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The Center for Comparative Immigration Studies

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University of California, San Diego

**Stability in a New Destination:
Mexican Immigrants in Clark County, Ohio**

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**Stability in a New Destination:
Mexican Immigrants in Clark County, Ohio**

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Abstract

Starting in the 1990s, immigrants began to settle throughout the United States, often moving to new destinations far from the traditional receiving communities. This paper is a case study of Clark County, Ohio, which has seen its immigrant population grow rapidly in the past two decades, with many of these newcomers coming from the small town of El Saúz de Abajo in the state of Michoacán. Many in this group express a strong sense of stability in their lives in this new destination and I ask what people mean when they express this sentiment. This paper argues that the sense of stability people express is complex and that it can only be understood relative to their past experiences.

Keywords: United States, Mexico, migration, new destinations, stability

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Introduction

Sitting outside of his ranch-style house in Clark County, Ohio in August 2008, José Carmona¹ took a long drink from his pale red hibiscus flower drink and told me about the major milestones of his life. Born in 1970 in the Mexican state of Michoacán, he was raised in the small town of El Saúz de Abajo. He grew up in a large family, with ten brothers and six sisters. His parents worked in the agricultural fields that surround El Saúz, but the food they grew on their own and the money they earned from working others' fields were scarcely sufficient to sustain the family. José left school after fourth grade to join his parents in the fields and support his siblings. He continued this work for four years before deciding to travel with his brother-in-law to the United States. They went to Arizona, working the agricultural fields by day and sleeping in them by night. It was all too much for 14 year-old José, and he returned home after only a month. But necessity led José back to the United States next year, this time Washington state, where he worked the fields for several months. For the next several years, José would make this annual journey north, leaving El Saúz in March and working in Washington and California until November. In 1987 José received amnesty as part of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), thus becoming a legal resident of the United States.

In the winter of 1990-1991, José was talking with two friends in El Saúz. Rogelio Miranda and Esteban García had also, like many in the town, just returned from the United States. But unlike most migrants from El Saúz, who went to the expansive agricultural fields of the California's San Joaquin Valley, Rogelio and Esteban had just returned from Ohio. Both were enthusiastic about their experience in that state, and one thing they said piqued his interest. In Ohio, they told him, there was a future. Compared to California, there were good jobs that paid well and a low cost of

¹ All names are pseudonyms

living. Excited by the possibilities of what Ohio might offer, José went with Rogelio, Esteban, and several others to Ohio in the spring of 1991.

A local pastor who had befriended Rogelio and Esteban helped José to find a job with a construction company. The work was hard but he enjoyed it, just as he appreciated the easy pace of life in Ohio. He quickly came to feel “at home”² in the state. José returned to El Saúz that winter and married, but since his wife did not have papers to go to the United States, he was forced to return to Ohio alone in the spring of 1992. But having seen the situation in Ohio, he decided to apply for papers for his wife to join him. He returned to his construction job and before long, he began to receive promotions. He continued to return to El Saúz each winter to see his wife, and later his two children. In 2002, the paperwork for his family members to come to the United States went through and they moved north with him. Today, José continues to work at the construction company that first gave him a job on his arrival to Ohio. He returns far less frequently to El Saúz these days, sometimes going several years without returning.

What did he think now, I asked. Was Ohio what he hoped it would be when he first came? Yes, he told me, it was. There he had found a good job that paid well, he had bought a house and two cars, he had good neighbors, his family was with him; what more could he ask for? Rogelio and Esteban were right, he said. In Ohio, there was a future. Not just for him, he said, looking at his two young boys running in the driveway, but for them. In Ohio, there is a future for them.

* * *

The sentiment that José expressed to me that August afternoon is one I heard repeated throughout my work with Mexican immigrants from El Saúz de Abajo who live in Ohio as well as among those who remain in El Saúz. One’s ability to imagine a better future is, of course, very much

² All translations are my own

dependent on one's circumstances in the present. And in the present, one of the most notable features of life in Ohio for many people from El Saúz is a sense of stability. Throughout my time in the summer of 2008, this concept of stability came up again and again, with many telling me how much more stable their lives in Ohio are. This stability is a notable feature of life for many people from El Saúz who live in Ohio, but what exactly do they mean when they discuss it?

I initially assumed that this greater sense of stability was purely economic, a recognition that my informants in Ohio were able to find steady work. But with time, I came to realize that while this is one aspect of the stability, it does not fully explain the content of their statements. In some cases, greater economic stability leads to other types of stability, as when the first migrants from El Saúz in Ohio began to earn more than they had previously and started to bring their families to join them. The stability that began in the economic realm led to greater stability in the social realm, as entire families came to settle in Ohio.

Hearing my informants express a greater sense of stability in their lives in Ohio came as a surprise to me. Much of the literature on immigrants in new destinations such as Ohio (see literature review below) discusses their desirability to employers as low-paid, flexible labor. And my own comfortable, middle-class upbringing in a town not far from the area where these immigrants were settling led me to imagine that they would see themselves as exploited and marginalized. Hearing my informants express satisfaction at the sense of stability Ohio had brought them came as quite a surprise to me. But it led me to an important realization: that stability is relative. Compared to my experiences, my informants' lives may have appeared unstable. Compared to their previous life experiences, life in Ohio was incredibly stable.

This essay, then, has two goals. First, it will trace out the content of my informants' statements about the sense of stability that they feel in Ohio. Doing so is like peeling an onion, with each layer removed revealing another layer underneath. I will show what layers of stability are hidden

underneath the visible economic skin. By exploring these layers, I will achieve the second goal of demonstrating the relative nature of stability. One's sense of stability at present is always in relation to past experiences.

