

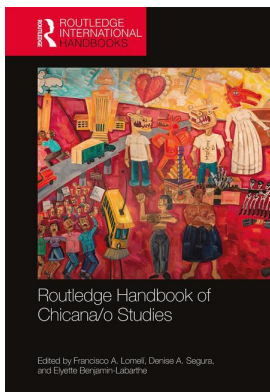
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Reconstructing home in the borderlands

Patricia Zavella

Families are exemplars of intersectionality, the theoretical framework that analyzes how power related to race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and other social hierarchies are mutually constructed (Hill Collins 1998; Carbado et al. 2013; Cho, Crenshaw & McCall 2013; May 2015). In the United States, these intersecting systems of power shape how families are formed and experience family life as well as how they challenge the ability of families to maintain their core values, norms and customs. Unlike previous eras when families were formed out of economic exigencies under the direction of powerful kin, in the contemporary era, families are formed by couples, including those with queer sexual identities, based on notions of romantic love and courtship, and are shaped in the firestorm of political debates regarding marriage equality (Coontz 1992; 2000; 2005).¹ Prior to the 1950s before the influences of social movements related to civil rights, feminism, and gay rights, social forces began transforming families in the United States. Those social forces included redefinitions of marriage based on love, providing stability to children, and accessing contraception, education, and employment for women (Coontz 1992; 2005).

Family formation can be a joyous occasion as well as an anxious process as people consider their own expectations and norms about families in relation to those of their partners and society. Further, when a couple marries (whether legally or through common law commitments), extended family members are integrated into a new family formation and expect that the good cheer exhibited at family celebrations – whether it’s a wedding, the birth of children, or an anniversary – will continue indefinitely. Masked by the romance, families establish economic stability as well, particularly if couples plan on raising children.

However, societal inequalities and powerful discourses related to race, class, or heteronormativity often create strains within families. In the twenty-first century, the marriage rate is the lowest ever and the percentage of unmarried women with children has increased (Ventura 2009). Further, more than 50% of mothers with infants remain in the workforce (Coontz 2005, pp. 264–256). Accompanying these demographic and social shifts in the United States are debates in Mexico and the United States about whether relationships should embrace companionate norms and practices or maintain those related to obedience, deference and respect (Hirsch 2003). After migration from Mexico, the lore suggests women gain power (*las mujeres mandan*) and men who give too many concessions are “hen-pecked” (*mandilones*) although women’s actual experience belies these notions (Hirsch 1999; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994).

The late twentieth-century decline in social welfare benefits to single parents, overwhelmingly women, means that more women are entering the labor market or returning to school, managing childcare and other family responsibilities with members of their support networks (Fujiwara 2008; Marchevsky & Theoharis 2006; Reese 2005). Despite gains for women in the workforce and the increase in women who manage work and families, scholars find that men's unemployment or women's labor market participation with relatively lower wages may disrupt family dynamics in heterosexual couples.² Among dual-worker families, employed women are curtailing their time spent in housework and U.S. working parents are spending more time with their children (Bianchi, Robinson & Milkie 2006). Further, state policies that allow family leave, for example, or corporate practices that provide support such as onsite day care centers to their employees with children also contribute to changes in family life. Gay and lesbian families are gaining increased visibility as they juggle parenting, childcare, and work and seek rights related to marriage and adoption (Bernstein & Reimann 2001; Lewin 1993). Families in the United States are microcosms of larger discursive and material societal shifts that create competing urgencies between work and family.

In addition, families are often normalized using heterosexist gender ideologies and rituals. The historic recognition of same-sex marriages by the California Supreme Court was nullified by the passage of Proposition 8 in 2008 that amended the state constitution to validate marriage only between a man and a woman, leaving queers without the rights inferred by marriage. LGBTQ activists then prioritized marriage equality and challenged the national Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) that had passed in 1996. In 2013, the Supreme Court struck down DOMA as unconstitutional as a matter of equal protection (Dorf & Tarrow 2014). In the aftermath of this ruling along with the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policies that discriminated against queers in the military, increasingly lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer subjects are included within the discourse about families (Acosta 2013; Bernstein & Reimann 2001; Lewin 1993; Moore 2011; Moraga 1997).

For Mexicans in the United States, families are situated within the borderlands of these multiple contradictory discourses. Additionally, some families also try to maintain some semblance of family life despite an international border separating family members. Borders are sites of exclusion as well as inclusion, and borderlands subjects must draw on their own creativity for assessing power relations and maneuvering within borderlands (Anzaldúa 1987).

