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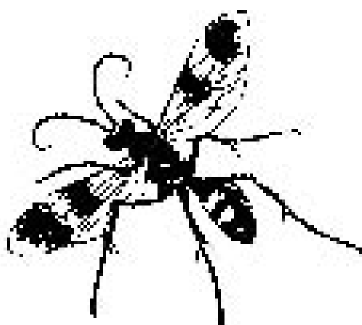

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Carey McWilliams and the magazine *Common Ground*

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> "Because ideas are or tend to be elusive and fragile, they must be captured in print. Appropriate forms must exist in which they find expression. And because new ideas, in the nature of things, do not always or usually attract large audiences, a diversity of small circulation media is needed to ensure their expression. The British and American experience would indicate that the intellectual magazines of limited circulation provide the best seed beds in which to plant and nurture ideas." ("The Importance of Ideas" 7).[1]

Carey McWilliams has been gradually acknowledged as one of the most important historians of California. He was also a prominent labor lawyer and activist, as well as an organic intellectual, as theorized by Antonio Gramsci – he was the Chief of the Immigration and Housing Department in California, under Popular Front governor Culbert Olson, in the early 1940s. He was moreover involved in famous legal cases of the time, from the Sleepy Lagoon to the Hollywood Ten. But his critical heritage is perhaps best remembered from his editorial work in New York leftist magazine *The Nation*, a position he held for twenty years (1955-1975) until shortly before his death in 1980. In addition to all this, McWilliams also gave a major contribution to ethnic studies, which has been greatly overlooked.[2]

It is the aim of this essay to highlight some of McWilliams's most important contributions regarding immigration history and ethnic studies in the U.S., in order to reinstate him as a reference within these fields. With this goal in mind, I will be examining his relation to the wartime magazine *Common Ground*, in which McWilliams published regularly and which I take, in the word of the epigraph, as one of the most valuable 'seed beds' in which his ideas germinated.

Little magazines, Edward Bishop tells us, are first and foremost arenas for discussion. It is their condition to be "in an adversarial position with regard to the dominant culture" (1996: 287) to which they introduce ideas that are more often than not innovative and disruptive. The little magazine is thus the vehicle of a project that finds no room among the existing printed publications. Bringing together a group of intellectuals, the magazine's community allows for a polyphonic debate that favors the development of ideas.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, 'little' magazines constituted arenas of multisided, vivid, ever renewed, debate. They were usually the heralds of small intellectual groups that aimed at small reading communities, and, Bishop adds, 'little' might actually apply more to the audience than to the magazine itself (1996: 296). Their purpose also made them very specific cultural media: "[l]ittle magazines are by definition magazines that do not make money; they are trying to promote new ideas or forms of art, rather than sales," Bishop further argues (1996: 287). As Carey McWilliams remarked, "[s]ome values do not carry a price tag nor can they be computerized" and, indeed, 'little' magazines served other functions than money making.[3] The main goal of 'little' magazines, McWilliams argued, was to break taboos and introduce new subjects: "to provide a home for new ideas and young writers. To prepare, so to speak, an agenda of items requiring national attention and discussion. To flush out new points of view. To support unpopular causes and issues. To focus a consistent and intelligent criticism on prevailing attitudes, policies, and dogmas."[4] And so he used them; he wrote for *Antioch Review, The New Republic* and *Survey Graphic,* to mention but a few, but *Common Ground* was the one that received most of his contributions.

Common Ground both abides by and deviates from the definition of the little magazine. It did indeed have a particular program to propose, but, on the other hand, it was linked to an institution, the Common Council for American Unity and had a fixed patron, the Carnegie Corporation. This made the magazine slightly different from other publications of this kind that tend to have a short life and constant problems regarding funding. Published as a quarterly between 1940 and 1949 with a grant renewed annually from the Carnegie Corporation, the magazine did, however, manage to exceed the term and scope of its 'mission,' outlasting the end of the war and developing a very progressive discussion on issues of race, immigration and social integration.[5] The magazine never became self-sustaining, as the number of subscriptions never rose above 7,700, but it did create a paid circulation of $4,000 in just six months.[6]

Its audience also differed from the typical 'little' magazine audience: it was wider and more mixed and in many cases the circuits in which *Common Ground* moved used the magazine as a tool for debate, so that the dissemination

of its ideas was very likely to be wide.[7] On the basis of a famous study by Theodore Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century* (1958), William C. Beyer suggests that at its time *Common Ground* was an important opinion maker; that it "moved Americans in the way journals of opinion and record like *Survey Graphic, The Nation,* and the *New Republic* wield power much greater than their circulation figures suggest" (1988: 228).

After the first number was published, subscriptions were received from all but three of the forty-eight states.[8] In fact, and despite the dubious ancestry of the organ that published it, *Common Ground* remained an important forum for progressive debate on matters such as race, ethnicity, citizenship, prejudice, discrimination and civil rights. Its advisory editorial board included such prestigious names as Van Wyck Brooks, Pearl S. Buck, Langston Hughes, Mary Helen Chase and Thomas Mann, whereas one easily finds, among the writer-critics that contributed to the magazine, figures such as historian Arthur Schlesinger, writer and public officer Archibald MacLeish, and writer Waldo Frank, among others.

