

# MEXICAN MIGRANTS

## The Attractions and Realities of the United States

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**Mayan Journeys: The New Migration from Yucatán to the United States.** Edited by Wayne Cornelius, David Fitzgerald, and Pedro Lewin Fischer. La Jolla: Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, University of California, San Diego, 2007. Pp. xi + 257. \$24.50 paper.

**Metropolitan Migrants: The Migration of Urban Mexicans to the United States.** By Rubén Hernández-León. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008. Pp. xi + 258. \$21.95 paper.

**Citizenship across Borders: The Political Transnationalism of El Migrante.** By Michael Peter Smith and Matt Bakker. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008. Pp. xii + 249. \$19.95 paper.

**Transborder Lives: Indigenous Oaxacans in Mexico, California, and Oregon.** By Lynn Stephen. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007. Pp. xxii + 375. \$23.95 paper.

By and large, the most recent economic recession significantly reduced employment opportunities for thousands of Mexican migrants settled in the United States, prompting many to return to their homeland in the midst of heightened anti-immigrant rhetoric and increased immigration raids at the U.S. workplace. This in turn decreased remittances from Mexican migrants abroad.<sup>1</sup> Yet many Mexican migrants (both documented and undocumented) decided to weather the recession in the United States, supported by solidarity ties and social networks: many nodes of friends, family, neighbors, coworkers, paisanos, compadres, and related forms of kinship.

According to official estimates, there were 11.7 million Mexican migrants in the United States in 2007, comprising 31 percent of the total

1. During 2008, Mexico experienced a 3.6 percent decrease in remittances from migrants abroad but still received \$25 billion in family remittances that year. This drop affected some states more severely than others. With the exception of Oaxaca, all home states of the migrants examined in the books under review showed significant losses in family remittance income. See Banco de México, "Las remesas familiares en 2008," January 27, 2009, 3 (<http://www.banxico.org.mx/documents/%7BB7CBCFAF-AB7D-BE65-F78F-6827D524C418%7D.pdf>).

foreign-born population. In 1995, only 20 percent of those eligible to become citizens had done so; this percentage rose to 35 percent by 2005. This 75 percent increase compares to the 20 percent increase for all other migrants.<sup>2</sup> By 2007, there were 2.5 million naturalized U.S. citizens claiming Mexico as their birthplace. These figures suggest that Mexican migrants are increasingly interested in incorporating themselves into the social fabric of the United States. However, a great many are also interested in maintaining a distinct ethnic and racial identity (on the self-designation of indigenous migrants, see Stephen, 209–230).

The books under review in this essay attempt to disentangle the complex dynamics of Mexican migration to the United States. They outline the critical distinction between migrants from urban and rural areas; the push and pull of expulsion and reception in urban contexts; the effectiveness of border enforcement as a deterrent to migration; racial and ethnic discrimination among Mixtec, Zapotec, and Mayan indigenous migrants; and transnational civic and political engagement. All draw on regional, community, and local studies to unpack migrant journeys and their continuities and differences, using multisited ethnographies in their analyses.

In *Metropolitan Migrants*, Rubén Hernández-León analyzes the structural origins of international migration among working-class households in the Monterrey–Houston circuit. With empirical evidence from surveys, participant observation, life histories, and interviews at several sites in Monterrey and Houston between 1995 and 2005, Hernández-León offers a glimpse of the social construction of transborder networks in two sending and receiving metropolitan areas.

Most classic and contemporary studies of the social dimension of Mexican migration to the United States have focused on journeys originating in rural areas. This emphasis is possibly explained by the slow emergence of distinct patterns in rural versus urban migration. Such patterns are difficult to trace because many studies consider only birthplace or current residence without linking internal and international migration histories.<sup>3</sup> Hernández-León notes that it was not until the late 1980s that researchers found that 30 percent of the labor migrants crossing Mexico's northern border came from cities of more than one hundred thousand inhabitants. This percentage grew in the 1990s, yet rural migrants still predominated. Seeking to provide a more dynamic account of Monterrey's emergence as a sending region, Hernández-León traces its historical roots, also citing surveys

2. Jeffrey S. Passel, "Growing Share of Immigrants Choosing Naturalization," Pew Hispanic Center Report, 2007, 18.

3. Lilita Rivera Sánchez and Fernando Lozano Ascencio, though focused on migration from the state of Morelos to the United States, recognize the importance of internal migration: "Los contextos de salida urbanos y rurales y la organización social de la migración," *Migración y Desarrollo* 6 (2006): 45–78.

