

Foreword

The last hundred years comprise the century of Mexican migration to the United States. Though ebbing and flowing and often changing in size, characteristics, organization, destination, and origin, the movement of people al Norte has been a constant, one that has transformed both the immigrants and the country on which they have converged. So large and persistent a migration is an event of unusual social significance. It is also the material for a fascinating, moving, and human story, one of interest not simply to migration scholars but to anyone concerned with the ways in which international migration is changing our world.

For all its impressive dimensions, the magnitude of Mexican migration has confronted scholars with a difficult challenge. Students of Mexican *emigration* have risen to the occasion: over the past several decades, they have produced a rich, interdisciplinary literature, using the full social science toolkit. Thanks to these efforts—of which the binational Mexican Migration Project may be the most notable accomplishment—we possess a deep understanding of the causes and mechanisms of emigration and of the consequences of both *emigration* and *immigration* for the emigrants' kin, their home communities, and indeed, for Mexico writ large.

By contrast, the students of Mexican *immigration*—that is to say, the experience within the United States—have found it more difficult to come to grips with the phenomenon and its salient characteristics. To be sure, monographs of high quality addressing a multiplicity of

topics—whether having to do with transnationalism, gender, labor, sexuality, the borderlands—have proliferated. But for the most part, the big picture seems to have been neglected, suggesting that this migration is of such size and complexity that it overwhelms the scholarly capacity at understanding.

In this light, the present book represents a new, daring departure in migration scholarship, as it seeks to comprehend the totality of the experience of Mexican immigrants in the very capital of contemporary immigration to the United States: Los Angeles. Fascinating, informative, and original, this book brings a fresh and badly needed perspective to migration studies. Coauthored by three distinguished Mexican scholars of migration—Rafael Alarcón, Luis Escala, and Olga Odgers—it looks at the phenomenon in a distinctive way, asking a series of questions that their US counterparts have generally not yet posed.

Readers encountering the pages to come will have a great deal to learn. They will certainly appreciate the multimethod nature of this study, which combines quantitative and qualitative material in a unique way. Drawing on the American Community Survey, the authors paint a statistical picture of Mexican settlement and adaptation in Los Angeles, demonstrating both the progress that the immigrants have achieved and the limitations that they have encountered. The authors then delve deep into that process, drawing on a unique set of interviews with immigrants from three different Mexican states—Zacatecas, Oaxaca, and Veracruz—each representing distinct stages in the history of Mexican migration to Los Angeles, from the oldest to the most recent. The authors bring a deft touch to the analysis and presentation of the interview material. The text gives voice to the immigrants, doing so in such a way that the reader is confident that the respondents have not been guided to answers sought by the researchers—as is so often the case—but rather are telling their own stories, in the way and with the words that they have chosen. At the same time, the authors take appropriate distance, attending to the contradictions, tensions, and conflicts that appear in the respondents' narratives.

But the core contribution of this book stems from its analytical perspective, which sets it apart from so much of the literature. Though focused on a single migration converging on a single place, the book engages with a question that arises wherever mass migrations occur: how the outsiders from abroad will belong. For the most part, scholars have answered that question with their backs to the border, looking inward—a tendency especially true of US researchers. Consequently,

the *international* and the inherently *political* nature of population movements across national boundaries falls out of view.

By contrast, the authors of this book work with a more encompassing framework, one that extends across borders, which in turn allows them to show the ways in which migration builds cross-border connections even as integration *into* the *national* society of destination leads to *dis*-integration from the *national* society of origin.

Thus, socially, the people opting for life in another state are not just *immigrants*, but also *emigrants*, retaining ties to people and places left behind. Though the *immigrant* search for a better life yields long-term changes likely to complicate interactions with the people left behind, the short- to medium-term effects take a different form, increasing the *emigrants'* capacity to help out their significant others still living in the home society—thereby encouraging further immigration and the ethnic densities that facilitate continued home country ties. Moreover, in moving to another country, the migrants pull one society onto the territory of another state, leading “here” and “there” to converge. As the home country society gets transplanted onto receiving states, *alien* territory becomes a *familiar* environment, yielding the infrastructure needed to keep up here-there connections and providing the means by which migrants can sustain identities as home community members while living on foreign soil. Thus, international migration both brings “them” “here” and imports aspects of “there,” a phenomenon that many researchers—whether for better or worse—understand as “transnationalism.”

