2008

Fear of a "Brown Society": Latina/o Laborers in East-Central, Illinois

Aídé Acosta
University of Illinois

Follow this and additional works at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo

Part of the Latin American Languages and Societies Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol11/iss1/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for Latino Research at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Diálogo by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact wsulliv6@depaul.edu, c.mcclure@depaul.edu.
Fear of a "Brown Society": Latina/o Laborers in East-Central, Illinois

Cover Page Footnote
This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

This article is available in Diálogo: https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol11/iss1/3
INTRODUCTION

The history of Mexican migration in the U.S. has expanded over a century and across diverse landscapes. Recently, Mexicans, and Latinas/os more broadly, have begun forging communities beyond the “traditional” spaces of residence. It is no surprise to hear about flourishing Latino (im)migrant enclaves in North Carolina, Arkansas, or Tennessee. The Pew Hispanic Center in a report on the “new Latino south” notes that across a broad path through “the region stretching westward from North Carolina on the Atlantic seaboard to Arkansas across the Mississippi River and south to Alabama on the Gulf of Mexico,” considerable Latino populations have emerged in communities where Latinos were a sparse presence just a decade or two ago (2005: i). In the 1990s, rapid growth in income and employment in these regions have provided the economic incentives for Latinas/os to migrate to new settlement states.

Latinas/os constitute a primary labor force in Midwest industries and also constitute the most vulnerable population in the contemporary anti-immigrant backlash. It is imperative then, to consider the U.S.-Mexico border beyond its geopolitical location due to its profound effects throughout the nation-state. The changes in these new arenas, however, have caused a wide-spread panic locally and at the national level. While working class Latinas/os creatively thrive under the harsh circumstances they often confront, their hosts often greet them with a racist, and in some instances, violent welcoming fueled by decades of racism against Latinas/os, and especially against Mexicans. Latinas/os have been migrating throughout the United States since the turn of the 20th century. Early on, Mexican laborers recruited by the railroad and agricultural industries began residing in places like Kansas, Michigan and Pennsylvania. And akin to today’s current immigration debates, in the early 20th century, Mexicans occupied a space in anti-immigrant discourse. The current debates continue to embody de-humanizing practices against working class immigrants. Latinas/os, and specifically Mexicans, continue to be constructed within racializing discourses of “illegal” and “alien.” They represent disembodied beings, whose labor is desired, but not their lives (Kearny 1998). A recent example is the passing of HR-4437 in the House of Representatives in December 2005. HR-4437 was the “Border Protection, Anti-terrorist, and Illegal Immigration Control Act” proposed by Republican Congressman Jim Sensenbrenner from Wisconsin. While the Bill failed at the Senate level, it nevertheless served as a catalyst for an intense immigration debate and for the 2006 immigrant rights protests.2

Currently, Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, as well as other Latina/o groups, are transforming the ethnic and racial landscapes of the heartland by occupying non-traditional spaces within the rural Midwest. While this population has been popularly categorized as “newcomers,” they are in fact actors of a larger historical journey of Mexican migration to the Midwest that initiates with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (Diaz-McConnel 2004). In the early 20th century, Mexican laborers were recruited to the heartland primarily by the railroad and agricultural industries. Similarly today, employers played a key role deciding where the “new” populations would reside and consequently their development as a community. Attending to these historical and current trends, I discuss current Latina/o (im)migration in east-central Illinois and the challenges this population confronts as they settle in rural communities.
Through ethnographic research conducted in summer 2005, I discuss the quotidian experiences of Latinas/os in rural towns. The large growth of Latinas/os within the past ten years in these new areas is only beginning to be visible in the host communities.

