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# UNDOCUMENTED LIVES

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The Untold Story of Mexican Migration

ANA RAQUEL MINIAN



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## **INTRODUCTION**

From Neither Here nor There

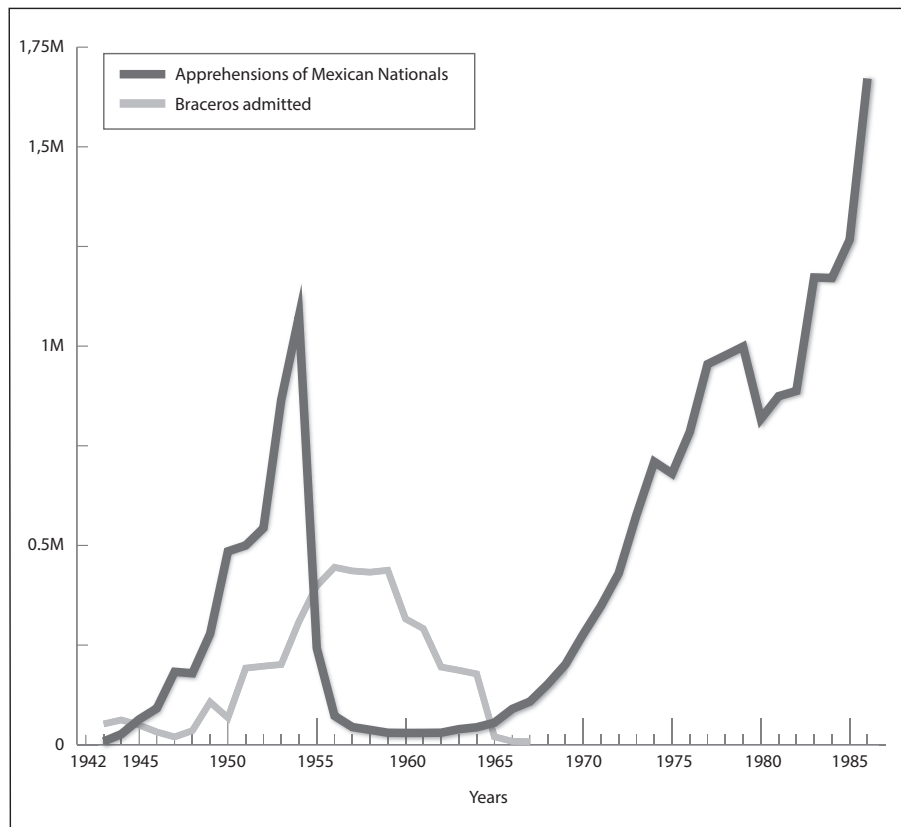
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This book explores how, for more than twenty years, migrants sought to establish a sense of local and national belonging, even as they were denied the ability to reside in any one place on a permanent basis. As they struggled to belong, and as they were pushed from place to place, migrants described a life defined by being “from neither here nor there” (“Ni de aquí ni de allá”). The story takes place between 1965 and 1986, a period when many of the current dilemmas around unauthorized migration were born. It tells of how Mexican migrants went from being a population that was pushed out of all the places they resided and pressed to engage in circular migration, to a population that felt trapped and pressured to settle permanently in the United States. It was during these two decades that officials from both countries helped create a permanent class of displaced, undesired people; that migrant activists rose up to insist that they deserved rights despite their lack of documentation; and that migrant communities forged and solidified the structures required to sustain and propel the migratory flow for decades to come.

In 1964, the United States ended the Bracero Program, a series of bilateral agreements with Mexico. During its twenty-two years in operation, the program issued over 4.5 million guest-worker contracts to Mexican men to labor temporarily in the United States.<sup>9</sup> Mexican workers who had become accustomed to working in *El Norte*, even if just for short periods of time, were dealt a huge blow by the program’s termination. The impact was compounded by the passage of the Immigration and

Nationality Act of 1965, which imposed for the first time a numerical limit on the number of Latin American immigrants to the United States.<sup>10</sup>

Those who sought work in *El Norte* after 1965 realized that if they wanted to keep crossing the border, they had to do so without papers. Unauthorized entries multiplied. The number of Mexican citizens apprehended in the United States—an imperfect but suggestive measure of Mexican undocumented migration—rose enormously in the two decades after the Bracero Program's end: from 55,340 in 1965 to 277,377 in 1970, to a peak of 1,671,458 in 1986, a 3,000 percent overall increase.<sup>11</sup> According to some estimates, approximately 28 million Mexicans en-



Apprehensions of Mexican nationals. Data Source: Manuel García y Griego and Mónica Vereá Campos, *México y Estados Unidos frente a la migración de indocumentados* (México: Coordinación de Humanidades, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) and Miguel Angel Porrúa Editor, 1988): 118–121, Table 2.

tered the United States without papers between 1965 and 1986, compared to 1.3 million legal immigrants and a mere 46,000 contract workers.<sup>12</sup> Before 1965, even those who crossed the border illegally typically viewed their migration within the context of the Bracero Program. It was only after no other real avenue existed for Mexicans to migrate north legally that illegality became the primary way in which they understood their journeys north.

