Introduction

I lived on Manhattan’s Upper West Side when I started this book and my neighbor was a busy mother who had a nanny helping her to take care of her two-year-old toddler. One day my neighbor asked what my research was about; I told her I wanted to learn more about maternal migration and how it influences children and youths’ lives. “Well,” she replied, “what kind of migration are you talking about? I live in the same country, city, and house as my daughter and she is not being raised only by me. Sara, my nanny, is from Mexico and she has a kid there, you should talk to her.” As the US media debates whether women can “have it all”—that is, a successful career and a family—migrant women like Sara wonder how they can care for them all: for their children in Mexico, children they have brought over to the United States, children who were born here, and (in some cases) children they care for professionally.

Sara, a Mexican migrant from a small rural town in the state of Hidalgo, became my first interviewee for this book. One day I saw her and told her I was headed to Mexico that summer to do research with children whose mothers were migrants in New York City. Sara told me she had a son, Agustín, whom she had left in Mexico seven years ago. I asked if she was willing to talk to me about her experiences of mothering from afar and her relationship with Agustín. She did not hesitate, as she seemed excited about the prospect of me taking some gifts to her son on my upcoming trip to Mexico. Sara instructed me to come to her house in the following days to meet her US-born son, Felipe, who was the same age as my neighbor’s child, whom she cared for professionally.

A day later I went to East Harlem to visit Sara in the one-bedroom apartment that she shared with her husband and Felipe. As we sat in the kitchen, enjoying some very spicy guacamole, I asked Sara about her crossing. Like all other mothers who participated in this study, Sara is undocumented. She crossed into the United States by foot via the Arizona border, from which point she reached the city of Phoenix.
From there, Sara and many others were put into trucks and vans that took them across the country to destinations such as North Carolina, Chicago, New Jersey, and New York City. As it was for other women in this research, her crossing was difficult and painful, something that she hopes never to have to do again. Sara became dehydrated during her four-day crossing and passed out in the middle of the Sonoran Desert. She recalls members of her group discussing if they should leave her behind and continue their journey. One man, who was a friend of her family, carried her for miles until the group found a place to hide from border patrol. The crossing cost Sara more than $4,000. Sara’s sister, Rosa, already in New York City, helped her cover half of the cost. Sara used her savings to pay part of the other half and got the remainder from her other sister, Tami, also in the United States. A single mother, Sara migrated alone, leaving her son Agustín behind with his maternal grandmother, Clarisa. Sara later met and moved in together with Marco in New York City, and together they had a son, Felipe. I asked Sara how she felt being away from her child in Mexico, but also having a child in New York City. She responded: “One feels divided, you are here, but your heart sometimes is there. I know I left him with the best care I could ask for and . . . now I have a child here, with another man. It’s hard . . . but I think it’s better this way.”

As Sara talked to me, she also checked her phone, only to find a text message from her 14-year-old son Agustín in Mexico that read: “hi I want to go out with my friends.” Sara paused. She took a deep breath and typed a response while uttering the words out loud: “It’s late already, what did your grandmother say?” Agustín texted back: “She said it is ok as long as you allow me to go.” Sara responded: “You can go, but you need to text me when you come back home. It can’t be after 9 p.m., tomorrow you have school.” Agustín responded: “Ok, thank you.” A couple of hours later Sara sent a text message to her cousin to confirm Agustín’s whereabouts. Agustín did not come back at 9 p.m. and his grandmother, instead of calling Agustín on his cell phone, called Sara in New York and asked her to call Agustín, because she was worried.

In between the exchange of text messages and my interview with Sara, Felipe showed up in the kitchen, crying, because his cousin did not want to share her Spiderman toy with him. Sara tried, unsuccessfully, to convince him that he had so many other toys to play with that
he did not need his cousin’s action figure. When he kept insisting and crying, Sara told him, “Felipe, if you keep being like this I will send you and your cousin to Mexico to be with your abuela.” At that moment, I observed one of the many daily actions related to “care” that constituted what I began to call a transnational care constellation. In the few hours I spent at Sara’s house during my very first interview, the small town in Hidalgo and the reality in East Harlem were intrinsically connected. The constant communication among caregivers, children, and mothers regarding everyday decisions and daily discipline made the physical border between Mexico and the United States more fluid. In a split-screen moment, I was able to visualize Agustín going to school in San Nicolás, a town in Hidalgo of 300 residents, and Felipe getting on a bus to attend a public school in New York City. During my fieldwork I was able to accompany both Felipe and Agustín as they got up and went to school. They both woke up before 6 a.m. and ate breakfast before they left. They both complained on the way to school and wished they could have slept another ten minutes. Agustín received money from Sara every week and all his school costs were taken care of, but he wanted to drop out of school as soon as he finished junior high school. Even though Sara did not want Agustín to drop out of school, she felt she had no control over the matter. Alternatively, with Felipe, Sara was confident that dropping out of school would never be an option as she felt completely in control. I reflected: When and where was school important? How did Sara’s absence influence or shape Agustín’s choices? Conversely, did Agustín’s choices influence Felipe?

Sara took center stage in her care constellation because of her decision-making power. This power was attributed to her by her sons and her mother, but at times she claimed it for herself. Her role as the biological mother, or, as she described it, “the one who birthed him,” was celebrated for better or for worse. She was the one who got asked for permission, she was the one who sent financial support, she was the one who bought gifts, and she was the one who made decisions about school-related activities. However, when she did not deliver on the activities related to care that were expected from her, she was criticized; she was blamed for everything that went wrong; she felt guilty and at many times helpless. Sara and other mothers interviewed played a large role in the academic and educational lives of their children. Though mothers
and children frequently had a tough time communicating about feelings, love life, personal desires, and dreams, when the discussion was about schooling—homework, classes, teachers, uniforms, books, summer classes, field trips, grades, parent-teacher conferences—the mothers were able to communicate their desires and assert their authority by giving children orders. Providing a better education was the topic that participants in the care constellation thought to be the most important or the reason behind familial separation. The act of talking about school, according to another mother, “made everything worth it.”

Agustín and Clarisa shared a relationship that Sara respected and did not compete with. As Sara said, “I left him with my mother. I can’t fight with my mother and tell her off . . . If she lets him do things that I do not agree with, sometimes I have to let it go. I know at this point he loves her more than he loves me. But that’s all right. She is the one that takes care of him.” At the same time, in my interviews with Clarisa in Mexico, she seemed concerned about not “going over Sara’s head” with regard to Agustín’s life. She stated: “Whenever she is ready, she should come back to enjoy her son . . . they are only young for a certain period in their lives . . . and those are the most beautiful years. She should really enjoy him.”