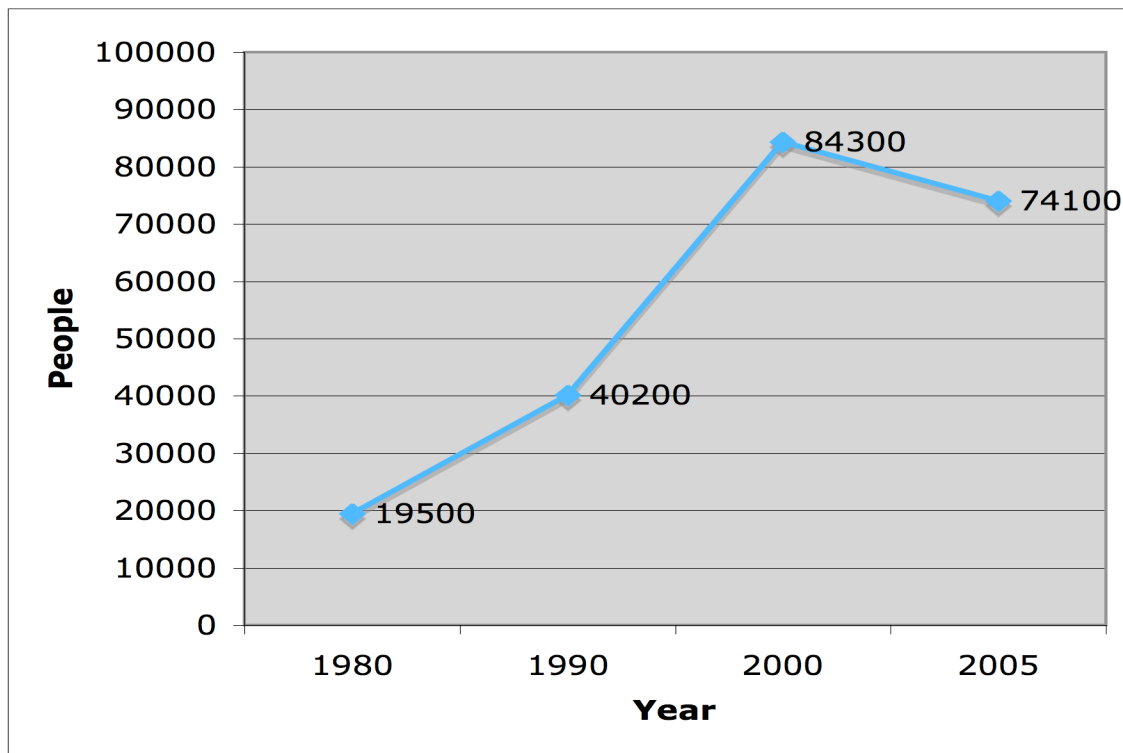
Literature Review

Migration to new destinations of the United States has become a hot topic in recent years, as the amount of research has begun to catch up with the saliency of the phenomenon. Researchers are finally heeding the call of sociologists Mary Waters and Tomás Jiménez to move “away from city-based studies in traditional gateways and look at the transformation of the South, the Midwest, and small cities, towns and rural areas, and suburban areas as sites of first settlement” (2005: 107). Research on migrants in new destinations has tended to address the issue from one of two perspectives: 1) macro-level studies, most often done by sociologists and demographers, that examine these population shifts, or 2) ethnographic case studies of communities in new destinations. Focusing more on how these immigrants have come to live where they do today, the industries within which they work, and their reception from their native-born neighbors, this second group of studies have less often asked how immigrants perceive their lives in new destinations. Little, if any, research has specifically addressed the concept of stability, though some work does touch on the concept peripherally.

The book *New Faces in New Places* (Massey 2008) exemplifies the macro-level approach to the study of migration in new destinations. Edited by sociologist Douglas Massey, the book examines the demographic shifts of the past several decades that have led immigrants to settle throughout the United States far from traditional destinations. The demographic trends that Massey and Chiara Cappelletto (2008) report in their chapter are striking. They write that in the 1990s, “something dramatic happened – there was a marked shift of immigrants away from global cities and the states

or regions where they are located toward new places of destination throughout the United States” (2008: 26). From 1985 through 1990, most newly arrived immigrants settled in traditional destination states, with 63% going to California and 20% to Texas or Illinois. However, among immigrants who came to the United States between 1995 and 2000, only 28% went to California, 15% to Texas, and 6% to Illinois. Over the course of a decade, the percentage of immigrants settling in these three traditional receiving states went from 83% to 49%. Migrants who were no longer heading to these “big three” receiving states were increasingly ending up in new destinations. Jorge Chapa, Rogelio Saenz, Refugio Rochín, and Eileen Diaz McConnell write that today in every state except Hawaii, the Latino population is growing more quickly than the total population (2004: 62). Looking at individual states, the magnitude of this demographic shift becomes even more apparent. Waters and Jiménez note that in recent years Southern and Midwestern states have been the recipients of most of the new immigrants. Between 1990 and 2000, the growth in the foreign-born population was 274% for North Carolina, 233% for Georgia, and 196% for Arkansas (2005: 112). In many places, Latinos have stabilized or even helped to grow populations that had been shrinking for decades. In the book *Apple Pie and Enchiladas: Latino Newcomers in the Rural Midwest* (2004a), Ann Millard and Jorge Chapa write that during the 1990s, “the total population of the Midwest increased by about 8 percent and Midwestern Latinos by 80 percent” (2004b: 9). Ohio was a part of this trend, as figure 1 demonstrates.

Figure 1: Number of Immigrants Arriving in Ohio



Source: Massey and Capoferro 2008

Explaining these demographic shifts is a task that has occupied many scholars. Using the traditional push/pull paradigm, Massey and Capoferro suggest four factors that have led to the rise in new destinations for immigrants: 1) the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986, 2) the passage of California Proposition 187 in 1994, 3) the selective hardening of the border, especially around traditional immigrant receiving states such as California and Texas, in the 1990s, and 4) industrial restructuring and the resulting changes in labor demand. Each of these factors is likely to have played some role in this phenomenon. IRCA, for instance, likely encouraged some portion of the over 3 million previously undocumented immigrants who were given legal status to move to different parts of the country in search of better jobs and better lives. And since such a high percentage of the immigrant population had been concentrated in California, the anti-immigrant

sentiment in that state throughout the 1990s that culminated in the passage of Proposition 187 may have been the push for some to seek out destinations friendlier to immigrants. If IRCA and rising anti-immigrant sentiment in California were factors that pushed many out of traditional destinations, then the selective hardening of the U.S.-Mexico border and changing labor demand were the pull factors drawing them to new destinations. Massey and Capoferro note that increased border security around the urban centers has led to many more crossings in remote areas. Since these migrants are crossing far from urban centers, they are less likely to simply remain in them, but are instead continuing on to new destinations. Finally, the changing geography of labor demand has pulled immigrants to new destinations (the recession of the early 1990s also hit California particularly hard, note Massey and Capoferro, pushing some immigrants out). For example, the increase in Latinos in meatpacking has come about as that industry has successfully executed a strategy of marginalizing unionized butchers in urban centers and using non-union workers at plants that dot much of the Midwest (see Gouveia, et al. 2005).