Though the way migrants thought of their cross-border movement changed after 1965, another essential feature of migrant life remained the same for the next two decades: Mexican migration continued to be characterized by its circularity. Even though no longer bound to return to Mexico by the Bracero Program, the overwhelming majority of migrants chose to cross back and forth across the border rather than settling permanently in either country. Circularity meant that the overall number of Mexicans living without papers in the United States did not rise nearly as much as the number of individuals who migrated illegally. Indeed, 86 percent of all entries were offset by departures.<sup>13</sup> Circular migration counters the popular stereotype of Mexican migrants as forever desirous of living permanently in the United States.<sup>14</sup>

Migrants' continual cross-border movement in the absence of a formal program that encouraged them to do so raises questions about how migrants and others understood and negotiated their geographic movement and sense of belonging. In the 1970s, Mexican policymakers, U.S. authorities, large segments of U.S. society, and Mexican communities of high out-migration came to reject the long-term presence of working-class Mexican men of reproductive age. In Mexico, the country's top politicians reversed their long-standing opposition to unauthorized and long-term migration and began to view undocumented departures not as a depletion of the country's labor force, but instead as a way of alleviating unemployment. At the same time, in the United States, migrants found themselves classified as "illegal aliens," accused of taking jobs away from deserving citizens during a time of recession, and regularly deported. Their permanent residence was also denied at the local level. When they lived in their hometowns in Mexico, their families and communities pressured them to head north to make money and when they resided in their new cities and towns in the United States, their loved ones insisted that they return home. Increasingly, migrants found that they could belong nowhere, "neither here nor there."

Migrants tried to make the best of this circular, undocumented life and conceived ways to assert their own cartographies of belonging. The world they sought to create defied their triple exclusion (from Mexico, from the United States, and from their local communities) and instead established migrants as welcomed and even indispensable actors in all three spaces. Migrants resisted the idea that they were superfluous in Mexico by becoming vital economic agents in their home country through the money they sent from the United States. They countered their illegality north of the border by claiming rights. They diminished the pressures that their families and communities placed on them to engage in circular migration by reconfiguring the very meanings of hometown, family, and community life to include a transnational dimension. These efforts, some intentional, some not, provided migrants with at least partial inclusion in the multiple locales in which they lived; however, that inclusion was only possible because they resided, at least part of their time, in the United States. Thus, even as the actions migrants took challenged their various exclusions, they also bound them to the migratory process and to the United States.

In 1986, the U.S. Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act, which made it more difficult for Mexicans to cross the border back and forth without papers. To avoid detection while entering the United States, migrants started having to pay much higher fees to their smugglers and to trek across hazardous terrains that were less patrolled. But by then, undocumented migration had already become a self-perpetuating phenomenon, and undocumented life had become normalized. In light of the new hardships of migration, many Mexicans settled permanently in the United States and dared not return to Mexico for fear that they would not be able to reenter the United States. Their presence was still rejected north of the border because of their undocumented status, and their own government representatives in Mexico still did not want them back permanently. But now, rather than feeling “pushed” from all these spaces, they found themselves trapped in the United States, which they referred to as the *Jaula de Oro*, or Cage of Gold.

The story of how migrants went from being ousted from the multiple spaces where they lived to being confined in the United States creates multiple subplots, exposes common assumptions about migration, and disrupts traditional narratives on the topic.



This book brings together two very different worlds that rarely interacted with one another—and that are rarely examined together—but that are crucial to understanding the history of Mexican undocumented migration. One story focuses on how Mexican and U.S. policymakers deliberated about how to deal with migration. It reveals how laws were written, how organizations lobbied government officials, and how the media shaped popular understandings of migration. But this is not the only story to be told. Mexican citizens experienced migration on a more intimate plane. It shaped how they thought about “home,” how they were treated, what they could afford, and the ways in which they raised their children, sustained romantic relationships, and supported their aging parents. Migrants’ personal stories seem so distant from the realm of congressional debates and bilateral meetings that, on the surface, they appear to be two distinct narratives. But it is only by examining these separate worlds together that we can understand each of them fully. After all, multiple decades of policies failed because lawmakers ignored the complicated social spheres of migrants; in turn, migrants had to restructure the lives they built in response to new laws.

