Transformations of

*La Familia*

on the U.S.-Mexico Border

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Introduction

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The U.S.-Mexico border is in many ways a unique space where family ties, Mexican and U.S. policies, and the Spanish and English languages are central components of everyday life. The borderlands is a place where families negotiate identities while interacting within changing social, political, and economic dynamics. For example, one resident, Mercedes, describes this complexity: “There are three worlds. You have the Mexican, the American, and the one here at the border, because here you have a combination of both cultures and it’s different from the Mexican and the American.” Her relatives from Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, treat her American home as their base on the U.S. side. They visit often, shop in the United States, participate in community activities on both sides of the border, and feel comfortable in Spanish and English. This is a “transborder” family.

Twenty-seven-year-old Nancy is a resident of an extended border urban area. She has a four-year-old son and a seven-month-old daughter who were born in the United States and are U.S. citizens. Her Mexican-born husband is presently serving in the U.S. military in Iraq. Nancy’s mother came to el norte as an undocumented immigrant when she was eight months pregnant with Nancy, thus making Nancy, who
was herself born in the United States, an American citizen. Her mother returned to Mexico with Nancy while her father continued to work in construction in Texas. Her father returned annually to see his family. Nancy continued her schooling in Mexico until seventh grade, when her mother rejoined her father, who was by then a U.S. citizen living in San Antonio. She earned her high-school diploma in San Antonio. Thus, Nancy has lived a transnational life as a U.S. citizen growing up in Mexico, attending school on both sides of the border, and celebrating traditional milestones in both countries. Nancy and her husband were raised in the same rural village in Mexico, and relatives living in the United States and Mexico maintain close contacts.

Mercedes and Nancy are representative of the families whom we write about in this book—families who live as if there are no borders. The complexity of their lives illustrates why we have chosen to include the terms “transborder,” “transnational,” and “binational” in this volume even though each of these terms reflects a different conceptual approach. Some families are “transborder”—they go back and forth on a daily basis to work, attend school, or tend to family needs. Other families live in the United States and have less frequent contact with their community of origin, but they have relatives who reside in Mexico and the United States, own homes in both countries, run businesses that have clients or markets on both sides of the border, and are economically, socially, and emotionally “transnational.” Still other families have qualified for dual nationality and are legal citizens of both countries. Their relationships with the border are shaped by the legal status that allows many forms of incorporation that noncitizenship denies. Many of the families whom we write about in these chapters include members who are undocumented, naturalized citizens, residents with various types of visas, U.S.-born citizens, or citizens with dual nationality. While using the terms transborder, transnational, and binational may seem analytically murky, all three indeed reflect the reality of border families.

Introducing Our Objectives

We enter this discussion fully recognizing that the wide expanse of the international border presents a serious challenge for researchers and policymakers, but perhaps even more so for the families who live
within the borderlands. There is a wealth of border issues that have been researched, particularly macro-level issues related to economics, immigration rates, and trade, but very few studies look at the micro-level impact of border immigration patterns, economic systems, and policies on families who live in the region. Existing research on border families (Ojeda de la Peña 1995; Vélez-Ibáñez 1996; Vila 2000, 2003, 2005) shows that members work in the United States and Mexico, with frequent crossings for visits with relatives, child care, shopping, or entertainment. The border is also an area where some of the poorest families in both countries reside. *Colonias*, or settlements that often lack the basic necessities for family life, are common along the north and south sides. The chapter by Yolanda Padilla and Ana Marie Argilagos in this volume addresses the specific sociodemographic makeup of the border region, with statistics that glaringly illustrate the impact of poverty on families and children.

The concept of family has changed over time to include single parents, extended families, and other nontraditional households, but we affirm the power of families to direct the course of individual lives. We focus on families as important social and economic units of society seriously affected by the border issues of trade, narcotics and prostitution, water rights, unregulated immigration, and labor migration. Much of the existing work on women along the border has been issue driven—for example, female homicides, women working in *maquiladoras* or as prostitutes. These issues obscure the important role of women in the daily economic, cultural, social, political, and family life on the border. Rosa Linda Fregoso (2003: xiv) writes about the shaping of social identities and the “historical, material and discursive effects of contact zones and exchanges among various communities on the Mexico-U.S. border, living in the shadows of more than 150 years of conflict, interactions and tensions.” Our perspectives are united in an interactionist framework arguing that what family members say and do and how they are presented take on a reality of their own. The family is not a stock social unit but the creation of its participants as they relate to one another and to the larger society. Families change in response to women’s economic strategies, labor market participation, and negotiations with spouses and relatives.

This border area is also grounded in a rich Mexican culture of strong family values, historical legacies, and the engagement and blending of English and Spanish. Women on the border face the impact of
differential labor markets based on female work. They negotiate gendered space within social networks and experience different patterns of migration within the course of their lives. Women confront multiple challenges presented by transnational and immigrant labor as domestics, housekeepers, and nannies. The economic conditions on both sides affect the jobs of heads of families and the income and wealth accumulation of border families and their members.