This book explores the ways in which maternal migration shapes the lives of the children of immigrant women who are in New York City and in Mexico, with a specific focus on children’s education experiences. It focuses on the care arrangements and family relationships that follow maternal migration, specifically by examining how these changes shape children’s lives in Mexico and the United States. I argue that the influence of migration cannot be understood by looking at only one side of the border; understanding how mothers in one location negotiate their care for children in different spaces requires a methodological approach that entails transnational multi-sited fieldwork. Children’s lives are an important, yet often overlooked, part of the story of what feminist scholars have referred to as “global care chains.” I show that caregiving practices regarding decisions about education that derive from maternal migration shape and influence children’s experiences of education in a broad sense. Schooling, achievement, and education experiences differ for separated siblings in Mexico and in New York City. Moreover, the self-identified gender of the child plays a role in how these experiences unfold.
Mothers often justify their decisions to migrate by stating that their goal is to provide a better education for their children, and indeed much of their transnational mothering is focused on that goal. But to stop at this statement would be a mistake. By focusing on the relational dimensions of maternal migration as experienced by members of what I refer to as a transnational care constellation, this research contributes to existing scholarship on how transnational migration and people’s mobility shape the lives of children and youth “left behind,” “brought over,” and “born here.” By arguing for the importance of attending to children’s lived experiences of familial separation and participation in care constellations, this research provides a nuanced analysis of migration’s many faces.

Even though I was looking for transnational practices of families’ everyday lives, I was puzzled by how the concept of care worked across transnational boundaries and also by the shifting nature of kinship relations in the context of global political economy, increased migration, and gender hierarchies that are characteristic of a highly integrated and globalized world. Although I am not arguing that maternal migration necessarily provokes a shift in familial power structures, I am describing a shift in familial dynamics, through transnational care constellations and the structures of care that influence the lives of children involved, especially regarding their education trajectories.

In this book I argue that, in order to understand how maternal migration affects children on both sides of the border, one must understand how they are cared for and how caregivers and mothers share childrearing practices. Although the ideal of care within the relationships in transnational migration oriented the initial steps in my research, throughout my fieldwork I became fundamentally concerned with how these arrangements influence sibling relations across borders, as well as their schooling, and gender roles. Thus, this book aims to answer these two overarching questions: How do mothers with one (or more) offspring living in New York City and one (or more) children in Mexico negotiate care, educational support, and investment in their children’s education? And how do high levels of Mexican maternal migration influence the education, migration aspirations, and social opportunities of the children in Mexico and their siblings born in or brought to the United States?
This book aims to answer other questions as well: How do ideas and practices of motherhood shape mothers’ attitudes toward their children? How do children on both sides of the border imagine and describe “the other side”? How do the educational experiences and social opportunities of children in Mexico compare to those of their siblings living in the United States? And, how might maternal migration influences vary by the gender of the child?

Mexican Migrants in New York City

Since the 1960s, Mexicans have been the largest group of Latin American immigrants in the United States. Mexicans in the United States are also the largest group of unauthorized immigrants in the country. Since the time of the Bracero Program (1942–1964), which brought significant numbers of Mexicans to the United States as manual laborers, Mexicans only began to experience a reduced rate of overall population growth after the 2007 economic recession. In 2011, 11.4 million undocumented Mexicans were estimated to be in the United States (Stoney & Batalova, 2013). Compared to other immigrant groups, Mexicans have the lowest chance of legalizing their citizenship status by becoming citizens or lawful permanent residents, or receiving refugee status from the government (Dreby, 2010). It is important to note that families are, for the most part, separated not by distance but by immigration status. If they had the ability, they would be going back and forth and so would their kids. Immigration status is a crucial factor for mothers in this study as it constitutes a tangible physical barrier to physical closeness.

US-bound Mexican migration has changed dynamics since the mid-1990s. Militarization of the border combined with stricter immigration enforcement activities and legislation interrupted a long-standing tradition of circular migration. Dreby (2010, 2015) has explained that there are virtually no pathways to citizenship available to Mexican migrants, and this factor changes the configuration of families separated across borders that had enjoyed more flexibility in the past.

According to Gomberg-Muñoz,

But for people who have entered and lived in the United States unlawfully, whom I call unlawful entrants, the road to a green card is neither
smooth nor easy—even for those with spouses who are U.S. citizens. This is because when they attempt to gain legal residency, two parts of the U.S. immigration system collide: The first part makes them eligible for a green card but requires them to leave the United States to get it. The second part then bars most of them from returning for 10 years. The only way they can return lawfully is if their U.S. citizen petitioner can prove he or she would suffer “extreme hardship” in the event of a 10-year separation. (2016: 340)

Mendoza (2008) explains that the interruption of this circular migration changed trips that in the past averaged 38 months to 72 months. The status of being undocumented, thus, has been created by a number of different factors, including militarization of the border, failed trade negotiations, economic recession, and specially the inability of the American government to pass a comprehensive immigration reform. In addition, issues arise when mixed-status families in the United States experience fear of deportation and detention of parents who are undocumented. According to Rojas-Flores and colleagues (2017), the chronic risk of arrest, detention, and/or deportation contributes to anxiety and tension within families. Enforcement by the government knows no bounds sweeping through residences and workplace. According to Passel, Cohn, and Gonzalez-Barrera (2012), during the five-year period from 2005 to 2010, a total of 1.4 million Mexicans immigrated to the United States, down by more than half from the 3 million who had done so in the five-year period of 1995 to 2000. In the meantime, the number of Mexicans and their children who moved from the United States to Mexico between 2005 and 2010 rose to 1.4 million, roughly double the number who had done so in the five-year period a decade before (ibid.).

Data from the Pew Hispanic Center show that there were 210,000 Mexican-born people living in New York City in 2011 (compared to Los Angeles, the largest immigrant epicenter in the United States, with 1.4 million Mexican-born residents) (Gonzalez-Barrera & Lopez, 2013). The Latino Project developed by the Center for Latin American, Caribbean & Latino Studies at the City University of New York’s Graduate Center also estimated that there are around 600,000 Mexicans living in New York City, with the largest concentration in Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx; and more than one million Mexicans in the tristate area (Saiz-Álvarez, 2016).
Women constitute 40 percent of all Mexican migrants in New York City (nationally, 47 percent of Mexican migrants are women) and they head approximately 22 percent of Mexican immigrant households. According to the US Census Bureau, in 2011 the median income of Mexican women who are head of household was a little more than $22,000. Estimating how many children migrant mothers leave in Mexico proved to be a daunting task. Fragmented statistics allowed me to only guess that this phenomenon was relevant and significant enough to be studied (Nobles, 2013).