This changing geography of labor demand is responsible, in large part, for another of the major demographic shifts among immigrants in the United States today, away from urban centers and toward rural areas. Not only are immigrants moving to parts of the country where they had not previously gone, but they are also ending up in small towns in these states. In recent years, several books have been written on immigrants outside of urban areas (Gozdziak and Martin 2005; Singer, et al. 2008). Katharine Donato and colleagues investigate the phenomenon and conclude that in non-metropolitan areas, “the population in the 1990s contained a disproportionate percentage of recently arrived Mexicans who were attracted by employment opportunities within particular industries offering low-skill and low-wage jobs” (Donato, et al. 2008: 95).

Much work on immigrants in new destinations, like that discussed above, has been quantitative in nature. This information has long been used by anthropologists in their studies of

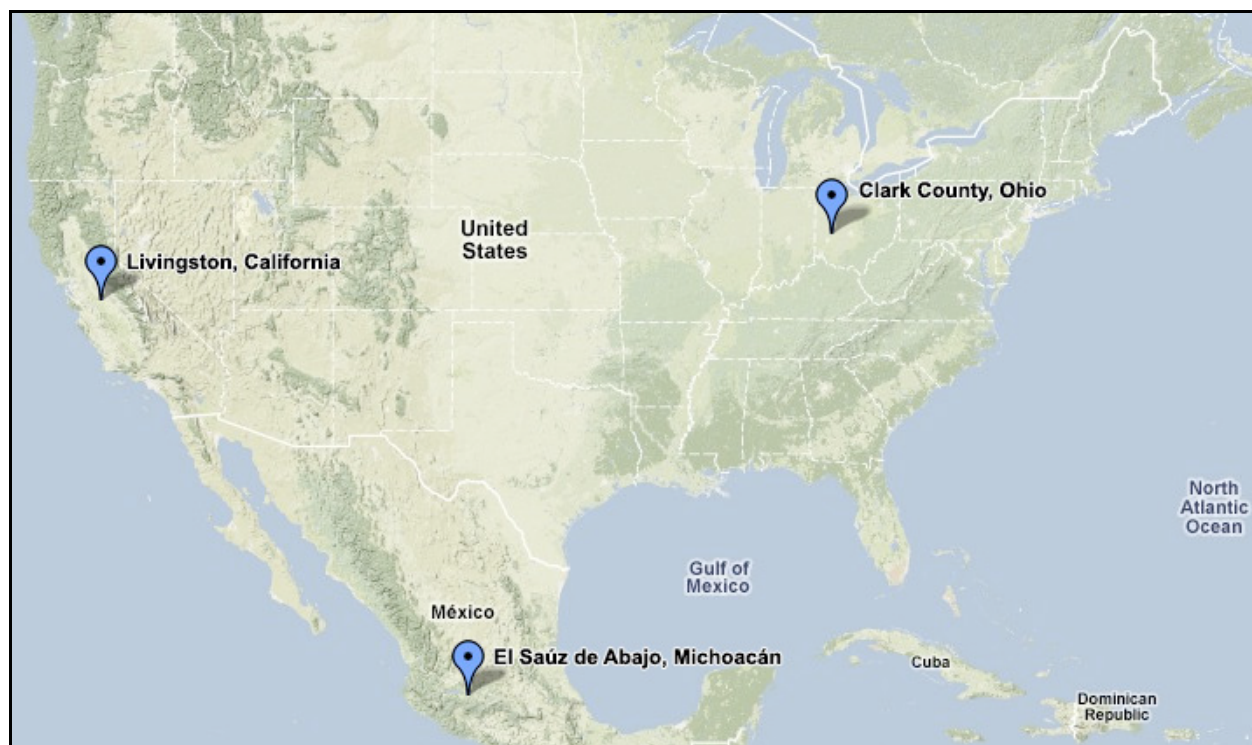
immigrant communities, but Colleen O'Neal perceptively asks them to reconsider how they do so. "How can sociology and demography be put to use as a resource within the anthropological text, rather than as an end in itself?" (1999: 222). Rather than simply mimicking sociologists and demographers, those using ethnography have sought to find a unique space for themselves in the study of immigrants, in particular those settling in new destinations. Many have focused on case studies of such immigrant communities (Bump 2005; Gouveia, et al. 2005; Griffith 2005; Hernández-León and Zúñiga 2000; Schoenholtz 2005; Striffler 2007), with a particular focus on how they have come to live where they do, their work experiences, and their reception in these destinations. Micah Bump (2005) tells the story of the arrival and development of the Latino community in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. Numerous pieces focus on the incorporation of immigrants in new destinations, including the work of sociologist Lourdes Gouveia and colleagues in Nebraska (Gouveia, et al. 2005) and that of Andrew Schoenholtz (2005) on Latino immigrants' increased involvement in the formal banking system in Arkansas during the 1990s. Anthropologist David Griffith (2005) focuses on labor market behaviors of Mexican immigrant workers in North Carolina while sociologists Rubén Hernández-León and Víctor Zúñiga (2000) focus on a town in Georgia which saw a rise in its Latino immigrant population during the 1990s due in large part to the carpet factory that drew them there. Because many of the researchers use incorporation as their theoretical framework, much of the work they produce ends up focusing on external measures of the experiences of immigrants in new destinations. One major exception to this is anthropologist Steve Striffler's (2007) piece on how Mexican migrants in Arkansas, many of whom previously worked in the fields in California, perceive their hometown in light of their new lives in this new destination. Striffler's work takes on the task set out by sociologist Robert Smith (2006), building on the ideas of symbolic anthropologists like Clifford Geertz (Geertz 1973), to focus on what migration *means* to the immigrants who experience it. With immigrants increasingly settling in new destinations,

there is an excellent opportunity to ask what specifically it means to be an immigrant in these types of places. In what ways do immigrants' experiences in new destinations differ from those of immigrants in traditional receiving areas? How do immigrants in new destinations perceive their lives there *vis a vis* their previous life experiences?

