

INTRODUCTION

WORKING THE BOUNDARIES

This is a book about the laborious condition of working men and women, and about the borders and boundaries that have meaningfully framed their lives and labors, but above all, it is about the everyday struggles that go into producing those boundaries. It is not a book that pretends to be a complete or comprehensive scientific account of fixed and finally knowable objective truths. Although it is very much a book about social realities, it is less about how a *thing* called society really is than about how social *life* comes to appear so thinglike, and about how people immersed in those processes seek to make sense of them. In other words, this book is about the inherently contradictory messiness of ongoing social dynamics and conflict, and the always unresolved processes of social becoming and transformation. It takes as its fundamental starting point the premise that “things” could have been different, and that nothing has to remain as it presently appears. Thus, this is a book about how specific people in a particular place have inherited the manifold consequences of a complex history but also have been and continue to be vital participants in the making of that history and their distinct location within it, in a manner that necessarily leaves them ultimately situated at the center of an open-ended historicity. Therefore, this book is more about questions than conclusions, and the critical formulation of problems that ought to be even more vexing by the end of the book than they were when it began. In this sense, this is a book not only about the ways that the significant boundaries that define social life get elaborated in everyday practice, but also about working and reworking the boundaries of how we even begin to understand and think about those lines of difference and division that impose their dreadful order on the sheer restlessness and creative ferment of living and historical becoming.

More specifically, this book examines the everyday *processes* of transnational migration, racialization, labor subordination, and class formation, as well as the historical production of the structures of citizenship

and immigration law that have defined the relationship of Mexican migrants to the U.S. nation-state as its iconic “illegal aliens.” Emphasizing processes, all these analytic categories refer precisely to the vital *movement* of social life itself. Migration, by definition, is about movement across space, and transnational migration is best understood as a movement of people across the borders that differentiate nation-state spaces. By the term *racialization*, likewise, I emphasize the dynamic processes by which the meanings and distinctions attributed to “race” come to be *produced* and continually reproduced, and more important, are always entangled in social relations and conflicts, and thus retain an enduring significance because their specific forms and substantive meanings are eminently historical and mutable. This study presents an ethnographic account of the ways that Mexican migrants in the United States become embroiled in a reconfiguration of what it means to be “Mexican” in relation to the dominant U.S. racial polarity of whiteness and Blackness,¹ and thus examines how their experiences of racialization provide a crucial standpoint of critique from which to interrogate the racial economy of the U.S. nation-state. Furthermore, when I refer to *labor subordination* and *class formation*, these terms specifically signal the always unresolved and contingent *struggle* intrinsic to the labor-capital relation due to the necessary and constitutive role of labor within, and simultaneously against, capital. Finally, when I suggest a legal *production* of citizenship and migrant “illegality,” historically, my aim is to denaturalize the commonplace notion that migratory movement can be equated with transgressing that “thing” we know as the law, and to underscore instead the deliberate and calculated interventions by which particular laws have effectively generated undocumented Mexican migrants’ “illegal” status.²

Among those whom I have designated in this book as “Mexican/migrant,” there was inevitably a remarkable heterogeneity of experiences and conditions, ranging from seasonal migration to long-term settlement, and from undocumented legal status to U.S. citizenship. When the category *migrant* is deployed here, it should not be confused with the more precise term *migratory*. Rather, the term *migrant* is intended to do a certain epistemological work, to serve as a category of analysis that disrupts the implicit teleology of the more conventional term *immigrant*. The terms *immigrant* and *immigration*, in other words, imply a one-directional and predetermined movement of outsiders coming in and thus are conceptual categories that necessarily can be posited only from the standpoint of the (migrant-receiving) U.S. nation-state. Throughout

