Abstract: ***From immigrant to stranger, Strangers in the Village***
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The idea of strangers in American culture is not a new one. While they tolerated them for their manpower, early 17th Century Puritans referred to Anglican and non-religious settlers as "strangers". The later arrival of Baptists, Lutherans, and the "dreaded" Quakers was also grudgingly tolerated. But Puritan tolerance was limited in the same manner of later generations who privileged certain groups of immigrants, mostly Anglo people, while barricading American shores against less "desirable" groups, a policy which resulted in the Emergency Immigration Acts of 1921 & 1924. No matter the need, Catholics, Jews and "infidels" (Native Americans) were never accepted into the larger community. In fact, some historians suggest that the infamous Salem Witch Trials may have been a reaction to the perceived threat from "strangers" outside the Puritan church (Mitchell 2008: 25).

The most current manifestation of strangers in American culture are of course undocumented immigrants who, like the homeless, have become part of the wallpaper of the urban environment, creatures we experience merely as part of the urban landscape through which we pass daily on our way to our "legitimate" business. Should these creatures make their way into our consciousness by accident, our experience of them is too often limited by the social filter to actually recognize them as fellow human beings. They retreat rapidly from our awareness, once again obscured by the stereotype created to preserve our identity, one carefully constructed on the concept of "other".

Invisibility among strangers is not limited to immigrants, as the work of contemporary artist and immigrant himself, Kryzsztof Wodiczko demonstrates. In a project he has titled Xenology, his term for "the immigrant's art of survival" (Deutsche 2002: 27), Wodiczko employs his training as an industrial designer to fabricate equipment for those immigrants and refugees who "seek protection from the threat of violence and injustice (Ibid.). His now iconic homeless vehicle can certainly be counted among this work.

My paper is not a sociological treatise on immigration. It is rather an essay on "stranger" as perceived outsider in American (and European) Culture. Opening with a brief power point accompanied by Neil Diamond's *America*, the text will consider some commonalities between the role of undocumented immigrants and other variations of stranger in culture. It will close with a brief discussion of an installation by Columbian artist, Doris Salcedo, her *Shibboleth*, sliced into the floor of the Great Turbine Hall at the new Tate Modern in London

From immigrant to stranger, Strangers in the Village

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But I remain as much a stranger today as I was the first day I arrived. . . James Baldwin (2012: 163).

This is an essay on "The Other" filtered through immigration.

My interest in immigrants as strangers to American culture grew from my work with visual artist, Krzysztof Wodiczko and from a course I teach at Wentworth Institute called Boston Voyages By Book and Foot. Two among the issues we investigate in this course are the urban renewal disaster of the West End of Boston in the late 1950's and the Molasses Flood in the North End of Boston on January 15, 1919, which killed 21 people, including children. The flood resulted from the collapse of a poorly constructed, 2.3 million gallon holding tank filled with molasses, with a dangerously low factor of safety and guessed at by a bean counter with no construction or engineering credentials. Despite his lack of credentials, Arthur Jell was charged with oversight responsibilities for the creation of that enormous tank, ultimately and deliberately positioned in a residential area with a population density equal to that of Calcutta, India.

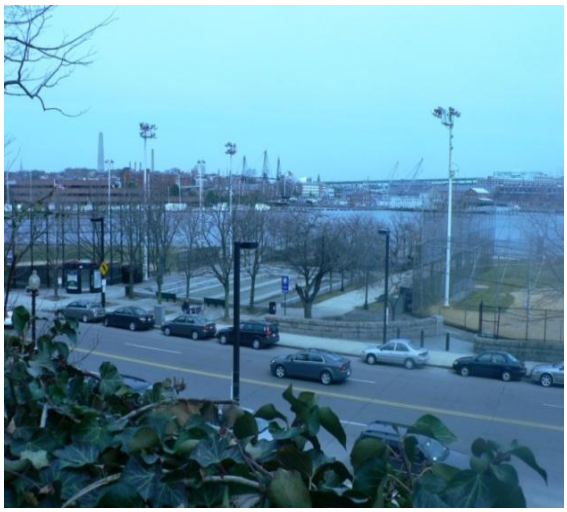

Figure1. Site of Exploded Molasses Tank. showing Commercial Street North End of Boston, taken from Copp's Hill. The tank was positioned approximately where the Bocce Ball court is, behind the blue sign.

Figure 2. Copp's Hill Terrace, demonstrating residential density. Author's photographs.

While the inner harbor *was* a convenient site for delivery, it was by no means the only possible place to site the tank. Why, then, choose this location when there were others available? Why choose to fabricate a slum in a low rent area filled with a diverse population of 23 ethnicities who actually got along with one another in a city famous for racial divisions? And there is no doubt that in the West End, fabricate is the correct word. Historic documentation shows that the mayor and his cohorts created slum conditions to gain access to urban renewal money. They told landlords not to fix apartments and refused to pick up garbage on a regular basis. Photographs of the resulting garbage strewn streets were posted in newspapers to generate public support for the project.

Figure 3. West End urban renewal in progress. Used with permission of West End Museum.

Although many comparisons can be drawn between these two events, one that is hard to ignore is the relationship between immigration and the attitudes toward these "strangers." As the 19th Century tsunami of immigrants poured rapidly into the Boston area, making East Boston second

only to Ellis Island in immigrant arrivals, it also severely taxed government resources. Astoundingly, at the opening of the Boston Public Library in 1895, the immigrant

Figure 4. Vilna Shul, immigrant synagogue, Phillips Street, Boston. Author's photograph.

population in the city was over 80%. Public tolerance diminished along with resources as those who were already citizens feared losing control to those who were often referred to as "the scum of the earth." A parallel version of this attitude was posted on the airwaves in Boston by radio talk show host, Jay Severin, during the Swine Flu epidemic. In it he complained that America was becoming "the magnet for primitives around the world" (*The Young Turks* 2009).

