“Immigrant labor and the fractured geographies of everyday life in the context of rural gentrification”
Lise Nelson, Penn State

[TITLE SLIDE] For the past decade and a half my research has focused on identity, power, and the politics of belonging in the context of globalization, particularly as these relate to labor migration from Mexico and Latin America more broadly to the United States. The specific context and set of cases through which I am examining these issues currently is rural gentrification. I will return in a moment to explain what I mean by rural gentrification and why it is significant, but suffice it to say that research with my co-investigator Peter Nelson (no relation) has demonstrated rural gentrification to be an important yet under-studied ‘pull factor’ for Latino immigrant workers settling in the rural U.S. over the past twenty-plus years. As such, these destinations represent a key site through which we can understand how poverty, race, gender, and “illegality” shape labor and everyday life for low-wage immigrant residents in the U.S.¹

[Drawing from the work of Nicholas De Genova, who conceptualizes “illegality” is a term to describe the real or perceived legal status of immigrant
residents, a deeply racialized process that produces them as deportable, criminal subjects inherently lacking rights].

[SLIDE 2] Perhaps most relevant to the topics in this workshop is that a fine-grained, qualitative investigation of the emergence of immigrant-based labor regimes in areas where they were largely nonexistant sheds insight into 1) the process of immigrant labor recruitment into dispersed service-sector work over the last two decades (a topic relevant to those doing work in urban, suburban, rural, or any space in between) 2) how immigrant-based labor regimes function in place (specifically the ways that poverty, race, gender and illegality fundamentally constitute these regimes and increase their profitability) and 3) the “fractured geographies of everyday life” for immigrant residents drawn into such regimes and geographic contexts. The term “fractured geographies of everyday life” refers to the spaces and relationships that are seen as outside of work but critical to the functioning of the economy as well as to social wellbeing—areas such as housing, school, religious institutions, and a range of community spaces. Exploring these geographies of everyday life gestures to the fractured experiences and vulnerability of low-wage immigrants in the contemporary United States, and is relevant to the other participants in this workshop who are activists, advocates and scholars working in a range of contexts.

My overarching goal is to consider the profound tension between on one hand processes of economic recruitment and incorporation of immigrant labor, and on the other hand dynamics of social and civic exclusion of immigrant bodies in the
contemporary U.S. Processes of social and civic exclusion are most visible at the national scale—witness Donald Trump’s recent calls to “build a wall” between Mexico and the United States and our efforts at border militarization more generally—but they operate within everyday life and far from the border, as noted by a range of scholars. My work contributes to efforts to bring questions of exclusion and bordering together with analyses of economic recruitment and (subordinated) inclusion. The local offers a particular vantage point for exploring how economic inclusion works in tandem with political exclusion: national narratives usually disavow economic recruitment and dependence on immigrant labor (that is implied when talking about immigrants as ‘invaders’) but local communities where immigrants live and work represent spaces in which economic incorporation rubs up against political, civic, and social exclusion and the intersecting architectures of racism and xenophobia that undergird these dynamics. It is within this friction that the fractured geographies of everyday life for low-wage immigrant workers is produced.

Before turning to my research findings and the voices of immigrants living in rural America, I first set up the broader context and questions driving the research upon which my analysis is based.

[SLIDE 3] Think of multi-million dollar homes in Jackson Hole Wyoming, hobby ranches owned by folks who do not earn a living from farming in rural Montana, or a vacation home in Highlands, North Carolina—these are landscapes associated with what I and other scholars conceptualize as rural gentrification (it is also common to see other terms such as “counterurbanization” or “amenity
migration” to refer to this process). A global phenomenon, rural gentrification refers the transformations wrought by the migration of privileged subjects (middle and upper-class, and usually white or European depending on the context) to high-amenity rural areas. These privileged migrants are often inspired to become part-year or full-time residents in ‘their’ rural paradise as a refuge from urban life, for proximity to nature and outdoor recreation, or to fulfill a longing to become part of small-town, rural life. [SLIDE 4 real state ad] The lure of the rural and proximity to nature for these privileged subjects is reflected in how real estate is commonly marketed in these places. [READ SLIDE] # This is a big and growing market: in the U.S millions of ex-urban gentrifiers have already moved as full-time or part-year residents to rural and small town America. Although it was slowed by the burst of the housing structure, given the structure of the baby boom and the propensity of making such a move as one ages, it is projected that 5 million or more gentrifiers will move to high-amenity rural communities over the next few decades. 

