

CHAPTER ONE

“We Had Nothing to Eat”

The Biopolitics of Food Insecurity

IN SEARCH OF FOOD

It is mid-December 2010 and I am arriving at the home of Betanía, a woman in her early sixties whom I met at a nutrition outreach event organized by the food bank. The address she provided me over the phone takes me to the Eastside neighborhood of Santa Barbara, a predominantly Latino residential area flanked on one side by the range of mountains that separate Santa Barbara from Montecito and on the other side by the commercial zone of Milpas Street. As I approach the carport leading up to a side entrance of the small, nondescript house whose address I hope matches the one I was given by Betanía, I notice the door is slightly ajar. Betanía beckons me in with a wave and shouts “Pásale!” from inside. As I push through the doorway, she dusts off a white plastic chair for me in the center of the kitchen. In the corner of the room stands an artificial Christmas tree decorated with colorful lights and various ornaments. Joining us is Betanía’s daughter Paula, who hovers over the table making cheese enchiladas, as well as Betanía’s

grandson, who is sent to play in another room shortly after we begin conversing. Paula occasionally chimes in during the interview to help answer my questions.

I learn from both women that four families live together in this two-bedroom home and that they help each other—“*cooperamos todos*”—by sharing household resources and expenses. Betanía’s husband earns money as a dishwasher at a Chinese restaurant, where he has been employed for the past nine years. Sometimes he collects aluminum cans and glass bottles to turn in at a local recycling station for extra cash. Betanía explains that she tends to domestic chores such as grocery shopping and helps with preparing meals for everyone in the household.

Responding to questions on my dietary survey, Betanía and Paula explain that they have had to limit themselves to eating only one meal per day because that is all they can afford right now. Also referring to others in the household, they report regular instances of hunger, reduced food intake, and diets that they consider to be unbalanced, even among the children. They complain that often they have “*solo frijoles . . . y arroz*” (only beans and rice) to feed the children. Betanía further discloses that food is especially scarce around the time that rent is due to the landlord, the fourth or fifth day of each month.

Since arriving in the United States, both Betanía and her husband have developed diabetes. Without access to health insurance they must pay out of pocket for any medical expenses related to their condition. Betanía’s US-born granddaughter has also been hospitalized from a serious illness for the past couple of years, but some of this care is subsidized. Although Betanía visits her granddaughter in the hospital almost daily, she notes that others in the household also take turns in making these visits. Between expenses related to Betanía’s diabetes and her granddaughter’s hospitaliza-

tion, the family does not see an end to the medical debt they have accumulated over the years.

Betanía and Paula describe life in Santa Barbara as “muy difícil” (very difficult) because there is “poco trabajo” (little work). They shop at the stores within closest proximity to their home, seeking “las especiales” (specials) because they do not have access to a car and cannot afford items at full price. Any supply of fruits and vegetables they have comes from the food bank. Unfortunately, however, Betanía is often unable to attend distributions organized by the food bank because of scheduling conflicts with her medical appointments. She rarely buys meat because she says that it is “tan caro” (too expensive). Toward the end of my visit on this day in December, Betanía leans over to me and whispers out of earshot from her daughter that although she often lacks meat or vegetables, she can always whip up an egg with beans, or beans with salsa, or *buevos a la Mexicana*, all the while gesturing with her hands.

Despite the family’s struggles with limited resources, Betanía reports that her diet has improved since coming to the United States. In Mexico she could not buy rice, beans, or vegetables, for instance, because she and her husband had no source of income. Her town lacked much in the way of employment opportunities, and although her family farmed for subsistence, severe droughts prevented them from producing enough food for the household. “No lo quiero recordar porque estábamos bien pobre” (I’d rather not remember because we were so poor), she says in attempting to recall the inevitable hunger that would follow unfavorable harvests. Season after season of poor yields and poor earnings prompted Betanía’s family to leave the Mexican state of Guerrero for the United States. Her husband was the first to arrive, almost a decade before Betanía; he strived to regularly send home a portion

of his earnings, but he was only able to do so occasionally. By the time I met Betanía, she had been living in the United States for nine years.

