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Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics In The U.S.-Mexico Borderlands (Nation Of Nations)



Synopsis

Winner of the 2009 Lora Romero First Book Prize from the American Studies Association 2009 Choice Outstanding Academic Title *Migrant Imaginaries* explores the transnational movements of Mexican migrants in pursuit of labor and civil rights in the United States from the 1920s onward. Working through key historical moments such as the 1930s, the Chicano Movement, and contemporary globalization and neoliberalism, Alicia Schmidt Camacho examines the relationship between ethnic Mexican expressive culture and the practices sustaining migrant social movements. Combining sustained historical engagement with theoretical inquiries, she addresses how struggles for racial and gender equity, cross-border unity, and economic justice have defined the Mexican presence in the United States since 1910. Schmidt Camacho covers a range of archives and sources, including migrant testimonials and songs, Amrico Parede's last published novel, *The Shadow*, the film *Salt of the Earth*, the foundational manifestos of *El Movimiento*, Richard Rodriguez's memoirs, narratives by Marisela Norte and Rosario Sanmiguel, and testimonios of Mexican women workers and human rights activists, as well as significant ethnographic research. Throughout, she demonstrates how Mexicans and Mexican Americans imagined their communal ties across the border, and used those bonds to contest their noncitizen status. *Migrant Imaginaries* places migrants at the center of the hemisphere's most pressing concerns, contending that border crossers have long been vital to social change.

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Customer Reviews

“This is a wonderfully written book that should be read comparatively with other migrant histories as a way to move still further in our imaginaries about what we dare to envision for transcending the unjust history we have inherited. Schmidt Camacho has made a valuable contribution in launching this call.”—*Journal of American Ethnic History*

“In this beautiful study, Schmidt Camacho demonstrates that Mexican migrant imaginaries affirm in songs, manifestos, poetry, novels, and testimonies visions of justice that exceed the limits of the nation-form and the logics of capital accumulation.”—Lisa Lowe, author of *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*

“Notably, Schmidt Camacho’s comprehensive interdisciplinary work lends insight into the current immigration crisis, one wrought from more than a century of failed national policies. Camacho offer[s] complementary strategies for rethinking the relationship between history (broadly defined) and cultural production.”—*American Literary History*

“A landmark book. . . . Highly recommended.”—*Choice*

“A sophisticated, timely, and insightful book that Schmidt Camacho has situated in the middle of one of today’s most important historiographical debates. How are we to understand border crossers whose experiences are more connected to the diasporic consequences of economic transnationalism than to the immigration metanarratives of national incorporation? Schmidt Camacho’s answer lies in her expansion of social theory to place non-rights-bearing people at the center of the conversation rather than on the periphery of the nation-state and its citizenry.”—*Journal of American History*

“Schmidt Camacho is quite simply one of the most exciting scholars working on Mexican immigration. She draws on history, literature, folklore, cultural studies, and ethnography to produce an unvarnished examination of Mexicano migrants from the standpoint of the people themselves. Tracing the discourses of migration beyond the nation-state and contemporary debate, she powerfully links Americo Paredes, Luisa Moreno, and the Salt of the Earth strikers within a matrix of a transnational imaginary.”—Vicki L. Ruiz, author of *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America*

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At no other time in the Western Hemisphere had there been a transfer of contract workers so large as from 1942 to 1964 when Mexico agreed to lend the United States an estimated five million laborers in the Bracero Program. This program was the pinnacle of a century-long migration of

Mexican workers to the U.S. to find work and in *Migrant Imaginaries*, Alicia Schmidt Camacho explores not only the hardships these migrants faced, but the sacrifices they made, the people they left behind and the rights for which they fought. The most impressive aspect of Schmidt Camacho's book is her extensive use of primary sources, especially direct quotes from migrant workers. The reader's mind opens when they can place themselves in the migrants' place, fighting for their rights, trying to survive despite wretched working conditions in order to earn a living. Schmidt Camacho makes certain her audience is well informed of the why the migrant worker left Mexico (high unemployment), how they were transported to their place of labor (train, bus) and what the physical and psychological conditions were like for the worker (backbreaking, imprisoned.) The migrant was so cut off from the only way of life they knew and the only country they called home, they were forced to imagine their ties to their native land and their families. In America, Mexican migrants had to dream of their rights because in reality, when they opened up their eyes, there were none. Schmidt Camacho deftly explores the state of mind of the migrant worker whose identity is stripped, skills exploited and liberties cheated. *Migrant Imaginaries* does fail to fully engross the reader, however. Though Schmidt Camacho's research is thorough and her historical evidence is overwhelming, the book is purely a collection of essays that jump from topic to topic with weak connections between chapters. The overall theme of the book, Latino cultural politics in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, worked well as the umbrella under which each essay was placed, however it would be more effective to include different authors' research on the same subject matter rather than constantly feeding Schmidt Camacho's opinions as gospel. Granted, this is her book, but the way it was laid out and dominated by only her opinion does not do the topic justice. The reader needs to understand contrasting viewpoints on topics like transborder solidarity, class racism and the impact of songs on the migrants' morale, for example. That this was done is not a failing of the book or the author, but merely a lost opportunity to fully expose the reader to a wider range of theories, opinions and stories from this chapter of Mexico-United States history. Though different researchers may not agree with everything she writes, including parts of them will give her own opinion more strength and conviction. A slice of history Schmidt Camacho did capture quite well is her commentary on the work of the Hermanos Mayo. The five brothers became well-known throughout Mexico for their photography documenting human drama in the day-to-day life of Mexicans. Their photographs' impact extended so far as to play a part in democratizing their country's mass media, something that had always been under government control. Schmidt Camacho includes two Hermanos Mayo photographs in *Migrant Imaginaries*, both documenting the bracero experience. In one, the photo depicts a bracero exchanging money at the border on his way