My focus on stability is one attempt to dig deeply into the lives of immigrants in the new destination of Ohio. Stability as a theoretical concept has only been touched on briefly in the literature on migration. Work focusing on the shift from temporary migration to settlement, including that of anthropologist Leo Chavez (1994), explores the experiences of migrants in this process. While the shift to settlement may bring some greater degree of stability, Chavez notes, other factors including undocumented status, may hinder this. Other studies of stability have addressed the concept in relation to employers seeking to have flexibility (i.e. less stability) in their workforce. Sociologists Charles Hirschman and Douglas Massey note that this desire for flexibility has contributed to the rise in the immigrant population in new destinations: "shortages of labor during periods of rapid expansion have increasingly been met by immigrant workers who are available, flexible, and willing to accept unstable conditions of unemployment that native-born workers find intolerable" (Hirschman and Massey 2008: 9). This is the situation in meatpacking and other industries that have come to rely on immigrant labor. But while some businesses clearly desire a flexible workforce, how do the workers perceive of their relative flexibility in this system? While employers may value immigrant workers for their perceived flexibility, the workers themselves may have a very different take on their role. Stability is a concept with meaning to both employers and employees. Examining stability in the lives of these immigrants is an attempt to seek their side of the story while at the same time exploring one aspect that may be unique to migration to new destinations.

The El Saúz Community in Ohio

Figure 2: Map of El Saúz de Abajo, Livingston, California and Clark County, Ohio



The process by which migrants from El Saúz de Abajo ended up in Clark County, Ohio reflects the factors listed above that have led many immigrants to settle in new destinations. But while these factors were important, serendipity also played an important role. Migration from El Saúz has a long history. I spoke with numerous older men in El Saúz who had taken part in the Bracero program and traveled to California, Arizona, Washington, Texas, Kansas, and Michigan. During the 1980s, migration from El Saúz came to be directed primarily toward California, with many people from the town going to the San Joaquin Valley to do seasonal agricultural work. While a few scattered people ended up in different parts of the United States, Livingston, California (a town in the San Joaquin Valley) became the center of the El Saúz community in the north. It was only in 1990 that migrants from El Saúz began to go to Ohio.

One of the key figures in this shift was Arturo Gaitán. He had migrated to Livingston for several years during the 1980s. Starting in 1984, he traveled to the San Joaquin Valley and worked in the area fields from March until November. But unlike most from his town, Arturo did not return home at the end of the California growing season. A self-described outsider, he took up with farmworkers from Guanajuato he had met and traveled across the country. Arturo continued to migrate with this group, and in 1987 they passed through Ohio, where they worked for a period of time on a farm outside of the small town of Jamestown. Arturo returned to Ohio the next two years, working on several farms before deciding to return to the San Joaquin Valley in 1990.

Arturo and many others told me that that work was not easy to find in the San Joaquin Valley fields in 1990 and migrants began to look for other options. Arturo mentioned that he still had the phone number of one of the farmers he had worked for in Ohio. Along with several others from El Saúz, he enlisted the help of a local pastor, who called to ask if the farmer could use any workers. The farmer said yes and agreed to send money for eight workers to come to Ohio. The group of eight bought a pick-up truck and headed east. The trip took five days (not the several hours some expected) and all arrived safely in Ohio. When they finally arrived at the Ohio farm, things were not much better there than they had been in California. Heavy rains continued for weeks, making the ground too wet to plant tomatoes. The combination of bad weather and little work led some to worry that their going to Ohio had been a mistake, and after two months, six of the pioneer migrants, including Arturo Gaitán, called relatives in California to send money so they could return, leaving only two workers – Rogelio Miranada and Esteban García – in Ohio. Fortunately for them, the weather improved and the work picked up as a result. In August, the farm owners asked Rogelio and Esteban to find more workers to come to Ohio, paying for the plane tickets of four others from El Saúz who flew in from California.

The next year, five people from El Saúz went to Ohio, led by Rogelio, who became an unofficial spokesperson for Ohio, telling those in Michoacán what he had found there. There was work, he said, and a lower cost of living, not to mention fewer Border Patrol agents, a plus to those who were undocumented (many told me that in the late 1980s and early 1990s, immigration officials would occasionally come into fields in California looking for those without papers). But Rogelio still had some things to learn about Ohio because when he arrived with a small group in February of 1991, snow blanketed the ground and there was no work at the farm where they had previously found employment. The five workers from El Saúz went to the local unemployment agency, which connected them with a Spanish-speaking Mennonite pastor, who helped them to find jobs in a local plant nursery, where they worked through November. This pastor continued to be of great assistance to those from El Saúz, helping many to find jobs and housing, translating for them when necessary, and offering other help they required.

Over the next few years, more and more people from El Saúz began to migrate to Ohio instead of California. Several people noted that those who had gone to Ohio starting in the early 1990s were returning to El Saúz in the winter with trucks, something farmworkers in California could not afford, and this proved an attraction. The El Saúz population in Clark County grew quickly. Eventually, many of the single men (along with a very few women) who were the pioneer migrants were joined by their families and some came to stay in Ohio year-round. Major changes would come around 2000, when several families began to purchase houses, further consolidating their position in the community.

People from El Saúz in Clark County today are spread over several towns. The center of the community is the town of New Carlisle, with others clustered in nearby Medway, Park Layne, Crystal Lakes, Enon, Springfield, as well as a few scattered outside of Clark County. Migrants from El Saúz work in a wide variety of jobs, including several plant nurseries, landscaping, construction,

light industry (e.g. pallet and sandpaper factories), warehouses, and food processing (all of which, it should be pointed out, are examples of the type of low-wage, low-skill jobs that have drawn immigrants to new destinations, as discussed by Donato and colleagues [2008]). Many people have year-round employment, but those who with more seasonal work have developed strategies to deal with this by either returning to El Saúz during the winter or working in other short-term positions during this time. Many who work at nurseries that shut down during the cold months, for instance, take temporary work to meet seasonal demand at a turkey farm around Thanksgiving and a toy factory before Christmas.