Figure 5. Chart shows explosion of immigration in 19th Century Boston, calibrated in 10 year periods, from 1790 to late 20th Century. The rapid growth is from about 1860-1940. Source: Massachusetts' State House Library. Author's photograph.

The most current manifestations of strangers in American culture are of course, the undocumented immigrants who, like the homeless, have become part of the wallpaper of the urban environment. Though they serve us our fast food, mow our lawns, change our hotel linens, clean our toilets, and occasionally clerk at all night convenience stores, undocumented immigrants remain complete strangers, virtually undetectable to us. We regard them, if we regard them at all, as part of the urban landscape, a mass of color in varying hues of brown, black and subtle blends of ochre. We experience the language of these "strangers", if we experience it at all, as an inharmonious Tower of Babel, the background sound track of our urban lives. Their "uniforms" and accents provide a slight dissonant tone to our otherwise busy and productive existence, but we rarely recognize the human beings contained within those exterior casings. They are mere shells constructed to service our needs, chimeras which make their way into our consciousness only when there is a rupture in the social fabric through which they appear. Even then, our experience of them is too often limited by the cultural filter to actually recognize them as fellow human beings. They emerge, briefly, into our awareness, shoved forward by a collaborating media too often willing to pander to the preexisting paranoia of the public because that sells more advertising time. As the crisis resolves they retreat from our consciousness, once again obscured by the stereotype created to preserve our identity, one carefully constructed on the concept of "other."

One framework for considering the question of stranger as "other" is provided by visual artist and MIT professor, Krzysztof Wodiczko, an immigrant himself, who asks in regard to his installation at the 2010 Venice Biennale titled simply *Guests*: "Who *is* a stranger? Who is a guest?" In an echo of Albert Camus's story of the same name, Wodiczko reminds us of the

close and indistinguishable relationship between "guest" and "host." In fact, in French, the one word serves both meanings. Wodiczko continues: " … perhaps we are guests to a country that we thought is ours … in which we feel at home", with immigrants "… working, taking care of our children … who clean our apartments, who cook for us, without whom we would be DEAD" (*The Europe of Strangers* 2009). In his presentation at the installation Wodiczko deliberately fogs images which he punctuates with indecipherable murmurs. He employs this mechanism to draw attention to "the other's" invisibility, thus creating a kind of visibility, an effort to bridge the distance between viewer and viewed. This is Wodiczko's attempt to allow us to "see the world from the point of view of strangers", the "only method" he believes, "to make meaningful change in the interest in making change in the world" (Ibid.).

An earlier parallel to Wodiczko's Venice Biennnale exhibit is to be found in his1987 projection onto the façade of the Los Angeles Westin Bonaventure Hotel, designed by architect John Portman and commissioned by the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art. In it Wodiczko expresses the conflict between private corporate gain and public rights. He documents the exploitation of the hotel's workers by projecting pictures of disembodied, chained limbs onto the façade of the hotel. The images are meant to represent hotel workers who are frequently drawn from the surrounding, often immigrant, communities. The presentation of human limbs in shackles onto the structure's exterior surface, is Wodiczko's effort to expose the truth concerning the use of abject populations to underpin America's culture of privilege. Thus, there are the chains, reminiscent of course of America's dirtiest secrets—slavery, internment camps, border patrols.

It is in the nexus between the urge to empathy and the often accompanying fear that urge generates in which Wodiczko positions his art. The effort to bridge that gap between "strangers" is brilliantly resolved in his now famous design of mobile vehicles for homeless individuals, based on the iconic shopping cart (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=59DV3k2fVfA), the vehicle chosen by necessity of street people. Its ability to create a transformative perception of homeless stranger from object to neighbor BECOMES the power of the design.

The cut, a wound really, sliced into the floor of the great Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern in London (2007), is Columbian artist, Doris Salcedo's objective correlative for the distance between center and border among immigrant and resident in European society, although it could as easily reference American society. She has named this cut *Shibboleth* for the biblical event in which strangers were identified through their inability to pronounce the sound "sh" and then murdered in one of the first recorded acts of genocide. "The presence of the immigrant is always unwelcome," Salcedo says, because "The ... immigrant is seen as jeopardising the culture of Europe" (*The Unilever Series* 2009). Salcedo chose to demonstrate this space between "guest" and "host" through the creation of a 167 metre (548 foot) jagged cut which runs axially along the length of the hall, bisecting it irregularly (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9acagGW3YpA). The elongated gap represents in her words: "borders, the experience of immigrants, the experience of segregation, the experience of racial hatred. It is the experience of a Third World person coming into the heart of Europe" (*The Unilever Series* 2009) with the hope of joining the larger community.

Near the conclusion of John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* Tom Joad quotes the murdered reverend, Jim Casey, Steinbeck's spokesperson for community: " he went out in the wildeness to find his own soul, an he foun' he didn' have no soul that was his'n. Says he foun' he jus' got a little piece of a great big soul. Says a wilderness ain't no good, 'cause his little piece of a soul wasn't no good 'less it was with the rest" (Steinbeck 1976: 535). It is the soul which gives birth to the heart, and in the end it is the heart that must be addressed—because it is the heart that remembers what the mind forgets. The heart can, with our conscious effort, be persuaded to recognize what these artists and writers proclaim through their work: that the "alien" really *is* our countryman.

In the global human community that we have developed in the twenty first century, surely there is a place at all of our tables for distant and not so distant relatives. The voices that would be seated at our communal tables *must* be allowed to penetrate our hearts, because it is only in that space, the space of the heart, that we are able to reclaim our own humanity.

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