FORGING COMMUNITY IN THE MIDWEST: THE CASE OF EAST-CENTRAL ILLINOIS

In east-central Illinois, Latinas/os occupy two major (im)migration patterns: seasonal and permanent. As with the earlier seasonal migration cycles of the early 1900's, Tejanas/os continue to occupy a significant role in agricultural labor. Every year for three weeks in the month of July, seasonal migrants travel from the valley of Texas, principally from McAllen, to east-central Illinois for corn detasseling. The migrants work long days, seven days a week for approximately three weeks following the 4th of July. They are brought to these Midwest rural communities by Texas recruiters who are aligned with large companies of the Midwest as well as area landowners. The recruiters, of Mexican descent themselves, are responsible for organizing cohorts of migrants to this region. The migrants arrive to the rural communities in their own vehicles, many in large SUV's, with minimal to no money at all. Most travel in groups or families with minimal essentials: clothing, toiletries, pots and pans, and maybe some food. Not all are as prepared, however. Many families arrive to the Midwest already in debt from the money required for the travel and are forced to ask for food and help from family they have not seen since the previous season, social services agencies, the recruiters themselves, or other migrants.

The town of Air City is host to a number of seasonal migrants during the hot and humid summers of east-central Illinois. Families begin arriving in the last days of June to initiate work, which, given the weather conditions, begin after the July 4th holiday. Families settle in different locations throughout the town, depending on the arrangements with the recruiter. Two major sites of temporary residency are in the outskirts of the town: the old air-force hospital and a section of low-income housing. The housing in the old hospital is in deplorable conditions. The migrants are housed in the small rooms that served as recuperating rooms when the hospital was functioning. Some rooms have window air conditioners, though not all. Outside the small rooms, the workers share communal spaces, such as showers, kitchen, and open spaces for socializing. They share stories and conversations related to work, their travel or the current novela on television. The youth occupy this space upon completing a long day of labor by socializing with their peers, including listening to their favorite hip-hop or Tex-Mex CD and playing cards or board games. The young children run through the hallways befriending with other children their age. This socializing is primarily done late in the evenings after a long, back-breaking day of work.

The low income residence units are in more decent conditions than their counterparts in the old hospital. The housing units are comprised of small apartments (modestly furnished), in which families or groups of men share the living quarters. Each apartment has 1-2 bedrooms, possibly a working kitchen, and private shower. The families that live in this housing often do not even have sufficient food for their children upon their arrival. For example, there was a case of three women who traveled from Texas with their small children:

The women asked us if there were any local programs that provided food, because they did not have any food, nor money. We replied that there are centers that distribute food, but we did not know if at that time they would be in service. We told them we would return with the information after we finished interviewing a family. The women replied, “but do not forget.”

As with this family, many traveled from Texas, possibly after months of unemployment seeking the opportunity of making a little money in the Midwest.

The detasseling of corn lasts about three weeks, and while most families come directly from Texas or other destinations, such as Oklahoma, some follow the different harvests. For example, some of the families travel to Indiana in the month of April before arriving to east-central Illinois to plant varieties of melons (i.e. watermelon, honeydew), which come into harvest by August. Some, upon completing the detasseling of corn, stay in the area until November to continue the processing of corn; while others travel to Michigan for the asparagus harvest. Given the economic conditions in the valley of Texas, many families or individuals, make the decision to settle permanently in east-central Illinois. Air City, for example, has flourished as an (im)migrant enclave within the last five years. Not only are Tejanos settling in this community, but also Mexicans from as far south as Chiapas and Puebla, and Central-Americans, particularly from Guatemala. Latinas/os, including indigenous immigrants, are settling in various rural communities of this region. In Air City, the settlers find employment in the service industry as well as in other local plants, such as the local pork processing plant. Latina/o migrants are dramatically shifting the rural landscapes of east-central Illinois. The small town of Lorraine, at the heart of Amish settlements since the late 1800’s, for example, is presently home to several hundred Mexicans that have migrated from the same town in Northern Mexico. The 2000 census reports that Lorraine’s total population is 2,652. Out of this population 89.4 percent is white, while 19.9 percent are “Hispanic.” Moreover, the school demographics demonstrate that it is a fairly young population. The Interactive Illinois Report card illustrates that at the high school level (7-12), 73.7 percent of the student population are white, while 24.7 percent are “Hispanic.” At the elementary level (kindergarten - 6), 57.4 percent of the population are white and 40.8 percent are Hispanic. These demographics are very telling of the future of Lorraine, where almost half of the student population is Latina/o, and primarily Mexican. In any case, the present demographics of Lorraine are visually present throughout the small town, with Mexican

“Mexicans were welcomed only as long as their labor was needed.”

