Ethnographic borders and crossings: Critical ethnography, intersectionality, and blurring the boundaries of insider research

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Accepted: 19 April 2022 / Published online: 9 September 2022
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Abstract
Critical ethnographers have long challenged positivist notions of research objectivity and the presumed unbiased observer, arguing that one’s theoretical lens and positionality influence research design, access, and experiences in the field. Scholars of color have further pointed out the need to examine people’s lived experiences through an intersectional framework, acknowledging the ways in which people’s lives are situated within larger structures of power and forms of oppression. In this paper, I use critical ethnography as an intersectional methodological approach to examine the lived experiences of mixed-status families and situate them within a larger political-economic context of restrictive immigration policies and neoliberal globalization. Critical ethnography is a useful methodology when interrogating larger questions of structure and agency, positionality, and social justice scholarship. I use critical ethnography to challenge the rigidity of ethnographic borders by proposing a concept of “ethnographic crossings” as moments in time and space when the roles of researchers and participants become blurred and intertwined. I draw on ethnographic examples to show the evolution of my project—from gaining access to immigrant families and following them across two countries to the close relationships developed during fieldwork that crossed emotional boundaries.

Keywords Critical ethnography · Reflexivity · Intersectionality · Insider/outsider status · Immigration · Mixed-status families

Fronteras y cruces etnográficos: Etnografía crítica, interseccionalidad y difuminación de los límites en la investigación desde adentro

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Resumen
Los etnógrafos críticos llevan años desafiando las nociones positivistas de objetividad investigativa y del supuesto observador imparcial argumentando que el lente teórico y la posicionalidad de una persona influyen en el diseño de las investigaciones, el acceso y las experiencias de campo. Investigadores de grupos racializados han señalado también la necesidad de examinar las experiencias vividas por las personas a través de un marco interseccional que reconozca las formas en las que las vidas de las personas se sitúan dentro de estructuras mayores de poder y tipos de opresión. Utilizo la etnografía crítica en este artículo como propuesta metodológica interseccional para examinar las experiencias vividas de familias de estatus migratorio mixto y situarlas dentro de un contexto político económico más amplio de políticas migratorias restrictivas y globalización neoliberal. La etnografía crítica es una metodología útil para plantear preguntas mayores de estructura y acción, posicionalidad y trabajo académico de justicia social. Utilizo la etnografía crítica para desafiar la rigidez de las fronteras etnográficas proponiendo un concepto de “cruces etnográficos”: momentos en el tiempo y el espacio en los que los papeles de investigador y participante se difuminan y entrelazan. Parto de ejemplos etnográficos para demostrar la evolución de mi proyecto: desde conseguir acceso a las familias inmigrantes y seguirlas a través de dos países hasta las relaciones estrechas desarrolladas durante el trabajo de campo que cruzaron los límites emocionales.

Palabras clave Etnografía crítica · Reflexividad · Interseccionalidad · Estatus desde adentro/desde afuera · Inmigración · Familias de estatus migratorio mixto

Saludos desde Chicago (Greetings from Chicago)

As I prepared for my trip to Zacatecas, Mexico, in the summer of 2010, I received a call from Valeria, asking me if I could take some gifts to her family.1 Valeria had not seen her parents since 2000 when she migrated to the United States with her husband, Max. After marrying, the young couple undertook a dangerous border crossing journey through the desert with the help of a coyote (smuggler). Unbeknownst to her, Valeria was a few weeks pregnant when she walked for nearly a day and half through the desert. She injured her foot one night but was able to complete the journey with the help of her husband. The couple first settled in Denver, and later moved to Chicago to join Max’s brothers. They have since raised three US-born daughters in a mixed-status family—composed of both undocumented immigrants and US citizens (Fix and Zimmermann 2001).

I first met Valeria in 2003 through a mutual friend. Over the years, I befriended Max’s family, Los Sanchez, regularly attending their children’s birthday parties and religious celebrations. I observed as Valeria meticulously video-recorded family parties, asking everyone to send their greetings and good wishes to those

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1 All names used are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of my interlocutors.
in Mexico. She prepared VHS cassettes and mailed them to her parents, later to be shared among different households. She kept them informed of major life events *en el Norte*, ensuring that their connections and family ties persisted despite their long periods of separation. Unable to travel freely to Zacatecas because of her undocumented status, Valeria found comfort in sending gifts and photographs to her loved ones. “*Me los saluda mucho. Y a ver como ve a mis papás,*” she stated, after dropping off a small package for me to take to her family. It was the least I could do, although I still lamented the unfairness of the situation.

