

1. Transnational Life in Ethnographic Perspective

THREE VIGNETTES

There's a time you can't believe you're here [in Ticuani]. You're like, "Oh, it's probably a dream down here." . . . Since I have dreams that I'm over there and I wake up. . . . But I'm like, "Oh, I'm really here." And I have fun. And in the nights you can't wait to leave your house at eight o'clock and go to the *centro*, and you see all the lights from the house.

LINDA, age fifteen

Linda's wonder at actually being in the town I call Ticuani—a small *municipio* (county) of less than two thousand people in southern Puebla, in the Mixteca region of Mexico—is not just an enthusiastic teenager's response to a favorite vacation spot: it attests to Ticuani's central place in her social world. Although she says that she cannot visit her cousins in Manhattan because it is "mad far" from her apartment in Brooklyn and her parents will not let her go, they permit her to travel more than two thousand miles with her brother or cousins (but without her parents) to stay for several weeks in Ticuani during winter and summer vacation each year. While in Ticuani, Linda can stay out all night to dance, drink beer (with discretion), and walk around freely outside, whereas in New York she is a "lockdown" girl who must come straight home from school and await her parents' return. In Ticuani she participates in the overnight Antorcha (torch run) for Padre Jesús and other religious rituals, which simultaneously give her freedom from her parents and a closer connection, as she practices traditions in which they have also participated. Such patterns transnationalize adolescent rituals for her and her second-generation immigrant friends and give Ticuani an enhanced place in their lives.

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Tomás Maestro got up at 5 A.M. on the morning of January 26, 2001, and went quickly to the *zocalo*, or town center, of Ticuani, wincing as he put pressure on the swollen leg that had kept him home from the Grand Dance the previous night. Normally, he would have spent the entire night at the dance, to which he had been looking forward all year. He had brought his wife and four children down to Ticuani from New York to enjoy such rituals with him. This year he went to the *zocalo* to keep an eye on his oldest son, Toño, as the dance ended. It was fortunate that he did. He arrived soon after Toño had screamed, “¡Pendeja!” (Asshole!) at his younger sister, Magda, when she refused to get out of a car with several youths he did not like, including some *pandilleros*, or gang members, from New York. One *pandillero*, thinking the insult was directed at him, got out of the car to confront Toño. Older relatives separated them, warning Toño how dangerous the *pandilleros* could be. Toño listened to Tomás, but the next morning Tomás got up early again, this time to hear his son angrily ordering his girlfriend, Julia, to go home despite her desire to stay in the *zocalo* and eat tacos with her friends.

These conflicts show how transnational life emerges and how gender figures into that process. Tomás, Toño, Julia, and Magda are all attempting to negotiate the different meanings of gender in New York and Ticuani. The relative autonomy of Mexican women in New York can be challenged by men in Mexico as they claim expanded masculine authority, often with support from local Ticuanenses. These assertions of authority, such as Toño’s “defending” Magda, are also assertions of masculine honor—of “heart”—because Toño stands up to *pandilleros* who inspire fear in both New York and Ticuani.

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“The water pipes have come in!” Don Emiliano tells me and the members of the Ticuani Solidarity Committee with excitement. Months of work are paying off for Ticuani. Committee members explain to me again how the old one-inch pipes cannot handle the pressure needed to pump water to distant parts of the growing *municipio*, and how the committee and the municipal government are working together to install three-inch pipes. The committee members are going to inspect the new pipes, which they tell me are plastic and will not corrode like the old ones. “We will be able to shower at any time of day or night,” says one committee member, “and plant trees

right in our backyard and water them without any trouble, too. It will make life better in Ticuani.”

This ordinary civic scene takes place not in Ticuani but on a Brooklyn street corner in 1993. We say goodbye to committee members headed to John F. Kennedy Airport in Queens. They will travel to Mexico City and then five hours overland to Ticuani for the weekend to consult with authorities and contractors on the work they are funding, returning the following Monday to their jobs in New York City. Moreover, the committee is the Ticuani Solidarity Committee of *New York* (hereafter the Committee), which has substantially funded most major Ticuani public works projects over three decades by soliciting donations from Ticuanenses in New York. For this, the largest Ticuani project ever, the Committee raised more than two-thirds of the \$150,000 cost of the project, exceeding the Mexican federal, state, and local government contributions combined. The Committee has also become involved in Ticuani politics, helping to fashion a set of rules and practices for participating in transnational public life. Fundraising in New York by Ticuanenses has become increasingly important in Ticuani electoral politics. That fundraising in Brooklyn basements matters so much to the public life of a remote village some twenty-five hundred miles away points to how much life has been transnationalized in some places in the United States and Mexico.