Moreover, it was not strictly a literary magazine, like others that go by the term; *Common Ground* published many literary, or fictional texts, and some poetry, but literature in the magazine was complemented with cultural and social critique. While the literary texts gave voice to a generation of ethnic writers in the making,[9] the texts concerned with cultural and social criticism provided a theoretical framework and a deeper understanding of the struggles for integration that emerged in many of the literary texts. These raised topics as diverse as alien registration, Mexican-Americans and the '*pachuco* riots' in California, or the detention of the Japanese, on which *Common Ground* provided the very first public commentaries. To add authenticity to the stories published, the magazine supported ethnic writers-to-be, working as a springboard for second-generation immigrant children who would later become the masters of what came to be called 'ethnic literature.'[10]

Another fundamental feature of this magazine was its interest in legislative reform, which was perfectly in tune with one of McWilliams's strongest preoccupations and theoretical investments throughout the 1940s – how to make of the law an ally against institutional racism. Prejudice was therefore the core of many of McWilliams's articles in *Common Ground*, a vital issue in the discussion of minority group integration. For prejudice was for him a matter of lack of knowledge, or of misleading information regarding the way social forces were produced; hence the paramount importance of talking to people and bringing people to discussion. Action was the next, and inevitable, step, and that was also why he called his program an education towards action, as advocated in his study *Prejudice* (1944: 293). Thus, in terms of its readership, its structure, its tone and its declared 'program,' *Common*

Ground could provide McWilliams with a reliable and challenging space for dialogue. In sum, being a seed bed for McWilliams's ideas, *Common Ground* was also a seed bed for his most outstanding theoretical and political project: how to make of U.S. society what he called an 'ethnic democracy'.

The institutional affiliation of this publication might give a hand at that, since the magazine was the journal of the wartime organization Common Council for American Unity. Although its ancestry could be traced, via the Foreign Language Information Service in the 1930s, back to the Committee on Public Information – the propaganda apparatus with which Woodrow Wilson sought to justify the U.S. entry in World War I –, the goals of the Council in II World War America made it particularly receptive to projects such as McWilliams's.[11] Still and all, *Common Ground* was one of the Cultural Front's most effective critical arenas on the "racial-cultural situation" in the U.S.

Read Lewis was the executive director of the magazine, whereas Slovenian immigrant writer Louis Adamic, a good friend of McWilliams's, was the project's mastermind. He approached cultural difference in a two-way fashion, as a matter of *reciprocity*, and in a way that would "mak[e] civilization safe for differences" (1.1 [1940]: 67). *Common Ground* was the forum where that project might come true by means of introducing ethnic groups to one another and creating a different dynamic among them. In the magazine's announcement Adamic wrote that the purpose of *Common Ground* was to tell "the greatest story under the sun" with an awareness that it was "a vast and complex situation at once promising and dangerous."[12] The story was immigration in America; the danger came from the nation's breaking apart on grounds of racial and cultural differences. Ethnicity, too, acquired centrality as the debate evolved and it was fundamental in unveiling the connections between race and culture.

The timing for Read Lewis's and Louis Adamic's project could not be better. With the Depression and the war, the 1930s had witnessed worsening poverty among immigrants and the rise of anti-immigrant feeling, in many instances, with institutional approval. The New York State Senate proposed to bar aliens from all jobs in public works, even when citizens were not available; the California legislature had recently attempted to deny relief to aliens, despite their paying the same taxes as citizens; Pennsylvania had just enacted an alien registration law and Congress had stipulated that no federal funds be given to any public housing agency which rented to an alien.[13] This was certainly in Read Lewis's mind when, in his letter of introduction to *Common Ground*'s project to the Carnegie Corporation, he stressed that the Common Council was putting "less emphasis on education and assimilation of the immigrant [. . .] and more on the education and assimilation of all of us into an America that accepts all its citizens." The magazine was therefore

endeavoured to let minorities speak and let 'old stock' Americans hear what they had to say. From this, a new understanding of intergroup relations would spring, one in which difference was rationalized in ways that excluded fear and distance. Knowledge of difference was in fact based on a premise of commonality; if 'old' and 'new' Americans realized how much alike they felt, thought and meant, the differences of race and culture might cease being motives for segregation and prejudice. It was not precisely the case that race and cultural difference would disappear, but rather the fear of them would. It was this fear that sought in prejudice the legitimization for distance and rejection.

Dialogue and knowledge were therefore terms and ideas with a deep resonance in *Common Ground* and although the magazine's program can ultimately be considered typical of the wartime atmosphere because of its emphasis on national unity and harmony, critics assess the projects of some of its contributors, such as Carey McWilliams's, as instances of "a more scrupulous universalism," given their preoccupations with the differences of particular social or ethnic groups (SINGH 1998: 488).

McWilliams's contributions

Carey McWilliams's texts are among the longest and most detailed that *Common Ground* published, for they were really whole chapters in books that he was preparing at the time. In fact, the journal can be seen as a springboard for many of the issues he wanted to discuss in a more extended way in his full-length studies. Due to its very dialogical nature, *Common Ground* provided a forum for debate before the texts were finally published in book form. For example, his article "The Forgotten Mexican" is a chapter in *Brothers Under the Skin* (1943); "The Nisei Speak" is part of *Prejudice. Japanese Americans: Symbol of Racial Intolerance* (1944), and "Minneapolis: The Curious Twin" anticipated McWilliams's study on anti-Semitism in America, *A Mask for Privilege* (1948). All these books stay as reference studies on the issue of race relations in the 1940s and 50s in the U.S.

The years between 1942 and 1949 witnessed the emergence of McWilliams as an authority in race relations and *Common Ground* offered him the platform he needed. Published in 1943, his book *Brothers Under the Skin* was the confirmation and corollary of this position, which was highlighted in *Common Ground*'s characterization of McWilliams as "one of the chief authorities in the United States on America's 'minority' groups" (7.4 [1947]: 11). However, McWilliams's ideas were not necessarily identical with *Common Ground*'s project. He goes beyond the thematic scheme that Deborah Overmeyer, in her study on *Common Ground*, correctly identified as centered on issues of unity,

contributions, prejudice and general adjustment (1984: 89). I also consider him to deviate from the conciliatory tone that dominated much of the writing in the magazine. In fact, he is one of those contributors who 'pulled' the magazine forward in more challenging and more demanding directions, leading to a significant turn to a deeper concern with legislation after the first two or three years. After all, McWilliams had first been a lawyer and his knowledge of the law informed much of his socially concerned journalism and critical writing.