It has been more than a decade since my initial trip to Mexico, and Valeria and Max continue to live in a mixed-status family, alongside their now teenage daughters. An estimated 10.5 million undocumented immigrants, like this couple, live in the United States, and 16 million people live in mixed-status households (Passel and Cohn 2019). Mixed-status families form part of larger transnational communities, but US immigration policies have made it difficult for undocumented immigrants already living in the United States to adjust their legal status. These families have thus been forced to live in “legal limbo” (Gonzales 2016; Miranda 2017) or “liminal legality” (Menjívar 2006) that keeps them in a state of uncertainty, under the constant threat of removal and forced relocation. For more than a decade, I have conducted long-term ethnographic research with Mexican mixed-status families in Chicago and return migrants in Zacatecas, Mexico, examining the ways these families negotiate restrictive immigration policies in their daily lives. I have seen families rely on local and transnational networks to keep their families together, sometimes successfully, other times not. Through this research, I have found that ethnographic boundaries of researcher/researched, insider/outsider, scholar/activist have become blurred, forcing me to grapple with the benefits and challenges of doing critical ethnography in one’s home community.

Critical ethnographers have long challenged positivist notions of research objectivity and the presumed unbiased observer, arguing that one’s theoretical lens and positionality influence research design, access, and experiences in the field (Castagno 2012; Madison 2012). Scholars of color have further pointed out the need to examine people’s lived experiences through an intersectional framework, acknowledging the ways in which people’s lives are situated within larger structures of power and oppression (Collins and Bilge 2020). In this paper, I use critical ethnography as an intersectional methodological approach to examine the lived experiences of mixed-status families and situate them within a larger political-economic context of restrictive immigration policies and neoliberal globalization. Critical ethnography, I argue, is a useful methodology that helps us interrogate larger questions of structure and agency, positionality, and social justice scholarship. I use critical ethnography to challenge the rigidity of ethnographic borders or divisions between “us” and “them,” and instead, propose a concept of “ethnographic crossings” as moments in time and space when the roles of researchers and participants become blurred and intertwined. I draw on ethnographic examples to show the evolution of my project—from gaining access to immigrant families and following them across two countries to the close relationships developed during fieldwork that crossed emotional boundaries. Through these reflections, I provide commentary on ongoing discussions in ethnography,
insider/outside status, and the continued responsibility researchers have to communities long after fieldwork has concluded.

Critical ethnography as an intersectional methodological approach

In the introduction to this special issue, Ramírez and Ríos make a call for the need to adopt an intersectional lens to better design and carry out empirical research. As they argue, such a lens not only helps account for the complex identities of participants and researchers, but also pushes us to move toward a more collaborative and social-justice-based agenda that benefits not only researchers but also the communities with whom we work. They thus propose a framework of “intersectional methodological approaches,” highlighting the need to (1) be attentive to the ways in which participants’ intersectional identities shape their lived experiences, (2) prioritize a collaborative relationship with participants in the production of knowledge, and (3) engage in a critical reflection of one’s positionality during the research process.

Many scholars have already called for critical research, and reflexivity has been taken up by many scholars in the past, particularly scholars of color since the 1970s. But the fact that rightists are attacking these frameworks, even legislating against their use at all, makes this focus all the more crucial. As of November 2021, for instance, state legislatures have passed bills in nine states and are debating others in nineteen states that prevent K-12 schools from teaching certain concepts related to race and gender and discussions of “conscious or unconscious bias, privilege, discrimination, and oppression” (see Ray and Gibbons 2021 for list of state bills). Not only is critical race theory (CRT)—an analytic framework that examines the intersections of history, law, and systemic forms of racism—not standard teaching in K–12 curricula, but these legislative efforts aim to prevent any serious discussions of race or of the ways institutional racism has affected our past and continue to shape present inequities. Relatedly, the framework of intersectionality, first championed by feminists and women of color (e.g., Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw), asks us to examine forms of oppression through different axes of power and structures, including race, class, and gender, among others.

Ethnography as a critical methodology

Ethnography has often been characterized by its dual function—representing both the process of doing fieldwork and the product or written text based of a researcher’s analysis and interpretation (Emerson et al. 2011). In Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes, Emerson et al. (2011) provide an instructional text on the process of ethnographic research and the different factors that can influence what a researcher finds in the field based on context, interpretation, and textual representation. During fieldwork, an ethnographer engages in “participant observation”—an immersive experience of learning about people’s social worlds through direct observation and active participation in people’s daily activities and interactions (Emerson et al. 2011, p. 1). The researcher writes down descriptive fieldnotes based on their observations, later
to be referenced during the writing process and data analysis. Participant-observation is a central component of ethnographic fieldwork, but it is not the only one, as many researchers also use structured or unstructured interviews, life histories, surveys, and linguistic or material culture analysis. Others may also use a mixed-methods approach, including archival research or statistical data, to strengthen their findings (di Leonardo 2006).

