Rancho San Marcos, San Luis Potosí, México. On one of my first days conducting fieldwork in rural Mexico, I found myself looking at a painted photograph of a handsome young man with chiseled features. The yellowed edges of the photo showed its age, and there was a jagged crack in the glass cover. The woman I was visiting, Ofelia, walked in and saw me studying the photo. “That is my late husband, God bless him. He was a good man. That photograph was taken when he was eighteen years old, just weeks before he left for the United States as a bracero,” she explained. She then pointed around the room to several other large photographs of family members who were living in the United States. “That is my daughter-in-law, Mario’s wife, on their wedding day.” The bride was wearing a tiara, surrounded by a cloud of white toile. “The first time I went to the United States was when I traveled to New Mexico for their wedding ceremony.” “That,” she nodded toward a huge photo of a young man in western wear, “is my son Tomás. He hasn’t been home for nearly four years. He went como mojado [without state authorization, literally “as a wetback” but without the negative connotations in English] so it is difficult for him to return to the rancho.” In the photo, Tomás was in a felt cowboy hat; at his waist, a belt buckle with two interlacing horseshoes. “For luck,” she explained, “because it is hard to be in the United States without documents.”

After a moment, she continued: “And here is my granddaughter, Lila, at her quinceañera [fifteenth birthday party] in Albuquerque.” Lila looked like a miniature bride, in a long white dress with pink silk flowers placed throughout her hair, a delicate gold cross necklace around her neck. “Today, seven of my children live in Albuquerque,” Ofelia told me as she looked at the photographs around the room. “Like their father, my sons crossed the border for the first time when they were young, in search of work to make a living. Now several of my daughters have migrated as well. I have even waded...
“Through the Rio Grande myself,” she said. “My late husband never would have imagined it!” She paused, and was silent as she glanced at each of the portraits, “Yes, there have been many changes since my husband first went to the United States so many years ago. It is hard to believe.”

*Albuquerque, New Mexico, United States* Just weeks before departing for Mexico, I had visited Ofelia’s daughter Lucía and her husband, Victor, in a recently purchased house in Albuquerque, where they were hosting a third birthday party—an important milestone among Mexicans—for their son, Carlito. Lucía greeted me at the door, “¡Bienvenida! Please, come inside. Can you believe how different it is from our apartment?!” Lucía asked, referring to a small two-bedroom apartment they had rented before the move. “After fourteen years, we finally have our own place.” There were more than fifty family members in attendance, including Ofelia’s children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren. The television was on, although no one seemed to be watching it; a small metallic banner, *Feliz Cumpleaños*, was draped above it. Several men were seated around the dining room table—some of Victor’s and Lucía’s brothers, as well as several cousins. There was another group of men in the backyard, overseeing the preparation of *carnitas* in a small firepit they had built. Children were running around, and several were jumping on a trampoline.

Lucía guided me into the kitchen, where nearly twenty women and girls filled the room. They greeted me and continued their conversation about a cousin’s upcoming wedding and the recent deportation of a family friend. “It has been such a struggle for his wife,” Lucía explained to me. “Can you imagine? Three young children, no income, such uncertainty about the future.” The women whispered about the recent behavior of a community member—he bought a truck, had been going to shows, and had been staying out late drinking. There were even rumors that he was seeing another woman, especially scandalous given that he and his common-law wife had a newborn baby. The women were interrupted occasionally when someone ran a plate of food and a glass of orange soda out to a newcomer, but they picked up where they left off as soon as she returned. They heaped food onto a plate for me and protested when I did not eat it all. Lucía’s sister Zulema looked around the room as she described her large family, “We don’t even need friends, we have so many family members . . . and this is a small celebration!” she told me, laughing.

The partygoers were fascinated to hear that I would be visiting the rancho, their home, and they prepared me for my arrival by offering advice for my stay. “The rancho is isolated, there is nothing there,” Lucía told me. “But I
love it, I miss it. I often dream of living there again.” Lucía’s sister-in-law, who was born in the United States, recounted how she had to walk out in the corral, next to the pigs and goats, to go to the bathroom during her first visits to San Marcos. “I demanded that my husband buy his mother a toilet,” she said. “So, fortunately, you will have a bathroom when you stay at my mother-in-law’s house!” One of Lucía’s brothers told me that I should make a trip out to the milpas soon after arriving. “It is beautiful, very peaceful. The beans will be nearly ready for harvest when you go.” Lucía’s son provided a lengthy description of the animals at his grandmother’s home—pigs, goats, dogs, a horse. “If you go with my grandmother when she feeds them,” he assured me, “you will be able to see them all.” Finally, Lucía’s teenage daughter, Cora, pulled me aside and warned me about the rancho. Her face was very close to mine as she whispered that it can be “soooo boring there.” She added that despite how quiet the rancho is, she hoped to visit her grandmother sometime in the upcoming year, so perhaps we would have a chance to see each another in Mexico.