As regards style, McWilliams' work is polyphonic, always reproducing debate and never presenting his own voice exclusively. For example, his introductions and discussions of subjects intertwine with those of other authorities in the respective fields, such as George Sanchez, Ernesto Galarza or Manuel Gamio on Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. McWilliams's expositions always thoroughly acknowledge reference and debate with as many voices as possible; his thought is therefore hardly ever a purely theoretical exercise.

He was a tough realist, concerned with the exposition of facts, which he always explored and tried to explain, clearly and uncompromisingly. This was the methodological basis for his approach of California immigration history, a history that had its specificities, the most outstanding of which was the fact that race hierarchies were significantly different from other problematic areas in the country. As McWilliams stressed, racism in California happened not against Blacks, but against the Chinese, the Japanese and the Mexicans.

'Sublabor' and racism – the Mexicans

Because the Mexicans were the most numerous ethnic group in California, and certainly also for particular historical aspects relating to empire building, they became the focus of McWilliams's analysis in many articles. McWilliams's first published article in *Common Ground*, "Mexicans in Michigan," appeared in Autumn 1941 and it was part of his forthcoming book, *Ill Fares the Land* (1942), which looked into the exploitation of Mexican migrant labor in U.S. agriculture, from California to the Midwest. It covered the replacement of European labor after the Immigration Act of 1924 until 1941, when San Antonio had been turned into "the capital of the Mexico that lies in the United States" (5) and into a nest for labor contractors, as well. Following their inhumane travels from San Antonio to the sugar beet plantations in Michigan and back to Texas for the winter vegetable crops, McWilliams's writing at this stage was certainly the product of his work as Chief of the Immigration and Housing Department in California. The piece in *Common Ground* provided a thorough account of the miserable living and working conditions of Mexican migrants, while presenting also the faults in legislation that allowed for such a situation:

most of the migrants were the so-called wetbacks, so the illegality of their presence in the U.S. protected any form of immoral or illegal practice against them; they were, as McWilliams finally remarked bitterly "a brave army, an army capable of almost incredible endurance." This was not intended to make them heroes, though; heroes they would be, if they found a way to denounce the exploitation system: "they are also an amazingly patient army; they make few complaints [. . .] which usually go unheard" (17).

Backwardness and racism – New Mexico

McWilliams's attention to Mexicans in his *Common Ground* articles related to the fact that this was the least protected of ethnic groups in California, largely because its existence had not yet been acknowledged. As he had noted in his first article, they remained conveniently an ever ready army of cheap, and docile, labor, yet hardly ever accounted for.[14] His "The Forgotten Mexican," in the Spring 1943 issue, looked into another group within those of Mexican origin in the West: the residents of New Mexico, descendants of the Mexicans who had been made American citizens by default upon annexation, in keeping with the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. New Mexicans formed an important section of the Spanish speaking population of the Southwest and, indeed, ninety percent of them were descendants of the Spanish who settled in the Rio Grande valley by the end of the sixteenth century. They had been overlooked traditionally by central governments, a situation which the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo sanctioned by failing to protect their individual rights and their integration as citizens of a new country. After centuries of neglect, the New Mexicans had finally acquired some visibility and were taking the first steps in bilingual education. This measure, as McWilliams stressed, was of paramount importance because the retention of the Spanish language allowed them to "retain childhood experiences and to acquire transferable concepts," which would in turn prepare children to learn better English later (72). Nevertheless, the bilingual educational system in New Mexico still had a long way to go.

This essay is a condensed version of the chapter devoted to Mexican ethnicity in the soon to be published *Brothers Under the Skin* (1943); in it McWilliams jumped on the bandwagon of the recently institutionalized Good Neighbor Policy, but in this case to call attention to needy cases within U.S. society itself. McWilliams argued that to achieve fairness the government would have to extend to the Latin Americans within the U.S. the same policies of nondiscrimination aimed at those living in neighbor countries to the south: "[f]or here [New Mexico] is the real, the living, the historical frontier of Latin American relations" (65). New Mexico, he argued, was a 'bridge state' that

could play a fundamental role in filling in the gaps of the Good Neighbor Policy.[15] New Mexico was also a refuge of residual values of which the U.S. culture was desperately in need, such as solidarity and community. It could be said that McWilliams posited these native cultures as 'countercultures of modernity,' in Paul Gilroy's sense, serving as ballast to the rapid and alienating modernization of U.S. culture.

The Spanish speaking in the Southwest already amounted to two million people, among immigrants and citizens. Immigrants in particular were the victims of a "self-perpetuating" well organized caste system that "doom[ed] them to restricted types of employment, visit[ed] upon them a complex and comprehensive system of social discrimination, and ma[de] for chronic maladjustment" (66). The caste system was a typical American device to discriminate in terms of race and, in the Southwest, Mexicans had been subjected to an exclusionary pattern applied first to Asian immigrants (namely, the Chinese). His attack on the various legislative measures aimed at Mexican immigrants also included the loopholes in those laws, which made it easy for unprotected, easy-prey, immigrants to cross the border right into the arms, or rather the trucks, of greedy, unscrupulous, and well organized labor contractors. The lack of control of the flow of people across the border contrasted with the spate of legislation aimed at controlling flows of natural resources and material goods. To add insult to injury, indifference continued with "[n]o effort whatever [. . .] to assist these immigrants in their adjustment to a radically different environment. Culturally, racially, linguistically, Mexican immigrants are sharply set apart from the general population" (68).