Theorizing Migration

Migration has historically been a topic of study of different disciplines. In this book I draw primarily from an anthropological, transnational approach. Rather than prioritizing nation-states and assuming that people “assimilate,” transnational approaches focus on how mobile populations make decisions in relation to social, cultural, political, and economic conditions both at home and in the new location.

In an article entitled “Approaches from Cultural Analysis in Anthropology to Latin@ Immigration,” Renato Rosaldo (2014) discusses key perspectives that distinguish anthropological research on migration. He describes how “studies of migration lead scholars to extend the spatial scope of the units of analysis. These works study collectivities, such as binational families [and] networks, rather than seeing the migrant as a discrete unit to be counted as she or he crosses the border” (p. 148). These studies include a focus on transnational family networks and community, and how those in the sending community are affected by the absences of those who leave. Second, anthropological studies of migration consider how immigrants represent their own experiences to themselves and to others. Third, cultural studies of Latin@ transnationalism consider how gender and sexuality shape the lives of immigrants. Young boys and girls face new and sometimes distinct risks and vulnerabilities. For example, boys may display their masculinity through involvement in gang activity; gay and lesbian teens may find that sexual discrimination compounds their marginalization. Fourth, Rosaldo (2014) explains that the association of “immigrant” with stereotypes about Mexicans rests on a racial bias that underlies immigration policy. He also discusses the
criminalization and deportation of undocumented Mexicans and the militarization of the border under the Obama administration. This book is situated in the historical moment described by Rosaldo. Militarized borders, high deportation numbers, and the influence of transnational family networks on children and mothers are all central to the stories told in this book. I focus on the everyday lives of separated families and especially how children in the present generation adapt and respond to the present reality.

In her book *Guadalupe in New York: Devotion and Struggle for Citizenship Rights*, Gálvez (2010) presents an argument that discusses the agency of those who are excluded from “first-class citizenship” or the idea of “good citizenship” (p. 16). This juridical definition of citizenship is “impoverished” according to the author. For Gálvez, Mexican immigrants in New York City make space in their new city while they negotiate notions of self-worth and belonging. Citizenship, according to Gálvez, “has been more rigorously defined in legal terms in the last decade” (p. 17).

Dreby (2015), in her timely book *Everyday Illegal: When Policies Undermine Immigrant Families*, makes a poignant argument for how concepts of being an immigrant from Mexico become conflated with being a criminal. Thus, the illegality, which Dreby refers to as an administrative status, becomes a salient part of immigrant families’ identities. Her comparative work shows how families in Ohio and New Jersey deal with the everyday anxieties that come with being undocumented. The author, a sociologist, points to the micro-complexities of each family and children in both locations by showing how nonlinear and determined these pathways are.

Building on this argument, I utilize a theoretical approach that allows for a nuanced understanding of immigrant experiences. Children’s trajectories are not as “linear” as described by dominant US-based sociological assimilation theories, and micro-contexts on both sides of the border influence each other in real time, every day. In order to build my argument and show the diversity of experiences within the same generation (in both countries), I use transnational care constellations as my unit of analysis. There are millions of people living in the same situation, divided and separated, but the ties they keep and the ways in which they act out these ties play an important role in their trajectories.
As I will show throughout each chapter, a theoretical concept premised upon looking at mobility within generations in the same country does not account for and cannot accurately describe how immigrant families and children live their lives transnationally (Coe et al., 2011; Dreby, 2010; Boehm, 2011; Schmalzbauer, 2004, 2008; Smith, 2005; Grasmuck & Pessar, 2005; Gamburd, 2000).

Anthropology of Migration and Transnationalism

In anthropology, as in other disciplines, scholars have long argued that the social and economic lives of migrants are not always bounded by national boundaries or physical borders. Fredrik Barth (1969) pointed out that boundaries are not necessarily territorialized and that group membership is under constant negotiation. Thus, the concept of transnationalism has been a central anthropological frame since the 1990s.

Glick-Schiller, Basch, and Szanton-Blanc (1995) have convincingly argued that transnationalism is part of an effort to reconfigure anthropological thinking so that it will reflect current transformations in the way in which time and space are lived. As in the United States, caregivers and children in Mexico are actively creating new arrangements to keep their status as members of the same group. Just as (for Barth) the idea of an ethnic group or a community becomes unbounded, parenting—and more specifically mothering—becomes an unbounded practice, where mothers do not necessarily live in the same household but are very much present and involved in the everyday lives of the children they have left behind.

The questions that have traditionally shaped studies of migration in anthropology have focused less on migration flows and more on how individuals respond to these global processes. Culture, which includes the study of the interaction between beliefs and behavior and social relationships, has resulted in an emphasis on adaptation, culture change, identity, and ethnicity (Brettel & Hollifield, 2000, 2008). Historically, the discipline has articulated migration studies as belonging to two analytical approaches: the first was rooted in modernization theory, and the other was rooted in a historical structuralist perspective based on concepts of political economy and the effects of global capitalism.
Modernization theory included a bipolar framework of analysis that separated and opposed sending and receiving societies, which brought attention to the well-known push and pull factors of migration. Push and pull factors are economic, political, cultural, and environmental forces that can either induce people to move to a new location or encourage them to leave their place of residence. According to anthropologist Michael Kearney (1986), this concern with push and pull factors and modernization is rooted in the “folk-urban continuum” formulated by Robert Redfield in 1941. Redfield’s model contrasted “traditional” folkways and “modern” urban life. The idea was that modernization theory marked the movement from country to city as people searched for more opportunities (or pull factors). This paradigm dominated much of the discussion regarding migration, linking people’s movement (urbanization) to hopes for economic development. Modernization, however, did not mean increased salaries and less poverty; quite the contrary. Many urban centers became characterized by the presence of shantytowns and significant poverty. In addition, this model of looking at migration did not describe international migration. The historical structuralist perspective, with its intellectual roots in Marxist political economy and world systems theory (Wallerstein, 1980), posited that capitalism was responsible for the unequal distribution of economic and political power among developed and developing countries. Thus, countries considered “underdeveloped” were trapped at a disadvantaged position causing people to move because of cheap labor and unequal terms of trade (Haas, 2008). For historical structuralists, people do not have free choice; instead, they are constrained by larger forces. These forces compel them to migrate to another country or region to fulfill globalization’s demands.