When I left the party late in the evening, Lucía had Victor carry a box out to my car. The box was filled with gifts for her mother and other family members, including clothes and shoes, some toys, and a small television. Lucía and Victor made small talk, and then there was a pause. “I wish we could go with you to our home,” Lucía said longingly. “Well, to one of our homes,” she added, looking back at her newly purchased house. “We are de ambos lados [from both sides]—from here and from there,” joked Victor. “I suppose we are from two places.”

In my work with transnational Mexicans, I have often asked individuals to imagine a scenario in which there are no barriers to movement between Mexico and the United States, and then I ask them where they would choose to live.¹ Almost always, Mexican (im)migrants tell me they would prefer the freedom to “go and come [ir y venir],” that ideally they would like to be in both countries and to create lives that are, as Victor described, “from both sides.” Yet while there are transnational Mexicans who do move back and forth to create homes in both places, the barriers preventing such movement are many. The presence of the U.S. state is strong in everyday lives, evident through the categories that define and exclude members of the nation, as well as growing border controls, an increasing number of deportations of Mexican nationals, and shifting U.S. immigration policies.

Such processes limit cross-border movement, so that even if one does “go and come,” it can be with months, years, or even decades between migrations.
north or south. And for all Mexican nationals, including those who have naturalized as or were born U.S. citizens, there are factors that prevent them from leading a life characterized by fluid, unrestricted movement between Mexico and the United States. Different subjectivities, experiences, and circumstances—based on legal status, as well as age, gender, sexuality, socio-economic class, access to resources, race/ethnicity, marital status, and family ties—intersect with political-economic realities, shaping who migrates; if, when, and how often they do so; and the character of their border crossings and lengths of stay in the United States.

This book explores the intersection of intimacy and “illegality,” uncovering the everyday experiences of migrant families—spaces that are often understood as domestic or private—as well as the public state actions that penetrate family life in multiple ways. Transnational Mexicans experience what I understand to be “intimate migrations,” flows that both shape and are structured through gendered and familial actions and interactions, but are always defined by the presence of the U.S. state. The following chapters explore how state-regulated migration and migrants’ emic understandings of family position, gendered selves, and generation are intertwined. Contextualizing today’s transnational movement within migration trajectories of the past, it is clear that ostensibly “intimate” relations—in the sense of personal, close, familial—have long been shaped by the state’s power to categorize migrants.

One’s U.S. immigration status, and what anthropologist Nicholas De Genova identifies as “the legal production of migrant ‘illegality’” (De Genova 2002: 419), is a constant backdrop to the intimate dimensions of transnational migration. Following De Genova and others (e.g., Coutin 2000; Chavez 2007; De Genova 2002; De Genova and Peutz 2010; Ngai 2004; Wileen 2007), I problematize the very notion of “illegality” and aim to “de-naturalize the reification” of categories such as “legal,” “illegal,” and “alien” (Peutz and De Genova 2010: 3). Thus, these terms are used throughout the book with the recognition that they are constructions that reflect particular historical and political conditions rather than absolute or natural categories. The effects of such constructions are, of course, profound, and a principal goal of my work is to demonstrate the inaccuracy and inadequacy of this system of classification that shapes virtually all discourse about and experiences of (im)migration in the United States today.

Drawing on scholarship across disciplines, this book engages theories of transnationality and borderlands, state power and the construction of illegality, gender relations, family and kinship, childhood, and transnational intimacies. The ethnographic study of transnational migration reveals much
about both the structuring of intimate lives and state power, and especially how state controls manifest in the everyday experiences of transnational Mexican women, men, and children. In much research about migration, intimate relationships go largely unnoticed. By demonstrating how intimate relations direct migration, and by examining kin and gender relationships explicitly through the lens of “illegality,” this research offers a new approach to the study of the state, transnational migration, and intimate interactions.