The Good Neighbor Policy was, however, an occasion for reciprocity, if only the U.S. government would assume it as such. Reciprocity figures indeed as one of the foundational pillars throughout McWilliams's proposals against social injustice and immigrant maladjustment and it is the essence of his proposed solution to the problem. He endorsed Ernesto Galarza's administrative approach, which was devised to deal with Mexican immigration both in the U.S. and in Mexico, which however required an explicit policy. Hence Galarza's proposed solution, quoted by McWilliams, suggested creating a joint international agency, composed of representatives of the United States and Mexico, to develop and carry out a long-term program of resettlement" (68), which should consider firstly "the normal needs of agriculture north of the border, the further development of the land program in Mexico, the utilization of Mexican land resources [. . .] and the technical knowledge and skill of citizens of both Mexico and the United States who understand this problem from every angle" (68).

Galarza's argument went on to focus on the difficulties of integration of the large number of Mexican-Americans, the immigrants' children, who

were cut off from Mexican culture on the one hand and driven into a U.S. society that made them extremely race conscious, on the other. The result was cultural-conflict which was the distinct badge of the Mexican-American community in the U.S.

The Spanish speaking population of New Mexico had a lot to teach their Anglo counterparts, though, and this is another point in which McWilliams's idea of reciprocity comes in. Socially, Hispano culture had experienced more development than the Anglo culture but it had been supplanted by an alliance of Anglo-lawyers and power-politicians that manipulated Spanish land grants (73). Because the local Spanish-speaking valued land for its use over its economic value, they were not well positioned to hold onto their lands against commercial interests. Yet, as McWilliams stressed, much remained of their former non-competitive ethics that was lacking in Anglo culture; their values of community, social cohesion and solidarity, for instance, embodied an alternative form of social organization much desirable for the U.S. society on the whole. These values, McWilliams argued, had to be preserved at any cost, for they were "the last vestiges of a semi-communal form of agriculture in America" and their preservation was not for exhibition but to serve as example of the "pattern of rural living which has much to commend itself to us at the present time."

For McWilliams, it was also important to note the almost complete absence of class distinctions that such a pattern of social organization fostered (77). In effect, the state of New Mexico was exemplary for its lack of discrimination due to the homogeneity of its population, which was mainly Hispano. On this basis, McWilliams held it up as a model from which the U.S. government could learn how to treat its Hispanic immigrants and citizens[16], eventually putting into practice within the nation the spirit of reciprocity of the Good Neighbor Policy.

Imperialism and racism – the Mexicans yet again

McWilliams returns to "The Mexican Problem" once again in one of his last contributions to *Common Ground*, in the Spring of 1948 issue (8.3), which is also a chapter in his study *North from Mexico: The Spanish-speaking People of the United States* (1948). Here McWilliams analyzes the singularity of Mexican immigration to the U.S., its differences vis-à-vis the standardized model of European immigration and, against that backdrop, the alleged failure of its integration. More importantly, McWilliams examines how the isolation of the Mexican immigrant community resulted in non-participation in political life, in an aversion to citizenship which left the community unprotected and segregated. Consequently, he calls for a different approach to immigration,

favoring causes over consequences and focusing on Anglo-Hispanic relations in the Southwest. In this analysis, he stresses the importance of geography in the definition of inter-group relations, and the forgotten deep roots of the Mexicans in the Southwest, in a similar manner to the French Canadians in Québec. If a group is deeply rooted in the space it inhabits, on what grounds is it termed 'a minority'? Moreover, the constant movement in Mexican migrant labor patterns made acculturation difficult, resulting in the immigrants' disinterest in citizenship (12-13). The 'Mexican problem,' McWilliams stressed, was a euphemism that hid the real issues of conquest and annexation that characterized the Mexican presence in the Southwest and the discrimination to which the group was subjected.

The border had created a divisionary line that did not, however, modify cultural or kinship links. Distance, in this case, was made real rather than psychological. In the Southwest, three cultures (Anglos, Hispanics and Native Americans) fought for supremacy and the forms of interrelation they established among themselves were decisive in terms of the definition of each group, which were valued on a hierarchical continuum: Native Americans were considered inferior, and to the degree that Mexicans mingled with them, they too were considered inferior... Mexicans thus became a racial minority in the Southwest, regardless of the number and variety of people that composed the group. To complicate matters more, yet another minority could be identified: the native-born of native-born parents (the *pochos*), who formed a 'buffer-group' distinct from Mexican immigrants, who were designated *cholos* or *chicanos*. Besides physical differences (the immigrant was more likely to be darker or have Indian features), the immigrant cultivated his Mexican-Indian cultural inheritance, was more illiterate and knew less English, whereas the native boasted his Spanish heritage and blood, was more literate and more fluent in English. In spite of these differences, they were regarded by Anglo-Americans as one single group of 'Mexicans,' a designation contested by the better-off of Spanish descent, who in turn discriminated against the immigrants in order to escape the stigma attached to them. As McWilliams noted, similar relations characterized 'light' middle-class African Americans vis-à-vis the masses of 'dark' African Americans, and German vis-à-vis Russian Jews (6).

The antagonisms of the two Spanish-speaking groups increased the difficulties of integration. The native-born scorned the immigrants, who had no citizenship rights, and these mocked the native-born, who had only limited access to these rights. Only one identity, cemented by intermarriage, *la raza*, transcended to some extent these differences. But yet a third group generated more difference: the native born of Mexican descent, the children of immigrants, Mexican-Americans proper, who became U.S. citizens by birth.

