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Review of Janitors, Street Vendors and Activists: The Lives of Mexican Immigrants in Silicon Valley by Christian Zlolniski

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Janitors, Street Vendors, and Activists: The Lives of Mexican Immigrants in Silicon Valley. Christian Zolniski. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006. 249 pp.

Christian Zolniski has produced a rich ethnographic tapestry that will benefit scholars of U.S. immigration, labor and community politics, and the growing body of social scientific work done on the Silicon Valley region. His is a focused long-term study of an East San Jose barrio he calls Santech. His ethnographic research spanned the period between 1991 and 1998. In 2004, Zolniski returned to capture the changes that had taken place in his informants' lives in the aftermath of the dot.com bust and the post September 11 immigration angst. By looking both deeply at individual lives, and broadly across years, this book connects the microscopic detail of individual choices to the macroscopic changes of economic globalization.

This book is set in Silicon Valley, but it is not about the region writ large. Instead, it takes some of the peculiar facets of the region—the unevenness of the high-technology economy, the high cost of living, and the cultural complexity—as structural characteristics that mold the experiences of a very specific community. Santech is comprised mostly of Mexican immigrants, documented and undocumented who live alongside others that occupy the lowest strata in the dynamic class structure of Silicon Valley. These denizens combine low-wage jobs, informal economic exchanges and public and non-profit support to survive.

Historically, Mexican immigrants have played a role in this Northern Californian region from the days in which it was dominated by agriculture, through the era of high-

tech manufacturing and into the current “information economy.” However, as was pointed out repeatedly, not all work is remote and the physical edifices of high-technology need to be cleaned. Such service work cannot be outsourced as low-wage work in other global regions. The book develops its ideas through a series of case studies based on individual workers. *Janitors, Street Vendors, and Activists* delves into the lives of the said groups by looking closely at the work practices, household activities and community politics of people living in Santech. Organized around those various activities, the chapters segue from individuals in the low-wage sector, to those who inhabit the informal economy, including women who ultimately develop their informal efforts into political mobilization.

Stories, such as those of the janitor Luis, serve as starting points for unraveling organizational constraints. Zolniski carefully parses the relationships between a high-tech parent company, a sub-contractor responsible for cleaning, the SIEU union local and the participating workers, primarily giving voice to the latter. The stories takes us beyond the triumph of the “Justice for Janitors” campaign to the aftermath of unionization. Ultimately, the janitors’ efforts to improve their working conditions are undermined by the bleak realities of postindustrial intensification, as less do the work of more. The looming presence of the INS destabilizes employment for undocumented workers.

Zolniski carefully develops the immigrants’ participation in the informal economy. Laura’s snacks feed the bachelor janitors, Arturo’s *paletas* sales mask a kind of flexible low-wage franchising and Gustavo’s dental business provides needed low-cost medical services while allowing him to accumulate capital for a dental office back in

Mexico. These activities reflect the nuanced ways informal work can support, supplement and provide an alternative to low-wage formal employment.

This book is not solely about work per se, but also about how that work shapes and is shaped by the household division of labor. *Janitors, Street Vendors, and Activists* is careful not to romanticize or reify Mexican immigrant *household* strategies, but to examine how each system of multiple-family households and multiple-household families plays out in the lives of individual women. Women are given agency in this interpretation. Similarly, the final portion of the book develops the stories of women whose roles as mothers and family members take them into community politics. Bilingual education, power politics in school site councils, and neighborhood engagements with landlords and drivers' licenses for undocumented migrants are focal points that lead women from issue activism into ethnic politics as they learn to recast their identities and mobilize their efforts.

This book is a vital addition to many bookshelves in both immigrant studies and the anthropology of work. There is much to recommend it, including engaging ethnography, a deep and abiding connection to the community and a nuanced analysis. Structurally, the epilogue, based on the 2004 fieldwork, literally overflows with current political issues and ideas. Many of the insights of that section would have been better integrated with the rest of the book than placed at the end. However, this minor point should in no way deter scholars from this finely crafted and important book.