Demographers demonstrate that there has been increased migration from Mexico by women (Cerrutti & Massey 2001). The passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act allowed more men to regularize their legal status and reunite their families. By 1995, women became 57 percent of authorized migrants from Mexico and women make up about one-third of unauthorized migrants in the United States (Cerrutti & Massey 2001, p. 187; Massey, Durand & Malone 2002, p. 134). In addition, more Indigenous peoples are migrating to the United States so the Chicana/o and Mexican population is more diverse (Fox & Rivera 2004; Fox 2006). Moreover, scholars of migration suggest that sexuality should be seen as part of complex causes of migration. Those with gender-nonconforming identities are more likely to migrate across international borders (La Fountain Stokes 2005). Often material resources such as remittances lead to more acceptance by families when queers come out after migration (Acosta 2013; Cantú 2001; González-López 2005). Queer families were unable to use family reunification immigration policies to bring partners and other family members to the United States until after 1990, placing them at great disadvantage (Gates 2013; González-López 2010; Luibhéid 2002; Luibhéid & Cantú 2005). It wasn't until 2013 that Janet Napolitano, secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, issued a directive to Immigration and Customs Enforcement that family relationships includes long-term, same-sex partners that family reunification became possible

for queer families.³ Thus scholars should analyze sexual and social situations of migrants prior to relocation, along the migrant path, after settlement, and during returns home (Carrillo 2004). The increased diversity of migrants means that families increasingly are contending with multiple types of borders and reconstructing families in borderlands established through geopolitical, social, and cultural processes (Stephen 2007).

Using a feminist borderlands lens, I will discuss how Chicana/o and Mexicana/o families negotiate family life in the borderlands. There are four key dimensions of borderlands – structural, discursive, interactional and agentic – which provide rich sites of feminist analysis (Segura & Zavella 2007, 2008). I argue that men and women form families with gendered meanings that situate them as subjects in relation to discourses in Mexico and the United States, through what I call “peripheral vision,” where they are aware of societal expectations in more than one place. Further, they perceive borders based on discourses or social interactions that differentiate migrants from Mexico from Mexican Americans or Chicanas/os.

Structural dimensions of borderlands include the effects of colonialism, globalizing economies, neoliberal state practices, growing regional interdependence and displacement of the poor who find migration their only option for maintaining their families. Globalization and production for export disrupts regional economies, labor markets, opportunity structures and cultural formations in Mexico. In tandem, neoliberal state policies and practices, which withdraw state support and push individuals to take responsibility for their own welfare, contribute to institutional mechanisms of inequality. For example, neoliberal state policies and corporate globalization practices in Mexico have contributed to the displacement of rural residents and increased migration to overpopulated urban areas and the North. These structural forces exacerbate tensions within the geopolitical borderlands between the United States and Mexico. Borderlands become regions with high numbers of migrant subjects, extreme exploitive relationships, and multiple forms of violence and trauma for structurally vulnerable subjects (Green 2011). Simultaneously, migrants in the United States, particularly the undocumented, are included through their labor and social citizenship even if “under imposed conditions of enforced and protracted vulnerability” (De Genova 2002, p. 429; 2005). Even those Mexicans who are U.S. citizens are racialized as being “illegal” and subject to substantive curtailment of rights and entitlements, which raises questions about whether they are “worthy” citizens (De Genova & Ramos-Zayas 2003; Ramos-Zayas 2004).

Discursive elements of borderlands offer critiques of ideologies and practices related to class, racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual hierarchies and illuminate the malleability of these intersecting power relations. In these instances, the locally constructed meanings, practices or social interactions – around femininity or sexuality, for example – become surveilled and contested as subjects construct their subjectivities that both internalize and contest powerful discourses (Acosta 2013; Zavella 2011). For example, Acosta discusses the ways in which gender-nonconforming women negotiate their “feminine” presentation at family gatherings and whether their female partners will be acknowledged as family members. Further, subjects may be considered members of different racial categories in Latin American than in the United States, “white” in one context but “Latina” in another, providing another discursive border that subjects in the United States must negotiate (Acosta 2013).

Interactional dimensions of borderlands include the ways that subjects may feel like outsiders to exclusive social arenas or contest expectations about appropriate displays of inclusion (García-López 2008). Language is an important indicator of borders within families. When some family members speak Spanish or an Indigenous language while others are bilingual or English dominant, communication within families often highlight other differences such as legal status or generation. In these instances, social interactions among family members may go smoothly

with a fair amount of humor or generate frustration by those who don't understand one of the languages and feel excluded.

