

## REVIEWS / RECENSIONS

---

Judith Adler Hellman

**The World of Mexican Migrants: The Rock and the Hard Place**  
New York and London: The New Press, 2008, xxiv + 256 pp.

*Gerardo Otero, Simon Fraser University*

---

As in her previous best-selling nonfiction work *Mexican Lives* (1994), this new volume by Judith Adler Hellman presents the multilayered, human side of a vastly complex socioeconomic and cultural subject. *The World of Mexican Migrants* focuses on Mexican migration to the United States. What, Hellman asks, makes Mexican migrants risk their lives, leave their

The book's introduction offers a brief overview of the history of Mexican migration and the two major "push" factors behind it: namely, a crumbling agrarian economy and, more recently, urban centres incapable of productively and remuneratively incorporating many workers. Addressing the "big questions" surrounding undocumented migration, Hellman explains how the "get tough" policies of the Clinton and Bush administrations, in-

being futile in stemming the incoming migrant tide. However, instead of dwelling on US government policies, which tend to assume that the United States is the epicentre of all inquiry, Hellman takes a migrant-centred approach, looking at questions ranging from who migrates and why to whether they want to stay in the US or return home.

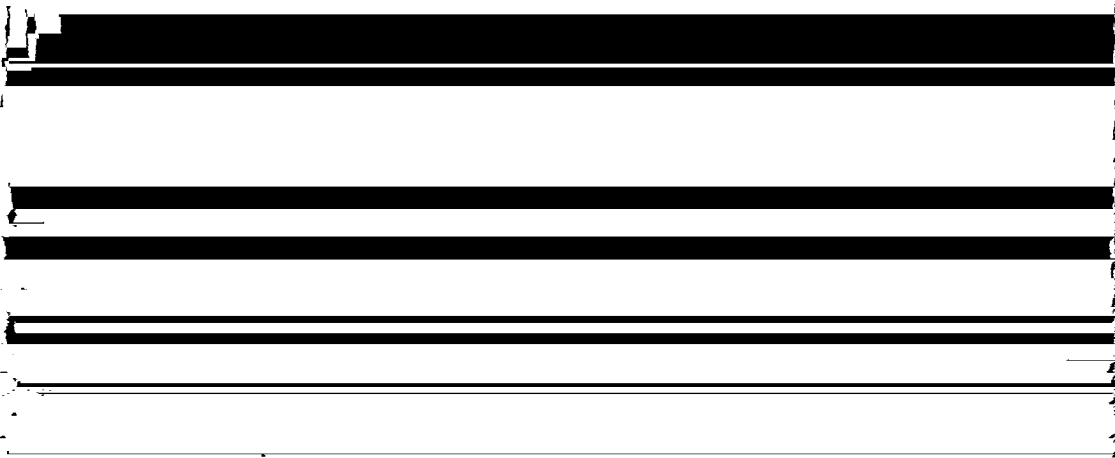
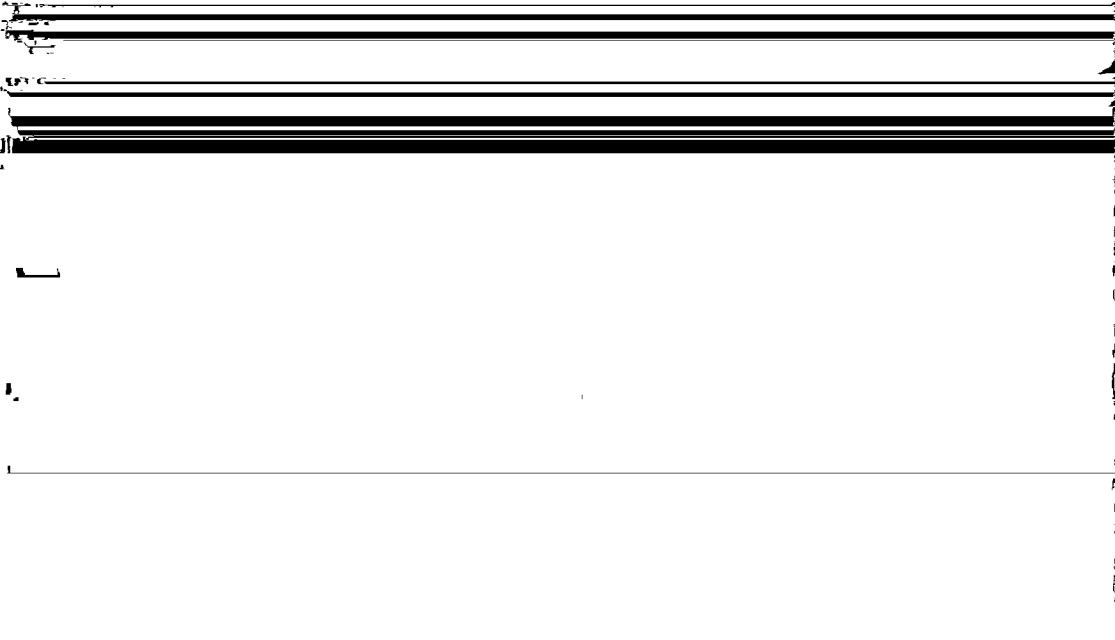
Part I (Chapters 1 to 5) covers a variety of topics, vividly portraying

are undocumented migrants who make an average of \$70 for a 12-hour day, or about 10% under the legal minimum wage. Besides their low pay, these workers have suffered many other work-related injustices. The toughest paradox is that all workers in New York, documented or not, have the same legal rights, but most migrants are too afraid to come forward and demand their enforcement.

With Part IV (Chapters 17 to 19), Hellman turns to consider the migrants' dilemma of whether to stay in the US or to return home, a difficult choice that I have called in my own experience the "migrant syndrome."

This consists in the troubling fact that while one comes to appreciate a number of things in the new society (while disliking others), one always remains nostalgic about the society left behind. Clearly, the experiences narrated in this book are highly gendered, with many or most male Mexican migrants tending to confront the everyday necessity of engaging in many activities (e.g., cooking, washing clothes and dishes, and cleaning the house) that used to be regarded as female activities. But when they live in shared arrangements or with working wives, they must accept the new roles, a situation that also results in a challenge to male authority as regarded in patriarchal relations. In contrast, Mexican women may find it liberating to be away from the yoke of in-laws and the community getting involved in and/

on migrants, Hellman suggests, then serious attention should be given to the fact that most want to realize a Mexican, rather than an American, dream. The problem is that Hellman's answers ultimately do shift back to a focus on the US. Stressing her disappointment with the receiving country's bipartisan policies for being mean-spirited and punishing of migrants, her book does



legislation [for migrants] could be put forward because of the contradictory nature of the demands on policymakers" (231). Thus, given that Hellman finds no hope of devising a public policy toward migrants that will satisfy the highly polarized electorate, she retrenches into the usual policy recommendation for workers: get organized. But after decades of anti-union and