to the United States. Her commentary on the scene gives the reader rich insight as to what the man had just endured: "His modest clothes imply that the bracero had gone into debt for this contract." The other photo displays a bracero on a train leaving his wife and two children behind. Schmidt Camacho reads into each person's facial expression in the photo, even to where they are looking--all of which she makes an educated guess as to the well-being of their relationships' status. She states, "The man and woman appear to not be communicating at all even as they hoist the child between them." Studied commentary like this makes effective use of primary sources and thus, adds a layer of profundity to the migrant experience. Schmidt Camacho's work clearly presents what it meant to belong in a country that did not want you as a citizen, only a laborer. *Migrant Imaginaries* stands out in that the reader gets to see history from the migrant's perspective through primary sources like songs, photographs and narratives. The imagined tie to home while struggling for rights, identity and dignity abroad provides a unique study in a book that clearly lays out one author's research, opinions and assumptions.

This is one of the most exciting books that I have read on immigration and what it means to belong. Schmidt-Camacho finds innovative ways to illustrate how immigrants contest their domination and imagine their social belonging. This book is a must read for anyone interested in immigration studies, border politics, and national belonging--or simply interested in humanity. I have recommended it to practically every student who has come to talk to me since I picked it up.

Delivered as promised.

Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands By Alicia Schmidt Camacho "Aunque el mono se viste en seda, mono se queda." Alicia Schmidt Camacho's *Migrant Imaginaries* postures as a form of academic scholarship. The gorgeous cover (from Alma Lopez' brilliant 1848 series), along with the title, promises insightful analysis of cultural politics. Schmidt makes copious use of footnotes to position her work as scholarly. Sadly, you can't judge a book by its title or its cover. A rant is still just a rant, no matter how many footnotes are attached. This (ambiguous referent) is no exception. Schmidt's work is dense: layers of unexplored presupposition and conscious interpretive manipulation underlie the series of essays presented in her work. Rather than focus on her work as a whole, I shall limit my critique to a few subjects with which I have substantial familiarity: her Chapter 5 entitled "Tracking the New Migrants - Richard Rodriguez and Liberal Retrenchment" (pages 193 - 234). At her (infrequent) best, Schmidt elucidates Rodriguez'

work. She notes his anti-nationalist agenda (217), his use of irony and paradox, and his relationship to migrants. Typically, however, Schmidt plays the high-priestlessly role of interpreting Rodriguez' work for us, establishing her own orthodoxy, rather than exploring the possibilities of the text. She first essentializes Rodriguez as a "middle-class, disaffected intellectual" who is more interested in "refus[ing] ethnic identification" than acting as an intermediary to an English-speaking world of a Mexican immigrant's child's experience (194). She associates him with both neoconservatism (197) and neoliberalism (198). She cites him as "the representative voice of Hispanic life in U.S. schoolrooms and college seminars" (216), thus grafting him to the (white/racist) dominant culture through her sheer will of attribution. In a back-handed move, Schmidt (who refers to Rodriguez as a "Chicano" - see p. 194) 'praises' (ie. dismisses) Rodriguez' literary awards (by an obviously white and racist society - the terms may function synonymously for Schmidt) as having been given based on (white/racist) essentializations of his "incisive power of observation and his disarmingly frank, confessional prose." (195) In fact she proclaims Rodriguez to be "the 'voice of "Hispanic" America'" on further occasions (206, 229) but ultimately seeks to replace his voice with the works of those more politically palatable to her (such as Francisco X. AlarcÃ³n, CherrÃ©e Moraga, or Gloria AnzaldÃ³a). What is not frank and disarmingly confessional is Schmidt's hatchet job on Rodriguez' work. Actually the phrase 'hatchet-job' is highly inappropriate. Schmidt has performed a very carefully crafted and deliberate involuntary political-sex-change operation on Rodriguez' work. The first step she takes to complete this procedure is performed through footnote-reassignment surgery. Some of these reassignments are obvious: on page 197 she cites and dates his 1992 Days of Obligation, and then proceeds to quote his 2002 Brown. In a more clever sleight of hand, Schmidt quotes Rodriguez' 1995 essay in "New Perspectives Quarterly", then associates it with his 1982 Hunger for Memory and concludes with the empirical observation that "fully half of the newer migrant population was female, a trend Rodriguez elides by conflating immigration with masculine rebellion." (219) The joke here is that Schmidt seems to be referring to the "new" post-NAFTA immigration (initiated after 1994) yet cites Rodriguez' works which were written at either the beginning of the "new" immigration or a decade before it began. Continuing the trend of quotation-reassignment surgery, at certain points, Schmidt places things in quotes (such as a description of the Chicana/o community as a "univocal, unthinking mass" p. 220) and then gives no citation at all, allowing us to assume that these are Rodriguez' words. Sometimes Schmidt is more honest, putting words in Rodriguez' voice but letting her readership know who the actual authors are, as she does on page 225 when she claims that Rodriguez seeks to become a "blank slate" by citing the words of Renato Rosaldo, and not Rodriguez at all. Equally disingenuous is her use of the phrase "studies