McWilliams also looked into cultural resistance, and cultural racism. He explained how Mexican culture was based on very different values than those of the industrialized U.S. culture the immigrants encountered, and how that discouraged identification. In turn, they were discriminated for their resistance and for their difference: their cultural traits were racialized, increasing the difficulty to assimilate (8). Mainstream institutions like schools and labor unions perpetuated these problems and stereotypes and practiced segregation toward Mexican immigrants. This pattern of forced isolation applied to housing, resulting in the confinement of Mexicans in the *colonias*, which naturally bred resentment. Mexicans understood that they were not accepted and that such attitude found support not only in custom and opinion, but in the law as well. This explanation for the forced failure to assimilate finally pointed towards its result: 'voluntary disenfranchisement' (13), deriving from a lack of interest in applying for naturalization. However, Mexican Americans were becoming politically aware and McWilliams foresaw more, and more effective, struggles in the future.

'State declared' racism – the Japanese and the internment

"Mexicans in Michigan" set the tone for McWilliams's contributions to *Common Ground*, seeking to give voice to the subaltern; his concern for Mexicans soon gave way to other discriminated groups. The next voices to cry out through his articles were those of the 117,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans who had been confined to 'internment camps' by means of the so-called 'voluntary evacuation' ordered by the U.S. Army. "Japanese Evacuation: Policy and Perspectives" (2.4 [1942]: 65-72) is one of the first public denunciations of the mass assault on the civil rights and economic interests of Japanese immigrants and U.S. citizens of Japanese ancestry, who were interned on the west coast, in 1942, as a 'war measure' following the attack on Pearl Harbor authorized by Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, on February 19th, 1942. Once he had criticized this social problem, McWilliams put forward a series of measures against it, which invariably involved the reform of legislation.

Besides the unconstitutionality of the situation, McWilliams became even more concerned with the relocation of the community as a group, so that he developed the notion of what came later to be termed 'group rights' – a concept that can be appropriated in seeking redress when there is discrimination against a group. In light of his argument, group rights should have the same protection as private property, such as when the government appropriates private property for public needs (69), which is no more than the 'moral' obligation of the government (67). But what concerned McWilliams most was

less the economic than the psychological damage of this operation (66); for obviously the government had resurrected a history of racial hate against people of Asian ancestry, treating the Japanese as non-citizens and depriving them of access to the institutions through which they conducted daily life and business. Because of their integration into the society at large, the Japanese were not simply an immigrant group whose citizen rights could be abrogated, but a group that was already familiar with the state's institutions.

Hence McWilliams contended that reintegration should include allowing the Japanese to take part in the war effort itself. His repudiation of relocation and his emphasis on reintegration were of a piece with his view that ethnic communities should not be ghettoized. By adopting a policy of reintegration, the government would redress its abuse of the Japanese as well as correct previously existing social ills, such as residential segregation. After the internment policy was ended, McWilliams also published another article, "The Nisei Speak," in which he called those previously interned to speak out their experiences, to leave their personal testimonies, as a complement to his critical views.

Engendering Jim Crow in California – the Chinese

"Cathay in Southern California" (6.1 [1945]) takes us into the very roots of prejudice in California: the Chinese community, in fact, the guinea-pig for discrimination laws which had been copied in other states. Excerpted from McWilliams's study *Southern California Country: An Island in the Land* (1946), the article presents a historical sketch of the Chinese presence in the region and, along with it, a particular pattern of discrimination. Here McWilliams also revalorizes the principle of reciprocity in inter-ethnic relations, as the piece focuses on the contribution of the Chinese to the fishing industry in particular and more generally to the development of the celery and citrus industries. But it also relates how the Chinese were laid off after providing the basic labor in these industries.

McWilliams unveils how the historic mistreatment of the Chinese workforce made it a model that other states applied to their ethnic minorities (36), whereas the pattern of discrimination against the Chinese came to be applied also to the groups that substituted them in the labor market in California itself (once the quotas for Chinese immigration were closed). Significantly, these groups were the Japanese and the Mexicans, as McWilliams had analyzed in his previous articles in *Common Ground*.

Additionally, any contributions the Chinese made to the development of California had been obliterated from history. Indeed, as McWilliams worked on these essays the very bones of the Chinese dead were being removed from

the ground and sent to China, as if no trace of them was welcome in California. Restrictive immigration laws would do the rest.

Intergroup racism: German versus East European Jews

With "Minneapolis: The Curious Twin" (7.1 [1946]), McWilliams initiates a series of articles that extrapolated from ethnic difference and the conditions of ethnic groups to a wider discussion on prejudice and discrimination. The Jews are the focus of his analytical lens this time. Evincing no specifically different racial trait, the essence of the difference of this ethnic group – religion and culture – allowed for a different reflection on the origins of discrimination, unlike that on the Chinese, the Mexicans and the Japanese.

Most likely a preliminary version of a chapter in McWilliams's study *A Mask for Privilege: Anti-Semitism in America* (1948), "Minneapolis: The Curious Twin" is an attempt to establish the social origin of group antagonism by examining the treatment of Jews in the twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. From fashionable clubs to trade unions, Jews experienced discrimination in Minneapolis, but not in St. Paul.

On the basis of this difference, McWilliams argued that discrimination was due to the group's arrival time in each city and to the social relations established by social and ethnic groups that had arrived before the former. Already settled groups sought to maintain their privileged social and economic positions by various strategies, among them the manipulation of religious and ethnic difference via stereotypes that bore no relationship to reality. As McWilliams maintained in another article, racial stereotypes were social constructs that existed quite independently of the individual's experiences, except when individual experience meant *success*: that was indeed what triggered tension and eventually the creation of stereotypes. Success, not numbers, gave rise to the need for practices to exclude the potentially successful who could reduce the privileges of those already well established in society ("Round-Up" 7.2 [1947]: 91).