The impact of amenity migration is profound in receiving communities, and echoes the effects of gentrification as it is studied and approached in urban contexts: it represents a material and cultural colonization of space by the wealthy—transforming housing markets, economic dynamics, land use patterns, social identities, as well as local political power. Even if ‘locals’ are not physically displaced from their homes due to rising housing costs (sometimes that is the case and sometimes not), they usually experience cultural and political displacement. # Whatever terms are used
to describe this process, the movement of privilege, ex-urban subjects to high-amenity rural areas has received significant scholarly attention over the last two decades.

However, many scholars of rural gentrification in the U.S. (and I would argue other places outside the U.S.) have not paid sufficient attention to the fact that the very economic changes stemming from the movement of privilege subjects in these contexts often generates an new migratory flow of marginalized subjects into these same communities (marginalized in terms of class, race, gender, and/or legal status). In the case of the U.S., from Jackson Hole, Wyoming to Highlands, North Carolina we have seen—simultaneous to a gentrification boom—a rise in the settlement of low-wage Latino immigrants in or near high-amenity areas. These immigrants provide labor essential to building and maintaining gentrified landscapes and providing services demanded in newly gentrified economies.6

The “linked migration” between wealthy, white migrants seeking recreation and proximity to nature, and low-wage, often undocumented immigrant workers arriving to a range of locales in rural America was the core hypothesis of my research with Peter Nelson. Analyzing census data we mapped the spatial overlap of these two migration streams quantitatively, and then between 2010-2012 we conducted in-depth qualitative fieldwork in two case study communities (drawn from those quantative results) to bring empirical evidence to the contention that they are not simply co-occurring but causally related. [SLIDE 5] With the support of the National Science Foundation, Peter Nelson, two graduate research assistants (Laurie Trautman and
Graciela “Meche” Lu), and I completed over 280 interviews and a combined total of 15 weeks of participant observation in Steamboat Springs, Colorado and Rabun County, Georgia. Both are places that in 1990 were overwhelmingly white according to the census (97% and 99% respectively), and both witnessed a dramatic growth in their Latino immigrant populations at the same time as gentrification took off in the 1990s. We interviewed local elected leaders, social service providers, employers, gentrifiers, as well as immigrant and non-immigrant working class residents with the aim of understanding 1) how employers “found” this new labor force when it had not been accessible or familiar to them prior to 1990 and 2) how immigrants were incorporated into local labor regimes and the effect of this on gentrification-linked businesses as well as low-wage workers, immigrant and non-immigrant. The importance of these two goals not withstanding, in the course of doing semi-structured, in-depth interviews and participant observation we also gathered data and insights that in some ways were beyond the topic of labor markets and labor relations. We gained important understandings of everyday life for immigrant residents in these gentrifying communities. This is perhaps unsurprising as feminist theory calls for seeing the spaces of labor and production in relation to spaces of home and daily life—what we call social reproduction. Both sides of this coin (what we term production and social reproduction) are essential to understanding how the economy functions and the extent to which labor markets are embedded within a range of seemingly “non-economic” relationships and spaces. In this way foreshadowing gender in my
scholarship not only brings with it women’s experiences and stories, but attention to re-thinking what we mean by “economic” change.