JUAN R. GARCÍA
Mexicans in the Midwest: 1900-1932, p.16
businesses, including a Mexican restaurant, a taquería, a carnicería, and a Mexican grocery store. These businesses also serve as important spaces in which not only economic transactions are taking place, but also social and cultural interactions.

The Mexican population in Lorraine also contributes to the economic and community with their labor. The local corn broom company is a major employer of the Mexicans in Lorraine. It is through the company that many of Lorraine's Mexican residents have been recruited. Most of the Mexican laborers of this area come from Jimenez, a small-size located in close proximity to Monterrey in northern Mexico. Jimenez is a major producer of corn brooms. Consequently, the Lorraine population contributes to the transnational production of corn brooms. The expansion of the company during the eighties coincides with the growth of the Mexican population in Lorraine and east-central, Illinois more broadly. Latinas/os are a relatively exploitable source of labor for employers. The family-owned company in the Amish village of Lorraine is among the small-town manufacturing companies that have attracted Latina/o immigrants recently. Latinas/os comprise 90 to 95 percent of the workforce (Lyons 2006:7).

The company was founded by a Lithuanian immigrant in 1896, originally located in Chicago producing old-fashioned corn brooms. Hard hit by the Great Depression, the company re-located in Tuscola in the 1930s. Tuscola was the heart of broomcorn production. At the time, Tuscola and its surroundings produced the majority of broomcorn harvested in the U.S.. During World War II, the company thrived; it joined the war efforts (1942-1945) by providing brooms to sweep the decks of aircraft carriers and ships in the Atlantic and Pacific. During the economic boom of the 1950's, the company once again moved, to neighboring town Lorraine. During the 1980's, the company consolidated its production under one roof. The company invested heavily during this time period, and became one of the largest integrated houseware facilities in the country. Moreover, since the 1980's, the company has expanded its product lines to become the leading manufacturer of high quality brooms, mops, and brushes in the U.S. Presently, the company is increasing its international goals by seeking to become a major transnational supplier. The company is a supplier for large enterprises, such as Wal-Mart and Lowe's. In light of the North American Free Trade Agreement, this company serves an important role in supplying large-scale corporations in retail sales that are presently expanding throughout North America and beyond.

The presence of Mexican immigration in Lorraine is visually noticeable beyond the factory and other labor spaces. In the annual cornbroom festival that took place in September 2005, Mexicans partook in the local traditional festival enjoying corndogs, onion blossoms and fresh lemon shakes as the children rode in the wheel of fortune-giving the air of a festival town in Mexico. The communities in which immigrants reside often serve as refuge. In the case of Lorraine, Mexican immigrants find shelter by residing in a rural community comprised of mostly residents from their hometown in Mexico. Nonetheless, they are the most susceptible population in these communities.

Latinas/os are marking their presence in rural communities in east-central, Illinois, and throughout the Midwest more generally. This population, however, serves the local industries as readily sources of labor in which the state and industries absolve themselves from the responsibility of providing basic services. For example, in many instances workers are faced with medical neglect on behalf of their employer and health care facilities. I provide three different scenarios that are telling of the local challenges found by the (im)migrant population, particularly related to health issues:

