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Anna Waldstein





# Living Well in Los Duplex

*Critical Reflections on Medicalization,  
Migration and Health Sovereignty*

**Anna Waldstein**

SCHOOL OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND CONSERVATION  
UNIVERSITY OF KENT



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*For Nenz, Nayeli and Iimabrac*



# Contents

<b>Acknowledgments</b>	xiii
<b>Series Editors' Preface</b>	
Neighborhoods, Networks, and Migrants: A Case of Autonomous Pluralism <i>Andrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart</i>	xv
<b>Introduction</b>	3
Mexican Migrants in Athens, Georgia	3
The Hispanic Health Paradox	7
About This Book	14
<b>Chapter 1 · The American Healthcare Crisis</b>	17
Colonial Legacies, Subjectivity and Medical Anthropology	17
(Bio)Medicalization and the Commodification of Health	19
Medicine, Citizenship and (Health) Sovereignty	25
Implications and Alternatives	30
<b>Chapter 2 · An Ethnographic Case Study</b>	35
Methodology	35
Methods	39
Census	39
Structured Interviews	39
Participant Observation and Unstructured Interviews	40
Cognitive Methods	42
Semi-Structured Interviews	43
Drawings	45
Post-Fieldwork Reflections	46
Five (Key) Families	48

<b>Chapter 3 · Mobility and Sovereignty</b>	53
Sovereignty at the Border	53
A Brief History of Migration Between Mexico and the United States	55
From Circular Migration to Settlement	60
Returns to Mexico and Flexible Living	65
<b>Chapter 4 · Local Ecologies, Health and Disease</b>	71
Neighborhood Conditions and Health	71
The Outdoor Environment	73
Household Material Culture and Neighborhood Social Environment	76
Environment and Health in Los Duplex	80
Causes	84
Signs and Symptoms	85
Pathology and Prognosis	85
Treatment	85
<b>Chapter 5 · The Individual and Society</b>	87
Stress and Social Relationships	87
Kinship and the Lifecycle in Los Duplex	90
Social Networks, Social Support and Well-Being	95
Community Life	100
<b>Chapter 6 · Balancing Lifestyle, Energy, Soma and Psyche</b>	105
Definitions of Health	105
Work-Life Balance	107
Imbalances of Energy and Eating	111
Causes	114
Signs, Symptoms and Pathology	115
Prognosis and Treatment	116
Body-Mind Balance	116
<b>Chapter 7 · Domestic Healing</b>	121
Healing Responses	121
The Local Pharmacopoeia	123
The Phenomenology of Healing with Home Remedies	125
Stomach Teas	125
Medicines for <i>Gripas</i>	129
Plants Used Topically for Pain Relief	130
Pastillas	131
A Note on Efficacy	133

<b>Chapter 8 · Medical Rights and Responsibilities</b>	137
Hospital Care	137
Fear and Loathing in Surveillance	139
Miscommunications, Medical Bills and Movement	144
Advice Seeking and Medical Decision Making	148
<b>Conclusion</b>	153
Summary	153
Health Sovereignty for the Common Good	159
Postscript	162
<b>Appendices</b>	165
Dramatis Personae	165
Illustrations	172
<b>Bibliography</b>	175
<b>Index</b>	199



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During the process of preparing this book I also became involved with Rastafari, which introduced the concept of sovereignty into my work and helped me to better express myself in writing and through art. It was while practicing Rastafari meditation that I was inspired to revive a latent talent and draw the illustrations for this book. Rastafari involves a Pan-African set of spiritual and somatic practices that are organized around the ideal of the Divine King and Queen (as embodied in the historical figures Emperor Haile Selassie I and Empress Menen I of Ethiopia). In Rastafari all men and women are divine sovereigns in potential who are working toward a holistic state of health, peace and

(free) will. I give thanks to my mentor Rt. Hon. Binghi Congo-Nyah for helping me organize my thoughts and arguments and to Tony Tafari Thomas who read an early draft of the introduction and helped me to refine my conclusions. It is because of their good influence that this book might inspire people to move beyond demanding human rights to citizenship in over consumptive states by recognizing our divine rights to sovereignty and self-determination and our responsibilities to care for ourselves, each other and our environments.

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## Series Editors' Preface

# Neighborhoods, Networks, and Migrants: A Case of Autonomous Pluralism

*Andrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart\**

Migrants are much in the news, and are a focus of international concern in Europe and throughout the world nowadays. It is therefore extremely timely that Anna Waldstein has written this carefully crafted study, combining a lucid historical narrative of Mexican migration into the USA, perspectives from critical medical anthropology, and an ethnography of self-managed pluralism among a population of migrants caught in economic change but exercising their own agency in search of health.