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This is a book about how the lives of many contemporary immigrants and their children are being lived transnationally. In each of these three vignettes, the actors have adopted practices in use both in the United States and in Mexico and which are understood by means of social and moral maps encompassing both Ticuani and New York.¹ *Globalization* and, to a lesser extent, *transnationalization* have become buzzwords describing how the “local becomes global,”² how distant people are becoming linked through economic markets, communications, and cultural dissemination and homogenization. But what do these processes mean in people’s everyday lives? Why are increasing numbers of migrants so interested in maintaining relations with their home towns and countries?³ More compellingly, why are so many of their children also participating in these practices, and how does this participation change their experiences of assimilation in the United States? My book sets out to provide interesting answers to these questions, drawing on an extended case study of migrants and their children from Ticuani, in Puebla, Mexico, who migrate to New York.

The tremendous growth in Mexican migration to New York over the last fifteen years reflects a larger trend. While most Mexican migrants still settle in the Southwest of the United States, during the 1990s migration to the East Coast increased: today, for example, more than half a million people of Mexican origin live in New York State. Transnational life emerges from attempts by migrants and their children to live meaningful lives, to gain respect and recognition, within the context of the larger processes of migration from Mexico, on the one hand, and assimilation in the United States, on the other.

I trace the emergence and evolution of transnational life through fifteen years of ethnography in the Ticuanense community, focusing on the formation of political community by first-generation migrant men; on how gender structures transnational life; and on second-generation assimilation and participation in transnational life. Migration itself has changed with the closer economic integration of Mexico and the United States, along with other forms of globalization, which foster, limit, or otherwise affect transnational life. Similarly, settlement and assimilation pressures in New York urge Ticuanenses and their children toward transnational action but also constrain it. Studying both migration and assimilation helps explain why and how Ticuanense migrants and their children remain attached to Ticuani. This attachment and the transnational life it supports are crucially affected by secondary processes affecting the lives of migrants and their children, such as adolescence and racialization. Finally, changes in communications and travel technology (including the postmodern concept of “time-space compression”),⁴ large-scale integration, and government intervention facilitate creation of transnational structures on the local level that are experienced differently than were earlier long-distance migrations and diasporas.⁵

My analytical strategy is dialectic, emphasizing how local and larger forces, structures, and actors influence each other over time in a generative historical process. I explain how migrants and their children in New York and Puebla are affected by political or economic events both local and global; I show how their responses to these new situations help institutionalize transnational life. The contours of local-level transnational life emerge through the repetition of certain political, gender, and cultural practices, which gradually become normative and structural—“social facts,” external to and coercive of individuals, in the words of Émile Durkheim—but also continue to evolve through the actions of migrants and their children and outside forces.⁶ My goal is more to tell how things came to be as they are today than to predict what they will be like in the future, though I also reflect on the direction I think transnational life will take.⁷

The evolution of Ticuani transnational life reflects my own sustained engagement with Ticuanenses and their children. I first did research in Ticuani and its neighboring town, which I call El Ganado, during the summer of 1988, and I followed up this visit with five- or six-week trips from 1991 through 1993, while doing ongoing ethnography in New York. From 1990 through 1994 I worked especially closely with Ticuanense men on the Committee, but also with women and the second generation. From 1994 to 1997 I stayed in touch with Ticuanenses and began a second major project, on the school and work fates of their children in the United States. This second period of intensive fieldwork, from 1997 to 2002, gave me the chance to revisit Ticuani and Ticuanenses in New York and to apply gender and generation as important analytical lenses, focusing more explicitly on the experiences of the second generation and of women. In reworking transnational issues, I deepened old friendships. And after I had worked alone for ten years, grant funds enabled me to hire several excellent researchers, whose influence is also felt in this book.⁸

My reentering Ticuani life from 1997 to 2002 has made this a better book. Attending the Feast of Padre Jesús (Ticuani's patron saint) in January 1999 for the first time since 1993, I was surprised not just by how warmly I was received but also by how deeply I was moved. Although I had participated in Ticuani life in Brooklyn in the interim, returning to Ticuani made me deeply happy—and also made possible new insights. I was able to see, for example, how age affected participation in transnational life: Some younger children who had not liked returning to Ticuani seven or even ten years earlier now embraced its rituals as adolescents, and some who had been adolescents in the early 1990s now participated less. At the same time I had been making my own journey from graduate student to professor, and from engagement to marriage to my wife, Maura, and the birth of my two children, Liam and Owen. Meeting my wife and children led Ticuanenses to see me as more real and gave us more in common. Finally, my reentry into Ticuani life led even my Ticuanense friends to ask when the book would be done, giving me more *ganas* (desire) to finish.⁹

