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Transmigrants

the weaving of a new American landscape

by Alexandra Copley

photography by Reuben Gonzales and family and Alexandra Copley
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Transmigrants
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Imagine a large cornfield. One filled with rocks and hard soil. Where there is no irrigation or fertilization. Arid, dry, rough, it is a place reminiscent of a Juan Rulfo novel. Deserted and lonesome, land that calls to it’s surroundings for help but loses it’s voice and coughs it’s pleas away. Shrugged off by the nearby inhabitants and the natural world.

A land that has come to epidemise a modern Mexican pueblo and the becoming of a town where there are large pieces of the puzzle missing along with the population. In San Miguel de Acuexcomac there is a population of approximately 1,900 people. When the seasons change, there is movement in the air. On my recent visit to Mexico there were at least 800 individuals who had left the town.

They had gone north and followed the corn now missing from that field. They are migrants working in another place but creating a home for themselves in San Miguel de Acuexcomac. The new sidewalks off the dirt roads that lead to the sparkling blue gazebo in the perfectly groomed plaza are evidence of the why they go year after year. Leaving behind their families, friends and the field to chase that elusive American dream created and perpetuated by this cycle of migration. When they leave the corn leaves. All crops pleading for care and attention get overlooked when the dollar is calling the names of so many young men in pueblos.

As a result of the signing of NAFTA, the U.S. flooded the Mexican market with corn, rice and other dry goods at below market value in 1996. Pueblos like San Miguel de
Acuexcomac felt the blow of this impact on the economy. These towns, like this field, began to empty and fall apart. With a loss of agriculture, came a loss of labor and with a loss of labor came the loss of the crops.

Agriculture is the where the origins of the culture of the Mexican migrant worker can be traced in the U.S. The ‘braceros’ of the 1940’s abandoned their rural communities and headed north. They stopped working their land and growing food for their families with the illusion that they would be able to earn a vast amount of money on the other side of the border. This notion remains the norm among young men throughout the rural areas of Mexico. The desire is strong to obtain the ‘American’ lifestyle, despite the hardships faced by those migrant workers who have lost their lives and struggled along the way. Looking at a sparse field of abandoned corn in a small pueblo, it’s rugged terrain and lack of growth are obvious. But you can also feel the loneliness caused by neglect. These fields have become a metaphor for lost agriculture, lost jobs, and a dream for a better life.

For most transmigrant laborers who travel to the U.S. the goal is the same. They hope to work and save enough money to send back to their families in Mexico for the construction of a home or a business. When the towns are empty that is when the homes are being built. The skeletons of unfinished and uninhabited homes line the countryside in Mexico.

When the winds blow the ghost of a Mexico that once was appears. It speaks of traditions lost and new customs found. It moves along the gusts through fields of neglect and skeletons of dreams laced upon the countryside. It never speaks of regret or of a time without pride. It embraces the present and leads a new generation into it’s future. Guiding gently, whispering softly in a low Spanglish voice it says, “sígame (follow me)”. 

Battles over the identity, culture and character of Mexican transmigrants working in the U.S. are still a reality. Transmigrants are often demonized by the media in order to insight fear among the public of the impacts of migrant workers and their ‘ways’. Cultures should embrace one another in order to learn. This tension between those who are geographically, politically, and economically marginalized in the United States and abroad becomes a woven perception of identity that is embedded in society over time. It is transculturalism.

I chose to use the concept of weaving as a metaphor for the coming together of two separate cultures into one with the belief that the differences when combined create a harmony of complexities. However, each maintains its integrity as a distinct piece of the whole.

This series of photographic imagery began at Lynds Fruit Farm in Pataskala, Ohio. This is where I met many transmigrants and their families. I became friendly with the Gonzales family. They live just outside of Morelia in Michoacan, Mexico. Rudy transported his family every year to Lynds in order to make enough money to open a business with his sons one day. The oldest son, Rueben, was very interested in learning photography. So I sent him back to
Mexico with many cameras. When he and his family returned in the fall of 2007 he was sure to call me to let me know he had brought all the cameras back with him. I have included many of these photographs in the book.

I then traveled to Mexico to follow the Gonzales family and the effects of remittances on their town. I found myself in many small pueblos along the way and every town told the same story of industry, job, labor and economic loss. These towns are at the mercy of the dollar as countless residents await money to be wired back home from relatives working in the United States. Without it they couldn’t afford to the necessities in life or even hope to rise above their current social class. The situation in Mischance is the same as many other agricultural states in Mexico. If a citizen wishes for nothing more than a good job to improve his life and that of his family, he must leave. In order for the town to survive they must depend on remittances.

This is a journey. Mine, yours, theirs and ours. It transcends borders and reveals truths. Truths that are universal in their meaning. Truths that are seen long after they have been revealed. Transmigrants spend their days and nights in a perpetual cycle of movement. Mentally, physically and spiritually the momentum of their desires keep them going. Moving from one country to the next, from one state to the next, from one city to the next, from one field to the next and back to their home country once again. Amongst all this movement it is necessary for transmigrants working in America to maintain some stability in the waves by embracing traditions and cultural identity from their homelands.

This series of work uses photographic imagery that represents social movement, exchange, migration and the subtle scenes of life weaving in and out of our consciousness. These images reveal the emerging cultural impacts of transmigrant workers in American and Mexican societies while considering nationalism, territories, and belonging. It is a documentation of those who are changing the notion of American life influenced by the ideas of transculturalism and transnationalism that exist in the American and Mexican landscape.

-Alexandra Copley
El Viaje, The Journey
Photographs by Reuben Gonzales and family
The journey, Gonzales family packs to travel back the U.S. to work at Lynd Fruit Farm
the backyard  r. the front yard Morelia, Mexico
two girls at a party  r. Ramón inside the living room
motorbike  r. a yellow rose