The world of migrants did not just encompass migrants themselves, but also nonmigrants—all those who remained in Mexico.<sup>15</sup> Both are central to the narrative that follows. In the years between 1965 and 1986, approximately 80 percent of border crossers were men who left their families behind when they departed for the United States.<sup>16</sup> Even while examining the experiences of the women who did cross the border, the story of Mexican migrants is primarily a story about men. But the story of Mexican migration is not. Men migrated, in part, because their wives, parents, and friends pressured them to head to *El Norte*, making these nonmigrants central actors in migratory decisions. Moreover, those who did not cross the border experienced the vicissitudes of migration just as keenly as those who did. Women and other family members anxiously awaited news from those they loved, wondered when the men would return home, raised children without fathers, and depended on the money migrants remitted home.

Attending to the stories of nonmigrants sheds light on how factors such as sexual and gender norms, rather than economics alone, determined who migrated and who remained at home. In Mexico, not only women but also gay men tended to refrain from going to the United States. Women’s decision to remain home and raise their children in

Mexico counters the stereotype of deceitful Mexican women giving birth north of the border in order to acquire U.S. citizenship—what would come to be known as the “anchor baby” phenomenon. Similarly, gay men’s preference to remain in Mexico counters the assumption that queer people in small-town, Catholic Mexico would jump at the opportunity to head to the seemingly liberal United States. Examining the movement of women and gay men, as well as their ability to remain in their home country, reveals as much about the forces behind transnational migration as do the border crossings of migrants themselves.

Exploring the mobility of nonmigrants expands the history of unauthorized migration beyond a singular emphasis on the act of crossing the national border. This is not only a national or transnational story; it is also a local one. People’s cross-border movement was deeply connected to their understanding of local mobility and spaces. For example, from the United States many men tried to limit their wives’ movement back in their hometowns, as they believed that women’s presence in public spaces signified marital infidelity. Women often felt imprisoned in their own houses, knowing that their husbands would get jealous if they heard that their wives were socializing outside the home and would stop sending money as a result.<sup>17</sup>

International migration is generally understood as a force that promotes cosmopolitanism and extends a person’s sense of space. Yet Mexican migration in these decades sometimes prompted the opposite, shrinking the capacity of many people—both migrants and nonmigrants—to reside in local and national spaces. It is undeniable that migration extended people’s lives and social networks across national borders. But a more nuanced analysis reveals that for many, including the women who were confined to their homes, migration also produced a significant contraction of space.

Even those who got to experience a new country saw the constriction of many of the spaces through which they moved. Mexican officials’ growing support of the out-migration of citizens combined with increasing rates of deportation from the United States effectively constructed the territory that spanned between the two nation-states as one in which Mexican men’s long-term presence was denied. Migrants experienced their own hometowns as shrinking in on them and pushing them out—a direct result of the pressure their families and communities placed on them to head north to make money. Once in the United States

they found further restrictions on their mobility, as they sought to evade immigration officials. Many migrants constructed “movement maps” that helped them to circumvent streets they knew to be policed by these officials. They sometimes took jobs that allowed them to hide from the public eye. In Tempe, Arizona, for example, migrants preferred to pick lower-paying citrus fruits rather than onions, because the thick foliage in lemon and orange groves provided cover when immigration officials passed through the area. Until 1986, migrants continuously moved transnationally, but they regularly experienced local spaces as sites of confinement.

Some migrants responded to the exigencies of their situation through local, binational, and translocal activism. It was during this period that migrants first rallied around the idea that “illegal aliens” deserved rights in the United States. Such battles were complicated. In seeking benefits for undocumented people, activists risked reinforcing their categorization as “illegal.” But through their efforts, migrants improved their working conditions, safeguarded their right to unionize, and ensured that unauthorized children could attend public school. These struggles are part of a long trajectory of undocumented migrant activism that continues to this day.

Migrant activists in the United States also built a type of extraterritorial welfare state by providing aid to those in need in many Mexican communities. Given that the Mexican government’s economic restructuring plans during these two decades regularly overlooked communities of high out-migration, many of those who left for the United States sent money back not just to support their families, but also to support their hometowns. Unlike private remittances, the funds that migrant activists sent home provided assistance to entire communities. Migrants paid for doctor visits and medication for those who were sick, they gave a monthly allowance to the poorest members of the community, and in some towns, they even built basic infrastructure, including paving streets, erecting health clinics, and introducing potable water and electric power lines.<sup>18</sup>

These multiple subplots show how, in the years between 1965 and 1986, migrants and their multiple communities negotiated questions of unemployment, welfare, family arrangements, and sexuality in a way that led men to engage in circular migration between the two countries. Rather than attending to what was happening on the ground, however,

U.S. and Mexican policymakers simply repeated stereotypes about migrants' relationship to the welfare state, about their families and "excessive" fertility rates, and about the effects of migration on unemployment rates. Policymakers' failure to attend to migrants' lived experience limited their ability to implement workable solutions and to curtail the growth of undocumented migration.