As readers of this book will see, the cross-border dimension is a salient aspect of the experience of *mexicanos* in Los Angeles. Consequently, the relevant identities are those that spring from the place of origin, not just those that are meaningful in the place of destination. Place of origin in Mexico affects experiences in the United States, for reasons having to do with regional differences in the history and timing of emigration. Moreover, origin remains socially meaningful, even if the *gringos*—hard of perception as always—fail to notice. Spouses are more likely than not to be *paisanos*; friends, acquaintances, workmates often share a common local or regional background; indeed, the strength of those ties generates resources crucial for settling down and getting ahead. Place of origin also structures interactions of a more formal kind, whether cultural, as among the *oaxaqueños* or *veracruzanos*, or political, as among the *zacatecanos*.

But it is not simply that ties originating in Mexico influence experiences in the United States; connections *to* Mexico remain vital, indicating

that migrant social relations have not yet been captured by the society where they live, but rather continue to span across borders. Thus, most of the respondents interviewed for this book reported that they sent money to relatives in Mexico and continued to travel home for a variety of reasons, whether to visit ageing or sick relatives, to relax while on vacation, or to participate in patron saint festivals. And not only did the Mexicans in Los Angeles attend to their relatives and home communities, they also continue to care about Mexico and to keep themselves informed about politics nationwide. A minority of immigrants also seek active political engagement.

Nonetheless, the importance of the cross-border dimension is steadily weakening, as the locus of social life inevitably comes to coincide with the boundaries of the territory where the immigrants actually reside. Though origin in Mexico remains a source of meaning, its importance is on the decline. Thus, while the typical couple involved spouses from the same town or state, a growing minority of couples took the form of mixed marriages involving partners from two different Mexican states. More importantly, the boundaries that may have been important in Mexico no longer seemed so important to these Mexicans living in the United States. As the authors note, none of the interviewees referred to mixed marriages “with concern or with any suggestion that they constitute a social disadvantage.”

To some extent, the greater diversity represented by these mixed marriages is a natural consequence of displacement to a different interactional structure. Movement to a huge, heterogeneous, cosmopolitan area like Los Angeles creates the potential to meet a whole range of people, many of whom—Iranians, Armenians, Pakistanis, Chinese, Koreans, not to mention Mexicans from opposite corners of the country—would never have been encountered had the migrants stayed home. Under these circumstances, moreover, identities change: since the core self-identity *imported* from Mexico often fails to convey a meaningful signal in the new environment, the immigrants have no choice but to adopt other identities that are more meaningful. As explained by one of the respondents: “It depends on whom you’re talking to. With people from other countries, we call ourselves Mexicans. If I’m among people from Mexico, I identify myself as Oaxacan, and if I’m among Oaxacans, then I say I’m from Macuilianguis.” For many immigrants, of course, the relevant identity expands beyond nationality, extending instead to the broader, more diverse population of Latin American origin. As the authors point out, “Mexican immigrants are not Hispanics,

but they become Hispanics through integration.” Though the new social context encountered in Los Angeles creates a meaningful framework for a Latino identity, the latter also results from the political environment. Classified as Latinos and organized as Latinos, the immigrants have little choice but to accept the official categories that they encounter.

Thus social integration *into* the United States yields social dis-integration *from* Mexico. Moreover, despite the force of the many cross-border connections, *territorial* dis-integration from Mexico is also well advanced, as the immigrants’ lives are increasingly confined to the territory where they actually live. To a large extent, the attenuation of cross-border ties reflected the overwhelming power of the tendencies toward settlement. As the authors explain, many respondents had displaced the entirety of their families to the United States. Though many retained property in Mexico, most of these properties had been inherited; by contrast, most the properties purchased by the immigrants were located in the United States. The deepening of ties to Los Angeles, as well as the immigrants’ growing economic commitments in the United States, meant that fewer resources were available for spending in Mexico. As explained by one of the authors’ Zacatecan respondents, “But now the bills, the debts you take on, they don’t allow it, although you want to go, but you know how much you’re going to owe every month, and that limits you.” And of course, there are the children, who may have grown up speaking Spanish and may think of themselves as Mexican, but nonetheless have been so thoroughly Americanized that return to the home country is inconceivable. As one of the respondents recounted, an effort to return home to Jerez foundered on the resistance from his children: after a year and a half, “they really didn’t want to be there because they missed *their* country, Dodgers games and things like that, or McDonalds, which they like, and all those minor things.”