The same topic is taken up in two later articles, "How Deep Are the Roots?" Parts I and II (7.4 and 8.1 [1947]). Concluding that the roots of anti-Semitism in the U.S were fairly recent, McWilliams revealed the imbrications of law and business concerning immigration and demonstrated how immigrant legislation could affect groups as diverse as the Jews and the Chinese. Anti-Semitism began with the rise of the industrial class around the time of the so-called Second American Revolution, when Big Business "occupied the country like an alien armed force" (Part I: 6). It bred an industrial culture that was essentially 'soulless' and 'tasteless,' which reflected this class's (mainly North European Protestant stock) inclination to protect its recently conquered

privileges against any new comer, especially the German Jews, who climbed social ladders pretty swiftly.

The security of that *nouveau riche* class's recently acquired social and economical privileges thus relied on distinctions of status. McWilliams resorted to Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* to confirm this historical phenomenon and its attendant features: "the gradually advancing wave of sentiments favoring quasi-predatory business habits, insistence on status, anthropomorphism, and conservatism generally" (7).

The protection of wealth and status was carefully articulated with discrimination against minorities, whereas the rejection of the Civil Rights Act revealed again how the law put its imprint into the matter, adding to the construction of the privileges of the new bourgeoisie. He further notes how the Supreme Court thwarted advances concerning the protection of minority groups by approving of segregation in the historical legal case *Plessy v. Fergusson*, in 1896, arguing further that those rights could then be transferred to the emerging corporations instead (8).

Thus, failure, or refusal, of the law to protect the most numerous internal minority, the African Americans, expanded to a failure to protect all minorities that arrived after 1870. The approval of the California Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 gave ultimate proof to Supreme Court rule over the federal government; unable to rule under the Civil Rights Act (deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court), the federal government decided to avoid discrimination by preventing the most abused minorities from entering the country (8-9).

Immigration law was therefore to give a hand in the internal politics of racial and ethnic prejudice. The Immigration Act of 1882 marked a new and paradoxical principle in U.S. immigration policy, providing a precedent for exclusion measures culminating in the Immigration Act of 1924. This Act in particular was to a large extent meant to prevent further Jewish immigration into the country, which was already the case in 1906, when the Aliens Act was issued (Part II: 4). The conclusion came easy: it was clearly the alliance of law and business that tied the federal government's hands, preventing it from doing something about "the tradition of bigotry and intolerance" that McWilliams traced to the triumphal moment of the industrial revolution (Part I: 9).

Part II of this article complements the question of status with that of intergroup relations: namely, intra-class competition, a fundamental element in the creation of prejudice. Eventually the above mentioned social and economic conflict derived into cultural conflict. East European Jews arrived fifty years after German Jews and the conflict was mainly between them. The cultural difference of East European Jews' poverty and foreignness became conflictive when their children sought to enter the middle-class. Then the

pattern of discrimination assumed the same features as with other minority groups: East European Jews were stereotyped by contrast with German Jews and were, moreover, considered unassimilable. For McWilliams, anti-Semitism, like racism, is the cultural means by which the *status quo* groups fend off bids for inclusion by subordinate groups or newcomers. He thus cites approvingly the following observation by Stow Persons: "the most striking aspect of the immigrant problem in industrial America has been the tendency on the part of native Americans to transform the economic and social conflicts of industrialism into culture conflicts whenever the immigrant has been concerned" (6).

But the rise of political anti-Semitism between the 1920s and the 1940s is also part of McWilliams's analysis. Political anti-Semitism, he noted, was the final stage on the road to discrimination against Jews. He established the connection between the revival of the Ku-Klux-Klan and Henry Ford's anti-Semitic campaign of support for Hitler, and the final crystallization of those interests, and of a general anti-alien movement, in the 1924 Immigration Act. This law put restrictions on immigration to the U.S. as the principal avenue of escape for Eastern European Jews, and marked a turning point in Jewish history because it indirectly induced the group to take more seriously the pursuit of a Jewish land in Palestine (9). It furthermore increased identity awareness among American Jews (10). In the 1920s, quotas that limited the number of Jews were imposed in some of the most prestigious U.S. Universities, such as Columbia. While American intellectuals denounced anti-Semitism abroad, few ventured to criticize that same prejudice at home (11). With the Depression, "special barriers against Jews multiplied," especially in the so-called free professions, while it continued in University admissions.

1939 marked a crucial moment in the growth of political anti-Semitism as well as that of other segregated minorities. But McWilliams was more interested in the causes than the consequences of such prejudice: "[p]olitical anti-Semitism [. . .] is a growth, not an invention. Political anti-Semitism must always be based on such pre-existing factors as social cleavage, a fairly well developed anti-Semitic ideology, and a pattern of social and economic discrimination" (14).

Finding new ways out of racism: a cultural analysis against the 'psychic imperialism' of race

As a complement to the situations he analyzed in the previous texts, McWilliams also published other, shorter articles on more theoretical treatments of race. "Race Tensions: Second Phase" (Autumn 1943), on the aftermath of several race riots across the U.S. (Detroit, Beaumont, Los Angeles

and Harlem), considered the reactionary element in racial conflict and its role in producing what Max Lerner had termed a 'psychic imperialism' (6).