Families on both the U.S. and Mexican sides are similarly affected by negative images and stereotypes that influence adolescents and young children growing up in these areas; moreover, pollution impacts children’s health and causes birth defects and other medical problems. La frontera, or the extended border, is also where the “grating” of two nations occurs (Anzaldúa 1987). There, two power differentials make contact, producing an environment that may either lack economic opportunities or provide economic advantages for residents of each country. These elements have made and continue to make the borderlands a unique place.

Gender and the Border

The authors contributing to this book are border women who have grown up along la frontera. The borderlands are our heritage as well as the heritage of our families who settled this region. As women, we have experienced both the good and the bad in family relationships. Most of us have endured the unequal power arrangements between men and women in the larger society, the disparate power in terms of wealth and capital that women bring to marriage, the dilemmas of finding adequate day care and good schooling for children, and other aspects of family life that relate to gendered discourses about femininity and masculinity, male and female roles, and male dominance.

Women as heads of household in the borderlands are often entrepreneurs in the informal economy that is so vital and central to the prosperity of the region. The contributions made by these women are often omitted from the formal statistics gathered on labor market participation, unemployment, and income. Heads of household may live on one side of the border and work on the other, taking advantage of economic opportunities where they find them. Policies in both countries affect their work, their children, and their families.
Methodological Approach

The scholars included in this volume—Latinas, immigrant women, or academics dedicated to immigrant issues—bring a broad collective knowledge that critically informs their analyses of border dynamics. A major concern as we designed both the research questions and the studies found here was that our scholarship reflect our lifetime of experiences and perceptions about the border. Rather than focus on traditional economic and social categories or common indexes found in the literature and in government reports, we have instead developed indicators reflecting the complexity of border dynamics. Attention to complexity has become the strength of the book, giving it breadth and depth in addressing perspectives from both sides of the border. The thematic threads of gender and family as well as transborder, transnational, and binational issues are interwoven throughout the chapters.

The authors incorporate ethnographic and qualitative approaches, literary and arts analyses, participatory research, and quantitative analyses drawn from various U.S. and Mexican data sets. Our analytical framework examines the border from the nation-state to state, county, and city levels but focuses on the family, or la familia. We concentrate on the issues surrounding Latino families because Latinos represent a majority of the U.S. residents along the border (see Padilla and Arreguin-Torres, this volume). Additionally, we include normative indicators of the Latino population along the border, such as labor force participation, health, education, and poverty rates—indicators that speak to the issues of immigration, citizenship, language, housing, and family composition. These variables further explain the contexts of Latino border families. We do not pretend to address the totality of issues related to the region, but we do claim to offer a well-rounded portrait of present-day Latino families within the U.S.-Mexico border landscape.

Defining the Border

No relationship between the United States and any other country of the world is perhaps as encumbered by history, geography, economic patterns, culture, and language as that between the United States and Mexico. The shared border extends nearly two thousand miles. If
combined, the economies of the northern Mexican states along that border and the U.S. border states of California and Texas would represent one of the largest in the world. More than 11.8 million people (6.3 million in the United States and 5.5 million in Mexico) live along the border, with 90% residing in fourteen “sister city” pairs (Davy and Meyers 2005). The scale of immigration into California (40% of the immigrants in California come from Mexico) is unequaled anywhere else in the United States and represents the principal component of growth in that state’s population (McCarthy and Vernez 1998).

In the 1800s the United States annexed a large part of Mexico’s northern territory that today comprises the American Southwest and includes California, Arizona, Texas, and parts of New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah. The borderlands reflect an involuntary incorporation of resident Mexicans as well as a continuous process of back-and-forth migration. Free movement of Mexicans to el norte occurred when seasonal labor, railroad workers, and agricultural workers were recruited by American labor contractors (Corwin 1978; McWilliams 1967; Montejano 1987), and this movement continues today. Jobs on both sides promote binational commerce, and social gatherings such as weddings, charreadas, quinceañeras, and other celebrations involve family members from both countries. Culture and kinship practiced in transborder and transnational interactions and relations help Mexican-origin residents in the United States lessen the strain of racial and class discrimination and foster opportunities for recognition and incorporation.

The U.S. border states with their Mexican culture, Spanish language, Latino institutions, and economic ties to Mexico create a context that promotes transnational lives. World and local events are increasingly linked across nation-state boundaries. Mexicanos along the border use the resources and skills they bring from Mexico to address issues in U.S. communities and family life. Even as they are incorporated into U.S. society, the families we studied maintain ties to Mexico in their work and as they raise children, go to school, vote, and participate in communities in the United States. Instead of loosening their connections or trading one identity for another, Mexican-origin residents of the U.S. borderlands forge social relations, earn their livelihoods, and exercise their rights across borders over many generations.

