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Migration Narratives: Diverging Stories in Schools, Churches, and Civic Institutions
STANTON WORTHAM, BRIANA NICHOLS, KATHERINE CLONAN-ROY &
CATHERINE RHODES

London; New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2020
270pp. ISBN: 978 1 350 18131 1, £81.00 (hb)

Migration Narratives documents the findings of longitudinal ethnographic research over the course of eleven years in an American town referred to as ‘Marshall’. Drawn to this town by its cyclical migration history over two hundred years, the authors focus on the most recent migrant group hailing from Mexico and illustrate the development of this community between the years 1995 and 2016. The book characterises Mexican migrants’ personal accounts of their experiences in ‘Marshall’, focusing on interactions and participation with others and within places such as schools, churches, neighbourhoods and community organisations. Additionally, it provides detailed insights about the impact of Mexican migration to the town according to pre-existing residents, namely English, Irish, Italian and African Americans whose ancestors once completed a similar journey. The book aims to contribute a more nuanced understanding of typical migration stories, centring Mexican experiences in ‘Marshall’ to illustrate how ‘migrant communities and individuals move along diverging historical pathways’ (Wortham et al, 2020: viii).

The authors highlight the heterogeneity of the Mexican migrant community and thus experiences according to the year and age of arrival (or birth) in ‘Marshall’, gender, social class and origins in Mexico, noting that all of these attributes play a key role in the kinds of networks that can be created or accessed. Utilising Latour’s (2005) ‘actor-network theory’, the authors frame their findings around the importance of networks which greatly increases the ease or difficulty experienced by migrants as they embark upon becoming part of the host society. This is because, as the authors explain, ‘networks are configurations of diverse, contingent resources,’ (Wortham et al, 2020: 10) which shape the trajectories and experiences of groups and individuals. An example of the importance of networks is illustrated within the story of the educational pathway travelled by a young girl called Allie who arrived in ‘Marshall’ as a toddler in 2003 and entered the American school system in kindergarten. Unlike older Mexican migrants who arrived in ‘Marshall’, she was able to develop and gain access to contingent resources like ‘fluency in English, her comfort in the American school system, her teachers’ familiarity with Mexican students, and the relatively large population of Mexican migrants in the second decade of the community’ which helped her to navigate with ease (Wortham et al, 2020: 10).

Intentionally or unintentionally, a key strength of this book is the authors’ acknowledgement of the power of whiteness and how it is a crucial component that greatly influences migration experiences within American contexts. This was a recurring theme throughout the book, but particularly when considering ‘Intersecting Migrant Histories’ in chapter one, where the authors summarised the previous migrant groups’ positionings in ‘Marshall’. For instance, whiteness can be seen to have helped the Irish and Italian Americans to achieve the classic migrant success story, while African Americans were not able to achieve the same, “even though they began arriving only a decade or two after the Italians,” (Wortham et al, 2020: 7). These observations are exemplified further when the authors discuss different neighbourhoods in ‘Marshall’ which were often divided according to ethnic and racial differences. For example, ‘Italian migrants settled in the East end of town, which became known as the “ethnic” side, in contrast to the West and North, where the Irish- who had become “White”...-and the remaining

White Protestant residents lived,' (Wortham et al, 2020: 23). This shows how the social construct of whiteness was expanded to first include Irish Americans and then Italian Americans who also as a group eventually gained inclusion within the same exclusive racial category- perhaps helped by the arrival of African American migrants after them, which aided in their upward mobility. Notably, some Mexicans already viewed themselves as white (Wortham et al, 2020: ix) and it is still to be seen whether they will also be accepted, in due course, like previous migrant groups. The power and influence of whiteness was also demonstrated in how the white residents influenced relationships between the other migrant groups, based on their higher socioeconomic status in 'Marshall' (Wortham et al, 2020: 110). In this way, there was an established 'Marshall' hierarchy which saw Black and Mexican groups scrambling to secure their positions, while the Whites had moved to the more affluent outskirts.

On the other hand, the key strength of the book contributes to one of the areas that could be improved, specifically the authors' lack of reflection about their own positionalities. As four white-passing researchers, the book would have benefitted from an acknowledgement of the hegemony of whiteness and the power dynamics this created within the research process when navigating around 'Marshall', and within the intimate interactions that occurred with individuals and groups from different racialised communities. Additionally, while it was great to read about the positive ways in which the research team became very involved in the Mexican community, like one of the authors becoming a godparent to a family's youngest children (Wortham et al, 2020: 64), or providing support and guidance around a legal dispute between a tenant and landlord (Wortham et al, 2020: 41), it would have been useful to understand the ethical considerations that prevailed when making these decisions.

Overall, this book was an insightful and compelling read which provided nuance to migration stories as a whole but specifically for the establishment of the Mexican community in 'Marshall'. It illustrated the ways in which communities mix and merge over time and space and as a result of historical conditions. It also shows that there are many factors that hinder or strengthen migration 'success' stories, such as the power and influence of whiteness. In agreement with the authors, this book would be beneficial to policymakers, researchers and educators who wish to understand and better support migrant communities and their experiences of settling in new host societies.

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