McWilliams denounced race hatred as a form of political manipulation aimed at moving people to the right and which circulated through powerful media venues such as the Hearst press. He proposed a program to counteract this trend and advocated the cooperation of the federal government in the form of a national policy that prohibited discrimination of any sort. McWilliams foresaw a legal instrument of coordinated action between the "educational, advisory, and trouble-shooting" Bureau of Ethnic Democracy and the Bill of Rights, which would lead to what he called a Fair Racial Practices Act. The latter consisted on a proposal for civil rights statutes, enforced by an administrative agency that sought to dismantle all forms of discrimination in public institutions, with additional effects on immigration law. This *de jure* institutional effort nevertheless required a *de facto* acceptance by the people in order to be successful. He thus strove after the active participation of the people on a local level through the formation of interracial committees and civic, anti-racist organizations that would in turn be coordinated by a nationwide committee.

However, participation required a more general educational framework that would align with culture in specific ways. A "long range educational process" was necessary to enable people to perceive how much American culture had in fact changed and was undergoing deep changes. McWilliams envisioned the integration of all groups, not just in the U.S. but "in all areas into a common world culture" (10). Once cultural analysis was used as a lens for diagnosing racial tensions, it would soon reveal how much the present crisis in the U.S. was primarily a cultural crisis, resulting from a lag in development. Because social relations had fallen behind vis-à-vis economics and technology, the new cultural analysis had to focus on the present, on the New America in formation (11).

McWilliams's last two articles in *Common Ground* are interesting for the historical turn they signal, dealing with the turn from racial to political persecution that was to characterize the following decade. In "Los Angeles: an Emerging Pattern" (Spring 1949), he overviewed the history of racial awareness and activism in the war years. If "[p]rior to 1940 an organized public opinion in support of the fair treatment of minorities did not exist" (3), once peace was restored the patriotism that had been accompanied by greater acceptance of minorities disappeared. This explained how the turn from racial to political prosecution could happen so smoothly.

Anti-communism took the place of race relations, the enemy was redefined and, as a consequence, the many local anti-racist committees that had mushroomed throughout the war years vanished. Los Angeles was

a model for this phenomenon. Yet, there was still hope since the excellent Negro leadership had remained within the city's Black community and so had the Jewish leadership, whereas the Mexican community was reaching self-consciousness. According to McWilliams, this guaranteed a permanent interest in "majority-minority relations" that foresaw a future for the project of interracial relations (8).

The responsibility of the law

As already mentioned, most of these articles share the common goal of bringing to the fore the alliance between law and (anti)discrimination. A lawyer by profession, Carey McWilliams found in legislation the best terrain to combat social inequality and *Common Ground* reflected this purpose. Even though Deborah Overmeyer remarks that sentimentality was much stronger than legislative reform insofar as *Common Ground* sought to change hearts before laws (1984: 385), she also acknowledges that in its final years the magazine definitely took a decisive turn toward legal activism and law reform (1984: 354). The analysis of this turn is deepened by William Beyer, in his study of the magazine and imputed to McWilliams and other political activists (1988: 336). Indeed, in the last years of the magazine's publication, a whole section called 'The Pursuit of Liberty,' signed by Milton Konvitz, took legislation as its focus. Beyer explains that the interest of the magazine for legal matters relied largely on McWilliams's contacts as member of local interracial committees. He became the bridge between the magazine and the so-called civic unity council movement, a "highly decentralized movement [. . .] [which] relied more heavily on litigation as a means to ends emphasizing unity more than diversity" (BEYER 1988: 337).

Law continued to inform McWilliams's approach to many subjects, and social discrimination and inequality the most, as his contributions to *Common Ground* prove. In his space in the magazine, McWilliams discussed changes to federal law and the implementation of the law. This discussion paralleled his practical work outside the magazine, such as the creation of a public institution to manage ethnic and cultural conflict in U.S. society, as designed in *Prejudice* (1944: 291). First sketched out in *Brothers Under the Skin*, McWilliams's idea of the Institute for Ethnic Democracy received much attention in the pages of *Common Ground*. The project was designed as a federal agency expressly authorized to deal with the problem of race by means of a range of educational and institutional functions aiming at the prevention of ethnic conflict.[17]

The Institute was the only institutional project indebted to McWilliams's theorizing, but the 1940s also witnessed the emergence of a series of legal

measures on human rights and civil liberties that included rights for racial minorities in the U.S., such as the Fair Employment Practices Commission, in 1941, and the President's Committee on Civil Rights, in 1946, signed by Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry Truman, respectively, and on which President Truman's legislation regarding minorities was based. All of these initiatives were very much in the spirit of McWilliams' civil rights work and illustrate clearly in how far *Common Ground* fulfilled its 'little magazine' mission of dissemination regarding McWilliams's project, converting ideas into reality. Maybe that was always in McWilliams's horizon, when he wrote:

> "[An idea] has a life of its own. Ideas can lie dormant for years and then suddenly explode with surprising force [. . .] The intellectual awakening of an individual usually dates from the moment he or she discovers that ideas are more than words on a page but are real and that the life-of-ideas is a timeless reality in human experience."[18]

NOTES

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1 "The Importance of Ideas", 7. Lecture, Cooper Union, Feb. 2, 1976. Carey McWilliams Papers (Collection 1319), Department of Special Collections, University Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles. Box 67, Folder "'The Importance of Ideas' Mss. Notes.'"

2 Joseph. P. Navarro's article is an exception: "Contributions of Carey McWilliams to American Ethnic History". *Journal of Mexican American History* 2.1 (1971): 1-19.

3 "The Importance of Ideas", 22-23. Lecture, Cooper Union, Feb. 2, 1976. Carey McWilliams Papers (Collection 1319), Department of Special Collections, University Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles. Box 67, Folder "'The Importance of Ideas' Mss. Notes.'"

