

Baseball, Snakes and Nativists: An Ethnographic Experience with Mexican Day Laborers

Carol Cleaveland, George Mason University

Mexican migration, and in particular the daily gathering of day laborers on sidewalks and in front of convenience stores, brought the nation's debate over unauthorized immigration to Freehold, New Jersey. By working alongside day laborers as they met with labor lawyers, wrote flyers announcing demonstrations and engaged in vigorous debate over building an organization to represent their interests, I was able through two-years of participant observation to see how day laborers perceive their struggles to support families despite escalating anti-immigrant legislation at virtually all levels of government. In particular, I explore Mexican migrant efforts to contest characterizations as "illegal," a term that has clear connotations of criminality, and to distance themselves from others who commit crimes. Migrants questioned the moral legitimacy of U.S. immigration laws, an indicator that vigorous legal efforts to thwart their arrival could prove fruitless.