There is no officially known size of the El Saúz community in Ohio, but in the summer of 2008 it was clearly growing. The community is a mix of the pioneer migrants and their families as well as more recent arrivals. Signs of Ohio are visible throughout El Saúz itself, from license plates, to Ohio State University t-shirts, to the Midwestern-accented English that springs from the mouth of those just returned from the United States. Everyone in El Saúz, it seems, has at least one family member in Ohio. Asked if he still recommended Ohio to those in El Saúz who might be thinking of migrating, one of the earlier migrants to settle there told me it wasn't necessary. Everyone already knew about Ohio and was eager to come.

Stability in a New Destination

Emigration from El Saúz de Abajo is not a new phenomenon. But since the early 1990s, the marked shift in migration patterns, away from California and to Ohio, has brought about many changes to people from the town. Most notably, it has brought about a sense of stability to the lives of many migrants in Ohio. But this sense of stability does not arise out of the blue. Instead, it is very much in relation to their own previous life experiences – in El Saúz and, for many, in California – as well as those of their friends and family members over many generations.

When my informants spoke of the sense of stability they feel in Ohio, it was often in relation to periods in their lives when they saw their lives as less stable, especially during their time as farmworkers in California. Thirty-seven year-old Roberto Arandas is one such person. One of six siblings, he remained in school through sixth grade, dropping out to work in the fields around El Saúz and help his struggling family. He worked for several years in Mexico before deciding to try his luck in the United States. Following the well-trodden path with his family members and friends from El Saúz, 14 year-old Roberto went north to the San Joaquin Valley of California in 1985 and found work in the fields of the area. All of the work he did there was hard, but nothing could compare to picking peaches. Roberto still has vivid memories of himself as a teenager, high on a ladder, straining to reach the tops of trees to pick the few remaining peaches while juice from the fruit covered his entire body, making him a sticky, syrupy mess. This hard work did bring him one major benefit: in 1987 he was able to take advantage of the amnesty offered to undocumented immigrants and obtain legal residency.

Roberto was one of the pioneer migrants in Ohio, coming with the first group in 1990. Although he returned to California that year when there was little work in Ohio, Roberto heard stories from those who had stayed behind. He recalled one such person who returned to El Saúz that winter with a car. "If he had a car," Roberto thought, "then he must be doing well in Ohio." Roberto decided to try his luck again in Ohio, returning in 1994. Roberto has now been in Ohio for almost fifteen years and he has made a life for himself in that state. He is married with two children, both of whom were born in Ohio, and he has learned English, thus enabling himself to get to know non-Spanish speakers at work and at home.

Roberto has held several jobs since arriving in Ohio. Like many, he found his first job at a plant nursery after arriving in 1994. From there, he moved on to a job doing nickel and chrome plating for vehicles. He worked there for several years before moving to Buckeye Diamond, a

company that makes wooden palettes. Roberto has been at this position for close to ten years and is quite pleased with it overall. “The work here is easy,” he told me. This surprised me. His job there involves putting together wooden palettes, which often requires heavy lifting and the use of heavy (and potentially dangerous) machinery. Others I got to know who worked at the same company told me that they returned home at the end of every work day exhausted and the potential for injury was quite high. How, then, could Roberto tell me that this work was easy? This claim only makes sense when viewed in relation to his previous work experiences. By my standards, Roberto’s work at Buckeye Diamond is anything but easy. But compared to standing on twenty-foot high ladders in one hundred-degree heat with peach juice covering his body, lifting a few palettes is not bad at all.

Roberto also told me that he liked his work in Ohio because it was predictable from one day to the next. As a migrant farmworker in California, he never knew what type of work he would be doing (or if he would even have work) on any given day. At Buckeye Diamond, however, he can work year-round. Roberto, like many who do work in similar places, made a point of telling me that he works in a *bodega* (factory), thus allowing him to work year-round, rain or shine. The importance of this can only be seen when one remembers that Roberto, like so many of those from El Saúz, spent many years working outside in the agricultural fields of Michoacán and California. Having a roof over his head at work is a major change for Roberto. It gives him a very real stability because he is able to work no matter the weather. But Roberto’s assessment of the stability in his work – both its relatively easy nature and its consistency – only make sense when compared to his previous, less stable experiences in California.

Much of the sense of stability my informants in Ohio expressed is economic in nature. And much of the economic stability that many express comes in comparison to their previous experiences in California and especially in Mexico, where the contrast to their current lives is most stark. Many present-day migrants in Ohio talked about not being able to find work while living in

Mexico, a situation that continues to this day. Those in El Saúz who have more or less regular jobs are the fortunate ones; many are only able to find day labor, mostly in the agricultural fields that dot the town. During my time there, it was common to see working-age men hanging out on the street (women largely remained in the house except to run errands) throughout the day. When I would ask them why they were there, the most common response was “because I couldn’t find work today.” Even among those who are able to find work in El Saúz today, their wages are usually low. The pay for work in the agricultural fields there, which provide employment for many, ranges from around US\$2 per hour during the planting season to around US\$5 per hour during the picking season. Today, many in Ohio find work closer to or even above \$10 per hour, leading one man on a return visit to El Saúz from Ohio to say, “Why would I stay here when I can earn the same in an hour in the United States that I earn in a day in Mexico?”

I have demonstrated ways in which my informants directly compare their present circumstances to what they experienced in California and in Mexico. But to make my point that my informants’ expressions of stability is relative to past experiences, it is important to examine not only the lives of my informants, but also those of previous generations of people from El Saúz. During the beginning of my work, I would ask people about El Saúz, referring to it in Spanish as a *pueblo*. No, I was repeatedly told, it’s not a pueblo, it’s a rancho. I initially assumed that calling the town a rancho was simply because of its small size – the town’s official population in 2005 was 1,377 (INEGI 2005). My informants used three categories to describe places where people lived: rancho, pueblo, and *ciudad* (city). El Saúz is located close to the latter two, and people often spoke of the rancho in relation to them. Many told me that people in Zamora, the city, people weren’t friendly and stayed inside their houses all day. The description most often given of Atetucario, the pueblo just down the road from El Saúz, was as a dangerous place, rife with drugs and guns. These descriptions served to separate these two places from El Saúz, the rancho. The small size of El Saúz

was important in the identity of the rancho, but most important was the fact that it was safe and people were friendly. Whether these differences were real or not, many people in El Saúz saw them as existing, and this was fundamental to how they saw their rancho.