this book, therefore, unless referring specifically to U.S. immigration law, policy, or politics, I rely on the category *migrant* and systematically reject the term *immigrant* in order to retain a sense of the *movement*, intrinsic incompleteness, and consequent irresolution of social processes of migration. I use the term *Mexican/migrant*, furthermore, to refer specifically to people who had migrated from Mexico to the United States. Regardless of their various legal statuses and heterogeneous migration histories, Mexican migrants in Chicago virtually never used terms such as *Mexican American* or *Chicana/o* to identify themselves; they pervasively referred to themselves simply as “mexicana/o” in Spanish, and “Mexican” in English. Similarly, Mexicans born or raised in the United States also predominantly identified themselves simply as “Mexican,” rather than either “Chicana/o” or “Mexican American.” Although there were often substantive differences in their citizenship statuses as well as other meaningful divergences that were the consequence of having been raised in either Mexico or the United States, both migrants from Mexico and U.S.-born Mexicans nevertheless tended to identify themselves the same way in Chicago (see Davalos 1993; Guerra 1998; Valdés 2000). Thus, in this book, the term *Mexican* refers to both and is generally modified as “migrant,” “U.S.-born,” or “raised in the United States,” as required by context. This inherent ambiguity and heterogeneity about being “Mexican,” regardless of one’s place of birth, citizenship status, or cultural orientations and tastes, is instructive; it reflects an expression in everyday practice of the resignification of Mexicanness as a specifically *racialized* category within the U.S. social order.

Ever since Mexican migration to Chicago began during the first decades of the twentieth century, there has always been a preponderance of migrants who come from the central-western Mexican states of Michoacán (perhaps singularly accounting for one-fifth to one-quarter of the total), Jalisco, Guanajuato, and Zacatecas (Gamio 1930 [1971]; Jones 1928 [1971]; Taylor 1932; and see Año Nuevo Kerr 1976; Rosales 1978; Weber 1982). The small neighboring state of Aguascalientes likewise provided a noteworthy number of migrants, historically, but this has become relatively insignificant numerically. In addition to these primary “sending” states, substantial numbers have migrated from Durango and San Luis Potosí (further north) as well as the central state of México (including the Federal District), and Guerrero (further south). Finally, there are also smaller but noteworthy numbers of migrants from the central-eastern states of Querétaro, Hidalgo, and Puebla, from Morelos (south-central),

as well as from Nuevo León and Chihuahua (northern border states). As of 2002, there were more than 160 Mexican hometown associations and seven state federations—Durango, Guanajuato, Guerrero, Jalisco, Michoacán, San Luis Potosí, and Zacatecas—organized in the Chicago metropolitan area (Cano n.d.). But beyond all the diversity of their origins—beyond village or city, province, and region—Mexican migrants to Chicago are incorporated into the U.S. social order in a way that is, from the start, incorporation into a racial order, where they are racialized—as “Mexicans.”

The research for this book relied upon ethnographic techniques, but it is not an ethnography in the conventional sense. It does not presume to be an all-encompassing study of a discrete and identifiable community or the authoritative representation of a “culture.” Rather, this study builds upon an ethnographic engagement with the everyday lives and struggles of transnational Mexican migrants in Chicago (now the second largest urban concentration of Mexican residence in the United States after Los Angeles), in order to analyze the social productions of race, space, and migrant “illegality,” and how they intersect as decisive features of class relations in the United States. By investigating the actual dynamics of racialization and illegalization through ethnographic methods, this book foregrounds the emergence of a transnational Mexicanness that is distinctly racialized in the United States in a way that exposes the concomitant production of a racialized “American”-ness. Rather than giving an exhaustive case study of a particular Mexican/migrant neighborhood or workplace, then, this book presents an ethnographic critique of U.S. nationalism as a racial formation and seeks to contribute to the formulation of a radically transnational paradigm for the study of migration, citizenship, and the production of nation-state space.

The research for this study was primarily located in a variety of industrial workplaces and urban spaces throughout the Chicago metropolitan area. During the primary research period, over two and a half years from May 1993 through December 1995, I was employed as an instructor of English as a Second Language and basic mathematics (in Spanish) in ten industrial workplaces (predominantly metal-fabricating factories), located throughout the city and some of its industrial suburbs.³ Factory classrooms thus emerge in this book as uniquely dialogical and highly politicized sites where Mexican migrants explored questions about labor subordination and class formation within a global division of labor, their experiences of racialized conflict and discrimination related to employ-