In this collection of research studies, we propose that the lives of Mexican-origin families in the United States cannot be understood
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without reference to their ancestral homeland. The transnational social fields in which they live are composed of family relationships and family and community commitments. For example, remittances from workers in the United States often support those relatives left behind in Mexico or contribute to hometown development projects. Children may attend school in both countries as they migrate back and forth with their parents. Adults own or invest in property on both sides of the border. Transnationalism forces us to ask important questions, such as: Will this generation of immigrant children follow the path of earlier waves of immigrants and gradually assimilate into mainstream American life? Or, does the global nature of the contemporary world mean that the trajectory of today’s immigrants will be fundamentally different?

Impact of NAFTA and U.S.-Mexico Policy Initiatives

The North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, signed by Mexico, the United States, and Canada and approved by the U.S. Congress in 1993, represented a dramatic change in U.S.-Mexico relations. Incorporating Mexico into an international “bloc” with its dominant northern neighbor and once hostile enemy, the agreement stimulated employment growth and increased foreign exports, especially along the northern frontier of Mexico that borders the United States. Thus, NAFTA created an economic community, in terms of geography and demographics, that is much larger than the European Union or the Pacific Rim (Davy and Meyers 2005). Guillermo Gómez-Peña notes that this agreement is “based on the arrogant fallacy that ‘the market’ will solve any and all problems, and it avoids the most basic social, labor, environmental, and cultural responsibilities that are actually [at] the core of any relationship between the three countries” (Gómez-Peña 2003: 752). While NAFTA did not significantly impact problems of poverty, especially in Mexico’s southern states, the agreement did bring about dramatic economic changes and internal modernization. Data show that the results of NAFTA include the liberalization and growth of the Mexican economy, more foreign investments in Mexico, and employment growth especially within the northern Mexican border states (Davy and Meyers 2005). Roger Wallace, former U.S. deputy
undersecretary for international trade, presented data at a conference on NAFTA held by the Latin American Studies Center at the University of Texas at Austin in February 2007, and he argued that the total value of U.S. trade with Mexico has tripled. It was reported that NAFTA helped to diversify and stabilize the Mexican economy. Those economic results vary significantly by region, however, with the northern states that border the United States benefiting most from NAFTA (Wallace 2007).

Many attribute the successful passage of NAFTA to the efforts of the businessmen in Mexico and in the United States who lobbied legislators, drafted policy papers, and hammered out the differences between the many constituencies involved. Because NAFTA is a trade relationship and not a broader policy, many important issues affecting the border were not addressed in the agreement. For example, nothing in NAFTA promotes macro-level economic stability, such as monitoring exchange rates or long-term interest rates that would avert another devaluation crisis in Mexico, or dramatic interest-rate shifts in the United States (Wallace 2007). NAFTA provided for some infrastructure funds, but certainly not sums sufficient for urban management or the large infrastructure improvements needed in Mexico’s southern states.

The NAFTA agreement, moreover, addresses very little on labor issues. Work visas were restricted, and although the requirements were subsequently enlarged and relaxed, there were not enough visas to meet the demand for workers. In addition, many roles in which personnel are greatly needed in the United States were not included, such as physicians and construction workers. Critics of NAFTA claim that the agreement did not go far enough to address labor rights and the existing social order, which includes many very poor and a few very wealthy in both Mexico and the United States. Indeed, many observers argue that more pressure in this area or on core labor standards and the right to unionize and workers’ rights enforcement would have jeopardized the passage of the agreement. Thus, while the families living along the border have benefited from NAFTA because of the growth in trade and in employment, in most cases the workers and heads of families have not seen dramatically higher wages or greatly improved working conditions.

In NAFTA, as in other border agreements, there was always the concern that one side would take advantage of the other. It has been diffic
cult for many people with a strong sense of national identity to think about a North American community that extends beyond their own borders. Others have argued that there can never be a free market because one cannot separate economic theory from society. Supporters maintain that NAFTA was revolutionary in terms of U.S.-Mexico relations and has encouraged employment and development in Mexico, particularly in the northern states (Davy and Meyers 2005). Issues of labor mobility, immigration, and citizenship as well as of energy and environmental pollution across the border in all likelihood would have been a “deal breaker” if they had been included in the NAFTA negotiations.

The U.S.-Mexico Partnership Agreement signed in March 2002 (Meyers 2003) attempted to address security issues that have resulted in border crossing bottlenecks that hinder the NAFTA free-trade cooperation between the United States and Mexico. Delayed crossings and border fences continue to be barriers to free trade and open markets as well as to transnational families. The long boundary is certain to play a role in these trade networks, and families in the borderlands will benefit from the improvements in infrastructure for commerce and labor movements.

Key to continued prosperity in Mexico’s northern states and in the borderlands is investment in human capital, particularly in border families. The number of children completing higher levels of education in Mexico has risen significantly, but investments in higher education and initiatives in education collaborations are central to the continued and future success of families on the border.