Anthropologist Marcia Farr describes a common view of ranchos and the rancheros who live in them as “pure country” (2006: 37), a model which El Saúz fits. Many there continue to farm small plots of land and one middle-aged man told me that his ideal job would be to work his own fields, describing the feeling he gets in doing so as “the maximum” (instead, he works for as a field supervisor for a local contractor that grows strawberries for a multinational company). This man, as well as many others in El Saúz, describe their ranchero identity as being intimately tied to the land. At the same time, my informants often described their identity as rancheros as being distinct from those of the pueblo Atetucario or the city dwellers in Zamora. For them, being a ranchero was everything that being from a pueblo or ciudad was not.

But looking at rancheros today is only one part of the equation. To speak of rancheros, I would later learn, is to evoke a long history that goes back to colonial times. Exploring the process by which rancheros as a social group originally came to be codified can help to more fully explain the sense of stability that my informants express today. Rancheros have been fundamental in many of the major events of Mexican history, and they have also been profoundly affected by their participation in them.

Defining a ranchero is not easy, but perhaps the best way to do so is by tracing out the history of this group. Rancheros today are seen as those who live in the small towns called ranchos, but they are the descendants of lower-class Spaniards brought over during the colonial period and the indigenous people who originally populated present-day of Mexico. Initially, the Spanish Crown was largely interested in Mexico’s mineral wealth. Extracting minerals and transporting them to ports from which they could be shipped to Europe proved difficult, as indigenous populations

revolted against their colonizers. Lower-class Spaniards, the original *rancheros*, were brought over to clear indigenous populations from strategically important land they inhabited and to fight off ambushes of those who refused to heed to the authority of the Spanish colonial powers. Control of land came to be even more important during the late sixteenth century, as the Crown expanded its focus to agriculture and animal rearing. The importation of cattle, in particular, at this time led to a much greater need for land as well as people to work it. The Crown pushed outward from the routes it already controlled and came to dominate larger and larger areas of land. *Rancheros* continued to arrive from Spain and were tasked with fighting off indigenous populations and occupying land taken in these fights. The plots of land awarded to these foot soldiers were less desirable than those given to more wealthy Spaniards. *Rancheros* began their lives in what would become Mexico on small, out of the way plots of land, often close to indigenous populations, with whom many would come to have children.

If *rancheros* were on the front lines of the colonization process, their role in early post-independence Mexico was equally important. After several decades of fighting with conservatives, liberals took power in Mexico, and their beliefs were codified in the 1857 Constitution. One major change that this document brought about was land reform which forced the Catholic Church as well as municipal and regional governments to sell off massive tracts of land. *Rancheros* were among the central beneficiaries of these reforms, as historian Jean Dale Lloyd (1988) has shown. They took advantage of pieces of the law that allowed individuals to claim rights to unused land, as long as the claimant agreed to farm this land for ten years. The numbers of *rancheros* increased rapidly in the mid-nineteenth century. Geographer Esteban Barragán López estimates around 6,000 *ranchos* existed in 1810; by 1900 the number was closer to 30,000 (1997: 88). A secondary effect of the liberal land reform laws of the mid-eighteenth century was the increased migration of *rancheros* (see map in Barragán López 1997; González y González 1974: 99). Knowing that land was available

throughout the country, many uprooted themselves and their families, settling in distant places, often on the edge of territory under the control of the state.

From this history, we can see the development of several characteristics that researchers have often identified as typifying *rancheros*. Many have written, and I observed during my fieldwork, the valuing of independence, hard work, and mobility. As *rancheros* shaped Mexican history, they were also shaped by it, with these values coming to fruition in the context of the events in which they took place.

Esteban Barragán López, who has studied numerous contemporary ranchos in Jalisco and Michoacán, recounts a common *ranchero* idiom: “Each person scratches himself with his own fingernails” (1990: 79). This idiom demonstrates the value of independence in many *ranchero* societies. This independence, especially as opposed to communal structures, has its origin in early *ranchero* contacts with indigenous populations. Although many *rancheros* today recognize that they are descendants of Spanish and indigenous populations, nearly all emphasize the former. Marcia Farr, in her book *Rancheros in Michoacán* (2006), notes that *rancheros* of today, both in Michoacán and in Chicago, take pride in the success that they achieve through their own endeavor, contrasting themselves with the communally-oriented indigenous populations who “work hard but do not ‘progress’” (2006: 161). I often heard similar statements about indigenous villages close to El Saúz, the residents of which, I was often told, were backward and lazy. It is clear, though, that this idea does not arise out of the blue today, but instead has come about over centuries of ideologically-motivated colonization and state formation in which indigenous populations were denigrated and *rancheros* who would take their land were lauded for their independence.

Similarly, many researchers have noticed the prevalence of the value of hard work in *ranchero* societies. In the rancho of San José de Gracia during the late nineteenth century, Mexican historian Luis González y González notes that for *rancheros* there “to work and to be good were

almost synonymous” (González y González 1974: 45). Esteban Barragán López writes that the rancheros with whom he works in Michoacán are “convinced that work is the only dignified way to get out of poverty” (1990: 81). Clearly, this value has a basis in the history over several centuries, during which time rancheros have often lived far from centers of power and been forced to work hard on their own to eke out an existence. They often could not rely on the state for support in settling the land they would come to live on; instead, the state depended on rancheros to consolidate its hold on territory. It was only with their own hard work that rancheros could succeed then, and a similar value remains in the minds of many rancheros today. In conversations on both sides of the border, with migrants and non-migrants alike, I repeatedly heard the statement, “We Mexicans work harder than Americans. That’s why employers like to hire us.” These same people described those who didn’t work hard with the disparaging term *juevón*, and then proceeded to tell me that *juevones* would never get ahead because they are simply lazy. In these statements, it was the work ethic (or lack thereof) of the individual that determined his or her fate. More than anything else, it was one’s ability to work hard that people of El Saúz promoted as the determinant of success.