Betanía learned to cook from her mother, like many other women in my research, and to grow corn and other crops from her father. In Mexico, her family lived in a *casita* (small house) and they were very poor. She went to school for only one year and never pursued employment outside of the home. She married at age fifteen and had her first child two years later. She is the mother of eight children, five of whom are living in the United States; two daughters and one son are still living in Guerrero. All of her daughters, both in the United States and Guerrero, have followed in their mother's footsteps of becoming traditional housewives, and they do not have formal employment outside of the home. Her son in Mexico is a farmworker, while her sons in the United States are employed as landscapers or as restaurant kitchen staff.

I continue to regularly visit Betanía at her residence in Santa Barbara, specifically—and of all places—in her kitchen, which doubles as the site of sleeping quarters with her husband. On a rainy day some months following my initial visit, I arrive again at Betanía's home at our scheduled time. Her daughter Paula greets me at the door and informs me that Betanía has gone to the store but should be returning shortly. It seems that Betanía had missed the food bank distribution the prior day because of the rain and has gone to the store in hopes that she might find items on sale today. A few of Betanía's grandchildren wave from the corner of the room and motion for me to take a seat. Paula explains that the children stayed home from school today because they woke up feeling sick. One has a sore throat, and three have the flu. The four of them sit wedged together in their pajamas on a short stack of

twin mattresses set against the wall, watching cartoons on a small television set.

As I wait for Betanía to return from her shopping excursion I watch as Paula proceeds to prepare food for the children. She lifts the lids of a couple steaming pots on the stove to reveal their contents: pinto beans in one and a *caldito de pollo con verduras* (soup of chicken and vegetables) in the other. Perched on the wall shelves behind me are packages of store-bought tortillas, bags of dried beans and lentils, crates of eggs, and a bottle of Nutralife tablets. I am reminded of the Nutralife brochures that have been left behind by Spanish-speaking sales representatives in the homes of my other research participants; I have learned that mothers sometimes substitute these tablets for fruits and vegetables when finances are not available to purchase the latter.

Around the kitchen there are also decorations such as silver streamers hanging from the ceiling and a sign on the wall that reads *Es Niño, Es Niño, Es Niño* (It's a Boy, It's a Boy, It's a Boy), left over from a recent celebration to welcome Betanía's newest grandson into the family. Paula orders all of the children to wash their hands before eating. The older boy does not like anything in his soup, and carefully removes each sliver of onion from the broth and sets it aside. In coaxing the children to try the soup, Paula tells them that "*caldito es bueno para la gripe*" (a little soup is good for the flu) and "*te curarás*" (you will heal). Meanwhile, Paula's two-year-old daughter sits in her stroller in front of the television, intermittently crying to her mother for attention. Paula gives her Cheerios, asking if she would like some milk; the little girl nods. Paula proceeds to heat milk on the stove and then adds it to the cereal. Stacking plastic chairs

one on top of another to function as a high chair, Paula props her daughter up at the table, yet the two-year-old still refuses to eat her Cheerios. For the boy who won't eat his soup Paula begins to prepare a sandwich of fried eggs, cheese, ham, slices of hot dog links, and mayonnaise.

About an hour past our scheduled meeting time Betanía finally returns home from the store, but with empty hands. She closes her umbrella and sits next to me with a look of resignation, indicating that her excursion was not a success.

These scenes from Betanía's home attest to the everyday constraints faced by many low-income, immigrant women in meeting the nutritional needs of households. With limited material means, they must resort to exercising their creativity and finding alternatives in this endeavor. While women such as Betanía attribute their decision to migrate to conditions of food insecurity, they regretfully report only minimal improvements to their household food resources after arriving in the United States. These constraints on nutritional needs compound the embodied aspects of *structural vulnerability*: "a positionality that imposes physical/emotional suffering on specific population groups and individuals in patterned ways . . . it is a product of class-based economic exploitation and cultural, gender/sexual, and racialized discrimination" (Quesada, Hart, and Bourgois 2011, 340). The cumulated effects of structural vulnerability, James Quesada and colleagues (2011) argue, translate to "very real consequences: shorter lives subject to a disproportionate load of intimate suffering" (351). This chapter examines how women attempt to subvert the structural violence of food insecurity through migration, even if they are reacquainted with food insecurity once living in the United States.