Jim Jones (NAFTA Conference 2007), U.S. ambassador to Mexico from 1993 to 1997, emphasizes how little policymakers know about Mexico and how few of them have even visited the border. Even if policymakers do not recognize the borderless economy shared by the United States and Mexico, a true integration will eventually occur simply by demographics alone. The U.S. population is aging and retiring (many, in fact, to Mexico), and Mexico is producing many young workers who will be attracted to jobs in the United States. As tightened U.S. border security makes it more difficult for workers without documents to cross back into Mexico, they and their U.S.-born children will remain in el norte. Thus, a borderless society of North America will probably occur de facto, if not legally, as immigration continues and is
encouraged by the social and family networks and economic remittances that extend across borders (Kandel and Massey 2002; Mooney 2003; Pedraza 2006). Certainly, as we can see from the chapters included in this volume, migration is a social and an economic system and the lives of border families are part of a global system. Networks in the border communities are extremely strong and, even with higher wages offered in Mexico, Mexican migration to the United States will continue because of these family ties and the strong labor demands found there.

Experts predicted that NAFTA would reduce immigration pressures in Mexico in the long term but would increase immigration in the short term. According to Dr. Susan Martin, director of the Institute for the Study of International Migration (NAFTA Conference 2007), the majority of Mexican immigrants to the United States have low levels of education (about 40%), but about 25% of these immigrants have levels of education higher than the U.S. average. The greatest surge in immigration from Mexico has been unauthorized immigration, which raises issues about the reform of our immigration system as well as issues of incorporation. The border states are key in the discussion of regulated and unregulated immigration because these states are the major gateways into the United States. Complicating these issues is the fact that many unauthorized immigrants live in households with legal resident-visa holders and U.S.-citizen children.

Additionally, efforts to address immigration reforms failed in 1990 and in 2005. Border enforcement has shifted movements but has not stopped them. Legal assumptions have not kept pace with the realities of immigration and transnational lives on the border, mainly because most Americans are ambivalent about the issue—they have hired housekeepers, nannies, gardeners, and others whom they want to remain in the United States, but at the same time they are fearful of increased waves of immigration. The strong economy in the United States and in northern Mexico has meant a strong demand for workers. The efficiency of immigrant networks continues to meet that demand, and when workers and family members cross the border, their removal is difficult. Border states on the northern side are dependent upon Mexican markets for their goods, and U.S. employers are dependent upon Mexican workers. Whether these neighbors like it or not, the border area will continue to play a pivotal role as the United States and Mexico try to deal with these difficult issues.
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Operation Gatekeeper

Operation Gatekeeper is an enhanced border enforcement strategy established on October 1, 2004, to reduce unauthorized migrant crossings into southern California. As a result, the Tijuana-San Diego border area has become “the world’s most policed international divide between two nonbelligerent countries” (Nevins 2002). Operation Gatekeeper marked a change of strategy on the part of the United States from apprehension of unauthorized migrants once they crossed the border to one of prevention meant to deter them from entering—the latter through reinforcement of the Border Patrol, increased use of surveillance technologies, and unprecedented levels of enforcement along the U.S.-Mexico boundary. Joseph Nevins (2002) notes that Operation Gatekeeper is somewhat paradoxical since it occurred at a time of rapid economic and demographic growth in the border region and increased interaction and integration between the United States and Mexico with the signing of NAFTA.

This strategy is seen as a reaction to the growing regional integration along the U.S.-Mexico boundary and an effort to enhance separation between the two countries. Operation Gatekeeper, and the general buildup of security and boundaries, has made it more dangerous for undocumented migrants to cross the border and has increased hardships for those transnational or transborder families by restricting where they can go and live and work. In addition to official policies to increase border security, private nativist groups have taken the law into their own hands. In the spring of 2004 the Minuteman Project in Arizona, a group of armed civilians, attempted to seal the border with “a dangerous mix of nativist intolerance, armed and untrained civilians and wild-eyed conspiracy theories” (Buchanan and Kim 2005: 24). Moreover, Claudia Smith, the border project director for the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation (2004), counted the number of migrant deaths on the rise at the U.S.-Mexican border, including the more than thirty suffocation deaths, among them eighteen people found locked in a truck near Victoria, Texas. More than one hundred migrants have died in the Arizona desert and Operation Desert Safeguard has done little to prevent these tragedies.

In 2006 the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill that called for a 698-mile wall along the border and that made it a felony to be in
the United States illegally. Employers were penalized for hiring undocumented workers. As Congress continues to debate border security, temporary guest-worker programs, and whether or not to allow immigrants to strive for citizenship, families along la frontera continue to lead their lives without borders. In addition to the formidable issue of security, the increasing militarization of the border that has accompanied the war on drugs, the persistence of undocumented immigration, and the transnational industrialization of the border region all present unique challenges in the areas of social policy and the study of transnational cultural forms.