While this project is informed by multidisciplinary research, it is also an ethnography that considers questions central to cultural anthropology. The book makes as its point of departure the “cultural logics” (Ong 1999) of gender and family that migrants embrace, reject, and/or reconfigure as they interact with state structures in a transnational space. It focuses on exchanges that are uniquely interpreted through ethnographic research: kinship and the (re)production of families; gendered subjectivities and relations; constructions of age and movement through the life cycle; and the character of negotiations between individuals and state regimes. Each of these intersecting lines of inquiry advances our understanding of the workings of kinship, gender, and age/generation, but also transnationality, state power, and “illegality.”

**Between Here and There**

When Victor described his family as “from both sides—from here and from there,” he was also articulating the notion of existing “in-between” (Bhabha 1994:1; Schuck 1998). Certainly, for transnational (im)migrants, there are “multiple ‘heres’ and ‘theres’” (Sirkeci 2009: 4), “restless movement” that is “here and there, on all sides, fort da, hither and thither, back and forth” (Bhabha 1994: 1). For example, while some immigrants may conceive of “the other side” as the homeland (e.g., Gabaccia 1994), transnational Mexicans understand “the other side” to be the destination. These “moving targets” (Appadurai 1989) are clearly relational and situational, much like the many ties and divisions among partners, family members, and adults and children that are described throughout this book. Close attention to the contexts within which people move or not reveals the intersection of spatiality and belonging, and demonstrates how transnational Mexicans are often caught between here and there, whether as a person walking across the border, an individual in the United States yearning for “home,” the partner of a migrant who has never been to the other side, or a child who is sent north or south by family members.

Transnational Mexican migrants use decidedly spatial terms to depict movement and their “place” in the world—territorial locales as well as sym-
bolic spaces of membership and exclusion. Migrants understand themselves as belonging to, divided between, and outside of two nation-states: here and there. (Im)migrants are, in their own words, “de ambos lugares/from both places” and “de ambos lados/from both sides,” “mitad allá, mitad aquí/half there, half here,” “del otro lado/from the other side,” and, tellingly, “ni de aquí, ni de allá/from neither here nor there.” While transnational movement makes “geographical and territorial certainties seem increasingly fragile” (Appadurai 1989: i), place matters even as it is transcended (Boehm 2010). Transnational subjects do not experience “placelessness” (Appadurai 1989: iii) as much as a “(re)construction of ‘place’ or locality” in which “points of origin” are “transferred and regrounded” (Vertovec 2009: 12). Guided by research participants, my analysis of transnational migration is indeed rooted in places but also, centrally, captures how lives extend beyond particular locations.

The theme of place as geographic locale but also as a metaphor for position, experience, or situation (see Feld and Basso 1996) runs throughout the book. The narratives of transnational Mexicans capture the contradictions of migration and separation—going and staying, connections and divisions, movement and its obstacles—and are powerful descriptions of the experiences of transnational Mexicans as they go and do not go between Mexico and the United States. Recognizing the problematic character of “either/or tropes” (Bailey 2009: 80), I write against the lure to “place” people geographically and conceptually as either here or there. Such work challenges the widely accepted and “decidedly modern” notion of the “excluded middle,” that is, the idea that someone or something must “be here or there, but not in both places at once” (see Pollock et al. 2002: 11–12). Significantly, the assumption of an “excluded middle” permeates much more than conceptions of place; it drives policies, defines the U.S. categorization of (im)migrants, and perpetuates profound social injustice. Indeed, forcing transnational Mexicans into particular categories and “places” appears to be one of the U.S. state’s guiding projects.

In addition to questioning the here–there binary, this book complicates multiple conceptual divides of the current moment—including public–private, intimate–structural, individual–collective, immigrant–nonimmigrant, man–woman, and adult–child—to consider how transnational Mexicans experience locations and positions as both, neither, divided, and/or between. It is through these situated depictions of (im)migrants’ everyday lives that I develop an analysis of the nexus of intimacy and state power. Close consideration of kinship, gender, and generation in transnational per-
spective shows how individuals and families are divided and united (part I), captures the fluidity and disruptions within gendered kin relations (part II), and demonstrates the simultaneity of belonging and exclusion that increasingly defines the lives of transnational Mexicans of all ages (part III). Tracing the “interactional wear and tear involved in this daily work of reproduction in a diasporic world” (Appadurai 1989: iii–iv), this ethnography portrays the character of state power as Mexican (im)migrants interact with family members; form, sustain, and/or dissolve partnerships across the U.S.-Mexico border; and negotiate with parents, children, and caregivers—transnational lives that are, in many ways, between here and there.