Rancheros have often been in spaces far from centers of power where they were forced to work hard on their own to eke out an existence. They often could not rely on the state for support in settling the land they would come to live on. Quite the opposite, the state depended on rancheros to consolidate its hold on territory. Animosity toward the government for what rancheros see as its government’s lack of assistance remains to this day. I heard the sentiment expressed by a middle-aged man in El Saúz when I asked what he thought of protests that were taking place about president current Felipe Calderón’s plans to privatize Pemex, the national oil and gas company. He laughed and said, “I don’t care what they do. I’ve never seen any money from Pemex come here to the rancho. What difference does it make if they privatize it? The money will just keep going to rich people in other places, just like it always has.” Encapsulated in his comment are several centuries of

built-up animosity toward reliance on government for assistance. This man has been a success among residents of El Saúz de Abajo, becoming a supervisor for a multinational agricultural company that grows several crops in the area. His success, he would be quick to add, has come with no help from the government, but instead through his own hard work.

The events of colonial times and the early independence period also produced highly mobile *ranchero* subjects, something that many continue to identify as a key characteristic of *ranchero* society today. Herón Pérez Martínez describes *rancheros* as a “half floating population” (1994: 48), David Skerritt writes of a “disposition to move” (1994: 146), and Marcia Farr speaks of the *rancheros* she works with in Chicago as having a “culture in which mobility (both geographic and socioeconomic) [is] valued” (2006: 161). *Rancheros* have, over several centuries, migrated in search of a better life. The ancestors of today’s *rancheros* migrated from Spain to present-day Mexico to take part in the colonization project. Many later migrated throughout the country, seeking to take advantage of the land reform laws of post-independence Mexico. In the twentieth century, *rancheros* would form a large percentage of those who migrated to the United States as part of the Bracero program. And today a large percentage of Mexican migrants in this country are, like my Ohio-based informants, *rancheros*. The *ranchero* values of independence and hard work can be explained in part as results of the values of independence and hard work. In some ways, a proclivity toward mobility is not so much an end in itself, but the means to achieve these other goals. If one believes that success comes from hard work, migration may be the price that is necessary to pay to achieve these goals.

This extremely abbreviated trip through *ranchero* history demonstrates the importance of examining ideas about stability not only throughout the lives of my informants, but also in the lives of their ancestors. It is in looking at the formation of these ideas over the centuries that we can best understand their current manifestations. It is perhaps because the ideas are centuries in the making

that they find such resonance among my informants today. Stability is, in part, based on one's ability to be independent and work hard. Not being able to achieve these ideas can have negative consequences, some I was convinced of on one of my first days in El Saúz when I met Santiago, a 25 year-old who had recently been deported. He had lived in Ohio for several years, married an American woman and had a child with her. Santiago had worked several jobs while in Ohio, but the landscaping and construction work he was doing was never stable. When it dried up in the winter, he had trouble paying his bills. As a result, Santiago told me, he started selling cocaine. He continued this line of work for several months before he was caught, sentenced to a year in prison, and ultimately deported. Reflecting on how he had gotten to that point, Santiago told me that it was in large part because he was unable to find stable, year-round work.

Social Stability

While the stability that many people from El Saúz speak of has an economic base, it has come to be about more than just dollars and cents. Indeed, economic stability has led to other types of stability, especially social stability. The first way this social stability can be seen relates to family structure. The economic stability that life in Ohio has brought to people from El Saúz has led many to come to see Ohio as their primary place of residence and as a result bring their families to join them. The El Saúz community has followed the traditional pattern proposed by Smith's (2006: 39) three stages of migration: 1) initial migration, followed by 2) settlement, before 3) consolidation. The mostly single male migrants who were the pioneers came to settle in the area, and after a few years many brought their wives and children, thus consolidating the community. This process has been aided by the fact that many of the early migrants to Ohio received amnesty in the mid-1980s. These men (and those I have met who received amnesty are all men) began to apply for paperwork for their families shortly after this time, and from the late-1990s on, wives, children, brothers, sisters,

and others have been able to join family members in Ohio. This is not to say that all families in Ohio have legal status in the United States. Many do not, and their numbers are increasing as the El Saúz community in Clark County grows as well. Whatever their legal status, the increasing presence of families from El Saúz in Ohio has reinforced the stability many feel there. 66 year-old Marta Menéndez, one of the earliest women from El Saúz to settle in Clark County, told me that she rarely returns to Mexico these days because her grandchildren are in Ohio and so she has no reason to go. Many brought family members to Ohio because they felt a greater sense of stability in Ohio; now, it is their presence that has now further reinforced this stability.

Social stability is also increasing at the community level. With ever-rising numbers of people from El Saúz in Ohio, the community has been, in a sense, recreated in this new destination. The size of the Ohio-based community makes the situation such that El Saúz is essentially a town with two physical locations. For many, the need to return “home” is not as strong as it once was because so many friends and family are no longer there; they are right down the street, in Ohio. And as the El Saúz community in Ohio has reached this critical mass, it is now self-reinforcing, becoming stronger each time members spend time together. One can see the size of the El Saúz community in several ways. Men from the town have, in recent years, formed two soccer teams made up almost exclusively of players from El Saúz. They play year-round (indoors in the winter, outdoors during the rest of the year) in a league with other Spanish-speaking immigrant teams. The regular games and practices provide an opportunity for the players to interact regularly with other people from El Saúz, thus strengthening the community. There are also often parties and dances organized by people from El Saúz and primarily attended by members of the community, and one of my informants works part-time as a DJ, catering exclusively to friends and family from the town. A final indicator of the size and self-sustaining nature is the fact that marriages are beginning to take place between people from El Saúz living in Ohio. No longer do members of the community who

want to find a partner need to return to Michoacán to do so (though many still do so); they can now just as easily find a partner from El Saúz living down the street in Ohio. The fact that the community is self-sustaining in this way suggests that it has the potential to continue for many years. As with increased family reunification, the stability that drew people from El Saúz to Ohio in the first place is now being recreated by the social structures that have been set up in the years since.

