This ethnography documents the daily struggles of poor Mexican immigrants in the United States as they negotiate a complex myriad of constraints surrounding migration and labor processes. Zavella draws on several rich strands of scholarship in her introduction to set out her theoretical framework: transnationalism, globalization, assimilation theory, feminist and queer theory, and the concepts of structure and agency. She deploys these conceptual frameworks against “underclass theory,” which, she argues, highlights poverty and destitution, leads to homogenized, essentialized portrayals of immigrants. This feeds into what she calls the racial nativist discourse perpetuated in the United States against Mexican migrants.

The ethnographic voice, together with the conceptual framework of structure and agency, gives the author space to understand individual reactions to structural constraints, moving away from the victimizing narrative she abhors, while closely examining how the challenges stemming from unequal power dynamics devastate people’s lives. She collected narratives of migration that delve into details of networking, transition routes, smugglers, clashes with border guards, remittances, as well as the complex calculus of choices, aspirations and longings that she suggests run ceaselessly through the mind of the migrant. These stories lead to what she calls “structures of feeling,” where recurring patterns of strong emotion, resulting from the particular socioeconomic positioning of her participants, are identified. The concepts of “peripheral vision” and of “belonging neither here nor there” are core structures of feeling shared by both Mexican migrants and Mexican-Americans. These terms capture the sense of lack of full assimilation to, or belonging in, the dominant society, of marginalization and racialization.

Zavella also takes care to fully draw out the gendered dimension of migration. Her detailed life histories clearly demonstrate how migration impacts men and women differently as they struggle to reconcile their cultural heritage and gender roles of their homeland with the norms and values of American society, which are perceived as comparatively more open and less traditional. The reader wonders whether reconciliation can ever take place satisfactorily, given how the harsh economic circumstances and insecure political climate that these families endure exacerbate such tensions and conflicts. Zavella describes the “divided house,” referring to the fact that in many migrant families, nuclear members are separated due to economic and labor market exigencies, bringing about “melancholia” and “mourning.” She argues that melancholia and mourning are common emotional characteristics of these households, brought about by the continual struggle with homesickness and separation from loved ones (mourning), poverty and the attempt to assimilate in an unwelcoming if not hostile place (melancholia).

Zavella provides a comprehensive overview of immigration and labor policies vis-à-vis Mexican immigrants, highlighting their shifting, arbitrary nature. Such policies are implemented through an uneasy tug-of-war between practical and humanitarian considerations and a
powerful and unsettling racial nativist discourse disseminated by media personalities who portray the United States as under the imminent threat of some sort of takeover by hostile Mexicans. However, she does not place these policies within the globalized context of tightening migration policies and “shrinking” citizenship regimes currently enacted across the globe (Dobrowolsky 2012), which gives the impression that these are regional or national phenomena, disjointed from broader international contexts. It may well be that in the United States, the apparatus of policies and politics surrounding Mexican migration takes on a distinctly brown vs. white, racialized tone, but Zavella stops there, failing to articulate that such racialization in the arena of migration is one distinct, concrete manifestation of a deeper fear of the “Other.” Julia Kristeva, (1991), Hannah Arendt (1994), and Benedict Anderson (1991) are just a few of the scholars who speak eloquently of these fears and imaginaries on a broader, global level and their absence in the text was noticeable.

Furthermore, there is scholarly research that contests accounts of migrants as melancholic victims of circumstances (e.g., Dossa 2004, Nourpanah 2010), arguing that such representation feeds into and reinforces popular representations of migrants, portraying them as suffering, passive victims who lack agency. I would argue that migration, in itself, is not necessarily a negative experience, and need not inevitably lead to “mourning” and “melancholia.” Rather, structural inequalities which bring about exploitation, hardship and suffering must be considered as prime causes of such “structures of feeling.” Although Zavella does a good job in laying out the historic roots of inequalities and vulnerabilities of migrants, the reader is left with the impression that it is migration, in itself, which causes this sorrow and suffering.

Zavella’s final chapter, which shows how these migrant “structures of feeling” discussed above can be artistically and culturally productive, is not quite integrated coherently with the rest of the book. It focuses on the careers of three groups of musicians with Mexican heritage, who have drawn on experiences of migration and borders in their work. Zavella “illustrate[s] how these artists construct cultural memory, a field of contested meanings associated with trauma” (p. 191). Zavella emphasizes that they are not just popular latino stereotypes of wider pop culture but “cultural activists”, embroiled in political controversies. Their lyrics are tributes to the subjugation undergone by these people, as well as capturing the essence of fluidity, complexity and “playfulness” that is one of the compensations of being a migrant. If becoming a migrant brings about some sort of identity crisis and break, their music forges an experience of identity for their listeners, a tapestry of emotion which they can relate and understand, as it reflects and gives meaning to their own daily experiences of hardship, turning it into an art form. Their music has become a voice of the oppressed, affirming the existence of joy, love and art in lives that, in Zavella’s telling, otherwise appear bleak and destitute.

Zavella contextualizes the daily reality of the lives of the working poor Mexican migrants within the current policy debates and historicized accounts of labor market formations and outcomes, while exploring the consequences, racialized subjectivities, fluid family and gender identities, and poverty-struck life trajectories. She develops a complex nuanced ethnographic description of their lives, highlighting regional and local dynamics. Pedagogically speaking, this book would be a useful addition to the recommended reading list of a migration or labour studies course, provided it was presented within a suitable global and theoretical context and could definitely provide material for discussion in an ethnography class.
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