**Scenario 1:** During a hot, humid day in late July 2005, I had assisted with a workshop on educational issues at Air City. I noticed that one of the women, Lilia, had rashes all over her legs. Upon noticing Lilia's rashes, the women immediately informed her that she needed to get that checked before they turned into painful blisters. Lilia was reluctant to tell her crew leader, but upon the women's insistence that she should not wait, Lilia asked me to call the crew leader. After an initial unsympathetic response, the crew leader indicated that she would be taken to the hospital. At the region's hospital, the doctor had one look at the patient and after inquiring about what she did for a living, immediately diagnosed her with having an allergic reaction to the corn. I asked if it was possible that it was poison ivy or a reaction to a fertilizer. He replied that it was possible, but unable to determine until she completed a medication and was under medical supervision. He stepped out and handed me a prescription and then stated that she could no longer work in the corn fields. When I inquired how the medication was taken, he stated that it would be indicated at the pharmacy. It turned out that the medication was a series of pills that needed to be taken in different stages. In the doctor's haste of getting us out of the small medical room, he not only speculated a diagnose without the appropriate examination, but failed to give a thorough explanation of the complicated medication.13

**Scenario 2:** A couple of days prior to Labor Day, a young man cut his finger while preparing at a small Mexican restaurant located in a small town outside the outskirts of Champaign. His employer cleaned up the wound with the business' first aid kit and put him back to work. When the young man arrived home, his uncle, upon seeing that he was severely bleeding, rushed him to the hospital where he was given 13 stitches. A couple of days later, the uncle asked me to look over the medical form, because he did not understand when the stitches would be removed. I explained to him that he needed to go back in 7-10 days and that the bill needed to be covered by the employer. After they returned to the hospital to remove the stitches, they gave the name...
of the employer to the hospital for billing. The employer refused to pay the bill.  

Scenario 3: Rosa first came to East-central Illinois through a network between her home town and Lorraine. She began working in the broom production industry. Soon after, she developed a shoulder injury from the intensity of pulling the broom material. The company covered the medical costs of surgery, but did not cover her income while she was on medical leave. Moreover, she was required to return to work before completing a full rehabilitation. Rosa did not fully heal from her injury and was forced to quit upon not being able to keep up with the broom production and after being threatened by her supervisors that she did not have any right to file a complaint.

These are a few examples of the various forms of exploitation and medical neglect confronted by Latina/o laborers. The educational settings for children are also arenas of struggle, in which the schools districts where Latinos are residing are often unprepared for the current student population. Students are often funneled into special education classrooms given the lack of well trained bilingual teachers and staff. Millard and Chapa assert that Latinas/os settle in the rural Midwest to work in food processing plants or light industry; “however, the communities that employ them are often reluctant to meet their needs as human being, like decent working conditions, housing, health care, social services and educational opportunities for their children” (2004: 21).

Despite the dependency on the laborers by the surrounding agricultural and industrial plants, workers are often denied basic rights including education, medical care, housing, and fair wages among other inequalities. The vulnerability of the Latino community is exacerbated by the lack of support for these laborers on behalf of the local institutions and government.

During a local rally after the 2006 immigrant marches, Congressman Tim Johnson of the Champaign district publicly stated that he would not apologize for his support of the xenophobic bill, HR-4437, which passed by the House of Representatives on December 2005. He went on to say that the immigrants in his jurisdiction are a strain on the schools and hospitals, and that the borders needed to be secured to protect citizens. Through these public comments, Johnson fails to position Latinas/os as citizens, and that in fact many of the Latinas/os who have settled in the area are Mexican-Americans from Texas. Moreover, Johnson absolved himself for seeking to eliminate the undocumented population through deportation and border security - as the racist bill promised - and denied the significant economic contribution by Latinas/os as laborers who sustain many industries of east-central, Illinois. In short, these communities serve as an available source of labor for local industries while freeing the state and industries from providing the basic services necessary to develop healthy communities (Vélez-Ibáñez 2004:13).