of hundreds of workers from La Fama, a typical working-class neighborhood in Monterrey. By the end of the 1990s, he finds, Monterrey, Mexico's third-largest city, had changed from a "magnet for immigration . . . into a source of metropolitan outmigration" (63). To put this change in context, "between the 1960s and 1990s as much as 75 percent of out-of-state immigrants to the city were originally from the neighboring states of Coahuila, San Luis Potosí, Tamaulipas, and Zacatecas, confirming the regional pulling effect of the Monterrey labor market" (62). The shift to export-oriented industrialization in the 1980s decreased once-stable employment in textile manufacturing and effectively dismantled the benefits (e.g., decent wages, social welfare, and union protected seniority) acquired during the golden era of import-substitution industrialization. The scarcity of well-paying jobs and the instability of the informal sector eventually pushed workers to consider U.S. migration as a viable coping strategy—a means to social reproduction—rather than as a risk-management strategy, as rural households saw it.

In perhaps the most interesting part of his research in Monterrey, Hernández-León finds that, "by the late 1990s, one-third of the households in the La Fama neighborhood had at least one member with experience in the United States" (107). For some of these workers, urban-to-urban migration to Houston and other metropolitan areas in the United States was their first uprooting; for others, the United States was "a destination of rural-to-urban flows stemming from localities and states with a long tradition of internal migration to Monterrey, such as Zacatecas and San Luis Potosí" (69).

Hernández-León identifies three important phases in the formation of the Monterrey–Houston circuit. He traces its origins to *braceros* (seasonal contract laborers) who, on returning to Mexico, decided to settle in Monterrey instead of their rural communities of origin, using their earnings from temporary U.S. employment to finance rural-urban migration within Mexico. In the 1960s and 1970s, a second wave of migrants emerged when U.S. firms recruited skilled male workers from Monterrey for jobs in the aerospace and oil industries in Los Angeles and Houston. Some who had migrated to Los Angeles subsequently relocated to Houston to be closer to their families. The last phase started in the 1980s, when increased labor instability in La Fama drove workers to seek jobs in Houston, where an array of oil-related industries welcomed these skilled *regiomontano* workers.<sup>4</sup> By the end of the 1990s, Houston had become the top destination for migrants from La Fama.

4. Unfortunately, Hernández-León's interviews with unionized factory workers in Houston do not address the impact that prior union socialization in Mexico, and the demise of union power and employment security in Monterrey, may have had on these migrant workers' engagement in U.S. labor unions.

Multiple social relations—kinship, exogamic marriage, soccer leagues, and *vecinazgo*—helped sustain international migration from Monterrey to Houston, as did the exchange of practical information (e.g., tips on effective border crossing and housing), invitations to cross-border soccer matches, job referrals, and low-cost remittance services. Hernández-León finds, in this context, that the reciprocity and obligations derived from urban-origin ties are not as strong and structured as are those from rural-origin ties, in which kinship and *paisanaje* are reinforced by endogamic marriage and *compadrazgo*, thereby creating overlapping obligations that drive migration to a much greater extent. In summary, Hernández-León shows that in urban-origin communities, weak ties forge useful social capital for finding employment, but, unlike in rural-origin communities, migrants can exit the network at a relatively low cost when conflict arises.

In contrast to these urban-mestizo actors, rural-indigenous migrants from the small town of Tunkás, in Yucatán, are the focus of the collection of essays edited by Wayne Cornelius, David Fitzgerald, and Pedro Lewin Fischer. *Mayan Journeys* offers the broadest range of topics and the most synthetic approach of all the books under review here. Using surveys, interviews, and ethnographic observations in one community in Yucatán and at multiple points of entry in Los Angeles and Orange counties in California, the twelve chapters—produced by an outstanding binational research team composed mostly of undergraduate students—make important contributions in the areas of stepwise migration, pre- and post-migration health disparities, the determinants of migration and settlement in the United States, the impact of immigration policies, ethnic-identity construction, religious affiliation, and transborder civic engagement.