These theories failed to explain why some people migrate and others do not. As the world became more globalized, migration scholars took up the notion of transnationalism to rethink territories and notions of culture (Appadurai, 1996). Migration forced anthropologists to move away from studies of bounded communities and develop new forms of ethnographic work (later multi-sited ethnography) to account for people’s movement and the bonds they maintain with their countries of origin. Transnationalism appeared as a concept to describe a process that could account for these practices developed by migrants. As Kearney (1986)
commented, “A heightened awareness of the magnitude and significance of migration among other things caused anthropologists to turn away from community studies in the 1950s and 1960s, when it became widely realized that such work was suffering from terminal myopia” (p. 332). However, Vertovec (2007) points out that even though transnationalism in anthropology meant that scholars would take on ethnographic work that went beyond geographical boundaries or “tribes,” “interrelations between multiple groups have not become the subject of anthropological inquiry as much as one might have expected” (p. 965). Dissatisfaction with how migration was always framed within a macro approach of push and pull factors led to a new form of migration theory. Critique of the bipolar model of migration culminated in a theoretical construct that proposed a transgression of geographic borders and a focus on how relationships and identities are maintained across terrains. Because the concept of transnationalism was developed through different disciplines simultaneously, it remains a complex interdisciplinary idea.

As early as 1979, in a piece for the International Migration Review, Elsa Chaney described a certain category of immigrants as having “their feet in two societies” (p. 209). Even though she never used the word “transnational” to describe this type of immigrant, Chaney described the process in which migrants kept practices from their country of origin very much alive in the new land. In addition, according to Brettel and Hollifield (2008), “the roots of transnationalism within anthropology can be found in earlier work on return migration that emphasized links with the homeland and the notion that emigration did not necessarily mean definitive departure in the minds of immigrant themselves” (p. 17). Though not a new phenomenon, transnationalism gained traction in the 1990s with multi-sited ethnographic studies.

Transnationalism is described by some scholars as a “catchall notion” (Ebaugh & Saltzman Chafetz, 2002) or, as Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt (1999) put it, a “highly fragmented field” (p. 218). The term, however, is central to the understanding and analysis of multiplicity in the daily lives of the families and individuals featured in this book.

Scholars agree that transnationalism is a notion that captures a process that goes beyond geographical borders in the form of political organizations or family relationships. Basch, Glick-Schiller, and Szanton-Blanc defined transnationalism as
The processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. We call this process transnationalism to emphasize that many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural and political borders. (1994: 7)

Whether or not a transnational approach might be an outcome of ethnographic research, or, rather, a lens through which ethnographers have come to see the world, transnational ethnographies of Mexican families like those written by Robert C. Smith (2005), Dreby (2010), Schmalzbauer (2009), Boehm (2011), and Hamann and Zúñiga (2011) have contributed to developing a methodology that is transnational in approach and enhances our understanding of ways in which migration, in association with processes of globalization, transforms everyday life such that people might sustain connections across time and space despite their mobility. A focus on care also allows us to point out the shortcomings of transnationalism. Not only do individuals have their “two feet” in two different worlds, but they also have hands, embraces, and kisses that are disembodied by the separation. Technology may mediate relationships, but it is simply not the same. I use this working definition of transnationalism to allude to the social field created through care. Instead of focusing primarily on political and economic links between the societies being studied, I emphasize “care” as a concern that both unites and divides families across borders.

Another development of anthropological research related to migration occurred when transnationalism came to be closely linked with postmodernism and feminist theory, which conceptualized space and place in new ways. Gender and migration are important components for the analysis of data collected in this book as I focus on maternal migration, care, and children’s educational trajectories.

**Gender and Migration**

More than half of the migrants in the world today are women (Population Facts United Nations, 2013). As the principal wage earners for themselves and their families, many women are driven to migrate in search of a living wage, leaving their families and children behind
Gender, historically, has not been an important piece in the dominant economic and sociological theories of migration (Cerrutti & Massey, 2001). Ethnographic research challenges this notion as it shows how gender reveals power differences within households and families. Cerrutti and Massey have found that most female migrants have left their country of origin to follow a husband or a parent (p. 196).

The reality is that an increasing number of Mexican female migrants migrate to the United States alone, leaving their children behind in the care of relatives or friends (Fernández-Kelly, 2008). Although mothers leaving children behind is not a new phenomenon, the number of years mothers stay separated from their children has increased due to longer periods of settlement stemming from the need to reduce the risks of exit and re-entry to the United States. Although some women migrate to reunify with family, Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997) found that 40 percent of their sample of undocumented mothers were working to support children left behind in the country of origin. Studies suggest that transnational migration challenges norms and ideals of family life that involve gender hierarchies (Coe et al., 2011), especially gendered roles and the division of household labor. However, women’s roles in the household and outside of the home vary tremendously according to social and geographical locations (Dreby & Schmalzbauer, 2013). Only recently have scholars begun to examine the life experiences of children of migrant parents, especially children of migrant mothers, in their home country (Bernhard et al., 2005; Dreby, 2010; Boehm, 2011; Hamann & Zúñiga, 2011; Fresnoza-Flot, 2013).

Mexican women’s migration to the United States has always been relevant, but it was not until 1986, with the passage of the Simpson-Rodino Act, which prompted entire families to move to the United States, that scholarly work on female migration developed. The “feminization of migration” (Dwyer, 2004: 36) reflects a global demand for low-priced labor that led women from poor countries to migrate to prosperous countries for jobs.

Undocumented immigration has been, and continues to be, a complex issue of enormous sociopolitical and economic consequence for Latina women who migrate to the United States in search of jobs.1 Single women’s migration is increasing relative to total female out-migration...
from Mexico and Central America (Valdez-Gardea, 2009). Compared to earlier generations, single women leave their countries with several objectives in mind and under vastly different social and economic conditions. This mobility has prompted interest in “transnational motherhood,” the practice of mothers living and working in different countries from those of their children, thus resulting in a “care deficit” in many nations in the global south (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002: 8; Yarova, 2006). In addition, the lack of immigration status contributes to low salary and lack of accountability of employers. Scholars are examining the impact of transnational mothering on children and partners or spouses, as well as on mothers themselves, asking how earning a wage affects women’s engagements with gender hierarchies (Parreñas, 2005a, 2005b: 103; Gálvez, 2011).

Maternal migration may economically benefit children, as mothers may be more regular remitters even though they typically earn less than male migrants (Abrego, 2009). However, the emotional costs of “transnational mothering” may affect children differently when compared to the absence of fathers (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002; Parreñas, 2005a). Because the mother is a nurturing and caring figure in Mexican society and her role is socially valued, mothers are often primary caregivers (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003; Hirsch, 2003; Paz, 1985; Lewis, 1959); hence, the consequences of maternal absence may be significant. Maternal migration may prompt changes in traditional understandings of gender, motherhood, and caregiving.