In many ways, ethnographic research is context-specific (based on time, place, and access) and dependent on the relationships that a researcher forms with the communities with whom they work. In order to develop meaningful relationships, a researcher engages in deep immersion ethnography by living in the field site (often for extended periods of time) and “see[ing] from the inside how people lead their lives, how they carry out their daily rounds of activities, what they find meaningful, and how they do so” (Emerson et al. 2011, p. 3). A key goal of ethnography is thus to gain a level of familiarity or “closeness” with interlocutors to learn not only what they do, but how they come to understand and construct meaning in their daily lives. This kind of context-based analysis and layered interpretation is what Geertz (1973) has famously referred to as “thick description,” aimed to distinguish it from “thin” surface-level observations or responses. These encounters, however, are also influenced by a researcher’s “consequential presence” or “the effects of the ethnographer’s participation on how members may talk and behave” (Emerson et al. 2011, p. 4). Ethnographers should thus be self-aware of how their presence is shaping the field, and how their positionality and identities may affect what interlocutors choose to reveal or withhold from them.

I would argue that ethnographic fieldwork is always a co-constructed experience, in which both parties—researchers and interlocutors—are reading each other and making conscious or unconscious decisions about how to present themselves and interact with one another. Fortunately, one of the distinctions of ethnographic research is that it is often carried out over extended periods of time, whether these are continuous months or spread out over several years. It is not uncommon for anthropologists to write ethnographies based on multiple years of fieldwork, including periodic returns to the field. As Emerson et al. note, “Continuing time in the field tends to dilute the insights generated by initial perceptions that arise in adapting to and discovering what is significant to others; it blunts early sensitivities to subtle patterns and underlying tensions. In short, the field researcher does not learn about the concerns and meaning of others all at once but, rather, in a constant, continuing process in which she builds new insight and understanding upon prior insights and understandings” (2011, p. 17). This long-term commitment and cumulative knowledge help researchers gain deeper understanding of local contexts and trace significant changes over time. Similarly, interlocutors can also benefit from the duration of a project by having opportunities to learn more about the ethnographer and deciding whether or not to build trusting relationships with them.

Although ethnography does have the potential for creating real partnerships with community members, we must not underestimate the power dynamics between researchers and participants in the research process, as these relationships can also become exploitative and one-directional. Latino/a/x anthropologists and ethnographers, in particular, have been at the forefront of some of these discussions—from
challenging the false dichotomies of the researcher/researched to problematizing power imbalances in ethnographic fieldwork and highlighting nuances on insider/outside dilemmas. So what happens “when natives talk back”?

The politics of representation and insider/outside dilemmas

Ethnography has had a long and complicated history in the field of anthropology. Although at first it was used as a colonial tool to help keep colonial powers informed of native populations, it was also a deviation from “armchair anthropology.” Early on, the discipline also had figures like Franz Boas (“the father of American anthropology”) who combated early twentieth-century scientific racism and eugenics-based claims on the inferiority of immigrants (di Leonardo 1998; Gonzalez and Chávez 2019). He promoted cultural relativism and trained individuals, such as Manuel Gamio who, in 1930, wrote the earliest ethnographic study of Mexican immigrants based on fieldwork in Chicago (Gonzalez and Chávez 2019). Yet, many of the early ethnographic works written about Mexican populations in the United States were done by white male anthropologists and drew on stereotypes and reinforced depictions of these communities as pathological, lazy, and superstitious (Gonzalez and Chávez 2019; Alvarez 1995).

With the rise of the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Chicana/o social scientists began to question these depictions of their communities by providing counternarratives with their own studies (e.g., Américo Paredes, Octavio Romano, Carlos Velez-Ibañez, Renato Rosaldo) (Gonzalez and Chávez 2019; Davalos 2001; Alvarez 1995). Chicana feminist anthropologists were particularly influential in contesting narrow representations of the Chicano family, highlighting the voices of both US-born and immigrant women (e.g., Zavella 1987). Chicano/a anthropologists further challenged the dichotomies between the researcher and the researched, as well as presumptions made about native anthropologists and the quality of their work. As Chicana anthropologist Monica Russel y Rodríguez writes, “The single status of ethnographer as objective knower not only concerns the Native as the knowable, static, simple object but upholds the researchers as superior, civilized, and complex. Conversely, the criterion for being the objective knower is to be not-Native. The Native knower, or Visweswaran’s ‘native authority,’ reveals this naked contradiction. … Although anthropologists of color are equality capable of writing good and bad ethnographies, they/we are also well positioned to expose this division” (1998, p. 17). Feminist and Chicana anthropologists have also complicated notions of insider/outside research, by pointing out that being “an insider” does not necessarily give one easier access to the field (di Leonardo 1987; Zavella 1993; Russel y Rodríguez 2007). There are always ways in which an ethnographer can be part of the community with whom they work, but also be an outsider in other respects.