4 "The Small Magazines" 4. Carey McWilliams Papers (Collection 1319), Department of Special Collections, University Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles. Box 17, Folder "Small Magazines."

5 In 1945 the magazine consumed about USD 15,500 of the grant. The total amount of the grant to the Council, between 1941 and 1946, averaged USD 32,500. Common Council (FLIS), Common Council for American Unity, Columbia University Manuscript Collections, Carnegie Collection Grant Files Collection.

6 Common Council (FLIS), Common Council for American Unity, Columbia University Manuscript Collections, Carnegie Collection Grant Files Collection.

7 *Common Ground* was read by community leaders, social workers, librarians, editors and educators, but individual subscriptions were never high enough to keep the magazine afloat. It was mainly subscribed to by institutions: it circulated in high schools, colleges and universities, libraries, churches and social organizations of various kinds. This, in turn demonstrates that its readership was indeed wider

than the number of issues shows; for instance, *Common Ground* materials were used in classroom discussions and the board received letters enquiring about how to organize courses in the racial-cultural field in high-schools, private schools, colleges and in the trade-union movement, while some of its articles were reprinted in periodicals with a wider reach. *Common Ground* also came to support new college courses on race in New Jersey, Long Island and South Dakota, while *Common Ground*'s materials were used in a sociology course on Race and Race Relations at the University of Missouri.

8 Common Council (FLIS) – Common Council for American Unity, Columbia University Manuscript Collections, Carnegie Collection Grant Files Collection.

9 The challenge made by Adamic to contributors was answered by writers from about forty different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Common Council (FLIS) – Common Council for American Unity, Columbia University Manuscript Collections, Carnegie Collection Grant Files Collection.

10 These included Japanese American Toshio Mori, Filipino Carlos Bulosan, Armenian William Soroyan, Black Americans Gwendolyn Brooks and Margaret Walker, and Chinese American Jade Snow Wong, as well as already established writers like Ralph Ellison or Langston Hughes. Furthermore, *Common Ground* was fundamental in supporting the publication of books on ethnic matters that have remained as reference works until our days. Some of these include Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, a biographical volume of a Chinese American in San Francisco (Harper & Brothers); Miné Okubo's *Citizen 13660,* on the Japanese American evacuation and relocation (Columbia UP); Woody Guthrie's *Bound for Glory*, a modern troubador's reflections on the saga of Okie and Arkie migratory workers (Dutton & Co.); and Jo Sinclair's *Wasteland*, a novel about second generation Jews in America, that won the Harper Prize Nobel Award (Harper & Brothers). There had been, moreover, three other studies inaugurating what would, decades later, be called 'ethnic studies,' and which were signed by contributors to *Common Ground* and published in a series edited by Louis Adamic, called 'Peoples of America' (Modic 252). Of these, *North from Mexico: The Spanish-Speaking people of the United States* (1949), by Carey McWilliams, was the first, and for decades the only general history of the Mexican people in the United States. The indication is provided by Joseph P. Navarro, in "Contributions of Carey McWilliams to American Ethnic History". *Journal of Mexican American History* 2.1 (1971): 1-19.

11 The Carnegie Foundation allocated ca. USD 15,500 for magazine, in 1945 (Carnegie Foundation Papers, 6), whereas the total amount of the grant to the Council, between 1941 and '46, averaged USD 32,500. Common Council (FLIS) – Common Council for American Unity, Columbia University Manuscript Collections, Carnegie Collection Grant Files Collection.

12 Announcement of the magazine to "American Writers and Literary Agents," Spring 1940. Common Council (FLIS) – Common Council for American Unity, Columbia University Manuscript Collections, Carnegie Collection Grant Files Collection. File "Common Council for American Unity – Support for Common Ground" 1940-1953; Box 119.

13 Letter to Frederick Keppel, of Feb. 29th, 1940. Common Council (FLIS) – Common Council for American Unity, Columbia University Manuscript Collections, Carnegie Collection Grant Files Collection.

14 Studies such as Manuel Gamio's *Mexican Immigration to the United States. A Study of Human Migration and Adjustment*, first published in 1930 and George I. Sánchez's *Forgotten People. A Study of New Mexicans*, from 1940, were the only exceptions.

[15] McWilliams came to contact Nelson Rockefeler, Head of the Office of Inter-American Affairs that worked on the improvement of relations between the U.S. and the Latin American countries, seeking support for solving the Mexican problem in California. His letter to Rockefeler was published in several media, including *The Nation*, on the October 15th, 1941 issue. According to Anne Marie Woo-Sam, who details the episode, only the *pachuco* riots did however finally excite Rockefeler, so that he sent an OIAA representative to California. See Anne Marie Woo-Sam's "Domesticating the Immigrant: California's Commission of Immigration and Housing and the Domestic Immigration Policy Movement, 1910-1945," PhD Diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1999, especially pp. 437-449.

[16] I use 'Hispanic' following McWilliams's own terminology for ethnic identities, which differs from the varied designations identities have acquired in recent decades. The same applies to his references to 'Negroes' and 'Asians', for instance. It goes without saying that at the time McWilliams was writing these designations were devoid of a pejorative sense.

[17] The debate on this issue took place in articles such as "An Institute of Ethnic Democracy" (Autumn 1943) and "Are Race Relations the Business of the Federal Government?" by John Collier and Saul K. Padover, and "The Tools for Ethnic Democracy" (Spring 1944) by Ward Shepard.

[18] "The Importance of Ideas" 17. Lecture. New York, Cooper Union, Feb. 2, 1976, p.2. Carey McWilliams Papers (Collection 1319).

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