

## REMITTANCES IN A CONTINUUM OF SPACE AND PLACE

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A Review of *The Remittance Landscape: Spaces of Migration in Rural Mexico and Urban USA*

By Sarah Lynn Lopez

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 336 pages.

Sarah Lynn Lopez's *The Remittance Landscape: Spaces of Migration in Rural Mexico and Urban USA* deftly carves out a largely unexplored space in the migration conversation—one that encompasses the duality of migration and the effects of this demographic flow on rural and urban physical spaces to track social change. These shifts that result from migration are part of what Lopez terms the “remittance landscape.” The remittance landscape serves as a nuanced canvas on which the dynamics of migration are displayed through the development of built environment supported by remittances from migrants. The built environment encompasses all human-made spaces and structures in which daily life takes place, which includes homes, schools, parks, workplaces, plazas, and community systems at large. The results of migration also have intangible characteristics that impact space—transforming the idea of identifying where one’s “home” is, and the significance of societal norms and cultural traditions that play out in public and private spaces. Lopez’s thorough investigational and anecdotal writing clearly connects how changes in the built environment due to migration result in these shifts in space and place. Heavily symbolic and reflective of global social change, remittance landscapes are an emergent geography that serve as a crucial component in analyzing migration between the United States and Mexico. Lopez’s book expertly weaves together illuminating ethnographies and multifaceted analysis, allowing readers to travel through towns and cities in Mexico and the United States, not as tourists, but as engaged visitors who leave with the ability to see and understand seemingly invisible forces that shape the remittance landscape.

As an assistant professor in the School of Architecture at the University of Texas at Austin, Lopez naturally uses the built environment as a primary academic focus. Her personal background enables her to see a migrant’s perspective. She spent time working as a cook in a small kitchen in Berkeley, California, alongside migrants from Guanajuato, Mexico. Lopez’s mother is a Cuban Jew born and raised in Havana, and her father migrated from Chihuahua, Mexico to south Texas to the town of Trona in the Mojave Desert. Just like the process of migration itself, this book was the result of the iterative process Lopez experienced throughout her life and career. Her work as an architectural and urban historian, perspectives on

migration, and extensive research blend to produce a cohesive interdisciplinary discussion of the material history of migration, intertwined with sociology, anthropology, and political, economic, and development analyses.


Lopez's analysis of migration dispels the dichotomy often attributed to the phenomenon; a dichotomy relegated within one set of borders or another. She illustrates how migration, in fact, exists in a continuum of space and change. This is most reflected in the practice of remittance, as migrants work in one location to send money to another location, usually their place of origin. Remittance is more than just the transfer of funds: the impact of remittance money has ripple effects, which Lopez profoundly explores. For example, the remittance house, a home that is built or gets renovations and embellishments paid by migrant money, is an embodiment of the lifestyle, status, desires, and ambitions for migrant workers and their families. Beyond this is the Mexican government's acknowledgement of how important migrant dollars are by institutionalizing remittance policies to support community development. Most notably was the governmental program "Tres por Uno," or "3x1," initiated in 2002 by then-president Vicente Fox, who acknowledged migrants as Mexico's heroes. Through this program, the government matched migrant dollars with federal funds up to nearly four times to support developmental projects. This initiative increased federal spending from \$15 million to \$50 million between 2002 and 2009. The 3x1 program served as an example for including the poor in a top-down process that traditionally marginalizes the most vulnerable populations.

As Lopez moves through space and place in her book, she examines how migration changes social expectations. She explores shifts of gender norms and roles that result from migration; the blurring of private and public spaces, as communal areas and surrounding buildings are developed; and how recent generations reconcile the notion of home as they navigate the concept of mortality, death, and burial practices in shifting physical landscapes. Finally, Lopez takes readers to Chicago, where Casa Jalisco, the city's Jalisco Federation migrant headquarters, serves as a physical emblem of the connection to the Mexican state.<sup>1</sup>

Although *The Remittance Landscape* embodies the confluence of various disciplines in the complexities of migration, Lopez writes skillfully so that readers, even those who are not scholars of these particular fields, can clearly understand the connections drawn between push and pull factors driving migration, the flow of people and remittances, and the collective impact of the architecture of migration. Lopez creates scaffolding throughout her writing, explaining and building upon concepts to culminate in a connected view of how migration both rises from and transforms shifting social spaces, both physically and cognitively. She accomplishes this by methodologically approaching migrants, not simply as storytellers, but

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as agents of environmental and social change—throughout the course of leaving and arriving—to encompass global discourse surrounding migratory patterns. Additionally, the question of whether migration has qualitatively changed from the past is explored within the context of contemporary globalization, which has effectively shifted the meaning of “home.”

In a highly readable book, Lopez unpacks the complexity of migration by providing an unconventional perspective through an exploration of how migration both influences and is influenced by the built environment. Readers will quickly come to see that buildings are not merely just physical structures, but rather essential components of social fabric upon which the human experience is imprinted. Such is the case within the sphere of migration and remittances as Lopez illustrates in *The Remittance Landscape*. 

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Inaugurated in 2011 in Chicago, Casa Jalisco is allegedly the only example of any building in the United States owned by a state or province (Jalisco) of another country. A \$5 million project paid for by the taxpayers of Jalisco, the Casa is a symbol of a “Jalisco without borders,” with its architecture and objectives linked to migrant activism and industry that span borders. Casa Jalisco resembles how increased government involvement in development represents the formalization of migrant organizing and activism, as an approach towards more partnerships with Mexican state institutions. Sarah Lynn Lopez, *The Remittance Landscape*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 214-216.