Mexican migrant women, in contrast to Mexican migrant men, reportedly continue to remit and stay in touch with children even after long periods of separation, yielding new transnational parenting and shared child-rearing practices that have been largely omitted from the literature on transnationalism and migration (Dreby, 2010). However, ideologies of motherhood are slow to change. In her studies of transnational Filipino families, Parreñas (2005a, 2005b) found that the care children received from relatives or other caregivers became obscured because it was not performed by their mothers. Parreñas (2005a) argues that the resulting “gender paradox” harms “children’s acceptance of the reconstitution of mothering and consequently hampers their acceptance of growing up in households split apart from their mothers” (p. 92).
Women in developing nations often resort to migration as a means of family survival (Schmalzbauer, 2005), and transnational mothers struggle with the paradox of having to leave their children in order to care for them. Members of their society call their maternal role into question when Mexican women migrate, and grandmothers, aunts, sisters, elder daughters, or friends assume the role of caregiver for their children. Transnational Latina mothers find themselves negotiating the closeness of family through remittances, gift sending, and various transnational connections.

Although women migrate to provide for their families, the question of how much remittances and migration help migrant families in Mexico is a matter of debate. Remittances can exacerbate economic inequalities in the sending society (Smith, 2005). Families with migrant members enjoy economic advantages (Kandel & Massey, 2002; Cohen, 2004). Children with a US migrant parent have better grades than children in non-migrant households; this trend is assumed to be associated with an increase in overall financial resources for families with a migrant parent (Kandel & Kao, 2001). However, parental migration exerts a heavy emotional toll. Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) find levels of depression to be higher among immigrant children in the United States who experienced separation prior to migration than those who migrate with their parents. Others find that in states with a long-standing tradition of US migration, the migration of a caregiver, including the mother, is associated with academic or behavioral problems and emotional difficulties among children (Carling et al., 2012; Heymann et al., 2009; Lahaie et al., 2009).

**Childhood and Migration**

“Children left-behind” is a term used in the literature to refer to children of immigrant parents who are in the country of origin while the parents are in the host country. The idea of “leaving a child behind” has bothered many scholars, as it is sometimes viewed as synonymous with a negative act, that of abandonment. Mothers who have migrated to the United States discussed openly the difference between “leaving” and “abandoning”: as one mother told me about her daughter, “la dejé, pero no la abandoné” [I left her, but I did not abandon her]. Other scholars
feel the term “left behind” is negative; they prefer the term “stay-behind children,” which alludes to the idea that children “remain” in the same place though other members of the family have departed. During the three years I conducted research with mothers in New York City, they referred to their children in Mexico as “los que están” (the ones who are) or “lo que está” (that which is) in Mexico. All mothers interviewed used the verb “dejar” (to leave) when referring to their departure. In this analysis, I adopt the term “to leave” as a way to capture the differentiation mothers made regarding where their children were located.

“Transnational mothering” has different consequences for children living in societies where the biological mother is socially valued for her provision of care and nurturing, as in Mexico (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994, 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002; Hirsch, 2003; Parreñas, 2005a, 2005b; Horton, 2008; Dreby, 2010). Author Garcia-Zamora (2006), with the help of a 2006 UNICEF-UNDP (United Nations Development Project) field office survey of Zacatecas, Jalisco, and Michoacan (three Mexican states), reports that one-third of households with children in each state were without both a father and a mother. Studies on the lives of children born in the United States to Mexican migrants or brought to the United States by Mexican immigrants are better known, especially with regard to educational attainment. Thirty-six percent of first-generation and 11 percent of second-generation Mexican Americans aged 16 to 24 do not have a high school diploma (or its equivalent) (Brick et al., 2011: 9). College enrollment rates of Mexican Latinos are lower than their peers: among children of Mexican migrants, 33 percent had completed only high school in 2010 (ibid.). Indeed, the 2000 Census showed that more than 40 percent of foreign-born Mexican immigrants living in New York City had less than a twelfth grade education, with no diploma. Children of Mexican immigrants face significant educational challenges: 30 percent of Hispanic public school students report speaking only English at home, and 20 percent of second-generation students report speaking English with difficulty (Fry & Gonzalez, 2008: 11). Further, 28 percent of Hispanic students live in poverty, compared with 16 percent of non-Hispanic students (p. 13). Given the correlation of socioeconomic status, parents’ education level, and English-language ability with academic success, these indicators should give us pause.
The situation becomes even more challenging for mixed-status families. Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) showed how special issues arise in families that have a mix of documented and undocumented children. According to these authors, in some cases the undocumented child may unconsciously become the family’s “scapegoat,” while the documented child may occupy the role of the “golden child” (p. 35). This inequity creates tensions and resentments, as well as guilt and shame. Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco state that one of the most demoralizing aspects of undocumented status is its influence on the educational aspirations of immigrant children. Yoshikawa and Kalil (2011) have found that children of parents without documents tend to live in poverty and overcrowded spaces while facing significant financial issues, including difficulties paying rent or bills.

My research adds a third component of many family structures—children who stay in Mexico. With that in mind, I turn to the idea of transnational care in anthropology.

Transnational Care in Anthropology

Maternal migration is shifting gendered notions of care. Baldassar (2007) and Parreñas (2005b), among others, address the gendered nature of “kinwork,” the routines carried out to reproduce and maintain the transnational social space across the family network. Parreñas’s ethnography of Filipino migrant mothers who leave their children reveals how the issue of their gender comes to the fore as they negotiate the dual roles of transnational breadwinner on the one hand and absent mother on the other.

Further, both roles are dependent on information and communication technologies (facilitating remittances and motherly contact, respectively). Baldassar (2007) observes that email has had the effect of making kinwork less gendered, as male family members with email access are more likely to take the initiative to contact other relatives individually, “thereby reinforcing and sustaining stronger and broader kinship networks” (p. 22). According to Baldassar, as a consequence of their absence and separation, migrants and their children long to be with each other. According to Rhacel Pareñas:
Contemporary transnational households have a different temporal and spatial experience from the binational families of the past. New technologies heighten the immediacy and frequency of migrants’ contact with their sending communities and allow them to be actively involved in everyday life there in fundamentally different ways than in the past. (2005a: 317–318)

However, while transnational migrants may adopt new information and communication technologies to suit their networking needs, the influence of these technologies on social networks, daily life, and community is largely contested. There have not been many studies concerned with how communication technologies affect the lives of children left behind in Mexico by their migrant mothers. Scholars do not automatically assume that increased use of the Internet, mobile phones, or other information and communication technologies makes individuals feel more connected or leads them to become more community-minded.

