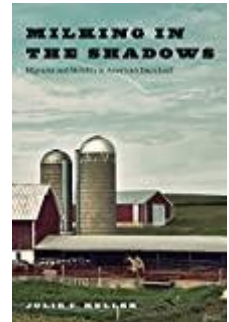


**Julie C. Keller.** *Milking in the Shadows: Migrants and Mobility in America's Dairyland.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019. 196 pp. \$28.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8135-9641-9.



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**Published on** H-Environment (July, 2021)

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In *Milking in the Shadows*, sociologist Julie Keller examines the mobilities and immobilities experienced by migrant workers living their lives between Veracruz, Mexico, and the dairy farms of Wisconsin. With a source base that includes interviews with sixty workers and eight employers, this book contributes to scholarship on the phenomenon (from approximately 1990 on) of Mexican migration to “non-gateway states” in the US and unexpected, rural locations. It also joins conversations about how globalization forces the movement of those who are economically desperate, and immobilizes migrants who fear criminalization, deportation, or death as they try to traverse various borders. Keller illuminates the paradoxical expectation that Midwestern migrant dairy workers be both mobile (available to migrate to a dairy farm) and immobile (stay at said farm to provide the employer with stable and reliable labor). As she skillfully demonstrates, Mexican migrant dairy workers do not just passively accept being trapped in these circumstances—they shape their mobility in certain ways and push back

against people or structures that try to enforce immobility.

While setting the landscape, Keller explains the reasons why Wisconsin dairy employers turned to Mexican immigrant labor in the 1990s. Smaller and less industrial farms needed to stay competitive with their larger counterparts, and federal price supports and government insurance programs did not comprise an adequate safety net. Turning to cheaper foreign labor, the dairy industry followed the lead of many other sectors of US agriculture. Meanwhile, to Mexican migrants, dairy work in *el norte* was attractive because it offered stable, year-round work rather than seasonal and peripatetic labor.

Keller rightfully gives her migrant subjects agency and describes how they attempt to facilitate, shape, and control their mobility. They arrange work opportunities in advance with friends and family; they obtain loans and contact smugglers to make the border-crossing journey; they arrange another worker to take their place when

they have to leave a farm; and they maintain communication with employers while in Mexico so they can return to their jobs (some even persuade employers to loan them money for the return journey—in essence, the smuggling fee). These workers know the geography of risk. If they are traveling without documents, for instance, they choose to hire a pricier taxi to their work site instead of boarding Greyhound buses, where immigration agents often come on board. Turning to employers' perspective, Keller uses a somewhat strange phrase ("employer freedom") to describe the process by which reliable Mexican workers allow employers to enjoy simply being manager figures, rather than harried subs who have to tap in when a worker leaves them in the lurch (p. 28). Some may think that Keller focuses too much on cooperative relationship dynamics between dairy workers and employers here, rather than exploitative ones (at an average of \$7.90 an hour, dairy work is still one of the lowest-paid jobs in the state). However, Keller does illuminate the reality of how both sides act strategically in using one another. There are striking moments in which Mexican migrants know the value of their work and threaten to leave for another farm if conditions do not improve at their present one.

Keller then turns to discussing the various immobilities etched into this labor landscape, arguing that "the rural idyll and the local legal landscape work hand in hand to hamper migrants' mobility in ways that both regulate and exclude them" (p. 104). Dairy workers' wages, shifts, and housing are all governed by farmers. Sleep deprivation is standard with early-morning or late-night shifts; workers are not guaranteed a day of rest; overtime pay does not exist; and workers are often placed in dilapidated housing that is on or very close to the farm itself, which does not allow them a true escape. Comparing themselves to birds in cages or "vaquitos encerrados" (locked-up little cows), workers suffer depression because of their isolation, and anxiety about being apprehended and deported by immigration authorities if

they dare to move beyond the confines of the farm (p. 106). As Margaret Gray has argued about the dairy industry in upstate New York, employers' rhetoric about Mexican migrant workers having greater discipline or a stronger work ethic in relation to US citizen workers only obscures the ways in which the laboring environment makes migrant workers unavailable to other things and people in their lives. Meanwhile, because their movements are constricted, Mexican migrants are not really known or seen by local white residents, who end up thinking of them in the abstract as criminals, threats, and foreigners.

The discussion of return migration, and what migrants feel and do when they go home to Mexico, is a fascinating part of the book. *Milking in the Shadows* is about multiple forms of waiting—waiting to save enough money to make a journey to the US, and waiting to return home. As smuggling fees get higher, many migrants postpone their trips back to Mexico by *years*. Thus, migrants and their families experience an elongated form of time and a different velocity of life and familial bonding. Keller concludes the book by informing readers of the ongoing dairy worker campaigns for fair wages and conditions in Vermont, New York, and Wisconsin.

In terms of critique, some parts of the book provoke questions. In the afterword/methodology note, Keller describes how she gained her Mexican interviewees' trust and acknowledges her privilege as a white woman and American academic. Surprisingly, however, she does not say more about how her whiteness allowed her to better navigate interviews with dairy employers. Keller describes the gentle questions that allowed her to glean more information, but greater acknowledgment of her easier entrée to this set of interviewees would be appreciated (having a Spanish surname would have surely shifted the dynamic). Another thing left unexplained is the small number of interviews she conducted with women dairy workers—she acknowledges that men are

the majority of her sample, but never fully explains why she had trouble acquiring more interviews with women (and does not adequately relate the content of the interviews she was able to conduct).

That being said, Keller has produced a moving and empathetic study that will make for a useful teaching book as well. Her proper attention to migration studies across disciplines and explication of the dialectical nature of mobility and immobility in migrants' lives are impressive. *Milking in the Shadows*, along with contributing to studies of migrants in rural American destinations, will enlighten anyone who might have taken the stability of milk in our grocery stores, school cafeterias, and restaurants for granted. This study of the migrants who help power our contemporary dairy industry will be appreciated by scholars of—among other topics—transnationality, oral history, migration and mobility, the Midwest, and working environments.

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**Citation:** Lori Flores. Review of Keller, Julie C. *Milking in the Shadows: Migrants and Mobility in America's Dairyland*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. July, 2021.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=56358>



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