OUT OF LATIN AMERICA: TRACING THE
GENDERED EFFECTS OF NEOLIBERALISM

Multilateral trade agreements, structural adjustment programs, and other modes of uneven economic development have contributed to widespread displacement of people from agrarian occupations and livelihoods in the world's less wealthy countries, as well as to mass migration of those displaced (Green 2011). A lack of economic opportunity in the home countries of migrants and a demand for workers abroad in the service sector has also translated to increased feminization of migration in the past two decades. In fact, a 2013 report by the United Nations estimated that women accounted for 48 percent of the total international migrant population, and that female-to-male ratios were even higher when looking at migration to the United States and Europe (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division 2013). Migration from Latin America has specifically been linked to global capitalism, neoliberal economic development, and geopolitical instability in the region (Durand and Massey 2010; Kearney 1995; Robinson 2008). Jorge Durand and Douglas Massey (2010) identify three predominant channels of this outward migration: intraregional migration (i.e., migration within Latin America), south-to-north migration, and transoceanic migration. This book focuses on south-to-north migration, specifically from Mexico and Central America to the United States.

Since the late 1970s women have migrated from Mexico to the United States in equal numbers as men as a result of increased "economic integration of Mexico and the United States" and "feminization of labor" (Segura and Zavella 2007, 2). Much of this migration is unauthorized, meaning that individuals who are migrating do not have formal permission to do so. However, some

scholars have actually argued that such migration is indeed authorized but that it is only fashioned as such “informally” through the labor demands waged by US-based employers (Plascencia 2012). Eleven million unauthorized immigrants are estimated to be living in the United States (Passel and Cohn 2011), one-third of whom are women (Segura and Zavella 2007). Compared to other states, California has the largest number of foreign-born residents from Latin America and the largest number of unauthorized immigrants employed in its economy (US Census Bureau 2010; Van Hook, Bean, and Passel 2005). Recent studies have suggested, however, that economic conditions related to recession accounted for a decline in the number of people migrating to the United States and even prompted some return migration to Mexico (Passel, Cohn, and Gonzalez-Barrera 2012). Durand and Massey (2010) note that although rates of Latin American intraregional and transoceanic migration are likely to intensify if the US economy slips into further decline, the actual number of immigrants from Latin America living in the United States continues to exceed populations in other regions. Thus, despite a temporary tapering off in the number of people arriving from Mexico, the United States continues to be an important site for analyzing migration from Latin America.

The ways in which women form a large part of this migration have received considerably little scholarly attention. Denise Segura and Patricia Zavella have, for instance, alluded to an underrepresentation of women “in the vast literature on migration from Mexico” (2007, 3); they note that migrant women’s strategies for “[coping] with social inequalities based on racial, gender, class and/or sexual differences . . . of feeling ‘in between’ cultures, languages, or places” (4) are often masked by “negative representations” circulated through the media and cultural norms (11),

therefore adding insult to injury. These negative representations of Mexican (and Central American) women living in the United States insinuate that they lack “agency, resources, and knowledge—a portrayal that fuels a continual disavowal of their central role in sustaining the wellbeing of their families, cultural traditions, and a workforce upon which many of us depend” (Mares 2014, 46). For instance, US-Mexico borderlands anthropologist Deborah Boehm highlights the double standard in which a man migrating without legal authorization is valorized as a “good man,” while an undocumented migrant woman proceeds with shame (2012, 97). Feminist scholar Grace Chang has also critiqued the popular misconception that Latina women represent a “new menace” to US society, being portrayed as “idle, welfare-dependent mothers and inordinate breeders of dependents” (2000, 4). She claims that a focus on allegedly high birth rates and immigrants’ consumption of public resources “is clearly not gender neutral” (5). She writes, “Just as black women have babies in order to suck up welfare, we are told, immigrant women come to the United States to have babies and consume all of the natural resources in sight” (34). Chang finds that some women come to accept these portrayals, even engaging in rhetoric that is self-effacing, for the reason that they find few outlets for formal social belonging in US society.