Lewin Fischer's introduction establishes Yucatán as an emerging migrant-sending state, from which an increasingly large number of indigenous Mayans leave in search of work in the United States. Although such migration dates back to the late years of the *bracero* program, it was small, and it dissipated with Cancún's development as a major tourist attraction in the 1970s. The possibility of short- and long-term employment in Cancún originally deterred indigenous Mayans from international migration, but later, as Andrea Rodríguez, Jennifer Wittlinger, and Luis Manzanero Rodríguez observe, it also served as a "school of migration." They find that, since the 1980s, "prior migratory experience within Mexico increases the probability of U.S. migration among Tunkaseños [people from the Tunkás region] by 28 percent" (86).

This international migration raises the issue of the logistics of border crossings. Ann Kimball, Yesenia Acosta, and Rebecca Dames find in their analysis of Yucatecan migrants that increased border enforcement by the United States has not decreased migrant flows; it has only raised the fees that smugglers demand and encouraged undocumented migrants to re-

main for longer periods in the United States. These findings are consistent with previous analyses of the effects of border enforcement on migrant behavior.<sup>5</sup> It is nevertheless surprising that a new sending area, with fewer or weaker networks, should be as successful as established regions at circumventing the U.S. Border Patrol. Seventy-four percent of undocumented Tunkaseños interviewed crossed the border undetected on their first try on a recent trip, and an impressive 97 percent entered the United States. On the negative side, the increased demand for effective smugglers has led to price increases, from a median fee of less than \$400 before 1993 to a median of \$1,600 for migrants crossing between 2000 and 2006.<sup>6</sup>

In treating the complex phenomenon of identity displays by Tunkaseños and the impact of exposure to other Mexicans and Latin Americans in the United States, Blair Lyman, María de Jesús Cen Montuy, and Edith Tejada Sandoval suggest that the self-identification that these migrants most often choose is Yucatecan (54 percent), followed by Mexican (19 percent) and Mayan (15 percent).<sup>7</sup> The interviews supporting these findings nevertheless offer a more complicated picture, given the frequent claim, "We are all Mayans" (172). Compared to other indigenous groups, these Mayans exhibit lower levels of linguistic segregation, with only 3 percent of *Tunkaseños* and, more generally, only 9 percent of Maya speakers in Yucatán being monolingual. Yet among migrants, the ability to speak a Mayan language is positively correlated with stronger attachments to their hometowns and negatively correlated with the desire to legalize their status in the United States. There is also a low perception of racial discrimination (both in Mexico and in the United States) among Tunkaseños. This finding contrasts with Lynn Stephen's analysis of the racial discrimination and economic marginalization that Zapotec and Mixtec migrants experience.

Although the contributors to *Mayan Journeys* make only brief mention of binational civic engagement, in the past two decades, an increasing number of Mexican migrants have participated in community development

5. See Douglas Massey, Jorge Durand, and Nolan J. Malone, *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002).

6. For a comparison of smuggling fees in traditional and emerging sending regions, see Jezmin Fuentes, Henry L'Esperance, Raúl Pérez, and Caitlin White, "Impacts of U.S. Immigration Policies on Migrant Behavior," in *Impacts of Border Enforcement on Mexican Immigration*, ed. Wayne A. Cornelius and Jessa M. Lewis (La Jolla: Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, University of California, San Diego, 2007), 53–73.

7. For a more comprehensive theoretical and empirical analysis of self-identification, see Jonathan Fox, "Reframing Mexican Migration as a Multi-Ethnic process," *Latino Studies* 4 (2006): 39–61; Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera Salgado, eds., *Indigenous Mexican Migrants in the United States* (La Jolla: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, University of California, San Diego, 2004). For a case study of ethnic identity among Nahua migrants, see Martha García, "Rituales de paso y categorías sociales en la migración internacional nahua del Alto Balsas, Guerrero," *Cuicuilco* 15 (2008): 77–96.

and transborder politics through hometown associations and ethnic organizations. The proliferation of mestizo and indigenous associations with binational agendas is an indication of the loyalty and strong attachment of these migrants to their communities of origin.<sup>8</sup> Although many such associations began informally, by the early 2000s, hundreds had become formal organizations, sometimes joining others from the same home states to form federations, with the encouragement of the Mexican government. This has increased the leverage of migrants with their home-state governments and has encouraged involvement in social development projects on behalf of their communities of origin and in defense of migrant rights in their U.S. communities.

