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On The Politics of Mobility a Review of MILKING IN THE SHADOWS

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Known for green rolling hills, rich forests, vibrant and welcoming communities, and most importantly cheese; Wisconsin and other upper Midwest states are the epitome of the rural idyll. Beneath these vibrant communities and picturesque rural cultures lies a sleazy economy supported by a mostly unwelcomed and mistreated workforce. Keller exposes the immigrant labor regime fueling the success of upper Midwest dairy farms. Earning her doctorate in Sociology at the University of Wisconsin Madison and working as an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Rhode Island, Keller began her research on the dairy industry labor demographics in 2011. Her ethnographic, multi-site, research study interviewed migrant workers about their circular migration from rural Mexican villages to rural Midwest dairy farms. Over a four-year period, Keller lived among dairy farmers and visited Mexico numerous times with intentions of exploring the immigrant experience in depth. This book exposes the paradox of America’s demand for cheap dairy products, and their denial of these individuals’ labor rights.

Organized into seven chapters that focus on the shift to Mexican labor on American dairy farms, with a heavy emphasis on Mexican migrants, Keller explored the process of migration planning, the factors causing migrants to leave their rural villages, and how they believe migration has changed over the years. On the American side, Keller illustrates farm life, work regulations, the lives of immigrants in rural communities, and the planning process of returning to Mexico.

After a brief introductory chapter, Keller argued in chapter two that the dependence of Midwest Dairy farms on Mexican laborers is one of the most substantial demographic shifts in the last decade. The influx of immigrant laborers in the Midwest increased throughout the early 1990s and 2000s in concurrence with the breakdown of small family farms and the emergence of mega-dairy operations. Demand for increased production required that farmers employ increasingly large numbers of both quantity and quality workers, attributes farmers believed were lacking in the local population and traditional sources of hire. The practice of recruiting migrants from rural Mexican villages quickly spread across the region producing both a relatively captive and malleable work force at very low cost. Chain-migration of family and friends, seamlessly filled job positions, and consequently the hard-work of undocumented immigrants carried the weight of a booming dairy industry.
Chapter three described the challenges associated with emigrating from Mexico to the Midwest. From months planning their passage across North America to finally embarking on their treacherous voyage, “It is starkly clear from these narratives that the risks that these migrants assume are profoundly greater than the farmers take by hiring undocumented immigrants” (p. 68). However, benefits of these risky outbound ventures are evident upon analyzing the gradual changes in Mexican communities.

Described in chapter four, the new concrete houses erected in the Mexican valleys are adorned with memorabilia of immigrant’s times in the Midwest such as cow patterned curtains and little trinkets. The effects of globalization are also notable including an array of new shops and roads exposing previously isolated villages to the larger world. One of the most prominent effects is not seen in the materialistic composition of these villages but rather the cultural shifts. Keller writes of the emergence of a culture of migration, where the life trajectory of an ordinary Mexican villager includes migration to the United States as a rite of passage. Citing a lack of jobs and low wages, young men are leaving in a pioneering spirit. Traditional gender roles of a male patriarch strongly effect the composition of migrating populations resulting in a largely male dominated migrant labor force in the Midwest, creating a large female population in sending Mexican villages. Keller however notes female migration is becoming more common and is causing a gradual change in this demographic.

Discussing in chapter five the significance of the border, Keller argued it not only signals the beginning of one country and the ending of another, but as one migrant described it, “one way of life from another” (p. 68). Following various policies concerning migrant labor, border policy has mostly been dictated by a white American fear of a lack of resources. Drawing on this anxiety, politicians have used border insecurity and fear mongering to sway votes, most notably in the 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump. This climate of paranoid uncertainty produces increasingly dangerous border crossings for undocumented migrant laborers.

Upon crossing the border successfully and arriving at dairy farms, immigrants redefine the concepts of what constitutes an employee and a community member, as explored by Keller in chapter six. Faced with a largely unregulated work environment, migrant workers experience working hours almost no legal citizen would withstand, substandard housing conditions, and feelings of ostracization. Keller argued that the legal status of these workers creates an unfair power differential between farmers and their employees, a differential furthered by language barriers that inhibit communication. Lacking governmental oversight, these migrants are made vulnerable and extremely susceptible to abuse within the dairy industry’s push for profit. In the Midwestern context as described in chapter seven, migrant workers are mostly confined to life on the farm due to a general lack of resources such as a vehicle, access to public transportation, or proof of citizenship. These restrictions inhibit migrant’s interaction with local communities, hides them in the shadows of rural idylls which are often unaware of the migrant presence.

Upon accruing a sum of money few would consider wealth, migrant workers begin contemplating their journey home. Weighing multiple factors such as current immigration policies, recent success of border crossings, and the political climate, migrant’s itinerary for departure is highly tenuous and places them in a vulnerable situation of immobile limbo. Keller argued immobile limbo is characterized by high levels of stress, vulnerability, and danger in
chapter eight. However, a successful return to Mexico for migrants makes the unbearable process extremely worthwhile.

Keller earned the trust of her migrant participants leading to interviews flavorful and open in dialogue, enabling her to collect information most would keep close to their chest. Wholesome interviews were paired with widely recognized studies concerning immigration and the immigrant population in the Midwest to provide a stunningly accurate representation of the complexity of the politics of mobility. Vulnerability, a reoccurring theme throughout Keller’s research encompassed a lack of predictability and safety from crossing the U.S.-Mexican border to living on isolated dairy farms at the goodwill of their employers. Though Milking in the Shadows perfectly illustrated the trials faced by migrant laborers, the stories were so compelling most readers will wish for more. With a rapidly expanding migrant population in the United States and an emerging emphasis on trauma informed practice, helping professionals, especially social workers, must have a working knowledge and understanding of the migrant experience to competently execute their varied responsibilities, making this publication a pertinent resource.