Building on Scholarly Research

Research on the U.S.-Mexican border addresses numerous issues on the processes of migration and urbanization as well as on development and ethnic group formation, but it often makes only passing references to women and children or to families, as noted earlier. Attention was given to these topics in a special issue of the *Anthropological Quarterly* published in 1976 that focused on women and migration. Additionally, other women scholars have addressed labor force and family issues faced by Latina immigrant women (Brethel 2000; Fernández-Kelly and Garcia 1991; Gabaccia 1991; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1992; Pessar 1995, 1996; Segura 1994), but little scholarship focuses on the ways that women and families make use of resources on both sides of the border.

When scholars do focus on women, they often do so within the family context. Some scholars have argued that women’s work lives are best understood as responses to the economy of the family unit within which they live, and as family members dependent upon the unit for their personal well-being (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Zahniser 2000; Zavella 1987). Others have argued that the family unit is particularly patriarchal, and that women must free themselves of the self-sacrifice required of them by family life (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). They propose that the lag in adjusting values, behaviors, and institutions to new realities creates problems in contemporary families (Coontz 1997). The absence of husbands through international migration enhances the autonomy of women by making them the sole authority in child rearing and daily household decision-making (Aysa and Massey 2004). Family
solidarity, however, continues to be a theme of considerable importance among Latinos, and it is respected as a positive value benefiting the individuals who make up the family unit (Lamphere et al. 1997; Zavella 1987). In kinship and family networks, women exercise considerable authority, and women and children are recognized as resourceful participants (Stack 1974). Moreover, Latinas and their children have strong identifications with their families and often construct their own identities through relations to others within the family unit (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Horowitz 1981; Orellana 2001; Zavella 1987).

Many of the women on the border confront the same inequities faced by women of color throughout the United States—earning low wages, experiencing discrimination and poverty, struggling as single parents to provide for their children, and making work choices to accommodate family and child care needs (Rothenberg 2007). Many of these families seek better opportunities in major cities such as Los Angeles and San Antonio, which become extended borders, but they do not sever ties to the borderlands nor to their home communities in Mexico (Mooney 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997).

Theorizing about the Border

Juan Poblete compiled short essays that elaborated on the benefits and risks of national/transnational/cross-border frameworks in the Latin American Studies Association’s journal, Forum (Fall 2006). The discussion focused on transnational dialogues on globalization and theorizing contemporary Latin American struggles. Poblete’s discussion is relevant as we address the theoretical frameworks appropriate for this volume.

In addressing the impact of globalization and the emergence of transnational perspectives for the analysis of border issues, we confront the multiple angles created by the flows of people, discourses, goods, and capital across the U.S.-Mexican border. Theories must address the subnational region that spans the political boundary of the two countries as well as the supranational regional and global dimensions of migrations, trade, and border economies. Latin American scholarship raises questions about the consideration of the “nation,” which still...
defines how people are divided into relations of power and status, especially when a very wealthy nation (the United States) borders a nation (Mexico) with an emerging economy, and when both have long histories of nationalism. We must also consider that the nation-states still play a crucial role in who has the formal rights of citizenship and legal residency. Nicholas De Genova (1998) suggests that rather than envision the border as an extension of Mexico, we see that “the Mexican-ness of the area signifies a permanent disruption of the space of the U.S. nation-state and embodies the possibility of something truly new, a radically different social formation.” Others have used the term “transnational community” to characterize this kind of space (Glick Schiller 1999; Glick Schiller et al. 1995; Levitt 2001; Levitt and Waters 2002) and have suggested that parts of transnational communities that participate both in their national country of origin and in their country of settlement create a unique third space that can be called “transnational.”

A positive contribution of theorizing about the border in this way is that it encourages us to think differently about the nation-state and the kinds of binary divisions of the two countries that have permeated so much of the social analysis of the border. It is certainly important to consider the “national” when thinking about transnational spaces, because part of the immigrant history and experience has been shaped by the recognition, or lack thereof, of citizenship status and/or basic human and labor rights. We present articles in this volume that address the situations of the border families who have crossed and continue to cross spaces that are much more than “national.” Additionally, there are ethnic, cultural, gender, and economic borders within each country that transborder migrants must deal with. Along the border with Mexico, in major sister cities such as San Diego-Tijuana and El Paso-Ciudad Juárez, and in extended border urban regions such as San Antonio and Los Angeles where many transborder migrants concentrate, areas emerge as strategic sites for globalized economic processes and a unique cross-border geography and culture (Sassen 2004). Saskia Sassen argues that transborder migrants can escape the boundaries of the formal polity and create organizations that deal directly with U.S. and Mexican public officials. The increasing number of Mexican immigrants allows these actors to develop a presence that can serve as a precursor to more formal political participation (Stephen 2006).
While there is a consensus that migration from Mexico is changing U.S. border states and other areas, there is no consensus on an interdisciplinary, comparative, and regional framework (Suárez-Orozco 2006). Many scholars are, in fact, assessing the conceptual and political effectiveness of “national/transnational/cross-border frameworks in the analysis of Hemispheric issues” (Yudice 2006). Basch et al. (1994) suggest a framework of transnationalism that defines the ways immigrants build extensive social fields linking their communities of origin to their communities of settlement. Transnationalism extends and challenges the more traditional assimilationist approach to studying border families (Glick Schiller et al. 1995). The past decade has seen an explosion in research on transnationalism, thus making the case that rights need to be extended beyond the national framework, that individuals belong culturally to more than one nation-state, and that new circumstances of migration brought about by globalization processes have an impact on both sending and receiving countries. A major criticism of cultural citizenship and transnationalism is that studies using this perspective have focused mostly on the situations in the receiving country.