Focusing on the personal experiences of several prominent migrants from Guanajuato and Zacatecas successfully engaged in binational, trans-local, and transborder politics, Michael Peter Smith and Matt Bakker offer a compelling, multisited ethnography of grassroots activism and transnational citizenship. *Citizenship across Borders* helps disentangle the questionable synergies between migration and development, the challenges and opportunities for migrant political participation in national and subnational arenas and institutions, and the possibility that migrant participation in communities of origin portends greater civic engagement in domestic U.S. politics.

The first part of this study offers a theoretical analysis of transnational citizenship and the multiple ties that facilitate or hinder the insertion of migrants into dual-citizenship frameworks. The authors' middle-ground approach challenges both Arjun Appadurai's romantic, postnational "ethnoscapes" and Samuel Huntington's idea that the excessive nationalism of Mexican migrants prevents unalloyed loyalty to the American creed and its Anglo-Protestant values.<sup>9</sup> In the view of Smith and Bakker, scholarship on transnational practices has focused too much on only one side of the story—either on state-level actors or on the politics of translocality—ignoring the agency and political influence of local and translocal actors to affect change in the state itself. Therefore, they seek

8. On differences between mestizo and indigenous organizations, see Gaspar Rivera-Salgado and Luis Escala Rabadán, "Collective Identity and Organizational Strategies of Indigenous and Mestizo Mexican Migrants," in *Indigenous Mexican Migrants in the United States*, ed. Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera Salgado (La Jolla: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, University of California, San Diego, 2004), 145–178. For an analysis of Mexican civic binationality in Latino immigrant mobilizations during the spring of 2006, see Jonathan Fox and Xóchitl Bada, "Migrant Civic Engagement," in *Rallying for Immigrant Rights*, ed. Irene Bloemraad and Kim Voss (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming), available at [http://www.wilsoncenter.org/topics/docs/Fox\\_Bada\\_chapterfinal1.pdf](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/topics/docs/Fox_Bada_chapterfinal1.pdf).

9. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 33–34; Samuel P. Huntington, "The Hispanic Challenge," *Foreign Policy* 141 (March–April 2004): 30–45.

to present concurrent and intertwined, binational practices of migrants “within relevant historical, political, economic, and institutional contexts, without assuming that those contexts can be invoked to explain outcomes” (19). This focus points to the emergence of a fledgling transnational public sphere across the U.S.-Mexico border.

In their analysis of migrant engagement in community development, Smith and Bakker focus on one maquiladora in Guanajuato and the structural conditions leading to the failure of the project, funded by migrants from Napa, California. The narratives of international, national, subnational, and grassroots actors reveal the contradictions, conflicting agendas, and different understandings of core capitalist principles and neoliberal ideology among those interested in leveraging migrant remittances as the newest “social innovation scheme” to promote national development.<sup>10</sup>

Smith and Bakker also retell the successful intervention of the late Andrés Bermúdez (known as the “Tomato King”) in subnational and federal politics in his home state of Zacatecas, one of the most prominent cases of political transnationalism by a Mexican migrant. Interweaving Bermúdez’s voice with their own interpretation of his actions, the authors open a door on the vicissitudes of transnational politics. However, the many unexplained aspects of this fascinating case left me disappointed. For instance, there is not enough detail for one to understand how state and federal political elites perceived Bermúdez’s insertion into formal politics, or how the community of Jerez, Zacatecas, reacted after Bermúdez was accused of corruption during his tenure as municipal president of Jerez.

The final section of *Citizenship across Borders* is devoted to the Janus face of binational politics, individual examples of migrant activist involvement in U.S. politics (mainly in political campaigns and in building coalitions between hometown associations and other Latino nongovernmental organizations in Southern California). Smith and Bakker believe that such participation in both the Mexican and the U.S. public spheres offers hope that migrant engagement in homeland politics will spill over into sustained political participation on both sides of the border.

In a timely response to Smith and Bakker’s complaint that few studies of migrants’ civic engagement address the interconnections of different contexts, scales, and spaces, Lynn Stephen provides a superb ethnography of the emergence and evolution of the transborder lives of rural Mixtec and Zapotec migrants in California, Oregon, and Oaxaca. With the authority of twenty-two years of fieldwork in the state of Oaxaca and long-

10. For a comparative analysis of the 3 × 1 Program in the context of Michoacán migrants in Chicago, see Xóchitl Bada, “Sociopolitical Remittances, Rural Development, and Mexican Migrant Hometown Associations: The Shifting Nature of Transnational and Trans-Local Connections in The Chicago-Michoacán Corridor,” Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 2008, 110–220.

term collaborations with many of the grassroots organizations portrayed in *Transborder Lives*, Stephen shows the reconfigurations of gender and family roles, community politics, civic engagement, ethnic identities, and survival strategies in the multiple locales that migrants inhabit on both sides of the Mexico-U.S. border.