TRANSNATIONAL LIFE IN SCHOLARLY AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

The image of the “clean break” with the old country, embodied in the title of Oscar Handlin's 1951 book *The Uprooted*, guided most research on immigration from the 1920s through the 1980s.¹⁰ A transnational perspective emerged in response to the failure of this and other dominant theories of

immigrant assimilation to explain the growing trend of close ties between migrants and their home countries, illustrated in the vignettes above. Whereas early work on transnational life saw it as wholly new, and newly discovered, recent work has detailed and compared its historical, contemporary, and theoretical contours. One study, for example, draws on random samples of migrant populations to gauge the frequency of transnational practices among them.¹¹

In its most common version, derived from the work of Nina Glick-Schiller and her colleagues, transnational theory has several elements.¹² First, it disputes the inevitability of severing ties to the old country, once assumed to be part of the inexorable transition from “immigrant” to “ethnic” to “native” in two or three generations. Rather, it argues, migrants and their children may remain linked to their home countries for long periods, in part to resist racial and other forms of inequality in the host country. Second, it argues that capitalism has created a set of global markets and processes that have increased migration and superseded the nation-state, creating a kind of global civil society that threatens the state’s monopoly on politics. This change opens possibilities for subversive action, aided by new technology such as the Internet. Finally, some argue or imply that transnationalization creates a kind of “third way,” or what the historian David Gutiérrez has called a “Third Space,” for immigrants, enabling them to somehow escape the grasp of the nation-state and the host and home societies.¹³ While all of these positions are correct to some extent, they fail to sufficiently consider factors limiting or extending the longevity of transnational life or to illuminate some of its dimensions, such as the role of adolescence and the life course in creating and shaping transnational life. They also sometimes err through what the anthropologist Sherry Ortner describes as an “ethnographic refusal”¹⁴ to investigate, for example, local conflicts and meanings, because the research is framed mainly in terms of resistance to domination by larger processes such as globalization.

I analyze transnational life or transnationalization by emphasizing lived experience and process, purposely avoiding the more common terms *transnationalism* and *transmigrants*. I also differentiate between transnational processes, which involve particular migrant populations and nation-states, and global ones, which involve economic, institutional, cultural, and other changes that reconfigure power on a planetary scale.¹⁵ As I use the term, *transnational life* includes those practices and relationships linking migrants and their children with the home country, where such practices have significant meaning and are regularly observed, as in the studies by the sociologist Alejandro Portes and his colleagues.¹⁶ But, for me, transnational

life is also embodied in identities and social structures that help form the life world of immigrants and their children and is constructed in relations among people, institutions, and places. Transnational life usually involves travel between the home and host destination, but it can also include the experience of stay-at-homes in close relationships with travelers.¹⁷ Finally, I understand transnational life not as an all-encompassing identity, but as one of several that migrants can hold and exercise. Involvement in transnational life is generally stronger than that in purely associational forms of social life, such as political parties, but less strong than that envisioned in the primordial notion of “natural community”¹⁸ as formulated by the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies or the American anthropologist Robert Redfield in the early to mid-1900s. I do not intend to fall on my theoretical sword in arguing for a transnational perspective. I point up ways in which transnational life seems strong and institutionalized and those in which it seems limited, and I reflect on factors that affect how long it endures and how it is experienced.

Most transnationalists avoid the concept of *assimilation*, which they conceive of in its mid-twentieth-century form, positing conformity to an imagined set of white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant norms. Yet while we should criticize this harsh Americanization project—for example, for its uncritically viewing differences in life chances as the result of inherent group traits (such as race)—we still face the fundamental question of how immigrants become part of the larger American society. Many scholars prefer the term *incorporation* to describe this process because it is free of the Americanization overtones of *assimilation*. Although I use both terms, I more often use *assimilation* because it more accurately describes what immigrants perceive to be a coercive process with often negative consequences for them and their children. I do not endorse this coercive dimension of immigrant experience, but I think we cannot get a good picture of the current reality without acknowledging it, especially among groups with lower levels of education and income.