The political-economic context of Mexican migration and mixed-status families

Mexicans have constituted the largest undocumented group in the United States since the 1920s (Ngai 2004). Thus the push and pull factors influencing that
enormous labor migration have been various. But the presence of the first Mexicans in U.S territory was a result of American imperialist expansion. The presence of Mexican labor in the United States has operated under a “revolving-door policy,” wherein mass removals (e.g., the deportations of Mexicans and Mexican Americans during the Great Depression) tend to be followed with migration incentives during years of labor shortages (e.g., the Bracero Program during World War II) (De Genova 2005; Massey et al. 2002). The demand for labor without the proper legal recognition has created a “migrant illegality” that has “historically rendered Mexican labor to be a distinctly disposable commodity,” highly exploitable and vulnerable for their “condition of deportability” (De Genova 2005, p. 215).

Although the passing of the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was intended to create a tariff-free zone to encourage trade and investment among Mexico, the United States, and Canada, it has arguably worsened economic conditions for small farms and businesses in Mexico (Bacon 2004; Harvey 2005). NAFTA has caused small agriculture and dairy farms, for example, to go bankrupt because of their inability to compete with US subsidized corn and powdered milk imports (Bacon 2004; McDonald 1997). This has led to rising unemployment rates, increased poverty, and further immigration pressures, particularly from rural Mexico (Bacon 2004). Many of my interlocutors, like Valeria and Max, migrated to the United States in the late 1990s and early 2000s when they were still teenagers and have not returned since. A majority of them are from Zacatecas and Michoacán—two states with a long history of Mexican rural out-migration (García Zamora 2000; Massey et al. 2002).

While some are quick to suggest that we can decrease “illegal immigration” by “tightening our borders,” sociologist Douglas S. Massey’s work has demonstrated that the increase in border enforcement since the mid-1980s has actually decreased the previously common outflow movement and encouraged migrants to remain in the US for longer periods of time (Massey et al. 2002). This longer stay has resulted in more immigrants setting down roots and forming families, many of which are of mixed status. Children can be citizens even if their parents are undocumented because the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution grants them birthright citizenship. Under current US immigration laws, mixed-status families have no protection from separation in the case of a parent’s deportation.

Mexican mixed-status families are not entirely novel in US history, but their numbers have experienced unprecedented growth in the past few decades (Passel et al. 2012), attributable to the unique set of conditions characterizing the current wave of undocumented Mexican labor migration (1986–present) and new settlement patterns distinct from the previous largely circular migration flow (Massey et al. 2002). These conditions include rising inequalities in Mexico caused by recent neoliberal global shifts (Harvey 2005; Mize and Swords 2011), the increased militarization of the US-Mexico border (Andreas 2000), restrictive US immigration laws from the 1990s forward (Parker 2007; Hagan et al. 2008), and the reemergence of an anti-immigrant/anti-Mexican political climate since the mid-1990s (Chavez 2008; Rosenblum 2011). With the passage of the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) and the new Homeland Security measures taken post-9/11, for instance, members of mixed-status families have fewer options
for adjusting their legal status or canceling the forced removal of an undocumented or legal immigrant on the basis of marriage, family ties, or length of stay in the United States (Guzmán 2000; Sutter 2006; Hagan et al. 2008; Mercer 2008).

**Ethnographic encounters**

To study how mixed-status families and their communities have been affected by immigration policies and, in turn, responded to these pressures, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork over the course of several years (2010–2016), as well as during summer periods since 2006. In my larger research project, Living in Legal Limbo, I examine the ways in which undocumented immigrants, US citizens, and return migrants navigate the legal and social constraints to which their families' uncertain status exposes them in the United States and in Mexico. My research was multisited, focused in the Midwest (in Chicago, in particular) and in north-central Mexico (in the state of Zacatecas). The Chicago area is home to the second-largest Mexican community in the United States (the first is Los Angeles). Zacatecas' migration stream has long-established communities in three key states—California, Texas, and Illinois (García Zamora 2000; 2005). I used primarily ethnographic methods—such as participant-observation, semi-structured interviews, life histories, and focus groups—as well as media and discourse analysis. Here, I focus on the participant-observation and life history interviews during different phases of my ethnographic research.