Historically, modernization theory has prevailed in discussions of why people migrate, emphasizing the push-pull factors that stimulate movement from poor countries to rich countries. Population movements have often resulted in migration-dependent communities and generation of further migration through the diffusion of consumerism and dependence on remittances (Durand and Massey 2004). Many factors of the push-pull elements of modernization continue to work on the U.S.-Mexico border, but these migration patterns do not result in linear development. The experiences and family lives in the region are much more complex, both for individuals and groups.

The history of U.S.-Mexico relations, the reality that the Southwest was once a part of Mexico, and the extensive shared border suggest that a historical-structural approach, drawing broadly on Marxist thought and world systems theory in the context of global migrations, would be helpful in understanding families on the border (Buchanan and Kim 2005; Buroway 1985). The impact of the global market and national and international economic and political policies have disrupted families, displaced jobs, and attracted new families and single women to the border. Underlying the transnational and transborder
patterns and linkages is the position of both the United States and Mexico in a global economy and their unequal positions of power (Basch et al. 1994). Still, there is dissatisfaction with macro-level approaches that portray migrants as passive reactors manipulated by the world capitalist system.

Transnationalism presents a critique of bipolar models of migration and instead suggests a social process whereby migrants operate in social fields that transgress geographic, political, and cultural borders (Basch et al. 1994; Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Pedraza 2006). Transnationalism emerged from the realization that migrants maintain their ties to the communities of origin; they “forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Basch et al. 1994); they are no longer “uprooted” or “assimilated” into the new society but move freely between home and host communities, back and forth across international borders and within different cultures and social systems (Glick Schiller 1999; Levitt 2001; Levitt and Waters 2002). Immigrants maintain connections through air travel, faxes, electronic mail, digital and video cameras, and cell phones that enable them to keep in close touch with those in their home country and to connect regularly to families left behind. Thus, there may be no bounded units of social analysis or localized communities to study. Spaces may be unbounded, discontinuous, and interpenetrating subspaces or imagined communities or racialized inequalities of power and opportunity (De Genova and Ramos-Zayas 2003; Kearney 1996, 1997; Wood 2004) as they are in the borderlands.

Chapter Contributors

The contributors to this volume represent a multidisciplinary collaboration that reflects our efforts to paint a comprehensive picture of Latino families at the U.S.-Mexico border. Here, the authors employ different theoretical constructs and perspectives in order to analyze the complexity of life at this national boundary. First, a transnational framework helps us understand how families concurrently participate in multiple U.S. and Mexican communities. Second, viewing migration as a process suggests that settling in a receiving country does not necessarily require renouncing allegiance to the sending community, and
individuals who lead transnational lives may maintain intricate linkages across both communities. Third, the role of second-generation youth’s participation in transnationalism is often overlooked. Fourth, living in the borderlands includes daily transborder activities and cross-border family negotiations about life decisions. And fifth, economic markets and barriers to entry into these markets do not occur in a vacuum but are the everyday reality of immigrant and ethnic communities.

Chapters 1 and 2 present national-level demographic profiles for each side of the border. The authors discuss the distinctive characteristics of the area in relation to the lives of the families and children who reside there. In chapter 1, “A Demographic Profile of Children and Families in the U.S.-Mexico Border Region,” Yolanda C. Padilla and Ana Marie Argilagos examine the indicators of social well-being on the U.S. side, using U.S. Census data and variables for the year 2000. In chapter 2, Catalina Palmer, on behalf of La Red por los Derechos de la Infancia en México, offers a profile of Mexican demographics in “An Overview of Children and Youth on the Northern Mexican Border.”

Harriett D. Romo suggests in chapter 3, “The Extended Border: A Case Study of San Antonio as a Transnational City,” that border influences extend beyond the physical place along the national boundaries. Romo posits that San Antonio, Texas, should be viewed as an extension of the U.S.-Mexico border because of its long history and the economic, demographic, and cultural links that connect this urban area to the borderlands. Romo further argues that the city of San Antonio, although not physically located within the territory traditionally defined as the U.S.-Mexico border, is a transnational border city. For her, in San Antonio, decades of migration support shared cultural beliefs and population movements such that transnational social fields develop and encompass all aspects of social life for families.

