

## Review Essay

**Harold A. McDougall. *Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community*. (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993) 244 pp., \$15.00 softbound. And, W. Edward Orser. *Blockbusting in Baltimore: The Edmondson Village Story*. (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1994) 241 pp., \$39.95 hardbound.**

This essay seeks to make a comparative review of two books: 1) Harold A. McDougall's, *Black Baltimore: A New Theory of Community*; and 2) W. Edward Orser's, *Blockbusting in Baltimore: The Edmondson Village Story*. The method of procedure used in this review essay will describe and evaluate the organizational structure of the books in a three-fold manner: 1) summary of the texts; 2) use of oral history in the texts; and 3) contribution of books to oral history literature and conclusion, drawing upon common themes between the two books.

### Summary

In reading *Black Baltimore* by McDougall, I found the book to be prolific, offering an alternative epistemology to conducting community studies. The central theme of this book focuses on the concept "Baltimore's Black Vernacular Community." The author refers to Black Vernacular Culture as, "Styles of speech, techniques for building relationships, and modes of networking" (McDougall, p. 2).

Equally important, the sub-title, *New Theory of Community*, incorporates and supplements the essential function of culture to this study. Indeed, culture is a primary variable in this book that provides a prism to examine the ethos, mythology, history, and motifs of African Americans in Baltimore, from the turn of the nineteenth century up to the 1980s.

Consequently, the relevance of culture is often times underscored in describing and evaluating the African American experience: thus, McDougall counters this point effectively, and creates a paradigm that locates Blacks in Baltimore from within their own human and historical experiences.

The author's use of oral historiography provides an overview of African American migration to Baltimore. This overview produces a context to explore the nature, cause and consequence of African Americans survival-advancement in Baltimore. Perhaps, McDougall's quest is to illustrate sign-posts that communicate an incentive of reaffirmation for African American self-help. From this historical overview, the author points out consistent patterns of adversity and struggle encountered by African Americans in their attempt to locate a niche within the economic, political, social, and public sphere of Baltimore.

Although Blacks were confronted with institutional and individual racism, they were indomitable and consistently agitated for justice and equality. Another example the author points out is that African Americans throughout history have transformed and transcended the political and social spheres of Baltimore: adopting ideologies such as DuBoisian or Washingtonism schools of thought (e.g., liberal versus conservative social and political thought). Nevertheless, themes such as self-help, collective-consciousness, and social responsibility were consistently agitated within the African American community, regardless of whatever ideology employed. The objective remained common "upliftment of the race."

McDougall critically and in detail examines the evolution and formation of Black communities in Baltimore, from the status of functional to dysfunctional communities. Significantly, throughout this book McDougall queries the stability of Black leadership and the collectivity of the Black masses in Baltimore to recognize a cultural, political, economic, and social mandate.

*Blockbusting Baltimore* is an extremely valuable resource concerning organization structure and formation of community-oral historiographic studies. William Orser describes this book as "a historical study of racial change in the Edmondson Village." The time period examined is 1910-1980. Paradoxically, the emphasis of this study is drawn on 1955-1965; this period accumulates whites leaving Edmondson Village and African Americans taking up occupancy in this community. Indeed, the latter is a period of protest and civil rights in American history.

The author queries articulations of the "mood, feelings, and reaction" of African American and Euro-American migrants existence and flight from the Edmondson Village. Equally important, Orser defines Blockbusting as "intentional action of a real estate operative to settle an African American household in an all-white neighborhood for the purpose of provoking white flight in order to make excessive profits by buying low from those who fled and selling high to those who sought access to new housing opportunities" (Orser, p. 4).

Orser throughout the book consistently addresses the unresolved issues concerning institutional and individual racism in Baltimore, as it affected housing, economics, politics, and social life. Ironically, in order

for blockbusting to exist in Baltimore, conventional wisdom of systematic subordination would have to be employed to insure the creation and consequence of subordinate group status. The author effectively shows patterns of this dilemma in the text. He adds that the evolution of Edmondson Village uniqueness was created by historiographic context, which eventually supported the concept of blockbusting.