Feminist borderlands analyses also include research that focuses on subjects' constructions of oppositional identities, subjectivities, and expressions of agency that contest structural, discursive and interactional borders. In these instances, borderland subjects often take extraordinary creative measures and assert their own sense of selves. Women involved in contesting feminicide,⁴ for example, are members of families that transcend the geopolitical border between the United States and Mexico (Fregoso 2006; 2007; Fregoso & Bejarano 2010; Peña 2007; Téllez 2008).

Among Mexicans in the United States these multiple types of borders lead to the construction of different "migrant family formations," sociohistorical processes of racialization in which particular family experiences are constructed within the context of high migration from Mexico (Omi & Winant 1994, p. 55).⁵ Specially, I will discuss four types of migrant family formations – reunited, suspended, mixed-status and separated families – with varied experiences and values in relation to family life in the United States (Zavella 2011).

Migrant family formations

In those families separated by international borders, trying to maintain a semblance of family life is incredibly challenging (Dreby 2010). Those left behind – spouses (often women), elders and children – may experience a sense of abandonment and increased poverty and feel ambivalent even when they have opportunities to join their migrant kin (McEvoy et al. 2012; Yarris 2014). Indeed, mothers who are separated from their children often experience extreme depression and even question their sense of motherhood (Nicholson 2006). Unexpectedly, children may also gain a sense of power when parents do not inform them of their own travails in the United States and family life is centered around remittances, gifts and compensating for the absence of parents (Dreby 2006; 2007).

In those families in which they are fortunate enough to be able to reunite after separation, adjusting to life as a family is not always straightforward or easy. Young people often feel a sense of being "between two worlds," neither fully accepted in Mexico or in the United States. They understand clearly the boundaries – material, language, cultural – between their families in both places (Pew Hispanic Center 2009). Further, undocumented youth may not always be aware of their vulnerable legal status until they become adolescents. Once they understand the limitations in terms of gaining employment or financial aid for college, they often experience extreme emotional dissonance unless they become involved in activism (Gonzales 2011; Nicholls 2013; Terríquez 2015; Tovar 2009).

Much has been made of the compression of time and space under globalization where technology, outsourcing and just-in-time planning allow for production and communication to occur more quickly (Harvey 2005). Borders play a key role in the production of the heterogeneous time and space of contemporary global and postcolonial capitalism (Mezzadra & Neilson 2013). Families that include migrants find themselves living suspended lives where plans to form families are put on hold as they save up to purchase land, build their homes, pay for weddings or secure authorization to reside in the United States. Being unable to realize family plans indefinitely can have debilitating effects on families. For example, some women who derive power from their ability to direct the procurement and preparation of delicious food may find their restricted budgets, small kitchens, and fewer kin available to participate in social exchange leaves them feeling diminished after migrating to the United States (Abarca 2006; Pérez 2014). The anxiety and stress of living suspended lives sometimes gets expressed through intimate partner violence that generates new processes of emotional turmoil and economic dislocations (Alcalde 2010; Berger 2009; Haney 2011).

Those living in mixed-status families where members have varied legal statuses – including the undocumented and citizens – also negotiate the boundaries related to legal status and material benefits for those subject to differential inclusion within the nation. For the most vulnerable, undocumented legal status is not experienced uniformly or in isolation from other structures of inequality (Gomberg-Muñoz 2017). The ability to use the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program established by President Obama, for example, has also created inequalities within families (Gonzales, Terríquez & Rusczyk 2014). And mixed-status families must make several types of accommodations. Often parents must rely on their English-speaking children to act as translators with those in power. This may disrupt traditional parental authority when children are asked to give options or opinions about delicate matters (Orellana 2001; Orellana, Dorner & Pulido 2003; Orellana et al. 2001; Perreira 2006). However, citizen children of migrants took leadership in the large-scale immigrant rights protests of 2006 and families often become the idiom through which activists frame their efforts for immigrant rights (Bloemraad & Trost 2008; Pallares 2015). Translation is a crucial social, cultural and political practice that enables the elaboration of a new concept of the common good (Mezzadra & Neilson 2013; Alvarez et al. 2014).

Families who experience deportation of some of their members find themselves struggling with multiple processes at once. Apprehensions of migrants at the U.S. border is at historic lows (González-Barrera 2016). However, the massive deportations that occurred during the Obama administration has targeted men, which Golash-Boza and Hondagneu-Sotelo call a “gendered racial removal program” (2013, p. 271). The deportation of men leaves families shattered with the loss of wages, affection, domestic labor, and male role models as well as children shunted to foster care or adoption (Golash-Boza & Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013; National Immigration Forum 2012; Thronson 2006; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2014; Wessler 2011). Further, the anxiety related to deportation may have long-term effects on families and even whole neighborhoods, where the undocumented are afraid to trust their neighbors or even make short excursions out of the home (Talavera, Núñez-Mchiri & Heyman 2010).