No doubt women and their children in this study longed to see each other. Longer periods of separation, however, did not necessarily reinforce kinship ties; instead, longer periods of separation allowed relationships to change over time. Mothers were still viewed as central in the children’s lives, but they also understood their role as a co-parent with caregivers in Mexico. Youth in Mexico had no problem asking their mothers for presents and money, but they also had a sense of loyalty to their caregivers. Thus, though children, youth, and mothers in this research all had cellular phones and participated in some sort of social network, communication was complex and did not always lead to feelings of longing for each other. Fights and discussions would erupt and communication was often cut off.

Transnational Care Constellations

To conceptualize care, I develop the notion of transnational care constellations. Dreby (2010) first developed the approach of looking for constellations of migrant parents to more accurately describe changes in family dynamics. Keeping in mind Dreby’s work focused on the parent-child-caregiver constellation, I further develop the concept by putting
the mother in the center and focusing on how care crosses transnational terrains and how it influences the different groups of children in Mexico and in New York City. Some scholars of citizenship similarly use the concept of constellation. Author Rainer Baubock (2010) proposes that the study of citizenship move to a more systematic comparative approach. He suggests the term “citizenship constellation” to denote a structure in which “individuals are simultaneous(ly) linked to several such political entities, so that their legal rights and duties are determined not only by one political authority, but by several” (p. 848). In the same vein, I propose that these individuals are linked and that the relationships they develop are determined not only by interactions between them and the people they live with, but also by people who are away from them, whom they imagine to be a certain way.

In astronomy, a constellation is a recognizable pattern of stars that has official borders and an official designation. The International Astronomical Union explains that throughout human history and across many different cultures, names and mythical stories have been attributed to the star patterns in the night sky, thus giving birth to what we know as constellations. Transnational care constellations became my unit of analysis for examining how everyday life happens across borders. My focus is on the relationships between mother, children, and caregivers. I use this unit of analysis as I seek to shed light not on the entirety of a family system, but on a recognizable pattern of who is involved in caregiving, as well as the everyday teaching and educating of children.

Herein, a transnational care constellation is a recognizable pattern always composed by the mother (“the one who gave birth”), children (in both countries), and caregivers in Mexico. In addition, teachers and fathers have sporadic roles that change according to time, emotional proximity, and physical distance. In the model I propose as a frame of analysis (figure 1.1), the mother is in the center in a larger circle—not because I assign her greater importance, but because she mediates the relationships that occur around her. Financially she is also the one who contributes the most. The other members of the constellation put the mother in a position of power, and she takes on the position of primary decision-maker for many issues regarding parenting, schooling, education, travel, curfew, and finances. In short, transnational separations cannot be viewed solely as affecting mothers and children as isolated
individuals; rather, transnational separations shape the intimately experienced bonds between mothers and children (Horton, 2009). I use the term transnational care constellation as a spatial concept that references how care and familial bonds travel across geographic and imaginary spaces.

Methods

A transnational project that focuses on the experiences and consequences of care constellations requires multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork. In the mid-1980s, George Marcus (1995) explained that even though the most
common mode of ethnographic research was intensively focused upon a single site of ethnographic observation and participation, there was also a second mode. Marcus described the second mode as a “much less common” mode of ethnographic research associated with the wave of intellectual capital labeled postmodern, which moves out from single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space (p. 79). Marcus (1998) explained, “for ethnographers interested in contemporary local changes in culture and society, single-sited research can no longer be easily located in a world system perspective” (p. 82). He explains that multi-sited research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicitly posited logic of association of connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography. Marcus proposes that the ethnographer can: follow the people, follow the thing, follow the metaphor, follow the story, follow the life, or follow the conflict.

Data for this book derive from a multi-sited ethnographic study that seeks to “follow the people” and their stories (Marcus, 1995: 106). As Abu-Lughod wrote, “by focusing closely on particular individuals and their changing relationships, one would necessarily subvert the most problematic connotations of culture: homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness” (1991: 476). Thus, all chapters in this book present findings, insights, and reflections on my engagement with members of transnational care constellations made up of mothers, their children, and their children’s caregivers. Although this study prioritizes the experiences of children with migrant mothers, I found that the interactions between children and caregivers, children and mothers, mothers and caregivers, teachers and children, and sometimes fathers were major parts of the experiences of the folks I studied. I used multi-sited methods to be able to more fully explain the social phenomenon of transnational motherhood. As such, I traveled between New York City and different states in Mexico numerous times over a 32-month period in order to capture the dynamism of communities who are both “here and there.” In Mexico, I conducted research in the states of Puebla, Hidalgo, Vera Cruz, Mexico State, Morelos, and Tlaxcala. I spent most of my time in the state of
Puebla. In the United States, I conducted research in the New York City neighborhoods of East Harlem (Manhattan), Sunset Park (Brooklyn), Jackson Heights (Queens), and the South Bronx.

Drawing on ethnography as well as surveys, I examined transnational caregiving practices among women with mixed-status children in New York and Mexico. After recruiting 20 families to participate in my study (see appendix A for a detailed description), I established three levels of engagement with participants. Eight transnational care constellations constituted the center of my qualitative research. I spent time with them in Mexico and in New York and tracked half of them for more than two years. The second level of engagement happened with the other 12 families, whose members I interviewed and observed in New York City but visited fewer times in Mexico. From the transnational care constellations, I interviewed and observed 30 children in Mexico (15 female and 15 male, ranging in age from seven to eighteen years) and 37 children in New York City (20 female and 17 male, ranging in age from four months to eighteen years).

Finally, participants who belonged to the third level of engagement included 40 mothers in New York City, as well as fathers, caregivers, and more than 60 children and youth in Mexico who were not matched. In addition, I surveyed 225 children between the ages of seven and sixteen in three schools in Puebla to understand the ways in which maternal remittance influenced school achievement. Specifically, I compared the educational experiences and social trajectories of children who stayed in Mexico, undocumented children and youth brought to the United States, and children born in the United States. The children and youth in a “care constellation” share the same biological mother who has migrated to New York City, but their lives differ dramatically in terms of education experience and familial support.

