

Silicon Valley, Women, and the California Dream: Gender, Class, and Opportunity in the Twentieth Century. By *Glenna Matthews*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003. xvii + 313 pp. Photographs, maps, tables, notes, index. Cloth, \$55; paper, \$22.95. ISBN: cloth 0-8047-04154-9; paper 0-804-74796-2.

Reviewed by Allison Baker

Glenna Matthews has written an important and pioneering study of the transformation of the Santa Clara Valley, from the “Valley of Heart’s Delight,” the world’s capital of the fruit-processing industry in the early twentieth century, into “Silicon Valley,” the world’s capital of the high-tech industry in the late twentieth century. Matthews uses gender as a lens for understanding this transformation, focusing on the experiences of two groups of female immigrant workers: southern European fruit-cannery workers and Asian and Latina high-tech production workers. Matthews seeks to enrich the literature on women workers in general; to show how the “regional culture and economy” of the Santa Clara Valley influenced the experiences of the women who migrated there ; and to uncover the reasons for the diminishing opportunities that have accompanied the growth of Silicon Valley (p. 10). She has achieved all three goals with this book, making an important contribution to scholarship.

Focusing on the fate of female immigrant workers, Matthews traces the factors that led one group to achieve a stable, middle-class life and the other to become relegated to a life of poverty. Although both groups of workers have toiled at the bottom of their respective industries, the fruit-industry workers became unionized during the 1930s, enabling them to enjoy the benefits of the “California Dream,” defined by Matthews as “the expectation that the good life will be even more available in the Golden State than in other parts of the United States, because of California’s salubrious climate and abundant resources” (p. 6). The “good life,” Matthews implies, meant that they were more likely to make a decent wage, thus attaining middle-class status, as symbolized by homeownership and college educations for themselves and their children. By contrast, the high-tech production workers have never been unionized; in fact, today, not a single firm in the

high-tech industry is unionized. Thus, a production worker in a high-tech factory can easily find herself living beneath the poverty line in Silicon Valley, while her predecessor in the canneries owned a home and put her children through college. Although Matthews does an excellent job of analyzing the many factors that led to the divergent fates of the two groups, her definition of the “California Dream” is vague. It also seems likely that the various immigrant groups who settled in the Valley were seeking different goals and ideals, leading to many versions of the California Dream.

Matthews notes the irony that the diminishment of opportunity took place in an area known at one time for its strong labor movement and now celebrated for its culture of openness and innovation. Just when the cannery workers were gaining access to the California Dream through unionization, the fruit industry began to decline (largely due to international competition). With the antiunionism and red-baiting of radicals during the cold war era, the labor movement lost momentum, and the hope for equal pay for equal work and racial inclusiveness died—with profound and long-term consequences for the fate of female immigrant production workers, as this study shows in detail. The high-tech industry, which literally took over the fruit orchards, has been able to prevent its workers from unionizing by maintaining a work environment that, from the standpoint of the low-end production worker, is anything but open and innovative.

The transformation into a high-tech economy occurred at the same time as the liberalization of the United States labor laws (the Immigration Act of 1965) and the arrival of Indochinese refugees after the Vietnam conflict, events that coincided to provide this burgeoning sector with a ready-made and easily exploited labor force that was predominantly Asian and Latino. The foreign-born population of the Valley increased from 7.6 percent in 1970 to 36.8 percent in 2000, as immigrants flocked there looking for high-tech jobs, hoping to attain the California Dream. Instead, the industry has kept its lower-tier production workforce dependent and powerless, hiring candidates who are least likely to make trouble and to organize—described by one manager as “small, foreign, and female” (p. 160). Matthews’s chapter about these “new immigrants” in the Valley is the strongest and most insightful part of her study.

Matthews notes that “migration is a profoundly gendered experience,” citing immigrant women’s experience on the “family tightrope” as they try to find a balance

between cultural traditions involving family issues and gender roles and their new culture in America (pp. 153, 179). Matthews also observes that most scholars of immigrant women have focused on the workplace, overlooking family issues. But this study shows that, for most women, workplace and family are tightly intertwined, a factor that Matthews could have examined more closely. Barriers to the unionization of these female high-tech production workers include their commitment to family and their status as immigrants. One worker explained: “They’re afraid of deportation, they can’t afford the dues, they’ve got to take care of their kids, and their husbands won’t let them [join a union]. And they don’t understand English good. And all [the organizers] said was, ‘But it’s in their own best interests.’ . . . Eventually, they got Spanish-speaking organizers, but it’s like they didn’t even consider the other barriers” (p. 239).

The book’s rich detail is both its strength and its weakness. Matthews provides an excellent multifaceted historical analysis of the transformation of the Santa Clara Valley, including chapters on the defense industry and its nonimmigrant female workforce during the 1940s and 1950s, the development of the semiconductor industry, and the rise of female politicians, earning the area its reputation as the “feminist capital of the nation” in the 1970s. However, her frequent detours from the story of the immigrant women workers results in a loss of narrative momentum and failure to develop important ideas. Matthews’s vivid portrayal of the fruit industry’s work culture and her thought-provoking discussion of the situation in present-day Silicon Valley would have been improved by a more thorough analysis from a comparative perspective. Also missing are the voices of these immigrant women. Although Matthews interviewed many of her subjects while conducting research for the book, she offers only brief profiles and quotes their own words only occasionally. Providing more details of these women’s lives and presenting their views of events would have produced a richer study. Generally, however, Matthews illuminates the historical context, helping the reader to understand how the Valley’s economic transformation shaped the fate of its female immigrant workforce. This provocative and wide-ranging book is a “must read” for scholars of gender and women, labor, business, and immigration.

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