students, some later in life. They raised their children the middle-class way by advocating for them in school and enriching them out of school with books, museums, sports, and music. The young people responded in the varied ways middle-class kids do. Today they are leading the mix of successful, mediocre, and frustrating lives that characterize college graduates’ children all across the nation. In short, the middle-class boost that a CUNY education represented for these women did not fade away; their children did not regress to the earlier patterns of their grandparents’ generation. Some questions remain. Did standards erode over time as charged? Were subsequent cohorts as fortunate as the first? Does CUNY’s success depend on New York’s scale and mass transit?

Can it be replicated elsewhere? These are issues for more follow-ups. For now, evidence trumps rhetoric and the evidence shows open admissions delivered on its promises.

Catching Hell in the City of Angels: Life and Meanings of Blackness in South Central Los Angeles, by **João H. Costa Vargas**. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006. 304pp. \$19.95 paper. ISBN: 0816641692.

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“Are you an authentic Black?” The question hounds Barack Obama, the presidential candidate or any person who veers from what is considered “the traditional” black identity. This question is addressed in João H. Vargas’s provocative book that weaves race, immigration, ideology, gender, and community activism into a rich account of how racial identity not only motivates, but also divides poor and middle-class blacks. Vargas’s emphasis on gender and economics especially points to fundamental differences within the black community, a theme often unexamined in the literature.

Catching Hell’s six-chapter ethnography is based in a community—South Central Los Angeles—where parenting, music, social interactions and community organizations serve as vehicles for social transformation. Vargas, a community activist prior to his research, moved into a South Central neighborhood in the early 1990s where he lived for two years and where gunplay is common and police helicopters routinely monitored his apartment complex. He befriends the residents whose lives prompt him to analyze the potential among this population to pursue social change. The first three chapters capture how black identity is affirmed through solidarity between poor mothers and community workers, and through shared musical expression. The next two chapters explore black identity as it creates spaces in which jazz and blues artistry are affirmed as blackness. In the last chapter, black identity operates as a mechanics for self-help, for the kind of transformation that carries the potential for social change.

Vargas presents fascinating portraits of four groups: women with drug problems, activists who fight against police brutality, former gang members who try to maintain a truce between the Bloods and the Crips, and musicians who perform in local clubs. In each case he describes the perceptions and the definitions of “blackness” these people use to cope with oppression.

The book’s most powerful instrument is the use of neighborhood maps to reflect the variety and complexity within the populations of both blacks and Latinos throughout the areas of Watts, Crenshaw, West Athens, and South Park. These neighborhoods of converted garages and homes protected by iron bars rank among the top four most crowded areas in the U.S. Vargas notes: “Social fault lines in South Central LA reflect both contemporary social and economic disparities and long-term struggles between and among blacks of different social groups, genders, and sexualities, places of residence, ages, political outlooks, and relations to the state” (p. 15).

Against this backdrop, Vargas, by applying both feminist and economic critiques, brings his compelling analysis of the conflicts between the more individualistic ideology of middle-class blacks and that of the poor. He notes the widely held notion that teenage pregnancy is a matter of choice and dysfunctional black mothers are the primary reason for poverty. Institutional racism is absolutely relevant to the residents he interviews, so too, in his view, is the apparent gender divide and the overwhelming masculinist approach. While it is true that black men are undereducated, unemployed, and dealing with the criminal justice system, “they still benefit from—and indeed are often the paradoxical victims of—patriarchy-informed controlling images insofar as their imposed and often-accepted representations situate them as necessary dominators in hierarchical relationships with others, black women included” (p. 23).

The question, Vargas contends, is that black identity has become a more complex issue than that borne of racial conflict. Black identity, so powerful before the Watts riots, has been weakened by larger social and economic changes taking place during the 1990s. The arrival of Mexican immigrants moving into South Central has forced blacks and Latinos to face one another across segregated

grids within the inner city. But rather than finding a basis for a powerful solidarity with those of other ethnicities and races, blacks have turned within their own community, clashing with Latinos.

In addition to the thought-provoking insights on black identity, the author is an excellent ethnographer who skillfully conveys the subtle dynamics of inner-city life. Noteworthy is his argument that the inner-city, with its diverse population of blacks and Latinos, welfare mothers, former gang members, and community leaders, is ripe for a progressive political movement. The women battle landlords, former gang members settle gang disputes, artists use music and poetry to address community struggles and activists demonstrate against Watts’s oppressive conditions—all in an attempt to change the quality of inner-city life. Yet, “the black radical tradition” of fighting against racism, is not enough. Vargas is right to argue that the inner-city can become a powerful political force in step with the black radical tradition that organized into, for example, the Black Panther Party and the civil rights movement.

Vargas’s message is that a perspective limited to race can never account for or resolve the vast landscape of gender and economic problems that has developed since the 1960s in South Central Los Angeles. This perspective also cannot acknowledge the experiences of the new inner-city residents until it creates a “permanent” and “open-ended dialogue” that addresses the needs of all residents (p. 19).

This provocative book is a page turner. Sociologists, students and anyone interested in the complexities of contemporary race and inequality issues should read this study.

Crossing the Ethnic Divide: The Multiethnic Church on a Mission, by **Kathleen Garces-Foley**. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007. 192pp. \$45.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780195311082.

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Crossing the Ethnic Divide is a welcomed addition to the growing volume of studies on the emerging multiethnic churches. With can-