[SLIDE 6]

I turn now to elaborate in more detail the three issues raised earlier—immigrant recruitment, the emergence of immigrant-based labor regimes, and the fractured geographies of everyday life in the context of rural gentrification. I will share two vignettes compiled from multiple interviews with a few participants who participated in this research… stories that in different ways bring all three points together and will provide the most fertile ground for conversations in the context of this workshop. All three of these vignettes are drawn from the research in rural Georgia, to provide some consistency in the context. [Happy to talk about Colorado case in Q&A]

Vignette #1

The first vignette draws on multiple interviews with a local white male business owner, in his early 50s, who owns a construction company in Rabun County. I will call him John--all names used in my talk are pseudonyms to protect their identities. John had worked in construction since he was a teen, and started his own contracting business in the early 1990s. It was small-scale, mostly remodelling at first. He initially had three employees (all 'locals' and friends from high school). He described the construction business in this early period as seasonal and fairly slow-paced as compared to what it became when the construction boom started in the late 1990s. As the demand for new home construction grew, fueled by exurbanites coming to Rabun
County in larger numbers, John found himself eager to take on more jobs and speed them along, but he had difficulty meeting demand. To offer clients a quicker and consistent production schedule he began to sub-contract work to firms from Athens and Atlanta—for example hiring drywall crews from out of town that he would put up in hotels for a week or two while they finished a job. Perhaps unsurprisingly, crews from these larger metro centers were comprised largely of Latino immigrant workers (urban labor markets in construction were comprised largely of Latino immigrant workers by the late 1990s). His first experience subcontracting a crew from out of town thus also represented his first exposure to immigrants as workers on his job sites, and his interaction with one in particular, whom I will call Roberto, inspired John to offer Roberto higher wages and to offer help in moving from Atlanta to work for him full time in Rabun County. Roberto arrived around 1997 and John built an apartment for him on the back of the company workshop. When conducting these interviews in 2010 and 2011 Roberto had lived in the apartment attached to the workshop for fourteen years.

John’s contracting business took off with the gentrification boom, and Roberto proved critical to John’s ability to expand his operations and to create more flexible labor regimes that increased the productivity of his crews and the profitability of his business. What may have started as a way to fill a labor shortage turned into a preference for Latino immigrant workers, which John and other employers interviewed often praised for their “work ethic” and dedication. As an example, he
told me that Roberto was someone who he could call at 10:00 p.m. on a Saturday, describe an emergency, and Roberto would be there ready and willing to work at 6:00 a.m. on Sunday. He could count on it. John described Roberto as a member of his “family” he trusted him to deeply. # Roberto became John’s conduit for recruiting more immigrant employees as demand in construction increased. This claim was reflected in a conversation I had with Roberto, who in a separate interview told me that “I brought in every Hispano that has come into the company. The boss said what he needed, and I told my people.” I asked him if he felt a sense of responsibility for how the other workers behaved, and he responded:

Yes, and more or less I knew all of the jobs [in the company] and so I went around supervising everyone. I would tell them [the workers], “You should do this and this.” Because they understood me, they would do it. The boss would arrive and he liked the work. “This is good.” They [the workers I hired] did it quickly, and so little by little he began to trust me more. Soon he was leaving me alone, in charge.

The very nature of employee-employer relations in the construction industry (and other types of businesses) in Rabun County were transformed as immigrant workers were recruited to the area—employer expectations about how hard workers should work and how little they should complain shifted, as did the productivity and profitability of their businesses. As important to this new level of productivity, employers reported being able to lay off immigrant workers with little bother (they “accepted” being told not to come back in for a while) and hire them again, as demand shifted from week to week or seasons to season.
Roberto’s experiences in this transformed labor regime were fundamentally different compared to John or other white, legal ‘locals’ who continued to be employed by John. Roberto was essentially expected to be on call nearly 24 hours a day, a situation exacerbated by the boss providing him a place to stay that was adjacent to the worksite and under his control. Roberto did not have access to a driver’s license. He did drive the company van regularly, with John’s full knowledge, because both had a sense that he would not be targeted by police if he was in vehicle with a corporate logo. Yet his mobility was limited and was tied to his employer. Roberto missed his children and wife in Mexico, he hadn’t seen them in seven years when I spoke to him, but he did send money home regularly and felt pride in providing for his family. Roberto sometimes attended the Catholic mass in Spanish locally, but otherwise spent most of his time at work or in his small apartment provided by John.