Chapter 4 captures changes that are occurring in new and traditional destinations of immigrant families in the United States and brings to the discussion a city- and county-level analysis. Belinda I. Reyes and Amanda G. Bailey, in “The Complex Picture of Cities near the U.S.-Mexico Border: The Case of Southern California,” look closely at the changing landscapes of border cities in California. Reyes and Bailey implement a typology of cities that highlights emerging trends within the immigrant populations who are settling and living within one hundred...
miles of California’s southern border. The history of the Los Angeles area and the long-term and large-scale Mexican migration along with the high proportion of foreign-born Mexican and other Latin American migrants in the area shape the context of home ownership and the demographics of the receiving communities. Undocumented Mexican immigrant labor in restaurants, domestic work, construction, and landscaping has been institutionalized in the Los Angeles extended border area. Indeed, local Mexicans are well versed in how to circumvent barriers to homeownership due to their legal status, by applying for mortgages in someone else’s name or in the names with the Social Security numbers of individuals with legal documents (McConnell and Marcelli 2007).

In chapter 5, “Maquiladora or Cross-Border Commute: The Employment of Members of Households in Five Mexican Border Cities,” Marie-Laure Coubès investigates the patterns of organization of family economies from the point of view of the participation of different members of the household in the labor market. Coubès focuses on the job and family linkage within a context of economic integration in border cities across the U.S.-Mexican border. Her work demonstrates high levels of cross-border interactions and discusses demand and supply among Mexican cross-border workers (Alegría 2002).

Many families who live in metropolitan areas with sister cities—such as Nuevo Laredo and Laredo, Ciudad Juárez and El Paso, or Tijuana and San Diego—lead their lives as if there were no geopolitical borders. For example, in chapter 6, “Transborder Interactions and Transnational Processes in the Border Community of Laredo, Texas,” Raquel R. Márquez examines transborder interactions and transnational processes occurring concurrently within a border setting. Márquez looks at how these phenomena redound to the benefit of families’ and women’s lives, and she explains how transnational processes allow border families to maintain cultural links and remain intact across national boundaries.

Though many transnational families do not physically cross on a daily basis, Latino families who live farther away from la frontera draw from traditions in both the United States and Mexico when they celebrate rites of passage and family celebrations. In chapter 7, “Coming of Age across Borders: Family, Gender, and Place in the Lives of Second-Generation Transnational Mexicanas,” Patricia Sánchez studies the
ways in which family, gender, and place intersect in the upbringing of transnational youth residing in northern California. Sánchez focuses on familial, social, and religious practices as well as on the gender negotiations of three young women who are U.S.-born but maintain close ties to their parents’ rural home communities in Jalisco, Mexico. Her research addresses the parenting strategies of transnational immigrant families as well as the socialization of children in this context.

Mary A. Petrón shifts the discussion from transnationalism to the Mexican side of the border in chapter 8, “‘I’m Bien Pocha’: Borderlands Epistemologies and the Teaching of English in Mexico,” where she examines the transnational experience of children of U.S. immigrants who have returned to Mexico and now work there as teachers of English. Petrón’s analysis challenges stereotypes of language and cultural practices in identifying how these teachers remain influenced by their experiences on both sides of the border—experiences that ultimately influence and shape their teaching practices in Mexico.

Amelia Malagamba-Ansótegui suggests in chapter 9, “The Real and the Symbolic: Visualizing Border Spaces,” that images of the U.S.-Mexico border penetrate the subconscious and imaginations of people who have experienced the borderlands as well as those who have not. The absence of particular images of Latino families, women, and conceptual frameworks sends a powerful message, as strong as the one that comes from other border life images. Images produced by the media and artists often define the border by neglecting the realities of transnational life.

Economist Bárbara J. Robles, in chapter 10, “Latina Entrepreneurship in the Borderlands: Family Well-Being and Poverty Reduction Policies,” explores the intersection of Latina entrepreneurial activities and the importance of the cultural competency of community-based organizations in supporting this entrepreneurship. Her work explores the ways in which Latinas contribute to family well-being, and she discusses the pivotal role that public policy plays in grass-roots community development. Robles argues that because of the high concentration of Latinos along the U.S.-Mexico border, Latina entrepreneurs see their biculturalism as an asset and the transnational economic environment of the borderlands as a catalyst for growth.

In the final chapter, “Public Policy Changes on the U.S.-Mexico Border,” Irasema Coronado proposes policy recommendations that emerge
from the various perspectives of families and children on the border. The author emphasizes the critical importance of bilateral collaboration to address the needs of families on both sides. Her research findings suggest that transnational policies and border families are an integral part of the successful future of U.S.-Mexico relations and of economic and social development in this region.

