

Review of *Beyond the Borderlands: Migration and Belonging in the United States and Mexico* by Debra Lattanzi Shutika

Laura Vásquez Roa
Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg (Germany)

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Beyond the Borderlands: Migration and Belonging in the United States and Mexico, published by University of California Press in 2011, examines one community of immigrants in their transnational life between Mexico and the United States. The author, Debra Lattanzi Shutika, is a folklorist and Associate Professor of English at George Mason University (United States). Her academic interests are mainly related to transnational migration, ethnicity, Latino folklore, and the intersection of space and locality in transnational contexts.¹

In this book the author explores the livelihood of a group of Mexican settlers in Kennett Square, a small town in the north of the United States that represents one of the so-called “new destinations” for immigration. She also provides an interesting reflection on the issues of immigration and integration in the United States. This is done through the examination of concepts like *sense of place* and *sense of belonging*. Discussions in this work are not only relevant for researchers interested in the topic of Mexican migration, but also for those interested in cultural integration, new destinations for migrants in the U.S., cultural geography, and spatiality in terms of transnational movements.

Beyond the Borderlands provides an interesting consideration of the idea of *border*. Here *border* is not something that is fixed, but rather something that is flexible. Thus, no matter how far these Mexican workers are from the geographical border, they, and the native population,² experience the border in many different places in the receiving country. This notion of *border* is linked to the understanding that professor Shutika presents about *place* in her book.

1 George Mason University. Retrieved December 11, 2015, URL: <http://english.gmu.edu/people/dshutika>

2 The author uses different terms to refer to the native population in the United States, some of them are: native English-speaking population, native-born population, majority population, American-born population.

Hence, it begins with a very telling phrase that offers the reader a glance at this central idea: “Although I live in Virginia, far from the U.S.-Mexico border, in 2005 it felt as if the border had moved into my backyard” (p. 1). For her, *beyond the border* implies multiple meanings. On the one hand, it is more than a geographical division, so here we have two different places with connected issues that are not only related to their physical position but that also represent deep divisions to negotiate. On the other hand, *border* is more than a limit between these two groups of people. *Border* is also *becoming*, which means that relationships and processes are the result of conflict and the subsequent negotiations that shape space.

In the book, the author explores three central questions about the nature of belonging and the sense of place in the context of Mexican settlement: How is belonging, particularly multi-local belonging, produced through daily experiences? How is a sense of place structured through spatial practices during settlement in the new destinations as well as the sending communities? How are ideas about belonging utilized at particular moments to explicitly establish collective identities or to legitimize claims to territory? (p. 20).

1. General structure

Shutika’s book is an ethnography done over a period of ten years in two different places that are connected through a group of Mexican immigrants in the United States. For the author, ethnography is more than a mere method. Using different techniques (ethno-surveys, interviews, and observations), the author collected data between 1995 and 2005 in two localities: Kennett Square in the United States, and Textitlán (pseudonym) in Guanajuato, Mexico. This methodological approach is also a good example of multi-sited ethnography that provides the reader with a material that is rich in details about the migration of Mexicans to new destinations in the United States.

The book is divided into seven chapters and an epilogue. The first section is the introduction to the topic with a description of the experience of the families returning to Textitlán from Kennett Square. It describes the holiday season and the experiences of these migrants returning to their village and its practices to re-embed themselves into the non-migrant community. It also shows the influence of immigration in the economic aspect, among others, in the *pueblo*. The second chapter continues with their experiences and everyday life in Textitlán. It covers the history of the *pueblo* and the details of the relationships between migrating and non-migrating neighbors. Although the next chapter also takes place in Mexico, it concerns the conceptual issues of home, homecoming, and belonging

through an examination of the practices of *Casas Vacías*. These are vacant houses that immigrants maintain fully furnished even though they are uninhabited while the owners live and work in the United States.