**Entering a familiar field and developing an intersectional lens**

I began my research on mixed-status families back in 2006. My interests in studying the effects of US immigration policy on immigrant families stemmed from both my personal background and a political commitment to advocate for immigrant rights. In 2006, Chicago was at the center of the immigrant rights movement, organizing the first large mobilizations against the infamous anti-immigrant bill HR4437, or “Sensenbrenner bill,” and calling for the need for comprehensive immigration reform. In ¡Marcha!, Pallares and Flores-González (2010) write about this historic moment and the ways in which different groups—from religious congregations to labor unions and grassroots organizations—partnered with Spanish-language media to organize and encourage people to come out and protest. Chicago was also the site of the sanctuary case of Elvira Arellano that gave rise to the New Sanctuary Movement, in which undocumented immigrants relied on religious and community networks to resist orders of deportation, not seen since the 1980s (Pallares 2014; Miranda 2017). Arellano would later become a key interlocutor in my research.

My participation in the immigrant rights marches and subsequent organizing efforts helped shape my early research, leading me to pursue graduate study. The public debates over immigration and the constant attempts to vilify undocumented immigrants as “criminals” or “a threat to the nation” were especially hurtful (Chavez 2008). The personal was indeed political. I am the daughter of two Mexican
immigrants (formerly undocumented) who had migrated to Chicago in the late 1970s and worked in manufacturing and service sector jobs. My parents were later able to legalize their status after the passing of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). But there was now a new generation of undocumented immigrants with few to no legal options for adjusting their status. They had come to the U.S. in the 1990s and early 2000s, following economic crises and widening income inequalities tied to neoliberal globalization (Harvey 2005; Golash-Boza 2012). But how did their experiences differ from those of previous generations? And how did undocumented immigrants and US citizens experience their family’s mixed status differently, based on their intersectional identities? Over the next few years, I set out to answer these questions and others, as I conducted critical ethnography and life history interviews with Mexican mixed-status families in Chicago.

My personal networks and familiarity with immigrant communities in Chicago gave me a certain level of access to the field, but this “closeness” also presented its own challenges. The boundaries between researcher and participants were not always clearly marked, as some of my first interlocutors were friends and others were recruited through snowball sampling. My insider/outsider status became more fluid and context-specific. At times I was seen as “an insider,” but I was also aware of my positionality and the power imbalances. I was not an immigrant, and my US citizenship afforded me privileges that many of my interlocutors did not have. Early on, I recall being hyperaware of how I interacted during interviews, trying to show when things were “on the record” by having my voice recorder out and other times pausing it to give the speaker space and simply lend a sympathetic ear. Crossing these ethnographic borders became sometimes necessary to allow for a more human or humane interaction, reassuring people that this was more than research to me.

It was during this period that I interviewed Valeria and Max for the first time. I had met Valeria a few years prior through a mutual friend and had socialized with her at their family gatherings. When I first asked Valeria if I could interview her for my research, she was very receptive and encouraged her husband to participate as well. As I would later find, this was not a common experience. It usually took twice as long for men to be willing to talk to me. They were understandably mistrustful of who I was and why I wanted to interview them about their migration and family life. I could hardly blame them, as this process could feel intrusive and require them to be vulnerable with an outsider.

Valeria and Max preferred to be interviewed together, and though I was skeptical of being able to keep up with both perspectives, they were incredible storytellers and would each remind the other of things the other had forgotten. During our first interview, I focused on their childhoods in Mexico, reasons for migration, and their border-crossing journeys to the United States. Their detailed descriptions of crossing the border were painful to hear, and I became concerned that my interview could be re-traumatizing. They would later tell me that it was cathartic or un alivio (a relief) to share their experience, but I did not ask them to revisit the story in follow-up interviews. Other interviewees also shared with me their crossing journeys, and I would remind them that it was fine if there were things they did not want to discuss. These were life-changing stories with significant memories and reflections, but they were also emotionally taxing for both narrator and listener. Their narratives haunted
me thereafter. I had grown up listening to these type of border stories, but they had become progressively more gruesome and deadly as 1990s US border security policies led to a rise in migrant deaths in the desert (De León 2015).

Crossing the border, however, was only the beginning. As Valeria and Max recounted, they continued to experience daily forms of surveillance in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. As Gilberto Rosas (2006) has theorized, there has been a “thickening of the borderlands” that has extended border securitization into the interior through enforcement policies in a post-9/11 United States. Although they were both vulnerable to racialized forms of discrimination because of their Latino identity, they each experienced the limitations of their undocumented status differently in their daily lives. Max, for instance, felt constrained about the places he could work and still remain undetected. Like other undocumented workers, he relied on family and friend networks to recommend places where his lack of work authorization would not present an issue (Gomberg-Muñoz 2010). He worked at a bakery in a Latino supermarket, only a few blocks away from his home, thus avoiding the need to drive long distances without a license. The couple admitted to staying within the city limits, avoiding neighboring suburbs where police were reportedly cooperating with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and targeting Latino drivers.