Families along the U.S.-Mexican border as well as families in the extended border areas and urban cities receiving new immigrants are changing. The ease of transportation and communication as well as the increasing economic collaborations across national borders facilitate living without borders even while terrorism and national security concerns attempt to make those political borders less permeable. As new generations in the borderlands form families, they will have experienced transnational and cross-border living as patterns of socialization. Options for dual nationality may increase the complexity of their lives. The continued growth in population along the U.S.-Mexico border, the demands on scarce resources of water and land, and the continued globalization of work and commerce suggest that the issues addressed in this volume will only increase in importance. Polices and practices affecting families and children on the border will have to be constructed from both sides, from multiple perspectives, and across different academic disciplines. We complete this volume with a full understanding that families will continue to seek resources and relationships from both sides of the U.S.-Mexico boundary despite tightened border security or restrictive immigration policies. Demographic changes, increasing economic regionalism, the continued demand and supply of labor, and the social networks that extend across nation-states and across the lives described in this volume will continue to generate transborder, transnational, and cross-border families.

Glossary

**Border Culture:** The U.S.-Mexico borderlands at times function as one entity, yet border dynamics are as complex as they are intertwined. Residents of the borderlands recognize the interdependent nature of their relationships. Links between the U.S. and Mexican sides are supported through a strong sense of family unity, social networks, cultural commonalities, and an understanding of the shared binational political
and economic interests. Language switching, or code switching, between Spanish and English is an integral part of borderlands culture and occurs daily in a variety of transactions, often without the speakers even being cognizant of the degree of code switching in which they engage. Opportunities to hold dual nationality in Mexico and the United States have encouraged many Mexicans and their family members to become U.S. citizens, which status allows them to participate in the politics, economy, and social fields of the United States.

**Borderlands:** The area referred to as the U.S. borderlands once belonged to Mexico, and throughout its history the region has continued to receive important migratory flows. The northern Mexican states bordering the United States are densely populated and boast the strongest economies in Mexico. The 1,989-mile boundary along the U.S. states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas and the Mexican states of Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas is the busiest border in the world, with 300 million two-way crossings per year (Migration Policy Institute 2002). If the economies of the border states in both nations were combined, they would represent the third or fourth largest economy in the world. Nearly 12 million people live in the borderlands, with close to 5.5 million on the Mexican side and nearly 6.5 million on the U.S. side, many of whom are Mexican American. The borderlands are disproportionately Latino both in comparison to the rest of the United States and to non-border counties in the border states. Historical and cultural ties with Mexico are evident in the extensive use of the Spanish language, cultural identity and traditions, and daily economic activity.

**Extended Border:** Despite the physical distance from the official border and a continued accessibility to Mexico, many Mexican and Mexican American residents live in the extended border of their Mexican homeland (Arreola 1987). There, Spanish is spoken regularly across all social classes in stores, restaurants, and social gatherings (Arreola 1995). San Antonio, Texas, and East Los Angeles, California, for example, although not physically located within the territory traditionally defined as the U.S.-Mexico border, have the context and expansive set of relationships produced by decades of migration that support shared cultural beliefs.
Maquiladoras: Maquiladoras are assembly plants located in Mexico that are predominantly owned by U.S. corporations taking advantage of low-cost labor, advantageous tariff regulations, and close proximity to northern markets. Employment in maquiladoras is characterized by long workdays and rigid schedules (Fernández-Kelly 1983). Daughters and other female relatives dominate the labor force in maquiladoras, which are one of Mexico’s primary sources of foreign exchange.

Transborder: Sometimes referred to as cross-border, transborder links in the borderlands are characterized by high cross-border mobility. Daily contact between the populations of both countries has facilitated the development of unique transborder social formations. Families and commuters reside, attend school, own businesses, and work on both sides. These families are commonly found in twin border cities such as El Paso and Ciudad Juárez or Tijuana and San Diego or the smaller sister cities all along the international border. In general, persons on the Mexican side must obtain legal documentation, speak a minimum of English, and have a social network to gain entrance into the United States (Alegría 2002).

Transnational: Many Mexicans and Mexican Americans are rooted in the United States, but their lives are integrally involved with resources, contacts, and people on the Mexican side of the border. Basch et al. (1994: 7) formalized the definition of transnationalism by stating that immigrants “take actions, make decisions, and develop subjectivities and identities embedded in networks of relationships that connect them simultaneously to two or more nations.” A “transnational social field,” or space, is created by the continuous interchanges between a person’s sending and receiving community—a space that enables the person to function in both places simultaneously. Transnational social fields encompass all aspects of social life (Levitt and Waters 2002). Moreover, formal and informal institutions promote the established norms and values of the home community in the receiving community and organize social life in ways that promote transnational identities and fields of experience.

Transnational Families: Transnational families live and maintain familial, social, and cultural contacts in both sending and receiving coun-
tries simultaneously. Parents often participate in raising children left behind in the community of origin or spend part of the year in one country and the remainder in the other. For transnational families, economic mobility depends upon extended family resources and on economic survival strategies that in turn depend upon social class and community resources. Remittances, that is, money or goods sent by immigrants to their families in their home country, are “a result of migration and also result in migration” by encouraging other relatives to join the migrant (Pedraza 2006: 48).

References