Conclusion

Migrant family formations illustrate the quotidian struggles of forming and maintaining places of intimacy, love and commitment, as well as the public acceptance and material benefits of forming a family. Reunited families, where one would expect joy and celebration, negotiate how to accommodate the materiality of family life as well as the hurt feelings and dashed expectations of family members who were left behind. Those who lived in suspended families struggle to work out where, with whom and, most importantly, when their families will consolidate and their lives are no longer on hold. Those in mixed-status families are attuned to quotidian privileges where unequal access to education or other resources can affect possible life outcomes. And those who live in separated families must negotiate long-distance communication, fears, anxiety and the overwhelming plans to try and reunite. In their family lives, migrants often do not feel completely accepted in the United States nor are they able to return to Mexico, leaving them feeling displaced.

As they negotiate their borderlands circumstances, Mexicans and Chicanas/os engage in peripheral vision, reflecting upon societal expectations and possible options in Mexico and the United States. Even those Mexicans born or reared in the United States for long durations find Mexico looms large in their imaginaries about family life. Further, the borders between Mexicans and Mexican Americans are clear, exacerbated by differences in language and assumptions about one another. Yet Mexican Americans are often part of or close to migrant families

and know how they cope with the vicissitudes of daily life. In many of these families, there are ambivalent feelings about Mexico and about the United States. We see that the social forces that pull families apart or bring them together may be exacerbated by migration where reconstructing home in the borderlands is a fraught enterprise.

Notes

- 1 I am using the term queer, which includes bisexuals, gays, lesbians or transgenders, as contingent since it may not include all those with gender-nonconforming sexual identities (Eng, Halberstam & Muñoz 2005, 3). According to Michael Warner: “‘queer’ rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political-interest representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal” (Luibhéid & Cantú 2005, p. x).
- 2 Women’s disadvantages regarding wages or job mobility reinforce patriarchal ideologies about divisions of household labor (Zavella 1987; Cohen 2004; Hochschild & Machung 2012). Regardless of class, women perform about twice as many household tasks than men perform, including in those families where both husbands and wives work (Blair 1991). Women with stable jobs or strong social networks are more likely to negotiate a trade-off of childcare with spouses while they work (Deutsch 2001, Fernández-Kelly & García 1997; Lamphere, Zavella, Gonzales & Evans 1993). And immigrant mothers are less likely to feel guilt over working for wages than Mexicans born and reared in the United States and socialized about American notions of motherhood (Segura 1994). However, Latino fathers are likely to spend considerable time with their children, particularly playing with them (Coltrane, Parke & Adams 2004).
- 3 www.uscis.gov/family/same-sex-marriages, retrieved on July 14, 2016.
- 4 Consistent with Fregoso & Bejarano (2010), I use the term “femicide” (femicidio), which means “genocide against women” rather than the more commonly used “femicide” (femicidio), which refers to the homicide of women.
- 5 Some of these migrant categories and experiences are not unique to Mexicans and mirror those found in other diasporas.

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Part III

Cultural production in local and global settings

Introduction

Cultural and artistic production reflects counter-hegemonic discourse to the historical impositions of U.S. conquest, pressure to deny Mexican culture, and assimilation into the cultural mainstream. The early and contemporary cultural expressions and writing of Chicanas/os often serve both a cleansing as well as a cathartic effect by which they define their inner being and how they view their relationship with the family, community, state, and world. The arts specifically permit Chicanas/os to establish continuity and tradition while re-examining them for more contemporary relevance and application, thus reaffirming their *raison d'être*. In this section, we find culture being transmitted as a system of knowledge by which a collectivity shares and interrogates attitudes, values, and practices that are vital components of their existence. Rituals and popular forms of expression mark the cultural referents that cut across time, while reminding the larger Chicana/o community of their roots and origins. Cultural production, then, encases belief systems, customs, common ways of thinking and how they express their surroundings in an interactive way as agents of creativity. Music, visual arts, literature, popular tradition, and film highlight originality and imagination as foundational notions of Chicanas/os' place in the world. In this regard, the chapters in this section explore a wide variety of key modes of expression that directly contribute towards delineating Chicanas/os' sense of themselves as procreators of ingenuity and inventiveness. These analyses consider historic traditions from the past in addition to creating new traditions, thanks in part to the inspiration derived in Mexico and carried to the United States as global migrants. This legacy, more critically, is evinced as a product of multiple efforts of struggle to generate new cultural practices as a contributing factor to overall American culture, not as an exception but as an essential part of the overall cultural landscape.