Ethnographic research on women’s migration from Mexico and Central America to the United States has identified several factors that influence women’s decisions to migrate: desire for reunification with family members; desire for improved economic opportunities; intimate partner violence; and political violence and instability (Boehm 2012; Chang 2000; Segura and Zavella 2007). Women’s levels of education, their prior marital status, and the strength of their social networks in the United States are also

important predictors of migration. Segura and Zavella contend that the numbers of women migrating within the US-Mexico borderlands specifically are increasing: “More and more women migrate within Mexico and from Mexico to the United States, a development that exacts particular regional effects in both countries, including women’s incorporation into the labor market and the feminization of specific occupations on both sides of the border” (2007, 5). They suggest that migrant women’s entry into the labor market facilitates their negotiation “for an enhanced social space in households, local communities, and the state” (3). It is important to point out that in noting how women’s migration is now almost on par with or surpassing that of men Segura and Zavella call for research that will enable us “to understand better the nature of this shift in the gender composition of transnational migrants and what it means for women’s work and family experiences as well as women’s identities and cultural expressions in the United States and in Mexico” (2007, 7). A fundamental aspect of endeavoring to understand shifts in the gender composition of transnational migrants is inquiring into how the very notion of gender is constituted through the process of migration. Given Judith Butler’s assertion that “[g]ender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (1998, 519), research on women’s migration might delve into how women contest, negotiate, and enact social expectations tethered to gender identity.

As populations have been displaced from agrarian livelihoods in Mexico and Central America through neoliberal policies of structural adjustment and trade liberalization, women from these communities have faced a unique set of challenges. Much of this

has to do with the ways in which women are disproportionately burdened with the labor of *social reproduction*: "the creation of people as cultural and social, as well as physical beings" (Glenn 1992, 4). While the "double-duty" workday extracts value from women both as wage earners and caregivers, these activities do not yield equal compensation. Susana Narotzky (1997) claims this is because the act of caring is believed to inherently provide its own rewards. Despite evidence presented by feminist scholars warranting compensation for the reproductive labor that undergirds "productive" labor and enables capital accumulation (Barker 2005; Narotzky 1997), reproductive labor has been consistently devalued.

Food Insecurity as Structural Violence

The North American Free Trade Agreement, signed in 1994 by the United States, Mexico, and Canada, serves as a prime example of legislation that has displaced many rural Mexican households from farming as an occupation because they are unable to compete with subsidized, imported commodities (Fernandez-Kelley and Massey 2007). The Central American Free Trade Agreement has had similar repercussions on Central American rural households. Shahra Razavi (2002) elaborates on the effects of these policies, particularly for women; she writes, "Rather than *shifting the terms of trade* toward agriculture, neoliberal policies have been, in effect, *shifting the burdens* of adjustment toward small farmers, and especially the women in rural households who often bear the double burden of farm (and off-farm) work and the care of human beings" (2002, 2; emphasis in the original). Stated bluntly, the effects of neoliberal economic policies have not been gender neutral. Rather, women have experienced uneven consequences of these policy shifts and have had to make "invisible adjustments"

along the way. Razavi further elaborates, “As governments have abandoned essential elements of public social provision, social responsibility has shifted to families and communities, throwing a disproportionate burden on women’s shoulders” (8–9), including the burden of the provision of food. Moreover, the demise of the welfare state brought about by structural adjustment, as well as the inability to compete with cheap agricultural inputs rendered through trade liberalization, has compromised the capacity of rural households to avoid food insecurity. Although Penny Van Esterik argues that “states have a duty to avoid depriving, to protect from depriving, and to aid the deprived” (1999b, 226), food insecurity, as a palpable consequence of these policy shifts, represents the biopolitics of the state and “states themselves often do the depriving intentionally or unintentionally” (226).