ers' divisive labor recruitment and workplace organization strategies, as well as the racialized politics of language, "assimilation," and nativism. During this same period, I was living in the almost exclusively Mexican neighborhood known as Pilsen, or *La Dieciocho* (the Eighteenth Street barrio), on Chicago's Near Southwest Side (a.k.a. Lower West Side), which has historically been the city's most prominent site of Mexican community organizing. Later, I again resided in Pilsen during a second yearlong period of research (August 1999–August 2000).⁴ During the primary research period, I also worked, to a much more limited extent, as a teacher in nonworkplace settings, including three community organizations in the Pilsen neighborhood and a voluntary vocational training and job-placement program in the majority-Mexican working-class suburb of Cicero. In addition to factory-based ethnography, then, this book draws from participant observation in the communities where I lived and worked, as well as approximately two dozen semistructured, open-ended "life-history" interviews conducted in people's homes in neighborhoods throughout the metropolitan area.⁵ Thus, the research was also situated in a wide array of Chicago's urban and suburban working-class and poor communities, where Mexicans commonly found themselves inhabiting either notoriously segregated interstitial Mexican or mixed-Latino zones between impoverished African American communities and working-class white neighborhoods in flight, or ghettoized enclaves within deteriorating, historically white working-class areas. However, this book explores the apparently local workplace conflicts or struggles over racialized urban space in Chicago in relation to experiences of undocumented border crossing, the everyday practices of migrant "illegality," and innumerable productions of a transnational social formation linked to countless communities throughout Mexico.

The racialization of Mexican migrants is located in this book at the center of broader discourses of nationalism and nativism that have been elaborated in historically specific ways since the late 1960s and became remarkably pronounced during the period of my ethnographic research in the mid 1990s. This more contemporary history of Mexican migration and racial formation in Chicago is likewise situated within the deeper historical framework of conquest and colonization in the U.S. Southwest, and the subsequent proliferation of interwoven ensembles of transnational social relations between the United States and Mexico. My ethnography is further contextualized in relation to the long history of racialized prerogatives underpinning U.S. citizenship, immigration law,

and naturalization policy that chart an institutional nexus linking U.S. citizenship, white supremacy, and the racialization of Mexican/migrant “illegality.”

THE ARGUMENT

Mexican migration to the United States and the social status of Mexican/migrant workers are distinguished by an irreducibly singular historical specificity that has been racialized, spatialized, legislated, and enforced. Thus, Mexican/migrant transnational social formations in the United States must be situated at the intersection of three integrally related and mutually constitutive features. First, transnational Mexican migration has historically been and continues to be primarily a *labor* migration, and so it is necessary to examine its preponderantly proletarianized class composition within and against global capitalism. Furthermore, Mexican migration comes to be *racialized* as specifically “Mexican” in relation to the hegemonic polarity of whiteness and Blackness within the space of the U.S. nation-state. Finally, the specific transnational character of Mexican migration is constituted across the nation-state border between the United States and Mexico and thus must be considered in specific political relation to the legal economy of the U.S. nation-state. Its precise migrant status is profoundly implicated in the production of nation-state space and the *spatialized* difference between “American”-ness as a national identity and Mexicanness as a racialized transnationality. By exploring the social productions of race, space, and “illegality” for Mexican labor migration, and the particular transnational social formation constituted by their conjuncture in Chicago, therefore, this book does not seek to make authoritative anthropological claims about Mexicans or their supposed “culture,” but rather deploys ethnographic techniques in order to focus a critical lens on the significance of racialized and spatialized difference and the unequal politics of citizenship as constitutive features of class relations within the space of the U.S. nation-state.

A forceful politics of anti-immigrant restrictionism and nativism, distinguished by its specifically anti-Mexican racialized content, prevailed in the United States during the the mid-1990s, when this book’s research was conducted. Rather than treat this nativism as a transhistorical and presumably always latent political impulse in the United States, however, this book emphasizes the specificity of late-twentieth-century immigration restrictionism in light of an unprecedented and expansive legal produc-

tion of “illegality” for Mexican migration in particular, beginning in the late 1960s. Further, the book locates nativism as a crucial feature of nationalism that helps to resolve the problem posed for any nation-state by the contingency of the nation through a kind of hegemonic identity politics that promotes the priority of “natives” over “immigrants,” simply on the basis of their being native. Thus, nativism appears to be necessary for the productions of national identity. In this light, nativism tends to ground claims not only against immigration but also in favor of it, by always evaluating migration from the standpoint of citizens who authorize themselves to debate the question in terms of what is good for “the nation.” Similarly nativist conceits are likewise pervasive in hegemonic U.S. discourses concerning migration, which subsume diverse and distinct migrations into the teleological discourses of *immigration* and assimilation and thus are posited always from the standpoint of the migrant-receiving U.S. nation-state. Through a critique of such nationalist premises, this book lays a groundwork for a more rigorously transnational paradigm for the study of migration.