But the immigrants are not just emigrants; they are also *aliens*, a condition shared by every foreigner crossing national boundaries, whether as legal permanent resident, temporary worker, tourist, or undocumented immigrant. As emphasized by the American sociologists Richard Alba and Victor Nee (2005) in their classic *Remaking the American Mainstream*, the social boundaries separating immigrants and natives may be blurry, allowing for extensive interaction across ethnic lines. Indeed, that is often the experience recounted in this book, which in so many ways testifies to the permeability of the society that the immigrants encounter in the United States.

By contrast to the blurry *social* boundaries, the *legal* boundaries surrounding the myriad, formal categories of alien are bright. Worldwide, the import of alien status varies by citizenship regime, exercising least weight where citizenship is a birthright; nowhere is its significance trivial. Naturalized citizens currently comprise one-third of all foreign-born people living in the United States; another third are legal permanent residents; another third belongs to some other, more tenuous, legal status. While immigrant offspring born in the United States are citizens, many young immigrant offspring *growing up* in the United States are foreign born and no small fraction is undocumented; many more have undocumented parents or siblings.

Consequently, the brightest boundaries are not imported and have nothing to do with ethnicity; rather, they are fundamentally political, made in and by receiving states, exercising long-term consequences at the individual level and beyond. International migrants begin outside the polity, remaining there long after roots have been firmly established. In a democratic society, alien status doesn't prohibit political activity, as shown vividly by the mass demonstrations for immigrant rights in 2006 or the continuing struggle by immigrant workers for rights at the job site and union representation. Nonetheless, alien status inevitably restricts rights and entitlements. Moreover, alienage leaves noncitizen immigrants vulnerable to nationals' efforts at tightening up and increasing the gap between citizens and aliens. That politics plays so central a role in determining immigrant destinies provides further demonstration of the authors' sensitivity to the dual, bidirectional nature of immigrant integration. While immigrants may integrate *into* a society by learning its language or gaining new competencies, the societal integration *of* the immigrants—or lack thereof—involves political decisions about rights and access to citizenship, decisions largely made by the nationals and their leaders.

As demonstrated in this book, those political boundaries and the changing mechanisms whereby they can and cannot be crossed have made a world of difference. The Zacatecans mainly crossed the border as undocumented immigrants; they moved to a Los Angeles where immigrants and their advocates exercised little voice and Mexican Americans had yet to gain much political influence. On the other hand, immigration enforcement both in the exterior and in the interior was lax. Crossing the border was easily attainable, making for a constant flow of back-and-forth moves to Mexico. Although undocumented immigrants were prohibited from seeking employment, employers were permitted to hire undocumented workers—opening doors to the labor

market. And gatekeepers at other crucial points of access—whether having to do with drivers' licenses or even Social Security cards—then paid little attention to applicants' legal status.

Thus, at the outset, political boundaries were of very modest salience, even though there were few opportunities for direct or indirect exercise of political influence. Moreover, timing proved crucial, as the undocumented immigrants of the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s enjoyed the fruits of the amnesty created by the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act. Legalization then led to family reunification in the United States and, for a sizable share of the newly legalized immigrants, full US citizenship. Mobility followed in other domains, with significant movement into property and business ownership, and even the professions.

The later arrivals, especially the Veracruzans, had a very different experience. Externally, the territorial border had become increasingly impenetrable, making it ever harder to enter the United States, but more importantly, making it ever more difficult to try a re-entry. Hence, the newer immigrants were deprived of the circularity enjoyed by the earlier cohort. Internally, the border between persons legally resident in the United States and undocumented immigrants became increasingly bright. Consequently, unlike the earlier arrivals, the undocumented Veracruzans found themselves confined to the same sector of highly unstable, precarious jobs that they had entered at the time of arrival in the United States. And as legal status became an increasingly important determinant of life chances, it also led to the internal stratification of the Mexican immigrant population, with lines of labor market segmentation corresponding to differences in legal status.

Of course, this brief foreword only skims the surface; there is much more that awaits the reader in this rich, thought-provoking book. By going where other scholars have feared to tread, Alarcón, Escala, and Odgers have risen to the intellectual challenge confronted by anyone seeking to understand the last century of Mexican migration to the United States. While the task is immense and much work remains to be done, this effort to illuminate the Mexican immigrant experience in the quintessential ethnic metropolis of twenty-first century America represents a scholarly landmark and one to which readers will return with profit for many years to come.

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This book is dedicated to our mothers Pompeya Acosta, Alba Rabadán, and María de los Ángeles Ortiz, in loving memory.