Criteria for inclusion in the study were that the candidates were female Mexican migrants who have been in the United States for at least one year but no more than 15 years, were mothers, and had at least one school-age child in New York City and one in Mexico. I found participants for my research in New York City through three strategies. My first strategy included three sampling methods. Sara was my neighbor’s nanny and the first participant in my research. She introduced me to different women; they, in turn, introduced me to more potential
participants. This sampling technique is what Bernard (2011) calls chain referral or network sampling (p. 147). My second strategy was snowball sampling, in which research participants were asked to identify other potential subjects. My third strategy was respondent-driven sampling (RDS), which involved asking each participant to identify two or more potential subjects, and then expanded through each of those social networks. Snowball sampling and RDS are approaches used for studying hard-to-find or hard-to-study populations. In this study, participants in Mexico were scattered throughout several locations, and in the United States many of my potential subjects were reclusive and “actively hiding” because their most common status of undocumented puts them at risk of deportation. The status of undocumented also infers a “catch-all” term referring to multiple complex statuses. According to Bernard (2006), when well used, RDS methods help the researcher avoid the following problems that sometimes occur with snowball sampling: (1) the people whom a participant names may be less anxious to grant an interview; (2) the recruiting process specifically deals with the likelihood that the target population was potentially reluctant to be interviewed; and (3) RDS methods may produce samples that are less biased than traditional snowball samples (p. 194). I looked for a balance in gender of the children “here and there.” In addition, I looked for families with comparable socioeconomic status so I could generate cohesive conclusions about this specific population.

My second strategy to find participants for my research in New York City was through volunteer work in selected organizations that I knew served immigrant Latino populations. They were the Union Settlement in East Harlem and the Center for Family Services in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. In the South Bronx I visited a Mexican grocery store and restaurant where my husband had lunch every day because it was near his workplace. I became close with the owner, Doña Dora, who allowed me to “hang out” in the space, talk to her employees, and leave my business cards on the counter. Through Doña Dora I met four of the core transnational constellations in my research.

My third strategy to find participants for my research in New York City was to ask fellow researchers and friends who worked with immigrant populations if they knew anyone who would fit the criteria. Recruitment for this research would not have been possible without the
help of others who introduced me to my participants. The nature of the topic is such that it was not easy to gain access into the lives of women and their children.

I conducted interviews and observations with several mothers and their children in the United States and then went to Mexico to meet their children and the caregivers of these children. I identified and recruited additional participants in Mexico through art workshops run by Universidad Iberoamericana in Puebla. There, I met children in two Puebla towns who had one or both parents living in the United States. I conducted interviews and observations with that group. Caregivers put me in contact with the mothers in the United States, whom I later interviewed. Through these many interactions, I collected five kinds of data: (1) structured, semi-structured, and group interviews conducted in Spanish with 68 children (36 female and 32 male, ranging in age from three to eighteen years); in-depth interviews with 31 caregivers and 60 mothers; and informal interviews with 36 family members, 21 teachers, and nine fathers; (2) participant observation documented through field notes with 20 transnational constellations; (3) surveys and drawings of 225 children in schools in Puebla regarding maternal remittances and education aspirations; (4) 88 children’s pictorial representations of what family, home, and the United States look like; (5) correspondence in the form of text messages via cell phones and Facebook messages via computers. Following a well-established tradition in anthropology, I changed all the names of my interviewees to protect their privacy. Table 1.1 is a compiled description of the two sides of the transnational care constellations in this study.

Recruiting participants did not come without significant rejection and suspicion. The undocumented status of participants put them in a tough spot, as they wondered what I would do with the information given. The fact that I am Brazilian and I was on a student visa studying in the United States helped put them at ease. My knowledge of soccer and Spanish was also beneficial to establishing long-lasting relationships with these families. Because I moved back and forth from New York City to Mexico, families trusted me to cross the border with small gifts, pictures, and letters for their families on the other side. They asked me to take pictures or short recordings of their sons and daughters at birthdays and celebrations. My position as a “bridge” for their communications
also helped me build trust. Doing research in Mexico, although dangerous at times, proved to be a simpler task than doing research in New York City. Schedules and time were more flexible in the small towns in Mexico, where I was able to live with each family for a few weeks at a time. I went back and forth for three years, and each time I went to Mexico I was there for a minimum of three months, ultimately spending nine months in total in Mexico.

During a three-year multi-sited ethnographic research project with families in Central New Jersey and Oaxaca, Mexico, Dreby (2010) used a combination of snowball and purposive sampling to interview 142 members of transnational families and recruit a total of 12 families for ongoing ethnographic research. In her research over 18 non-continuous months in the Philippines, Parreñas (2005a) interviewed 30 children with migrant mothers, 26 with migrant fathers, and 13 with two migrant parents. Gálvez (2011), in her two-year multi-sited ethnographic research, combined qualitative and quantitative methods in order to understand women’s narratives of reproduction and motherhood. She used surveys, medical records, and interviews to combine biomedical...
data with cultural practices of patients and their narratives. The number of transnational constellations recruited in this research thus fits within the tradition of other scholars of migration and transnationalism who have done multi-sited research.

Organization of This Book

The two main research questions this study addresses are: How do mothers with one (or more) offspring living in New York City and one child (or more) in Mexico negotiate care, educational support, and investment in their children’s education? And, how do the educational experiences and social opportunities of children in Mexico compare to those of their siblings living in the United States?

Chapter 1 explores the tensions behind the ideals migrant mothers have of caregiving and “mothering.” It addresses the question: How do ideals and practices of motherhood shape mothers’ attitudes toward their children? I discuss how ideals and practices of motherhood that may seem at odds are actually adaptations of what mothers consider to be “good” and “caring” mothers. The very act of leaving and migrating represents a “break” in the nexus of motherhood—which includes physical presence but is made and remade in order to fulfill women’s ideas of what care should be.

Chapter 2 addresses the question of how mothers negotiate and participate in the educational trajectories of children in the United States and in Mexico. It illustrates how mothers in New York City are central decision-makers in school-related issues in Mexico and in the United States, even when there is lengthy separation from the children in Mexico and language and legal status barriers with children in the United States. I argue that mothers in New York and grandmothers in Mexico go through similar challenges when interacting with teachers and school staff in both countries, as they feel like they have little power or influence to assist children. This chapter shows a “split-screen” format, comparing the experiences I observed on both sides of the border regarding school interactions. I also use data from phone calls and text messages across borders to explore how the reach of mothers in New York goes beyond formal boundaries. Thus, I show how Internet and Communication Technologies (ICT) foster regular interactions between mothers
and grandmothers, between mothers in New York City and teachers in Mexico, and between separated siblings when they are doing homework and/or playing.

Chapter 3 explores the perspectives of children and youth on migration and family separation on both sides of the border. Much of the fieldwork for this research was spent with children and youth as they attended social functions, were at home, went to school, and engaged in other activities like sports, dances, and church. From photographs, drawings, poems, and narratives to Facebook messages, text messages, and other tools in social networks, I am able to show how children and youth make sense of migration and how these ideas shape their perspectives about their futures. I focus on two narratives that illustrate the ways young people make sense of migration: The first narrative concerns material goods and socioeconomic status, and the second is concerned with “the other side” or “where the rest of the family” is, informed by their interactions not only with family members who are physically close to them, but also by interactions within the entire transnational care constellation. I use drawings and interview data to explore how their understandings are a product of both their interactions with siblings and the information they receive from their parents.