After these three chapters, the following two are based on the lives of Mexican settlers in Kennett Square, Virginia. In the fourth chapter, Shutika analyses the daily life of Mexicans in three different periods of emplacement between 1994 and 2005. The author also explores the concepts of *sense of place* and *sense of belonging* and how Mexican settlers negotiate their place in this small town. The fifth chapter considers the social action of Kennett Square's English-speaking population in relation to their Mexican neighbors and how it influenced Mexican belonging. The author analyses how even though the social action led by the English-speaking community aimed to integrate Mexican immigrants, it actually reinforced their own dominant position in the local group.

The last two chapters provide an insight into the festivities in Textitlán and Kennett Square and their connection to the concepts of *belonging* and *sense of place*. The sixth chapter examines the homecoming of *textitlanecos* for the season of *fiestas*. These celebrations are deeply rooted in spiritual life, and they allow the unification of migrants with the local community, at least temporarily. The seventh chapter, on the other hand, turns to the celebration of the Mexican *Cinco de Mayo* holiday in Kennett Square. Highlighting the opportunity that Mexicans have had to enjoy access to public life in Kennett Square, this chapter describes the transformation of this festival when it is organized mainly by the English-speaking community.

The epilogue reflects on different issues linked to the contemporary situation of undocumented immigrants (most of them from Mexico and other parts of Latin America) in the United States. Shutika discusses new destinations for immigrants and the reaction of these communities to the changes brought by the newcomers. Taking the example of Kennett Square, she argues that the same phenomenon can represent similar challenges to community in many other new destinations. Consequently, the outcomes of the experience collected in this book can help to improve our understanding of these processes of interaction in other places. Additionally, Shutika shows how new generations with an immigrant background deal with new challenges, and with new opportunities as well. Although the position and experiences of new generations were not considered in this study, the author encourages us to do more research in this area in order to understand the changes and challenges associated to living as a second generation in new destinations for immigrants. Finally, she opens up the discussion about the political action of anti-immigrant movements and new challenges for the Latino community in this context.

2. Key concepts and theoretical discussion

The framework of *Beyond the Borderlands* covers concepts from different fields such as geography and anthropology. In this way, the key concepts in this work are *place* and *sense of place*, *belonging*, and *translocal places*. This theoretical framework rests on a discussion about space and spatiality. As was said in relation to the concept of *border*, the author considers the spatiality in which people live to exceed geographical space or the physical world; in that way, the border can be in a different place than the boundary between countries. Shutika uses the concept of *place*, “as space made culturally meaningful” (p. 10-11) in order to think *beyond* the constraints of space as something fixed. *Place* is the result of meanings and practices that people perform on a daily basis in a specific space. It is the lived context for “all human activity and cultural processes” (Low 1994, 66 cited in Shutika 2011, 10). That includes the relationships between different people that share and produce *place* as something with a powerful meaning that touches and is touched by every single action that happens in that space and that shapes and produces space as something lived in different ways.

Place is experienced intimately. The *sense of place* includes emotional and subjective attachments *to* a particular place. Also, *sense of place* “considers how humans shape the places they inhabit and how places similarly influence human social interactions and cultural processes” (Cresswell 2004 cited in Shutika 2011, 10). In that way, *sense of place* is not only an emotional and cognitive experience. It is also cultural beliefs and practices that shape how a particular place is experienced and that simultaneously transform that place. This is a very important point for Shutika, because she is very interested in how Textitlán and Kennett Square are also the result of negotiations and confrontations between immigrants and the local community, a continuous process that involves particular actions in order to maintain or transform a space as cultural experience.

For Shutika, belonging is a feeling, a particular sense of place, but also a process. It emerges in a complex set of relations to a particular place that includes activities, meanings, and relationships with other people who inhabit that place. Therefore, to belong to a place is to feel that a site is appropriate for a particular social and vital trajectory. As a process, belonging includes all the activities that make a particular place a place with a sense of belonging. The book provides several examples of how Mexican immigrants are transforming both Kennett Square and Textitlán in “a process contingent largely on three factors: migrant social networks, the attitudes and actions of the receiving community, and access to public space” (p. 93).

