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Book Review: Latino Heartland

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Book Review

Latino Heartland: Of Borders and Belonging in the Midwest

Sujei Vega

2015

New York, NY: New York University Press

263 pages

Softcover: \$29.49 US

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“This book is a wake-up call,” announces Sujei Vega (p. 226), author of the extraordinary ethnography *Latino Heartland: Of Borders and Belonging in the Midwest*. The central theme of the book revolves around the rights of non-white immigrants to settle in a small Indiana town, to lay claim to public spaces, and to reshape the notion of what *community* means in the rural Midwest. The author, who spent several years embedded in the town of Lafayette, Indiana, accomplishes her goal by describing the erased history of Indiana’s immigrants and pioneers, White and non-white, interviewing Latino and non-Latino Hoosiers about their community, and watching with palpable unease as immigration debates and harsh political rhetoric began to stir resentment and fear among Lafayette townspeople. This up-close account of the racism Latino Hoosiers encountered alongside the convenient forgetting, by many White residents, of their ancestors’ own immigration struggles, as well as the longstanding Latino presence in Lafayette (Vega reports that the first Mexican families began arriving in the 1950s), are the book’s most compelling features.

The book begins with a thorough description of the author’s approach and methodology which is essential for a scholarly work, but especially important in this case because the author is, herself, navigating the borders of belonging in the Midwest, albeit in a different way than many of her Latino subjects. Vega is the daughter of Mexican immigrants, and first came to central Indiana as a graduate student and settled in the town of Lafayette to work for the school district. She clarifies her activist researcher approach in the tradition of Behar and others, whose subject matter is deeply personal but nonetheless academically rigorous. Many of the book’s chapters serve as a corrective to what the author rightly views as a whitewashing or sanitizing of history in which White townspeople who believe their claim to the land threatened by more recent Latino arrivals, choose to ignore the ethno-cultural assimilation struggles of their German forebears, and the displacement of Indiana’s original residents, Native Americans. Chapters describing spiritual identity and claiming/re-claiming public space within the town pivot around this theme. Archival research, historical records and newspaper accounts, and contemporary local media reports on the ever-polarizing immigration debate lend support to the individual accounts of interviewees scattered throughout. The situation of contemporary life as a Latino Hoosier, particularly in the wake of harsh new immigration laws and increased vigilance about *undocumented* immigrants against border theory works well in some places but seems strained in others. For instance, a section on a Latino Catholics’ religious procession delves into dense language about *sacralizing* a public space and the importance of this public display of religiosity in carving out belonging in the town. The description of the procession is moving, but the author spends much of the chapter casting the

particular importance of this ritual as a deliberate attempt to *Latinize* a public space, and it is unclear whether the Latino participants share her interpretation of the event.

Dense though the book may be at times, the chapters are well written; and where Vega does provide detail on specific families, encounters, or verbatim interview excerpts (provided in both Spanish and English, when interviews were conducted in Spanish), it reads quickly. The last two sections in particular deal with the opening of a painful chapter in recent history, legislative actions that criminalized immigration and made deportation raids frighteningly common (a chapter that is still being written). Vega describes broader debates on borders and belongings filtering down to small town Indiana. Her interviews with non-Latino, mostly White Lafayette residents are particularly harrowing for the rank, race-based political rhetoric many of these individuals have swallowed about their neighbors. These national conversations about Latinos and immigration, all too conveniently reaching an apex during a time of economic downturn, steeped the town of Lafayette in animosity toward Latinos. Although the references to Senate bills and other political maneuvers are specific to a certain place in time (Indiana, 2006-2012), these accounts are relevant mainly to provide contextual knowledge about the often-precarious situation of Latino residents in the Midwest. Lafayette and other nontraditional settling locations for Latinos—Iowa, Michigan, Oklahoma, and many rural spaces—are often forgotten during discussions of Latino migration and Latino settlement. Vega's book makes clear that Latino Hoosiers are a vibrant and significant part of both Indiana history and contemporary Midwestern life. A take-home message particularly relevant for rural social workers may simply be to grasp the depth of the Latino presence in the heartland.

Vega herself is not a social worker, although she was heavily involved in community advocacy throughout her time in Lafayette. Graduate students in social work preparing for rural practice will find the book useful as an introduction to the cultural diversity of the Midwest, and will especially appreciate the plight of undocumented immigrants who live in a painful legal and social limbo, a crucial part of social work practice with many Latinos. Those interested in qualitative research methods may find the text helpful as an ethnographic, *activist researcher* example. For foundations-level coursework, MSW instructors may find Chapters 1, "The Making and Forgetting of the Past in Central Indiana," and 4, "The Impact of Microaggressions and Other Otherings in Everyday Life," trenchant for macro-level Human Diversity in the Social Environment discussions or advanced independent study on interpersonal practice with Latinos. Overall, this is a fascinating work that offers a fresh perspective on a frequently overlooked community (Latinos) in a frequently overlooked place (the rural Midwest). It is indeed a wake-up call to those of us who have the privilege of forgetting.