As Van Esterik (1999) contends, “Women’s identity and sense of self is often based on their ability to feed their families and others; food insecurity denies them this right” (225). Food procurement, preparation, and allocation are inherently social activities through which women may sustain and negotiate relations with others while also asserting some level of influence over these relations (Abarca 2006; Allen and Sachs 2007). Carole Counihan (1999) stresses the historical precedence of these activities, and of feeding in particular, as they have been asserted by women throughout the world. Drawing on Counihan’s influential work on food and gender, Masha Sukovic and colleagues underscore that “women have always had a special relationship with food, as they have universal responsibility for food preparation and consumption, are often defined as nurturers, and carry out this role mainly through feeding” (2011, 229). Feeding and its accompanying labors—what Brenda Beagan (2008) calls foodwork—therefore comprise a central aspect of social reproduction. As such, imped-

iments to these activities have very real social consequences. As Van Esterik notes, "For women who are normally responsible for feeding their families, the experience of being unable to feed their children is tantamount to torture" (1999, 230).

Notably, the literature on women's migration from Mexico and Central America to the United States has yet to identify or consider with much resolve the role of structural violence in the global industrial food system and the gendered division of foodwork in shaping human transnational flows. Teresa Mares's (2012; 2013) research on Latino immigrants' engagements with different food programs in the Seattle area in some ways stands as an exception. In examining Latino immigrants' reliance on emergency food programs and how they view these programs as complementing ties of mutual aid, she finds that "the provisioning of emergency food remains an inadequate solution to transnational material inequalities that disparately impact the lives" of these immigrants (2013, 2). She also extends her thinking to the structural violence of a food system that has transnational implications, gesturing to the possible ways that food insecurity patterns migration, noting, "The stripping of rights and agency is indicative of the inequalities that persist not only in the emergency food system but also in the transnational economic disparities that impel people to migrate in the first place . . . this reliance on emergency food and the absence of self-sufficiency must be placed into a transnational context whereby the crossing of borders becomes a strategy to survive neoliberal policies that have impoverished millions" (2013, 19). Despite Mares's astute critique, her speculation about how food insecurity interacts with people's decisions to migrate remains a secondary area of interest in her overall analysis. Her data also do not necessarily allow her to explore the extent to which these patterns of displacement are gendered.

Indeed, few scholars have explicitly questioned the reciprocal relationship of food insecurity to migration (Crush 2013), an issue that merits further attention. One explanation for why this gap exists, at least in terms of the ethnographic literature, could be that informants and researchers often implicate one another in the production of nostalgic narratives of food and homeland. For instance, the isolated or rare occasion of feasting during a festive celebration might override the everyday scarcity or monotony of food in informants' retelling of the past. Experiences of food insecurity and hunger prove to be undoubtedly painful and even traumatic, and as such they are often folded into a more generalized discourse of poverty or suffering in informants' narratives. Veena Das's insight that "[r]esearch on gender and violence is not only about how worlds are unmade by violence but also how they are remade" (2008, 293) suggests here that part of the process of healing or distancing oneself from traumatic experience involves informants reconstructing the past as they would like for it to be remembered.

In the following section I turn again to the experiences of my key informants to suggest that women's decisions to migrate may indeed exhibit a desire to uphold social obligations in the realm of food amid massive structural shifts that translate to livelihood displacement in rural communities. I highlight the prominence of food insecurity in these women's decisions to migrate. Specifically, the act of *alimentarse*—a verb from Spanish translating as “to feed”—occupies a central place in these women's conceptualizations of motherhood, with subsequent implications for women's decisions around migration. Despite the ubiquity with which women throughout the world are assigned to overseeing this aspect of social reproduction, I also wish to push back against depictions of all women as “natural” nurturers; it is this sort of bio-

logical essentialism that sustains and supports a continued devaluation of reproductive, caring labors.