In this sense, belonging cannot be understood in just one direction. This means that it is important to acknowledge that belonging refers not only to the newcomers, but to the native people as well, “By examining the process of belonging for Mexicans in Kennett Square, *Beyond the Borderlands* also uncovers perhaps one of the least understood aspects of immigration: how newcomers find their places in their new home and maintain their places in the old, and how the native-born population eventually adapts to their presence” (p. 32).

Place, sense of place and belonging constitute the basic theoretical framework of the book. This framework is worthy of consideration because it allows the author to think in terms of process and movements. Actually, Shutika considers place, sense of place and belonging not as fixed, but as progressive “projects of becoming” (Massey 1994, 119 cited in Shutika 2011, 12). This consideration has important implications. The coming of new people causes a change in the place where they live, and that produces conflict.

An interesting contribution of this work is that it opens up a possibility of thinking about the newcomer without forgetting the native community. Thus, ethnography explores the sense of belonging in both the newcomers and the native population. One example of this discussion is the response to the use of housing and other spaces in Kennett Square. Mexican settlers used to live on the outskirts of town for a long time, but when their visibility became more notorious, the English-speaking population showed disagreement with measures the authorities took to house them in a more central place. Nativist responses to these measures constituted a reaction against social and cultural change (p. 140). Thus, Shutika considers confrontations for the places — Kennett Square and Textitlán— a complex interplay of people, practices, legal acts, and physical space. The usual arguments about racism and integration seem insufficient because Shutika shows what the lived environment of all the participants is like and what is at stake.

In this way, migration challenges the sense of belonging of immigrants and residents alike. As Shutika puts it:

“In communities where populations have been relatively stable, the idea of belonging is often interpreted as straightforward: if you’ve spent most of your life in one place, you belong to it. But in periods of instability or rapid social change, such as in times when migration and settlement transform what were once familiar neighborhoods into new destinations of immigrant settlement, people are more likely to feel that they do not belong (Dench, Gavron, and Young 2006; Mulgan 2009). Feelings of displacement can also occur for longtime residents when they see their

neighborhoods transformed around them and perceive their hometown as changed and unfamiliar” (p. 95).

In addition, this is a double challenge for immigrants because they live between two places. But as place and belonging change in the practices of people, it is not possible to take for granted “a place that they truly belong [to]” (p. 19). That is why immigrants spend a lot of energy maintaining their ties with Textitlán and making new ties with Kennett Square. They live in a *translocal* space, a “local-to-local spatial dynamic” (Ma 2002 cited in Shutika 2011, 19). In that way, *Beyond the Borderlands* “explores their efforts [Mexican settlers] to belong to two distinct, but deeply connected places” (p. 19).

As a translocal community, Mexican settlers still live in Textitlán and the town is part of their daily lives. For Shutika, the idea of *local* is even more accurate than just talking about a transnational community. Local-to-local spatial dynamics provides the opportunity to recognize how local processes shape the experience and identity of settlers. This concept is also linked with place, thus, “translocal places are those whose social relations and local communities have been reshaped through transnational dynamics” (p. 19). Furthermore, the author argues that “[by] exploring the translocal ties between Textitlán and Kennett Square, it is possible to develop a sense of the Mexican families and their lives, particularly the multifaceted experiences of these contemporary immigrants in new destinations and their ongoing relationships with their homeland” (p. 31). At this point, the chapter that explores the *Casas Vacías* (empty houses) phenomenon gives us an interesting perspective on the efforts made by the immigrant community to belong to both places:

“[...] Even as homeowners and long-standing residents, these families often acknowledge that their sense of belonging in the United States is tenuous. If they are not homeowners, their situation is complicated by the fact that they must compete for limited rental housing [...] Refusing to let go of the house in Mexico then softens the reality of their lives in Pennsylvania. If they feel out of place here, then they can at least hold onto the idea that they have a rightful place elsewhere. The house allows Mexican families to hold onto dreams of returning home, of once again belonging to their natal communities. At the same time, the Mexican house maintains the position of the absent family in the community” (p. 85).