The contemporary discourses revolving around issues of immigration and border security are not new. Historically, the U.S. has recruited immigrant laborers as disposable subjects and organizes these workers accordingly. In the context of the Midwest, Mexican laborers have constituted sources of labor for its major industries and when they are no longer needed, get deported back to the border. Such was the case during the early depression of the 1920's, the Great Depression of the 1930's, and again during the post-war economic depression of the 1950's.

The environment of fear that was generated early on with the threat of deportation during periods of economic crisis, and with the creation of inspection agencies, continues to be part of the quotidian experiences for immigrants. After the successful 2006 immigrant marches that brought together millions of people to the streets, the federal government retaliated with increase immigrant raids in places of employment and public spaces, including bus and train lines and places of business. In Beardstown, IL, a small town along the Illinois River, sixty-two people were arrested at the break of dawn during an immigration raid of the cleaning company that was working the night shift at the local meat packing plant.  

The news of the raid soon spread throughout the region causing panic among local residents. In Champaign County, it was rumored that there had been a raid in one of the local companies. Days after the Beardstown raid, the local Spanish radio clarified that there had not been a raid in Champaign, but in Beardstown, IL. The frequent inspections have been an effective mechanism to create an environment of fear, forcing people to live in constant panic.

After all, the anti-immigrant, border security, and anti-terrorist Act, HR-4437, was proposed by Sensenbrenner, a Midwest Congressman. The dialogues taking place are a reflection, in part, of the current immigrant influx to “non-traditional” spaces, in which the anxieties of residents and politicians are expressed in the most vacuous and racist ways. These new immigrant communities in the Midwest can be
defined by what Cynthia Bejarano (2005) refers to as the ‘borderization phenomenon.' She argues that imagining this country transformed into a “brown society” has “prompted people to panic or perpetuate xenophobic propaganda” (2005: 47). These marginal communities are themselves in search of refuge from racist threats in fear of the Mexican “other.”

NOTES

According to the report, the states that registered the highest rate of increase of the Latino populations in the U.S. between 1990 and 2000 are North Carolina (394%), Arkansas (337%), Georgia (300%), Tennessee (278%), South Carolina (211%), Nevada (207%), and Alabama (208%).

2 The immigrant marches in 2006 brought together millions of people against HR-4437, the bill that promised to raise penalties for undocumented immigration and classify undocumented immigrants and any one who assisted them as felons.

3 I am currently conducting my dissertation research, which I initiated in September 2007. I initiated preliminary research in summer 2005 and have remained relatively close to my research site since then.

4 Name of towns in this section of ethnographic research are pseudonyms to protect research participants.

5 Detasseling entails removing the long tassel in the corn to prevent cross-pollination.

6 Recruiters have been central in facilitating arrangements, often informal, for migrant workers and the employers. Valdés states that the recruiters or enganchistas played a significant role in the recruitment of laborers during the early migration of the 20th century. “The enganchistas were hired by the companies and were sent to the border and into Mexico with the promise of seasonal work in the beet fields, good working conditions and high pay” (Valdés 1991: 9).

7 In Champaign County as with most of the state of Illinois outside Chicago, the public channels are all in English. Spanish channels are only visible with satellite cable.

8 Field Notes: Friday July 1st, 2005.

9 There is a large constituency of indigenous immigrants, principally Maya. It is imperative to note that the indigenous immigrants are a heterogeneous group, culturally and linguistically.

10 See http://iirc.niu.edu/default.html

11 http://iirc.niu.edu/ [First visited on July 10, 2005]

12 Field Notes: July 10, 2005

13 Field Notes: July 20, 2005.

14 Scenario 2: September 2005

15 Field Notes: July 8, 2005.

16 The raid took place at 2 am in the Cargill Pork Slaughter House located in Beardstown, IL and which employs over 2,000 people. The federal government raided the cleaning company QSI, a subcontractor that cleans the slaughter house floor and equipment overnight. Out of the sixty-two workers arrested, 13 were facing criminal charges on identity theft.