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Book Review

by Claudette L. Grinnell-Davis

The Last Best Place? Gender, Family and Migration in the New West

Leah Schmalzbauer

2014

Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press

224 pages

Paperback, \$24.95

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This ethnography on Mexican migrants to southwest Montana fills a gap in the immigration literature by examining the role of gender and geography in a previously unexplored relocation zone for migrant families. In addition, this ethnography also provides a rigorous understanding of the ethnographer's own position in relationship to space, place, and privilege as a part of the ethnographic research process, and as such provides a robust model of deconstructing one's own position of epistemic privilege in the opportunity to conduct this research in the first place.

The New West is a sociological designation for the transformation of places like southwest Montana from a predominantly agricultural area to a desired relocation spot due to the influx of "lifestyle migrants." These lifestyle migrants move to the area either for the opportunity to enjoy outdoor leisure pursuits on a regular basis, or for an idyllic lifestyle free of concerns related to violence and corruption. As a part of this migration, these new migrants have brought more fiscal capital and higher expectations for quality of life than that which previously existed in the area. As a result, in addition to the traditional demands for migrant labor in the ranching and agriculture sectors, the need for skilled and unskilled construction labor has resulted in an increased influx of Mexican workers and their wives and children into southwestern Montana. Together, these couples form survival teams with complementarian divisions of labor to meet the needs for the entire family.

For some of the families, this division of labor mirrors what life was like for them in their home regions of Mexico, where men worked agrarian jobs and women took care of domestic duties. This comfort in turn supports their own self-defined sense of an idyllic lifestyle. However, these families are also more self-reliant than they may have been in the regions in Mexico from which they come, as they live in isolated locations separated from each other by many miles. For the women, many of whom speak no English or have no access to transportation while their husbands work, their lives revolve around their homes and their children. Some women in these families embrace this similarity to the lifestyles they lived before coming to the United States, embracing what the author calls *survival femininity* as a means of providing for their families and assuring their ongoing existence. However, for others, this rigidly domestic lifestyle is a prison where even contact between others of the same ethnic community is limited, both in terms of fiscal and social independence.

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At the same time, this isolation is part and parcel of their survival. The author identifies southwest Montana as a location in which anonymity is impossible; there is no way for migrants to blend in with a predominantly White culture and as a result they perceive themselves as being perpetually scrutinized. In addition, given strong anti-immigrant sentiment in the area (which is also an area in which white supremacy has a strong history), these families live in perpetual fear of being pulled over during a traffic stop, held on immigration status, and then deported. This combination of marginalization and geographic isolation frequently results in a complete lack of community on which to fall back should something as catastrophic as a deportation happen. Thus the isolation of the geographic terrain in Montana also provides a measure of security as they can stay out of the public eye and minimize potential involvement with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

The Great Recession, which took place during the author's research, disrupted both the practice of gender norms and the stability of the families. As frequently happens in recession periods, high-paying traditionally male-occupied positions rapidly decreased while low-wage traditionally female-occupied positions—positions which had not been readily available to Mexican migrant women in the past—increased. This resulted in a form of survival femininity that not only involved maintaining the complementarian role traditions as much as possible but also simultaneously becoming transgressors of these traditional norms, brought on by having to work outside of the home. Combined with the physical isolation and the in-home presence of unemployed and economically disenfranchised husbands whose own well-being is threatened, this brought on physical and emotional exhaustion.

This same complexity of negotiation between traditional ways and new ways has always been a way of life for the second generation (children born in Montana) and the “halfway generation” (children born in Mexico but who experienced part of their childhoods in Montana). Similar to other children of migrants in other locations, these children have and exercise power by being interpreters for their parents. At the same time, they internalize the threat from their parents' documentation status. In addition, because of a lack of geographic proximity to others, these children are frequently socially isolated even while being in school. This isolation becomes harder for boys than for girls, but with it comes a paradox: while the bullying that these boys receive encourages them to reinforce their fathers' traditions of masculinity, the ability to function in their school settings makes the younger girls transgressors of the family roles. What promotes survival away from the family has the potential to create threat within it. So while school and social settings for children in Montana may result in role congruity for the boys as they become young men, the same settings produce a situation in which young women have to do more gender and ethnic identity work as they negotiate their own multifaceted identities in relationship to their families.

Overall, while some of the experiences of Mexican families in Montana mirror other migrants in the United States, the geographic isolation of Montana leads to other complications. The notion of community is a matter of weak ties with minimal relationships, except for passing encounters in local stores or at the monthly Spanish Catholic Mass. So in effect, this is not an ethnography of a community per se, but of an aggregate of individuals scattered in an area who share like characteristics outside a community.

In a twist of irony, it is precisely this aggregate nature that allowed for this research to be done in the first place. The author identifies that it is precisely her position as a scholar who spoke fluent Spanish and who had young children that allowed her to complete this ethnography. Being a mother created a common identity between the women in these migrant families and the researcher, allowing her entrée into these families' lives. Because of her bilingual language ability, she was a participant observer in her work as she would occasionally provide herself as a resource for women who needed her language skill as well as a volunteer in a food bank whose target population was predominantly the families she was studying. Despite writing about isolation in the lived experiences of these women's lives, it was through her intersection with these shared identities - and the relationships that developed as a result—which allowed for this work to take place at all. So in the end, while this book may be about isolation among Mexican migrants in the New West based on gender, it is also ultimately about relationships—because without relationships, the research could not have been completed. How this is framed in terms of privilege and oppression is left for interpretation.