With these women's stories I also suggest that resistance to recognizing migration as a survival strategy of many has the dual effect of dehumanizing those who suffer and obscuring experiences of poverty. By highlighting the experience of food insecurity as a consequence of poverty and primary impetus for women's migration, I question in the chapter's concluding section why the moral economy through which categories of inclusion and exclusion are constructed and enacted currently does not allow for recognizing the violence of being denied adequate food.

THE PROMINENCE OF FOOD IN GENDERED MIGRATION

As I listened to women's histories of migration in conducting my research, I was slightly surprised to hear one phrase uttered over and over again: "Allá no tenemos nada que comer" (Back there we had nothing to eat). In invoking this past, many women were alluding to everyday struggles to uphold obligations to family shaped by overall material scarcity but epitomized in the constraints on feeding and eating. I am by no means the first to make this observation. Deborah Boehm accounts for the "intimate relations," for instance, that shape women's migration from Latin America to the United States, and Melanie Nicholson (2006) observes how Mexican women "are literally providing food for their children" by migrating to the United States: "[They] are also constructing visions of their children's futures that would have been impossible without migration. [These women see] the present separation from their children as a *sacrifice* that [will] lead to improved standards of living for the family as a whole, and particularly for their

children, in both the present and the future” (2012, 21). The following vignettes reveal a framing of migration through the language of feeding and eating as they also underscore the forms of grief, conflict, and exploitation that intersect with women’s decisions to migrate and their aspirations to overcome the structural conditions that constrain them as mothers.

“There Isn’t Enough Money”

Linda, a mother of three, found solace in having spared her children from the hunger she knew as a child. Growing up in Michoacán, Linda’s family could not afford to buy any food. Instead, they relied on a diet of *básicos* (basic foods): “If one desires fruit or vegetables, *one must buy them* and our parents didn’t have enough money to buy. We ate almost no meat because it was very expensive. So we ate beans, chilies, tortillas; this is what one ate most because we didn’t have money for fruits and vegetables.” Her father tended to the land and her mother to fruit trees; these activities provided an important source of food for her family despite the unpredictability of harvests. Her parents suffered from different health problems, including diabetes (her mother) and complications from alcoholism (her father). In reflecting on how diabetes eventually led to her mother’s death, Linda speculated on the extent to which this disease was brought on and exacerbated by a diet lacking in quality sources of nutrition. Despite her resentment toward her father for having been an abusive alcoholic while she was growing up, she exhibited some sympathy toward him in relaying how the economic desperation of her family could have had a similar effect on anyone.

As a child Linda was expected by her mother to clean the house, launder clothes by hand, and iron things for money from

others in town. She did not attend school for long because her parents needed the children in her family to work. She recalled the shame of not being able to even afford shoes. At the age of twelve Linda began working in *el campo* (the fields) "cortando la fresa" (harvesting strawberries), then broccoli, and later tomatoes. Even with the combined income among her siblings the family was never able to accumulate enough money to buy nutritious food ("no alcanza dinero para comida nutritiva"), nor were the children permitted to eat the food that they picked as farmworkers.

In her early twenties and anticipating her first child, Linda decided to migrate to the small Southern California city of Carpinteria, where her husband had been working in the local flower nurseries. Linda's husband paid \$1,200 to a *coyote* for her crossing into the United States, an experience that proved highly traumatic. She had been racked with anxiety prior to crossing, and the person waiting to escort her on the other side—her uncle—attempted to molest her.

I meet Linda when she is in her early thirties, almost ten years after her arrival in the United States. She and her husband do not have papers, but all of their children, now ages twelve, seven, and five, are US citizens by birth. On a typical day Linda drives her husband to work in the morning in their used minivan, makes breakfast, brings her children to school, cleans the house, goes to the grocery store, does laundry, makes dinner, and bathes her children. Linda also does the majority of cooking for her husband's parents who live nearby; Linda and her husband bring them food every other day on the way to or from his work. Linda earns some money on the side doing laundry for her neighbors, and she has a job cleaning a woman's house about thirty miles away once a week.