As a stay-at-home mother, Valeria’s social world was initially limited to Max’s family, but she soon carved out her own female networks through her daughters’ school where she met other immigrant mothers. She also interacted regularly with health and school officials, who encouraged her to seek out resources for her family and learn strategies for getting around without a social security number. For example, Valeria learned from a comadre about applying for an ITIN number to open a bank account, and she was the one in charge of administering the family’s income while setting aside money to send to Mexico. For many years, the family lived in a small basement apartment, but when the homeowner lost the property after the housing market crisis in 2008, it was Valeria who reached out to the bank to figure out their options. But Valeria was also exposed to microaggressions due to her limited English-speaking skills, similar to those Vega (2015) describes in her ethnography of Latinos in Indiana. When one of her daughters was bullied at school, she repeatedly asked to meet with school officials and, at one point, went above the principal’s head and contacted a district official to assert her rights.

Although, at first, I viewed Valeria and Max’s story as one of pure hardship, as a critical ethnographer, I learned to observe and document the ways in which immigrants also exert their power and agency. Following the dynamics between structure and agency allows researchers to acknowledge their interlocutors’ complex humanity. I never ignore the structural and state violence enacted on undocumented immigrants and their families (Menjívar and Abrego 2012), but long-term ethnographic research has also allowed me to witness moments of defiance, resourcefulness, and belonging. Valeria and Max also demonstrated their unwillingness to let their undocumented status overwhelm their family life in the way they worked out their limitations and learned to celebrate their children’s milestones and life events. From baptisms to quinceañeras, I observed the couple attempt to create happy memories for their daughters, which they would record and send back to Mexico. There was a certain level of bravery and defiance in their refusal to diminish their lives, like
those Gonzales (2016) documented while working with undocumented youth. At the same time, this stance was possible only if Valeria and Max remained “under the radar.” They were quickly reminded of their legal vulnerability when encountering the occasional traffic stop or ticket. They tried to stay alert through their social networks and Spanish-language media.

**Ethnographic crossings—turning the lens inward**

During my research I interviewed two types of mixed-status families—those comprising of undocumented parents and US-citizen children, like Valeria and Max’s, and others comprising an undocumented immigrant married to a US citizen. Contrary to popular belief, most undocumented immigrants have few to no legal options for adjusting their status once they are residing in the United States. In fact, if they leave the country, they are subject to a three-year, ten-year, or permanent bar depending on their length of residency or number of crossings. The 1996 IIRIRA introduced changes to the Immigration and Nationality Act that raised the requirements for the legalization process and made it vastly more difficult for mixed-status families to remain together. Undocumented immigrants found living in the United States without authorization for more than six months are barred from reentry for three years—and for ten years if the duration of residency is more than one year. Undocumented immigrants married to US citizens are eligible for a an “extreme hardship” waiver to lift the three- and ten-year bars. But first, applicants need to prove that a denial of the waiver will cause the US citizen or legal permanent spouse extreme hardship. Proving extreme hardship, however, is not a straightforward task, as waiver requests are often denied. Deciding to begin the process to legalize an undocumented partner’s status is thus often a gamble for many (Gomberg-Muñoz 2016; Miranda 2017).

Soon after my interview with Valeria and Max, I asked Max’s brother, Carlos, if I could interview him. Carlos was an undocumented immigrant married to a third-generation Mexican American, Julia. They both agreed and asked my partner and me to join them for dinner at a pizzeria. Although I would have opted to visit them in their home, I did not want to impose and agreed to meet them at their preferred place. As had been my experience before with a couple, our exchange was casual and felt more conversational than a one–one-one interview. Carlos talked about his reasons for migrating to the US and the type of work he did at a Greek-owned grocery store. Confidently, Carlos asserted that he was not worried much about his undocumented status and simply wanted to enjoy his family life with Julia and their two daughters. Then I turned to Julia, who was visibly more reserved and talked about her concerns over Carlos’s undocumented status. She explained that she had suggested looking for an immigration attorney, but Carlos refused because he did not want his father-in-law, who had previously expressed reservations over their marriage, to think that he had married her *por los papeles* (for the papers).

The interview was going well, but then I turned to some hypothetical questions. I asked, “What would you do if your husband was suddenly deported or was unable to stay in the US?” The question was not meant to be hurtful, as this was a real
possibility that many of my interlocutors faced daily. I later learned to be more tactful with my wording and the way I touched on these difficult subjects. More than anything, I wanted to get a sense of whether couples had contemplated this possibility, planned for it, or tried to ignore it all together. Then Carlos, visibly annoyed, turned to me and asked, “What would you do if [your partner] had to go back to Mexico? Would you leave everything to follow him?” His turning the ethnographic lens back on me caught me off guard, even though it was fair. What gave me the right to ask them these personal questions? And would I be willing to ask these of myself? Up until then, Carlos and I had only engaged in friendly casual conversations, and he had agreed to be interviewed because he knew my then undocumented partner. Put on the spot, I responded almost instinctually, “Yes, I would.” But the question lingered with me thereafter. It is not as if I had not thought of it before, but like Julia and Carlos, I was now being asked to talk about it out loud. The researcher had become the researched, and during these “ethnographic crossings” I found it difficult to disentangle my personal circumstances from the issues I was studying. My research was too close to home.