### **Use of Oral History**

McDougall's use of oral history in *Black Baltimore* is extremely effective. Selection of resource personnel is balanced and represents African Americans across a spectrum of class levels. For example, the interview conducted with William Murphy, Sr., provided an abundance of oral historiography concerning economics, politics, and social class of the African American community in Baltimore. As an aside, the Murphy's are still considered an affluent African American family in Baltimore today. Other interviews were equally important and represented personnel from Black religious, fraternal, political, and social organizations. Altogether, McDougall has exhibited an alternative knowledge base in conducting community studies, use of oral history, and presenting critical query for the development and advancement of African Americans.

*Blockbusting Baltimore* uses an abundance of oral history. Orser points out in the preface that this study is based on thirty oral history interviews conducted over a ten year period. The personnel consisted of Black and White residents of Edmondson Village. Such in-depth analysis and use of oral historiography provides a prism to describe and evaluate the human experience in this community from a "shared authority." Collectively, the use of oral history in both books is effective and illustrates applied research and analytical tools for research and writing in theory, memory and methodology in oral history.

### **Contribution to Oral History/Conclusion**

Finally, the two books reviewed in this essay make a significant contribution to the literature and intellectual study of oral historiography. In general, the authors are successful in providing new material, new knowledge and new meanings for interpreting community studies. Even more important, McDougall and Orser indicate their interest and social interaction in Baltimore: therefore, this point is relative in locating their interpretative-analysis about culture, social and historical interaction of Black and White residents of Baltimore.

Furthermore, the authors' draw upon common themes of multiple articulations that locate issues such as culture, race, ethnic identity, class, education, and social stratification within this study. Simply put, from reading both books, I was challenged to answer two questions: 1)

How am I integrating this information into my knowledge base; and 2) Where does dialogue begin in examining race relations when groups view reality differently? Overall the two authors' attempts to critically discuss these issues is effective and provides me with a re-integrative factor in putting together ongoing analysis of new knowledge and consciousness.

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## Book Reviews

**Eve Harris (Director and Producer). *Secret Jews of the Hispanic Southwest*. Eve Harris, 568 12th Avenue, Apt. A, San Francisco, CA 94118; (415-387-7934). 1/2" VHS videocassette, 18:09 minutes. 1995. \$20.00 (includes shipping and handling).**

Although this film is short, it is sweet to the eyes and ears. The story is brief and may appear simple, but its ramifications are extensive, reaching back into the distant past and extending from the present into the future regarding complex matters of ethnicity and ethnic identities. The material is particularly significant to those involved in Hispanic and Judaic studies. Beyond those areas, however, the data present some challenges to definitions of ethnicity, the perceived longevity of certain group and individual ethnic identities, and our knowledge of the processes of culture change.

As implied in the title of the film, Harris is exploring individual and family identities that are, or have been until recently, held in secret. This situation, of course, sets some serious methodological limits to as full an examination as one would be able to conduct, for example, on Hispanics, American Indians, African American, Latvian Americans, or Jews who are not trying to conceal their identities. The circumstances also give rise to some controversies, often bitter, especially among certain Jewish scholars who essentially deny that secret Jews could exist in the American southwest. In some quarters, the investigation of such a possibility is almost taboo. On the other hand, the literature on secret Jews (also referred to as Hidden Jews, Crypto-Jews, or Marranos) in Spain, Portugal and Latin America is fairly extensive. Crypto-Judaism has continued to some degree in those areas and today individuals in considerable numbers are coming out of their clandestine closets. Is it impossible that similar processes are occurring today in the American southwest?

Despite these limitations, Harris gives a fascinating glimpse into this question. With funding from the Tucson/Pima Arts Council and the Tucson Community Cable Corporation, she interviews four informants who