Although she considers her present living circumstances vastly better than those she experienced as a child, and access to food

in the United States as “mejor que nuestro pueblo” (better than in our town [in Mexico]), Linda laments that frequently she does not have the resources to provide what she considers to be a balanced diet to her children. She has also been making pleas to her husband to curtail his drinking habit so that they can have a little more money for food. To save money on groceries, she risks driving without a license forty minutes south to the city of Oxnard because she can find foods there at a cheaper price. However, much of the food in her household comes from charitable local food pantries because “no hay suficiente dinero para comprar” (there isn’t enough money to buy [food]). She collects produce through charitable distributions at a church on the first and third Wednesday of each month and also once per month at a community center. Although her family never goes without eating, she worries that the food they eat is insufficient for maintaining good health.

Linda was not the only one of her siblings to leave Michoacán in search of a better life; her sister Luisa had migrated, also to Carpinteria, for similar reasons. Luisa’s recollections of her childhood, especially in terms of food, mirror those of her sister: *básicos* such as beans, a piece of cheese, chilies in vinegar, *hecho de mano* (hand-made) tortillas, and on rare occasions, meat: “Here [in the United States],” she explains, “you don’t lack for an apple, an orange, fruit, anything. In Mexico, it is very different. In Mexico they raised us on beans. When she could, our mom bought us a piece of cheese and chilies in vinegar to add to our meal. . . . When they had money they sometimes bought us soup or meat. But very little meat because it was so expensive and our parents didn’t have the money to buy it for us. We ate whatever there was for us to eat.”

Like her sister, Luisa had helped around the household and attended only a few years of school but was sent to work in the fields at the age of twelve. She was twenty-two years old when she



Figure 7. The nursery grounds—the site of Linda's husband's employment—in Carpinteria. Photo by the author.

migrated to the United States with her husband, as they were soon going to start a family. By the time they married, her husband had been migrating seasonally between the United States and Mexico for ten years.

When I meet Luisa she has been living in the United States for fifteen years and shares a home with her husband, son (age fifteen), and daughter (age twelve). I usually visit Luisa on weekdays at her apartment, which is located mere blocks from Carpinteria State Beach; her husband is always at work, so I never have the opportunity to meet him. Often when I visit Luisa she is caring for others' children as a means to earning some income. She enjoys taking these children with her on beach walks as part of her daily exercise. During our mornings together, chatting over coffee and the *telenovelas* resounding from Luisa's television, she complains of heated arguments with her husband from the night before; she implies that increased financial stress at home has prompted many of these arguments. Moreover, she worries that her husband is

siphoning away the already meager amount of money that she has earmarked for food through his worsening drinking habit. Fortunately, she is able to partially make up for these losses through help from food stamps and provisions from local food pantries that she frequents with her sister. She thinks about leaving her husband and taking her children with her, but she fears lacking the means to feed them. During a focus group discussion, Luisa informs us all that she is on a waiting list for family counseling services.

"I Fight for Their Well-Being"

Tensions with her husband and an inability to provide for her children, especially in the way of food, had informed Malena's decision to migrate from the Mexican state of Guerrero to the United States. While living estranged from her husband for several years as he migrated to and from the United States, Malena had relied on him to send remittances home in support of the family: "He left me with my child when he was only two months old; he came here [to the United States]. He had been coming here since 1984. So he already knew the country well." These remittances from her husband had been helping Malena to procure foods for her children until one day when this support suddenly stopped.

When I meet Malena, she is forty-four years old, working more than seventy hours per week as a hotel housekeeper and living with her youngest daughter (age four), who has US citizenship by birth. Three of her children (ages thirteen, fourteen, and eighteen) are still living in Guerrero with their grandmother and she has since gone through a divorce from her husband.