Chapter 4 compares how Mexican maternal migration has influenced the educational experiences and social opportunities of children in Mexico and their siblings living in the United States. I answer the question: How do high levels of Mexican maternal migration influence the education, migration aspirations, and social opportunities of children in Mexico and their siblings born in or brought to the United States? I argue that some of the assumptions about quality of education and social opportunities in Mexico are complicated when compared to the lives of those who are in the United States. Data for this chapter come from interviews and observations with children, youth, and their teachers in school. I also consider the perceptions of mothers and family members regarding schooling experience on both sides of the border.

How might maternal migration influences vary by the gender of the child? Chapter 5 discusses girls’ superior educational performance as linked to the following narratives: (1) education attainment as a path to reunification with mothers; (2) over-achieving in school to live up to
the expectations of mothers and hoping that academic performance will bring them together; (3) performing well in school with the expectation of receiving material gifts; and (4) school as a space to forget. Finally, I conclude with one story of reunification in New York City and the implications of transnational care constellations as a care arrangement for children, mothers, and caregivers.

The structure of this book represents the trajectory this research has taken over the years. From the starting point, which was mothers, to the growing focus on children, I try to give enough background on families so that the reader can understand the complexities of the stories. The core of the data for this book is based on ethnographic research with 20 constellations. I complement the chapters with data from interviews with 40 other mothers during the course of the three years, as well as with independent surveys with children in Puebla, Mexico. The chapters build on each other in two different ways. Some chapters address the background stories of mothers and their narratives, and other chapters introduce the voices of children and youth, who describe their side of the experience. Second, the chapters attempt to present to the reader the synchronous impact of maternal migration on both sides of the border. As noted earlier, this research required high levels of mobility and flexibility. Even though the constant back and forth and depth of ethnographic observations and interviews with families on both sides of the border can leave one confused, that is precisely how life is experienced by the participants in this study. Thus, I document the experiences of these families as they challenge steady concepts of “host” and “sending” societies, as well as assumptions behind generational mobility and the way in which parenting—especially mothering—influences children and youth’s trajectories.
INTERLUDE 1

Parallel Lives

As I sat in the small, bright, lime green room in the South Bronx, 20 women around me chatted in a lively way. Some of them breastfed, others drank tea, and a few just stared. This was a regular place for some of my research participants to go. It was one of hundreds of Herbalife offices spread out in the city. This particular one, near the “Intervale” stop on the 2/5 subway line, was run by a family of undocumented evangelical Mexican immigrants. The office space represented a “break” for many of these women. A break from their tiny apartments. A break from their routine of cleaning, cooking, and caring for the kids. A “safe place,” as one of them described that February day. Because almost every woman who went there had one or more children, all of the women “took care” of the kids. Aruna, Emilia, and Maya (participants in my research) were regulars. Sometimes they would spend four hours there and only leave after receiving a phone call from their husbands/partners.

During the winter the small office served as a warm space, and during the summer it was one of the few places in the neighborhood with a strong air conditioning system. The women engaged in a daily ritual. I ended up visiting three different Herbalife sites, in the Bronx, Queens, and Sunset Park. Virtually everywhere I recruited a participant she would ask me to go with her to “la batida” (the shake). They called the place “la batida” because the “ritual” of hanging out involved consuming the company’s products. First, “el agua” (flavored water) “because it helps the circulation,” then “el técito” (the little tea) for digestion, and finally “la batida,” which helps you lose weight. Not just any weight; baby weight. “Un consumo,” or this particular sequence of products, costs $5. Many of these women sold Herbalife products door to door, so they would get “un consumo” for free. There was also a big chart on the wall with each woman’s name (my name was eventually added to the chart) that followed each one’s daily check-in and consumption. After accru-
ing ten stars, you receive a “free” product from Herbalife. Women there discussed everything from relationships with their partners to problems with teachers and schools to families they left in the country of origin. The liveliest discussions had to do with telling each other about their own childhoods and their relationships with their own mothers.

“Una tequilita Gabi?” Candela asked me as we sat in the garage of her home in Puebla, Mexico (Field notes, Mexico, May 4, 2012). Candela didn’t drink, but she wanted me to try the handmade tequila her son had brought her a few days before. As we sat there in chairs while I sipped tequila, more women joined us. When I met Candela in 2010, she gave me her “blessing” to do research in her town in the Mixteca poblana. Many of the caregivers of the constellations I was researching came to “hang out” at Candela’s house. Candela was known to be the “informal” mayor of the pueblo. She sold everything: flowers; regalos (gifts) for quinceañeras, weddings, and baptisms; tortillas; and all kinds of “agua” (jamaica, horchata, piña). The women who went there didn’t just sit around and chat, they bought and sold different products, gossiped, and talked about what “El Norte” (the North) had done with their sons and daughters. A nostalgic tone was predominant in their narratives. Memories of how “it used to be” when mothers could raise their children. Memories of when women had a well-defined place and role in society. As Tami, a matriarch raising grandchildren at 72, wondered,

How is it that we have become this type of society that allows and, more than that, needs mothers to leave their children and needs children to leave their mothers? It used to be that you could go to the city [Mexico City] and that was that. But in the last 10, 15, 20 years you have to cross the border to have a future.

Sitting around the coffee table fanning themselves, these women discussed politics and injustice and how corrupt the president was. At the end of every conversation, though, were stories and statements about longing for a period in time when their “families” were together. In the back of Candela’s house there were cans and bottles and packages of shakes, teas, and powder to flavor water from Herbalife. I asked Candela if she bought those things herself and she told me some of it, yes, but the more expensive products were sent by her daughter-in-law from Sunset
Park, Brooklyn. Almost every house I visited in Mexico had one or more products from Herbalife that were bought in Mexico or sent from the United States.

In almost parallel lives, mothers and daughters sit in completely different physical places. They are indeed divided by a physical, spatial border. However, they share many characteristics and talk about each other. In my quest for understanding the relationship between mothers and children left-behind, I was surprised by a “child-mother” bond that did not include the small children I was researching: the intergenerational relationship between mothers and their own mothers, who were often raising some of their grandchildren in the mother’s absence. Out of the 20 care constellations I followed in my research, 17 had a maternal grandmother as primary caregiver of children left-behind. I found that maternal grandmothers’ relationships with their own daughters shaped and influenced concepts related to motherhood and care.