If El Saúz can be thought of as a town with two physical locations, then we must ask how the stability many have found in Ohio is affecting their actual hometown. In some ways, the relative stability that people from this town have found in Ohio is unrelated to life in El Saúz de Abajo. But, in other ways, the shift in migration patterns to Ohio has had a profound effect on people in El Saúz, and the town has changed dramatically as a result. Indeed, many there expressed a sense that things have become more stable in El Saúz because of increased remittances. Thirty-five year old Vicente, who has lived in Ohio since 1997, put it succinctly: “things went up in El Saúz” when people started going to that state. The economic situation in El Saúz has been bad for a long time. The subsistence farming that many had long practiced provided little food, especially for the large families that were typical before the Mexican government began to promote birth control measures in the 1970s. Esmeralda Macías, a woman in her fifties in El Saúz, told me of many days she spent as a child eating only tortillas, salt, and chilies. Her father, seeing how hungry she and her siblings were, suggested that they sing to drown out the cries of their stomachs. It was this deprivation that drew many to leave El Saúz for the United States in the 1950s as part of the Bracero program and then later on their own. During the 1980s and early 1990s, the many migrants who went to the San Joaquin Valley earned enough money to support their families throughout the year, but larger purchases were still out of the question. With the beginning of migration in earnest to Ohio, residents of El Saúz began to see dramatic changes in their lives. This new destination had jobs that paid enough for their family members to send back money not only for food, but also for luxuries

such as electronics, cars, and even houses. Walking around El Saúz one day with a resident, I pointed out all the newer-looking houses that had clearly been built with remittance money. When had they been built, I asked. He told me that not one had gone up before the mid-1990s. Ohio had provided the money that had led to a veritable construction boom in El Saúz.

It is apparent that El Saúz has, in many ways, benefited from the increased stability in Ohio, and has become more stable itself. The purchasing power that remittances provide enables residents to know where their next meal is coming from, to be more mobile in newly purchased pick-up trucks, and to sleep in solid, well-built houses. Yet these increased comforts are not enough to keep people from leaving El Saúz. Many see the material goods that their friends and family members in Ohio can buy, and follow them north in the hopes of doing the same. The increased stability in Ohio has made life more stable in El Saúz in some ways, but it has not reduced the number of people leaving home. Stability, as I have argued, is an entirely relative concept, and so the increased stability many feel in El Saúz appears less so when compared to that on offer in Ohio. More and more people continue to leave El Saúz, headed for the greener pastures that so many believe exist in Ohio. What has stabilized, more than anything, is the stream of migrants leaving El Saúz.

Conclusion

My discussion of the lives of my informants in El Saúz, Michoacán and Clark County, Ohio has demonstrated that notions of stability are always relative. In describing their more stable lives in Ohio, migrants are constantly comparing them to their past experiences in Mexico and, for many, in California. In addition, I have argued that my informants' statements about stability cannot be understood without examining the longer-term historical events that have affected rancheros over the centuries. "Possibilities of the future," Ana María Alonso writes, "are inflected by the past" (1995: 177). My informants may talk explicitly about Ohio as offering a more stable life than that of

a migrant farmworker in California or of a small farmer in Michoacán, but in their words it is possible to hear echoes of the events of previous centuries that have shaped rancheros. The independence and hard work that rancheros have come to value, as well as the proclivity toward mobility to achieve these goals are all products of centuries of changes. One could take a centuries-long perspective and note that rancheros are a population constantly on the move, and in many ways the norm for them is mobility, not stability. With this, notions of stability expressed by my informants take on new meaning.

Throughout this essay, I have also hoped to show that my informants' descriptions of greater stability in Ohio are more complex than might be initially assumed. While this stability clearly has an economic base, it has come to include other areas as well, including family and community life. These effects are on social structures, but there is also one effect on individuals themselves, namely a greater ability to conceive of a future. José Carmona telling me that he saw a future for his children in Ohio, the anecdote with which I began this essay, is one example of this phenomenon, but it is most definitely not the only expression of the sentiment I heard.

When Roberto Arandas told me about his time in Ohio and walked me through his employment history, I asked why he had changed jobs. One answer struck me. He had decided to leave his job doing nickel and chrome plating, which paid quite well, because he grew concerned that the chemicals used at the factory would cause cancer in the future. This reason for leaving an otherwise good job is one that can only be offered by someone who is thinking long-term, and long-term thinking is much more difficult when one's present is murky. Roberto had been in Ohio for several years when he left this job and it is only with this time and the subsequent changes it had brought that he could begin to think in this way. He had previously had quite dangerous jobs (recall his climbing incredibly tall ladders to pick peaches in California), but never left them for fear of his

health. Indeed, it is not a stretch at all to say that it was the stability he had come to feel in Ohio that allowed him to consider his job possibilities with such a long-term perspective.

For many, imagining a better future is not just for themselves, but also for their children. 32 year-old Carolina Macías has been in Clark County for nearly 10 years, the entire time without legal status. She came to the Ohio in 2000 to join her husband Vicente, who had been there for several years previously. Her trip to the United States had been difficult, involving several days of grueling hikes through the desert. But the most difficult part had been the separation from her two Mexican-born children, when she had given them to a smuggler, who would cross them in a car using false papers. The days she spent separated from them felt like an eternity, Carolina recalled, and she worried that she would never see her children again. But eventually all crossed safely and were reunited in Ohio. Asked what motivated her to go through all that she had to bring her family to Ohio, Carolina responded that she brought her children to the United States because she wants to “give them what I wasn’t able to have.” In Ohio, she said, “there is a better future for my children.” The stability that Carolina Macías and so many people like her from El Saúz in Ohio feel today is not just a description of the present, it is also the basis for imagining a better future.

Epilogue

I returned to Ohio in December of 2008. Sitting in the living room of Vicente and Carolina Macías, I shared with the couple the results of my endless questioning from the past summer. I told them that I was writing about conceptions of stability among people from El Saúz living in Ohio and asked what they thought of the idea. It was great, they said, and they agreed with my assessment that Ohio had brought stability to many people from El Saúz. But then they paused. It *had* brought stability, they told me, but now things weren’t looking so stable. The economic downturn had meant

Vicente's hours had been cut and they were struggling to make ends meet. Many of their friends and family members from El Saúz in Ohio were experiencing the same marked decline in stability.

I finish, then, not with an answer, but with a question. Will the greater stability that my informants expressed in the summer of 2008 last? Is it a permanent shift associated with these migrants moving to a new destination for immigrants or was it part of a temporary period of greater stability, given the boom in the economy during the 1990s and early 2000s, the period in which they had been in Ohio? Only time will tell how stable this feeling of stability turns out to be.

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