It took us a couple of years before we revisited this conversation. I was invited to a Sanchez family dinner, during which I began talking with Max about the latest immigrant rights mobilizations shown on TV. Max and Valeria began to share with me their latest project in Mexico, as they had begun construction on a new house. They explained that they wanted their daughters to visit their grandparents one day, although it also served as a form of security in case they had to go back. I asked whether or not the changed political climate had shifted their thoughts on returning. Did they now feel the threat of removal more strongly than before? Listening nearby, Carlos joined in our conversation. He stated, “Si me tengo que ir a México porque me deportaron, pues ni modo. Uno no puede hacer nada. ¿Pero, y mis hijas, y mi esposa? Ellas son de aquí, son ciudadanas. ¿Como les voy a pedir que se vayan a México conmigo?… donde no hay trabajo, ni puede uno pagar la escuela. Si me deportan, hay que hacerle la lucha para regresar.” (If I have to go to Mexico because they deported me, oh well. I can’t do anything about it. But what about my daughter, and my wife? They are from here, they are citizens. How am I going to ask them to go to Mexico with me?…Where there is no work, and you can’t pay for schooling. If they deport me, one has to make the effort to come back).

Julia, however, promised to follow him wherever he went. “I don’t want to even think of him crossing the border again. With all of the stories you hear. … I’d rather just move to Mexico,” she said. But the fact that the couple has decided not to begin the legalization process suggests that the fear of being forced to live in Mexico for ten years (if the application were denied) is all too great. Coming out of the shadows requires them to place the future of their family in the US at risk, which was something they were not willing to do, just yet.

Following families across borders

During the second phase of my fieldwork, I followed a number of Mexican mixed-status families, as they returned to their rural communities of origin in central
Mexico, analyzing the unique challenges men, women, and US-born children faced during their resettlement process in a place they no longer consider home. I analyzed the narratives return migrants created as they were faced with renegotiating their position with the Mexican nation-state, while still dealing with the memories of their lives in the United States and of the family members they left behind.

Sitting in his mother’s kitchen, Brian (a childhood friend of Max and Valeria), described his frustration with his recent return to el rancho—a place he had not seen in over a decade: “I had always wanted to go to el norte. But when I was there, I had no intention of staying. … I don’t know, I guess I always had la ilusión of coming back, but not in the way that I did…or [the way] that they sent me back.” In 2011, Brian had been forcibly removed from the US following an arrest for disorderly conduct in Atlanta, which had been resolved, but the case had still been transferred to ICE. He spent five months in a detention center in Texas until he was sent back to Mexico. In his absence, his wife Susana, who was also undocumented, was unable to keep up with their mortgage payments and household expenses and decided that, rather than spend all of their family savings, she would take their three US-born children to Zacatecas, while they waited for Brian to reunite with them. Once in Mexico, Brian and Susana were faced with a new reality and set of challenges that came with living in a place that was no longer familiar to them.

Even though return migrants were proud of their humble origins, they also admitted that their experiences in the United States—both good and bad—had transformed them in significant ways. It had given them “a new reference point” for how they wanted to live and raise their children. Brian, for instance, explained how his inability to provide for his family in the way that they had grown accustomed to had made him want to go back to the US and support them from afar—not unlike what his father (a circular migrant in the 1970s and 1980s) had done for many years throughout his childhood: “At first, it was hard to get used to the quiet, dusty streets of el rancho, but after a while, it all starts to feel normal again. … But then the weeks go by and the money starts to run out … and your kids start asking you for things they had over there. … You get this knot in your throat, that feeling of impotence … and that’s when you start thinking about crossing again.” The dangers at the border and the cost of crossing—estimated at $5,000, plus the additional “protection tax” to avoid trouble with organized crime—had dissuaded him up until then.

During their initial period of return, a majority of migrants reported feeling a sense of displacement and estrangement about being back in their ranchos. In a focus group, one participant stated, “Today’s Mexico is not the same one that I left behind … and even though I’m from here, ya no me hayo aquí” (I don’t feel like I belong here anymore). Some migrants described their ranchos as having changed dramatically because of all the men and women who had migrated and now resided in the United States, as only those with papeles would come back during the seasonal festivities. Others quickly noticed how their ranchos’ economies had stagnated because of the post-NAFTA disadvantaged position farmers held in the production of staple crops like maize and beans.

