Introduction: “Little Americas”

When walking the streets of San Francisco, one is struck by the ethnic diversity of the urban metropolitan population. This diversity is manifested in a variety of ways: through a multiplicity of languages – Vietnamese, Cantonese, Mandarin, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, Tagalog, Russian, and French – spoken in everyday life; social services that cater to the needs of specific ethnic groups; Christian churches, Jewish synagogues, Muslim mosques, and Buddhist temples that attract worshipers of similar ethno-religious traditions; a multiformity of ethnic neighborhoods that form the infrastructural tapestry of the urban landscape; and parades and festivals that celebrate the national holidays of the homelands of residents of these cultural enclaves.

Ethnic niches thrive in several locales in the city. Some date as far back as the colonial period, some the second half of the nineteenth century, while others are of more recent origin, having emerged in the post-Civil-Rights-movement era. Some of these neighborhoods, such as Chinatown, maintain a strong ethnic presence in San Francisco; others such as Japantown and Little Italy have become gentrified, a sign of their continuing integration into the larger city system. Still others, including the emerging Koreatown in the Western Addition, are presently burgeoning, either as a result of the group’s recent migration to San Francisco or as a result of intra-urban migration, as in the case of the New Chinatown in the Richmond District. Finally, there are those – like the now defunct Chile Town or Manilatown – that have disappeared as ethnic neighborhoods because the ethnics no longer reside there as a group.

What also catches one’s attention while strolling through San Francisco are the sobriquets that designate some of these ethnic neighborhoods. These sobriquets reflect their dominant ethnic composition
and have entered the city’s mainstream vocabulary, having been domesticated through discursive practices. Some neighborhoods are identified by the home countries of the diasporic residents, while others do not bear an ethnic name. For example, San Francisco’s Chinese settlement is known as Chinatown, but the principal location of Mexican Americans is referred to as the Mission District, named after a settlement first established by early Spanish missionaries in order to convert the local indigenous population to Christianity. Such a name attests to the historical existence of the neighborhood prior to the arrival and settlement of the dominant and hegemonic Anglo community in San Francisco. One may recall that the various distinct minoritized ethnic neighborhoods emerged during three different periods in the history of San Francisco: namely, the period preceding the city’s incorporation into the United States; the long era when racial discrimination was a genuine policy of the city; and the years after the signing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, which made housing discrimination and segregation illegal.

The city’s spatial order is encoded in the sites that comprise its morphology and is made up of mainstream neighborhoods differentiated by social class and economic status, neighborhoods currently undergoing ethnic demographic shifts and gentrification, and visibly distinct ethnic neighborhoods. This book focuses on three ethnic neighborhoods: commoditized Chinatown, gentrified Japantown, and defunct Manilatown. Examining these areas, the book seeks to decode their spatial significance, explain their insertion and incorporation into the city system, and interpret their different paths of growth. This study also examines these neighborhoods’ status as capital cities for ethnic residents who live within and outside of them, and analyzes their structural position as global ethnopoles.

There is something special about the American urban landscape. Its peculiarity inheres largely in the life and death of ethnic enclaves. San Francisco is no exception to this seemingly historical phenomenon that has much to tell us about the history of immigration and the multicultural genealogy of urban America. The mainstream system seems to produce ethnic enclaves through numerous processes, and the logic of the capitalist apparatus paradoxically leads to their extinction as well. How should we explain the fact that for many years ethnic minorities have lived in specific ghettoized neighborhoods? Is it because people want to maintain an enclave that represents the national territory or capital city of their homeland? Or have racial discrimination and housing segregation confined people to these