Stephen's decision to locate her thick descriptions within what she calls a transborder framework gives freshness to the frequently sterile debate about the usefulness of "transnational" as a label for social, economic, and political processes connecting more than one national space. Moving beyond the latter as the privileged actor, Stephen characterizes the lives of the migrants presented in her book as transborder because "[t]he borders they cross are ethnic, class, cultural, colonial, and state borders within Mexico as well as at the U.S.-Mexico border and in different regions of the United States. . . . While crossing national borders is one kind of crossing undertaken by the subjects of this book, there are many others as well" (6). The transnational is thus best described as a subset of a more holistic approach to transborder experiences.

Aptly using Arturo Escobar's model of "meshworks" to conceptualize migrant activity and the "thickening" of migrant contacts,<sup>11</sup> Stephen traces the interlinking affiliations and civic memberships that exist where migrants settle. She contends that migrants are simultaneously embedded in different public spheres across the border. For example, migrants from San Agustín participate in transnational public works committees scattered across ten cities in the United States, in the local government in San Agustín, in farmworkers' unions in Oregon, in churches in the United States, and in immigrant rights coalitions and events. As we learn how different nodes in migrant networks are intricately connected by ties of kinship and *compadrazgo*, and to hometown associations, we discover that "multiple sets of laws, institutions, values, and social conventions can work at once within one social field, as seen, for example, in the case of male farmworkers who learn the rules of undocumented farm labor in labor camps, participate in U.S. churches and immigrant rights organizations, and return home to take on a *cargo* as part of their community citizenship requirements in Oaxaca" (315).

The reduction from three to two years in the time to be served in unpaid *cargos* in some Oaxacan villages with local self-governance is a concrete example of the long-term effects that internal and international migration have in transborder communities. This change, accomplished with the active participation of men who had returned from Mexico City and

11. Arturo Escobar, "Actores, redes e novos produtores de conhecimento: Os movimentos sociais e a transição paradigmática nas ciências," in *Conhecimento prudente para uma vida decente*, ed. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (Porto: Afrontamento, 2003), 605–630, qtd. in Stephen, *Transborder Lives*, 19.



the United States, is juxtaposed with cases in which migrants return to the United States after serving cargos to take up leadership positions as community organizers or human rights advocates in Oregon or California. Stephen thus presents simultaneous practices of civic binationality.

Finally, in reflecting on collaborative, activist, ethnographic research, Stephen makes an important plea for “results that can be held accountable to some kind of analytical rigor and not be measured just in terms of political correctness” (322), a suggestion for future anthropological work that might equally apply to several other disciplines in the social sciences. This is certainly a difficult task, but for those of us interested in rescuing collaborative research from the realm of applied science and willing to face our subjects as partners while acknowledging differences in power, class, and status that often become major sources of tension in these endeavors, Lynn Stephen provides a valuable road map to emulate her achievement.

Collectively, the four books reviewed offer a glimpse of the challenges and opportunities faced by mestizo and indigenous migrants from Mexico in crossing linguistic, economic, ethnic, religious, cultural, racial, and national borders. They provide new clues to understand migratory cycles and give important explanations for the different forms of expulsion and reception found in rural and urban areas. From different angles, they help unpack grassroots action, revealing the many ways in which migrants exercise multiple memberships in faith-based communities, hometown associations, and labor unions in the United States, as well as in local, state, and federal institutions in Mexico. A common denominator of these works is the tacit recognition that current immigration policies need to adjust to the reality of U.S.-Mexican life. To this end, academics, opinion leaders, politicians, and decision makers on both sides of the border might greatly profit from reading these books. The governments of Mexico and the United States need to acknowledge that sharing a national border should also mean sharing responsibility for fixing the broken immigration system, for working as partners on a level playing field. Let's hope that all the migrant activists and leaders portrayed in these books keep pushing for this to happen.