Indeed, one of the most pressing challenges return migrants faced during their resettlement process was finding stable employment. During these moments, non-migrant family members and local residents became one of the most important
resources available to them, especially if they had returned with little savings or had not invested their remittances in land or in the construction of a family home. This was particularly true for deportees, whose abrupt return had given them no time to plan ahead, and as one migrant described it, “We arrived with only the clothes on our backs, and nothing to show for the time spent in the US.” Nonmigrant relatives were able to provide return migrants with a safety net. They offered returnees initial food and shelter in their homes, recommended them to their employers, provided emergency childcare, and gave them extended emotional and moral support.

New challenges in ethnography

No one ever tells you what to expect when you go into the field, especially when the field is one that is familiar to you. Perhaps this is because you do not really know what you will find until you are there—immersed in the daily lives of your interlocutors, listening to their stories and memories, and questioning whether you have become “too close” to maintain healthy boundaries. Engaging in “ethnographic crossings” or blurring the boundaries between the researcher/researched is not necessarily something to avoid or to deem less rigorous than “outsider” research. The reality is that ethnography is a co-constructed experience made possible by the interactions of a researcher and participants, whose lives become intertwined during the period of “the ethnographic present.” Just as a researcher can have “a consequential presence” in the field (Emerson et al. 2011), so can interlocutors leave a permanent mark in an ethnographer’s life. I am reminded of this when I read through my field-notes and transcripts, or when I feel guilty for not returning to the field as often as I would like. Do they think of me as much as I think of them? Not likely. But I am constantly revisiting our shared time during the writing process, and when I present their narratives to academic audiences.

Although ethnography can be a collaborative effort, one must not underestimate the power differences between researchers and their interlocutors. An ethnographer may try to do their best to adequately and responsibly write about their participants’ social worlds, and the multiple ways in which they create meaning in their lives. Ultimately, however, the written representation and analysis of this experience is still often shared through the lens of the ethnographer. As Emerson et al. (2011) write, “Ethnographers should attempt to write fieldnotes in ways that capture and preserve indigenous meanings. … They must become responsive to what others are concerned about in their own terms. But while fieldnotes are about others, their concerns, and doings gleaned through empathetic immersion, they necessarily reflect and convey the ethnographer’s understanding of these concerns and doings” (Emerson et al. 2011, p. 16). Ethnographers can thus still get things wrong. And neither insiders nor outsiders, or those in-between, are exempt from this possibility. We all have to do our due diligence, build toward a “thick description,” and be accountable to the communities with whom we work. In the study of migration, there have been new, exciting collaborations between researchers and undocumented immigrants who have co-designed and co-authored projects, such as Decolonizing Ethnography: Undocumented Immigrants and New Directions in Social Science (Alonso Bejarano
et al. 2019), and We Are Not Dreamers: Undocumented Scholars Theorize Undocumented Life in the United States (Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales 2020). These are promising new directions in the field, and I look forward to the possibility of one day co-authoring with my interlocutors.

In recent years, however, ethnographers have also been faced with new challenges in conducting fieldwork in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Given that the method is defined by its immersive quality and layered analysis, one is left wondering whether it is possible to conduct ethnography remotely. For this, one might turn to anthropologists, critical geographers, and other researchers, who have already been doing digital or virtual ethnography. The Center for Global Ethnography at Stanford University, for example, has released a six-part series of interviews with anthropologists who have done remote research. Anthropologist Yarimar Bonilla, for instance, conducted phone interviews with Puerto Rican residents in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria and shared new insights on the importance of linguistic analysis with this type of work.

During the pandemic, I have tried to maintain communication with my key interlocutors, sending messages of support and solidarity. Sadly, Valeria’s mother passed away from COVID-19 complications in Zacatecas in December 2020. Valeria was forced to mourn her mother’s passing from a distance. Friends and family sent messages of support and sympathy through social media, while others sent small amounts of money to help pay for flowers and funeral costs. These rituals of transnational solidarity are not uncommon, but the context of the pandemic and the lengthy period of separation that Valeria has already experienced made her situation even more heartbreaking.

There is much that my interlocutors have taught me about hope and resilience during difficult times. And as an “insider” researcher, I often feel an added weight to speak up about the injustices faced by my community. This sense of accountability, however, is not one that only scholars of color should be expected to bear. The framework of “intersectional methodological approaches” should be considered by all researchers, especially those whose careers have benefited from doing work with and about marginalized communities. No one is exempt.

Acknowledgements I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful suggestions, and the guest editors, Marla Ramírez and Sarah Ríos, for their work on this special issue. I would also like to thank fellow ethnographers Micaela di Leonardo, Mariaelena Huambachano, and José Villagran, whose work and friendship inspires and motivates me to keep writing. Most of all, I am indebted to my interlocutors, who have generously let me into their lives and allowed me to share their stories.

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