John felt so close to Roberto that John took his entire family to Mexico to visit Roberto’s home village. Roberto could not go because crossing back over the border without documents is costly and dangerous. I will come back toward the end of my talk to reflect more explicitly on the ways race, class, gender, and illegality shape both the labor regime and geography of everyday life experienced by Roberto.

*Vignette #2 [SLIDE 7]*

Turning to my second vignette, I draw on the stories and experiences related to me by Sonia, a 34-year old immigrant who had lived and worked in Rabun County for
eight years at the time of our first interview in 2010. Born in Guanajuato, Sonia crossed the U.S. Mexico border with the aid of smugglers who required her husband Martín to work off their debts in Atlanta. Martín was working at a plant wholesaler in Atlanta when he met his future Rabun County-based employer who, after seeing him on a few occasions, invited him to move to Rabun County, promising housing and a small loan to pay off his debts. While Martín briefly lived in a trailer provided by the employer (not dissimilar from Roberto’s experience), once Sonia and their child arrived they moved to a trailer at the end of a dirt road in the woods—a very isolated spot. Martín eventually shifted from landscaping (his original job) to metal working for a small, family-owned company. Sonia, in looking back on that time, expressed relief at having left Atlanta, which she felt was dangerous, crowded, and scary. She appreciated the beauty and rurality of Rabun County, as well as the good school system [relatively well funded due to the property tax receipts generated by escalating property values during the gentrification boom].

Like many women, Sonia was drawn to Rabun County through her spouse. However, she, like many women in a similar position provided a pool of workers for employers reliant on low-wage workers. While jobs in construction or landscaping were coded as masculine, gender norms facilitated women’s entry into restaurant work and/or cleaning services. After giving birth to her second child, Sonia began working in a restaurant part time, and eventually turned to cleaning houses. The kind of work she accessed was less regular than her husband, due in part to the need to balance the
caretaking of her children with the paid employment and the kinds of jobs available to her. She often found herself at the bottom of chains of vulnerability, the key example being that one of her jobs was to clean hotel rooms for $3.50 per room when another Latina immigrant acquaintance, Rosa, ‘sub-contracted’ these rooms to her when she was too busy to clean them. Both Sonia and Rosa were undocumented, but Sonia had young children that prevented much beyond these temporary, irregular jobs.

The other reoccurring theme my conversations with Sonia was her ever-present fear of deportation. Part of the reason they chose to live deep in the woods was a feeling of being hidden and not seen by neighbors (for immigrants in Rabun County the options were either to live in an apartment building coded as “Mexican” in town or live in dispersed housing provided by trailers). Paradoxically this choice to live in an isolation space required her and her husband to drive on a regular basis, despite lacking drivers licenses. They left every day for work more fearful that they might not return to their children, who were both citizens. In reflecting on life as an undocumented immigrant, Sonia responded:

> Without papers, without a license, there is nothing else besides work and home, it is our life all of the time. We imprison ourselves here at home, nothing more. [...] We only go to work, enclose ourselves at work, try to take care of ourselves with the police... this is our life. We are scared to go out. We think about going back to Mexico because this is not a life, but then we think of our children and we know that their lives can be normal, they have rights and better schools. We suffer this for them.