This counternationalist paradigm and its critical standpoint on the U.S. nation-state are embodied in the formulation of *Mexican Chicago* as a transnational conjunctural space—a Chicago that is practically and materially implicated in Mexico and thus, a Chicago that can be understood to belong meaningfully to Latin America. Locating Mexican Chicago as its unique standpoint of critique, the book makes a critical intervention aimed at a transnational reconceptualization of the theoretical paradigms that ground Chicano studies, Latin American studies, and American (U.S.) studies.⁶ The research that is the basis for this book emerged from a multiplicity of sites across a metropolitan space that is not at all delimited by a bounded geographical locale, and moreover, is not reducible simply to a population of Mexican people contained in such a place. Not merely an “ethnic enclave” or an “immigrant” ghetto, then, Mexican Chicago is a conjuncture of social *relations* and thus comprises innumerable places. Understood as a conjuncture of the national and the transnational, furthermore, Mexican Chicago is constituted through the everyday social relations and meaningful practices of a racialized labor migration, capitalist enterprises, and the U.S. nation-state. Thus, Mexican Chicago emerges in this study as the conjuncture of an urban ethnographic site (comprised of a multiplicity of particular places across the metropolitan region) and a set of specific questions about class formation, racialization, and the transnational politics of space.

Migrant “illegality” proves to be a decisive feature of the distinctive racialization of Mexicans in the United States. Rather than naturalize this “illegal” or undocumented condition, however, the book demonstrates empirically how U.S. immigration law has generated the juridical categories of differentiation among various migrations, defined the parameters of “legality,” and continually revised the possibilities for “legal” migration in ways that have been disproportionately restrictive for Mexicans in particular, and increasingly so. The U.S. nation-state’s enforcement of immigration law and policing along the U.S.-Mexico border, notably, have long sustained the operation of a revolving-door policy—simultaneously implicated in *importation* as much as (in fact, far more than) deportation (Cockcroft 1986). This study contends that the legal production of migrant “illegality” has never served simply to achieve the apparent goal of deportation, so much as to regulate the flow of Mexican migration in particular and to sustain its legally vulnerable condition of *deportability*—the possibility of deportation, the possibility of being removed from the *space* of the U.S. nation-state. It is deportability, and not deportation as such, that has historically rendered Mexican labor to be a distinctly disposable commodity. “Illegality” is thus lived through a palpable sense of deportability whereby some are deported in order that most may remain (undeported) as workers. In other words, “illegality” provides an apparatus for producing and sustaining the vulnerability and tractability of Mexican migrants as labor. In this way, migrant “illegality” is a spatialized social condition that becomes inseparable from the particular ways that migrant workers from Mexico are racialized as “illegal aliens” within the United States, and thus as “Mexican” in relation to “American”-ness.

The intertwined racializations of Mexicanness and “American”-ness, furthermore, expose the workings of U.S. nationalism itself as a racial formation for which “American” national identity is inherently racialized as white. This book’s ethnographic research reveals how Mexican migrants in Chicago tended to systematically infer and consistently recapitulate a socially ubiquitous equation of “American”-ness with racial whiteness, to the exclusion of African Americans as well as U.S.-citizen Latinos (including Mexicans born in the United States).⁷ Mexican migrants thus negotiated their own reracialization as Mexican, always in relation to both a dominant whiteness and its polar opposite, a subjugated and denigrated Blackness. While this book is indeed centrally concerned with the production of Mexicanness in the migrant encounter in

the United States, therefore, this is *not* a study of something that might be called “Mexican culture.” Rather, this book explores the social production of a “Mexican”-ness that is always doubly produced at the conjunctures of race and space, as an “illegal” transnationality, reracialized between whiteness and Blackness within the space of the U.S. nation-state.