The migrants in question lived in Athens, Georgia, at the time of the study, although subsequently, since the early 2000s (2002–2003) many have moved

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\* Pamela J. Stewart (Strathern) and Andrew J. Strathern are a wife-and-husband research team who are based in the Department of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh, and co-direct the Cromie Burn Research Unit. They are frequently invited international lecturers and have worked with numbers of museums to assist these organizations in documenting their collections from the Pacific. They have worked and lived in many parts of the world. Stewart and Strathern have published over 50 books and hundreds of articles, book chapters, and essays on their research in the Pacific (mainly Papua New Guinea and the South-West Pacific region, e.g., Samoa, Cook Islands, and Fiji); Asia (mainly Taiwan, and also including Mainland China and Japan); and Europe (primarily Scotland, Ireland, Germany, and the European Union countries in general); and also Norway, New Zealand, and Australia. Stewart and Strathern's current research includes the new subfield of Disaster Anthropology that they have been developing for many years. They are on the Editorial boards of the journals *Shaman and Religion and Society* and they Co-Edit the *Journal of Ritual Studies*. They are the Co-Leaders of the University of Pittsburgh, Study Abroad program Pitt in the Pacific in New Zealand, which they created. Their webpages, listing publications and other scholarly activities, are: <http://www.pitt.edu/~strather/> and <http://www.StewartStrathern.pitt.edu/>

elsewhere. Los Duplex was a neighborhood with a population three quarters composed of Mexicans, who had occupied space previously lived in by African Americans, and consisting of trailer parks and apartment complexes on the outskirts of the city of Athens itself. Most of the neighborhood people were working long hours in poultry processing plants. The area had some problems arising from alcohol consumption and gang activities, but Waldstein identifies the community strengths that offset or mitigated these problems, largely through the integrative efforts of the married women in families connected through situational friendships as well as a network of kinship ties formed around sibling relationships.

Waldstein builds her narrative and analysis on two different fronts. Theoretically, she takes as her starting point the idea that the American health care system is itself in an overall crisis, with the over-medicalization of health and the loss of what Waldstein identifies as health sovereignty, the ability to control one's own health status. Bio-medicalization implies the dependency of people on what the available biomedical facilities and practitioners can offer them, coupled with control over them. It implies that people do not use their own knowledge to take care of themselves. Biomedical care is also expensive, and even insurance can be more expensive than what low income or disadvantaged people such as migrants can access or pay for.

Against this situation Waldstein details and analyses the situation of the migrants she studied, who carried with them a considerable amount of local knowledge of herbal remedies based on the humoral premises of Hispanic medicine brought with the original Spanish migration into South America. This knowledge was largely deployed by women in families who saw themselves as the keepers of responsibility for health. The plants used for this medical system were mostly ones that grow, or can be grown, on small amounts of garden land, and included basil, mint, rue, chamomile, and mullein. Women also opportunistically, and in pluralistic fashion, used Tylenol, Vicks Vapor rub, and Alka Seltzer. They also made it their business to discover how they could access benefits from government welfare and hospital services, while dealing as much as possible with their own health and well-being. In the traditions of holistic thinking Waldstein points out that women's deployment of neighborhood networks centered on kin and friends had a positive outcome in health as well as social terms. Isolation is the enemy of well-being, and the pro-social ethos of Los Duplex women, along with their families, protected people from the risks associated with isolation.

Female ties were also important in mediating migration patterns, because women would encourage their sisters to come, and as single men married into such networks the stability of their lives increased. Social ties, then, were their

major social insurance. A point that Waldstein also makes here is interesting. She notes the increasing efforts by USA border authorities to stem the flow of migrants from Mexico and the dangers that would-be illegal entrants face in trying to cross desert places in order to evade detection. However, she says, these efforts by authorities have effects opposite to those intended, because once migrants are in the USA they are less likely to return, whereas in the past more migrants were often ones who worked seasonally and then returned to Mexico. Overall, the situation of migrants varies enormously from one occupation to others. Poultry workers do not have very healthy working conditions, but crop pickers on farms experience more arduous conditions, with long hours and heavy manual labor dependent on strength and endurance and risks of injury to their bodies, as Seth Holmes and others have documented (Holmes 2013). Waldstein, therefore, does not claim that the findings from Los Duplex are typical. Her study is nevertheless illuminating, both because of its critique of bio-medicalization in general, and because of its demonstration of how people, primarily women, can take charge of aspects of the health of their communities, provided they retain sufficient folk knowledge to do so and can also act pluralistically to secure health care. Finally, here, it is also interesting that these women were not healing experts in their own places. Few such experts in the curandero traditions seem to have made their way into Los Duplex, and there is also only a minor mention in Waldstein's text of the fears of witchcraft which are quite strong in Mexican culture generally and which might be expected to be strong in low income and stressful contexts of migrant life (compare Stewart and Strathern 2004). Los Duplex at the time Waldstein made her remarkable study seems itself to have been a remarkable place.

## Reference

- Holmes, Seth 2013. *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Stewart, Pamela J. and Andrew Strathern 2004. *Witchcraft, Sorcery, Rumors, and Gossip*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