One last element should be highlighted in this study. Shutika refers to the encounter between these two communities in terms of anxiety and ambivalence

for both. For the author, the native population had ambivalent feelings about the changes that the Mexican community might represent for their place as they knew it before. One of the best examples is the celebration of *Cinco de Mayo*, the first two versions of which took place on the main street of Kennett Square, but for the third edition the festival was moved to a parking lot (p. 233). Although the explanation given for this decision was the commercial impact that closing the street had on local business, the ethnographical study points to different fears and stereotyped ideas about the place that Mexicans were starting to have in the town. This example and others in the book show how the native-born community sometimes moved forwards and sometimes backwards in trying to understand the shifts that the community experienced over time.

The findings of this research not only provide insights into the livelihood of immigrants in new destinations, they also reflect on the process of new assimilation as a mutual change in both communities (p. 247). As the reader can see, the discussion not only refers to discursive and spatial practices of the native population that limit the access of Mexican settlers to different uses of space and to the possibility of belonging to this place; it shows how a gradual transition took place in this community where Mexicans became part of Kennett Square and how this phenomenon simultaneously involved changes for the local community as well. Moreover, the book takes the argument back to Textitlán by accompanying the return of these migrants and shows how belonging, as a fundamental aspect of the sense of place (p. 95), connects Mexican settlers with both places and makes their hometown more than merely a sending community.

3. Implications for migration studies

Shutikas's book contributes to the study of transnational communities and new destinations in the U.S. The focus of this discussion is to see how a better encounter between different communities can take place. There is also the question of how it is related to cultural difference. One of the most remarkable aspects of this book is that it considers migration to be something that goes beyond the idea of moving between two locations as a definitive fact. Of course, this is the starting point for a description and subsequent analysis, but it also allows the reader to think about migration as a spatial practice and as a process or, in other words, as "a project of becoming".

The particular practice of maintaining *Casas Vacías* is an example that destabilizes the typical notions of migration as a definitive movement. At first glance it seems illogical to keep those houses with no use for such a long time. However, Shutika provides a better understanding of an empty house as an

important issue because it ties immigrant's experience to the hometown to make Textitlán the one place to which they truly belong.

Another example of the potential of this approach to considering *space* and *place* is to understand that negotiations and conflicts around place are much more complex, not only in terms of assimilation or racism, but even more in a role that they actually play: ways of living and being in a certain place, for migrants and natives alike. This opens up different ways of considering the political and social implications of migration. For instance, Shutika refers to the encounter between two communities (Mexican immigrants and the English-speaking population in Kennett Square) as an encounter marked by anxiety and ambivalence which, as mentioned above, shows how the native-born community sometimes moves a few steps ahead and sometimes a few steps back in trying to understand the shifts that the community experiences through time and space.

Regarding this point, it would be interesting to analyze social dynamics like these in terms of new concepts that open up the idea of *border* to a broader category that considers the complexity of this field of study (see Chiara Brambilla, Noel Parker, Nick Vaughan-Williams, P.K. Rajaram, Carl Grundy-Warr). For instance, *borderscape* is one of these new concepts that express “the spatial and conceptual complexity of the border as a space that is not static but fluid and shifting; established, and at the same time, continuously traversed by a number of bodies, discourses, practices and relationships that highlight the endless definitions and shifts in definition between inside and outside, citizens and foreigners, and hosts and guests across state, regional, racial and other symbolic boundaries.” (Brambilla *et al.* 2015, 113). This would be a fruitful area for further work.

The research presented has also shown that building a place where you belong is an active practice that involves not only your own action but also a wide range of activities, beliefs and relationships. It is a practical and a political endeavor, a spatial issue that materializes the quest of people that travel to another country in order to have a better life. What is at stake is place as context of life, so, considering *place*, *sense of place* and *belonging* not only allows a comprehensive understanding of migration as a spatial issue, it also makes it possible to consider migration as a complex phenomenon. That is the most important conclusion that the reader can draw from this book, and one that is particularly relevant in the contemporary world.

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Laura Vásquez Roa is an anthropologist with a minor in History from the Universidad de los Andes (Colombia). She is presently doing a Master's degree in International Migrations and Intercultural Relations at the Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg (Germany).
✉ lauravazquezroa@emmir.org