The challenges and insecurities faced by Sonia and Martín reflected stories told by many undocumented residents. Lacking drivers licenses combined with the ability of
police to pull them over with the potential of it leading to deportation as a result of legal changes over the past decade, occupied their minds on a daily basis [happy to elaborated in Q&A]. In rural settings with no public transportation systems and often living in dispersed housing, low-wage Latino immigrants negotiated fear and insecurity on a daily basis at a level that is perhaps more intense than those living in urban contexts. Sonia and Martín enclosed themselves at home and work—making few friends and connections locally despite having lived there for eight years.

**Discussion [SLIDE 8]**

During the 1990s globalization drove the exponential economic and demographic growth of Atlanta—producing new levels of wealth among the city’s elite, making it possible for many to build a mansion on Lake Rabun or Lake Burton or purchase a hobby farm in its bucolic valleys. This movement of people and capital from urban to rural drove demand in construction, landscaping, and other service-oriented businesses in Rabun County as well as other amenity destinations popular in the South. Examining how employers found and recruited Latino immigrant workers to meet this demand—workers that settled and became permanent residents of Rabun County—helps counter the persistant narrative that treats low-wage immigrant workers, whether documented or undocumented, as ‘invaders’ or as inherently transitory subjects.

Local employers in Rabun County tentatively began recruiting workers starting around the mid-1990s, largely in relation to crews they had subcontracted from large
urban centers. Within a few years many had transformed their work force, establishing new regimes of low-wage labor supply and demand. This immigrant-based labor regime allowed a range of gentrification-linked businesses to increase productivity and profitability. Early ‘core’ recruits often provided employers a conduit to social networks that allowed them to recruit with relative ease more immigrant workers (this point follows early work on immigrant social networks by Roger Waldinger and Alejandro Portes, among others). These ‘core’ recruits were not only critical to accessing more labor, but fundamental to disciplining and improving the productivity of the crews: they were usually left to hire, supervise and fire workers as needed in a constantly shifting business landscape. The highly flexible and beneficial labor regime—from the perspective of the employer—was produced at the intersection of class, race, and illegality. In the words of sociologists Jill Harrison and Sarah Lloyd, the it is these structural positions that produce low-wage immigrant workers as “compliant workaholics” to the benefit of employers.

The nature of labor market incorporation was deeply gendered, in that men tended to have access to landscaping and construction jobs, as well as backroom restaurant work. Most Latina immigrants either cared for children at home if it was an option, or if involved in paid employment, were concentrated in restaurant work and cleaning services. Both men and women navigated fractured geographies between home, work, and other spaces of social reproduction, with women often bearing the
extra burden of transporting kids to school or searching for medical help when the children got sick.

Thus, despite their central role in supporting the construction and maintenance of gentrified landscapes and lifestyles, life for most of the immigrant residents was quite difficult. They worked extremely hard but could rarely get ahead, living in fear and constrained in their ability to access and experience the spaces of life outside of work. The intensity of work the the expectations by employers is a starting point: most immigrant residents we interviewed worked extremely hard, usually from 60-70 hours / week and like Roberto, Martín, and Sonia, often felt they were on-call 24 hours per day. Housing was dispersed but public transportation non-existent. The fear associated with driving led many to lead highly constrained lives. Many depended on their employers for transportation and/or they drove as little as possible.

The demands of labor coupled with constant surveillance in public spaces produced fractured geographies of everyday life. In other words, their “value” as employees was reinforced at work but conditioned on compliance and willingness to prioritize the needs and schedule of their employer. Once outside the workspace they experienced the surveillance of police and the deportation regime, inhibiting their mobility and their ability to build connections and belonging in the community even after many years of living in Rabun County. All of these dynamics were profoundly racialized, as Latino immigrants—universally described as “Mexicans” by locals no matter their national origin—were marked as the compliant hard worker while in the
workspace and marked in public as “illegal” subjects lacking rights. While some immigrant residents we interviewed pushed back on these exclusions in various ways, the majority viewed them as something they just had to navigate and to adjust their lives to. Like Martin and Sonia, they hoped for better futures for their children but saw few possibilities for their own ability to belong.