Some scholars see assimilation overwhelming transnational life as the second and subsequent generations become largely monolingual English-speakers.¹⁹ Yet this is not always the case, and even if it were, the transnational relationship would persist among new waves of immigrants. The relationship between assimilation and transnational life is complex, changing across the life course, by generation, and by class. Indeed, assimilation pressures are refracted through transnational processes: just as assimilation can be “segmented” into upward and downward mobility (into either more schooling and better jobs, or leaving school without graduating and poorer

jobs),²⁰ transnational life can extend such tendencies. Hence gang members on negative assimilation paths and students on positive ones in New York live out these experiences when they return to Ticuani. By so doing, they transnationalize both gangs and a culture of educational mobility, and this experience then affects assimilation and incorporation when they return to New York. Moreover, assimilation and transnationalization are not mutually exclusive processes: being more transnational does not necessarily mean being less assimilated. Indeed, leaders in migrant communities in the United States who engage in collective action there also tend to participate more in transnational life.²¹ Some evidence suggests that this was also the case in the past, as in the Swedish temperance or franchise-reform movements, which were pushed by the same adherents in both countries in the late 1880s and early 1900s.²² Hence, I think the biggest danger to positive assimilation is not transnationalization but negative assimilation pressures in the United States. Transnational life in fact has great potential to facilitate positive assimilation in the United States.

Transnationalization affects life differently in Mexico and New York. Life in Mexican sending villages like Ticuani (the communities from which migrants come to the United States) becomes oriented toward *el norte*, while life in New York is dominated by the daily struggles of surviving. Yet, among the more than 40 percent of Ticuanenses in New York and their children who become significantly involved in transnational life, it changes how they understand their own Mexican identity and their attitude toward various economic, racial, and ethnic assimilation pressures in New York. (I estimate that between 100 and 150 youths and 300 to 400 adults return to Ticuani each year, figures that represent at least 10 percent of all Ticuanenses in the United States and Mexico. Thus some 30 to 40 percent of all Ticuanenses return to Ticuani over the course of three years.) That transnational action does not directly involve all migrants does not detract from its pervasive influence. Indeed, a generation ago, the urban sociologist Gerald Suttles showed that, as with unions or political parties, the actions of leaders and a few active followers have disproportionate effects on collective life and on the less active members of a community.²³

Transnational life and reciprocal effects on assimilation and migration are not new, but they require a new theoretical lens to see them as such. Indeed, essays in “historical retrieval” are now documenting patterns of transnational action in immigration history that were not previously seen as such.²⁴ Immigrants during the late 1800s and early 1900s engaged in many of the transnational practices described in this book, including involvement in local politics and religious movements in communities of

both origin and destination. Migrant-sending countries also took many of the same measures in the past as they have done today, such as attempting to cultivate a closer relationship with their diaspora by establishing special programs for them, using their emigrants to lobby for national interests, and pursuing nationalist goals from abroad. Yet transnational life today is different from that of the past. These differences result in part from communications and travel technologies that enable migrants to participate in communities in both countries. A different regime of assimilation in the United States today also encourages ethnic identification and links with the home country rather than stressing Americanization. Moreover, today's migrants are likely to come with an identity linked to their country of origin, whereas migrants a hundred years ago might have identified themselves more strongly with their home village. And the current international system exerts contradictory pressures on migration. It controls most potential migration through passport and other state controls—what the political scientist Ari Zolberg calls “remote control”²⁵—which did not exist during most of the last wave of migration, from the 1880s to the 1920s. But it also promotes economic and cultural globalization, which fosters migration. More than two hundred million people around the world are now migrants, the largest number in human history.

The conditions supporting transnational life will persist for the foreseeable future.²⁶ With regard to transnationalization between Mexico and the United States, these conditions include globalization (ably analyzed by Saskia Sassen) and continuing labor market and migration pressures in Mexico. One-third of all Mexicans will travel to the United States during their lifetime, and half have a relative who has done so.²⁷ Changes in U.S. immigration and other laws and closer integration with the United States have also led to quicker long-term settlement in the United States.²⁸ U.S.-born children of Mexican migrants are the largest foreign-born group in Mexico outside Mexico City.²⁹ More than twenty million people of Mexican origin live in the United States; Mexico's population is now more than one hundred million. Without a major disruption of these conditions—on the scale of the Great Depression and World War II, which combined with restrictionism to end the last wave of migration—transnational life should continue to grow strongly in the future.

KEY SITES FOR ANALYZING TRANSNATIONAL LIFE

I analyze local-level transnational life at three of its key sites: in politics in the first generation, in gender relations in the first and second generations,