suggest...." without providing any citations as to what studies she refers to. (203) More frequently she simply put words into his pen as in her analysis of his use of a "female representative of 'Mother' Mexico" (222). Despite the fact that his original work uses no feminine-gendered references whatsoever, Schmidt makes a specifically gendered point of his use of feminine imagery as being, for Rodriguez, "predatory feminine sexuality". (She is thus able to play into homophobic stereotypes of women-hating gay men as a means of critiquing Rodriguez' intellectual stances.) Nicely, Schmidt imposes her own racist fantasies on Rodriguez' words, overwriting his own description of the characters in his drama. After quoting page 101 of Rodriguez' *Days of Obligation* (at least her footnote is correct), in a brilliant moment of exposing Rodriguez' "erotic script" and "transgressive desire" Schmidt notes the following: "Night duty at the border becomes a Western romance as the cowboys make their roundup of border crossers. The author takes an interest in the undocumented for what they reveal about the border guard whose racialized, masculine authority fascinates him. (He does not comment on the Chicana/o agents who make up a sizeable percentage of the Border Patrol.) The routine arrests provide an erotic script for this theater of social dominance, Calling the immigration agents 'cowboys,' Rodriguez calls up the history of border lynchings by Anglo 'posses' only to displace the hint of violence onto the terrain of sexual fantasy." (223) Schmidt assumes that the "cowboy" Border Patrol is Anglo (a contentious enough term to impose on Euro-Americans). Ignoring the history of "cowboys" in the U.S. (many of who were of Mexican ancestry), she plays on her already established theme of Rodriguez denying his Mexicanness (and thus seeking state-sanctioned "whiteness" in her interpretation). What makes this all the more ironic is that she fails to cite the preceding page, after taking Rodriguez to task for 'ignoring' the issue of race among members of the border patrol: "I get introduced to a patrolman who will be my guide to the night. He is about my age and of about my accent, about my color , about my build." (Rodriguez, *Days of Obligation* 100) Schmidt states that "he alternately seduces and is seduced by white border guards" (224, note the plural), thus racializing the patrolman, contrary to Rodriguez' own descriptions. In fairness to Schmidt, the officer (unlike the patrolman) in Rodriguez' passage is not explicitly racialized by him, thus allowing her to inscribe her own racial prejudices upon the ambiguous subject. Unlike the botched sex/politics-reassignment surgery Schmidt attempts to force upon Rodriguez, her treatment of bilingual education and Proposition 187 are ham-fisted and represent much more of a 'hatchet-job'. While she takes time to note that "59 percent of California voters approved Proposition 187" (211) she fails to note that any of these voters were 'Hispanic'. She explicitly negates the role of economics as she defines "the virulent revival of a racial discourse" (201) against immigrants in late 20th century America to which Rodriguez (in her

view) contributes. She claims on the one hand that "Rodriguez absented himself from struggles for civil rights" (206) and then throws him a concessionary bone later when she claims, "Rodriguez opposed the legislative initiatives that would have curtailed the civil rights of immigrants" (215). Schmidt is not the only one to be blamed for this poor scholarship: where were her editors? where were her reviewers? if this was a reworked dissertation, where was her advisor? When there are so many well-crafted works of Chicano studies (and related studies), it is a shame that Schmidt's voluminous compendium on such a worthy topic (cultural politics) could not have been more honest, and less like a tricked-up monkey.

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