Although Malena expresses tremendous grief in being away from her children, she rationalizes her decision to migrate to the United States for the primary reason that she was no longer able

to fulfill her responsibilities as a mother while remaining in Mexico. Her husband had forfeited his obligations to the family by discontinuing financial support and communication, and she had a debt that was accumulating from needing to borrow money to buy food: "The debt that I had there [in Mexico] . . . this is what was worrying me. So I thought and said, 'When I am going to pay this money?' So, I thought and thought only of this, and I had faith and hope that I'd arrive here [in the United States]. Ultimately I was thinking of work because I came to work, to find a job."

With limited resources to feed her children, and desiring to reconcile her marriage, Malena decided to seek work and reunite with her husband in the United States. Malena's husband begrudgingly assisted with the \$1,500 they paid to a *coyote* to help her cross the border. When she arrived in the United States, however, she struggled to find work. Her husband was of no help, and he berated her for being a financial drain on him and others in their shared household. He also tried intimidating her with accusations that she would never find work and that she was incapable of supporting herself.

Food was especially difficult for Malena to manage during those times when she did not have a job. There are often long pauses whenever I ask about hunger or reductions to one's food intake; she'll then open up about times in the past that she would lock herself away in her room for days at a time, forgoing meals entirely.

Almost a year after her arrival in the United States, Malena's brother was finally able to arrange a job for her picking and packing peaches, grapes, and cherries in a Northern California town near San Francisco. Malena credited her five months working in Northern California, and living away from her husband, with having doused her fears and cultivating in her a newfound strength



Figure 8. Malena's self-portrait at work. Photo courtesy of Malena.

that allowed her to stand up to her husband: “perdí mi miedo . . . me dio una esperanza” (I lost my fear . . . and [this experience] gave me hope). Since this experience, work has provided an important source of pride for Malena, perhaps partially because food has been so difficult to manage without a job. Her self-portrait while dressed in uniform at work is a testament of this pride.

Malena attributes the end of her marriage to irreconcilable differences. Her husband felt no sense of obligation to the family and did not care to comport himself in the manner of a faithful companion or devoted father. “He does not live for his children, they do not merit his attention, and he didn’t even want to speak to them. He didn’t like the responsibility of having children,” she

explains. Her children wanted to hear from their father but he rarely called or visited. Malena describes him as someone who preferred to drink and party with friends. Whenever she would confront him about his behavior, their exchanges always escalated into "conversaciones fuertes" (heated conversations). Eventually she gave him the option of divorce, which he accepted. She has since been caring for the family entirely on her own.

Malena has not seen three of her children for five years, as they remain in Guerrero with their grandmother. Her undocumented status makes it nearly impossible for her to visit them without risking reentry to the United States. During one focus group discussion Malena becomes visibly distressed as she reflects on being away from her children in Mexico; she wants them to know that "Esforzarme para dejarlos bien" (I fight for their well-being). She adds, "I hope to do something better for them because they are young and they still need me." They frequently ask when they will be able to visit, but she fears she won't be able to provide for them in the United States, as she has already needed to significantly reduce the amount of money she sends home each month. Without anyone else to help take care of her youngest daughter here, the two of them sometimes eat at fast food establishments such as McDonald's because they are the cheapest option: "el precio mas que nada" (price more than anything).

AN UNENDING HUNGER: FOOD
INSECURITY IN ACCOUNTS OF
RETURN MIGRATION

While constraints on eating and feeding might precede women's decisions to migrate from their home countries, as in the experiences of Linda, Luisa, and Malena, it is also the case that these

constraints could factor into decisions around return migration. Following economic recession, many of my research participants relayed stories of return migration on the part of relatives, friends, or neighbors, or even speculated on their own plans for return.

Mothers who are living estranged from children increasingly perceive fewer advantages to remaining in the United States. Yolanda, for instance, a mother with children on both sides of the US-Mexico border, has been contemplating a return to Acapulco. She cites how continuing effects of the economic crisis have jeopardized her ability to feed her children. Originally, Yolanda migrated to the United States to assist her husband, who was not earning enough money to support her and their two daughters (ages fourteen and eight) in Acapulco. She arrived in the United States in 2004. “I was sad because my husband was gone,” she explains. “[Our daughters] wanted to see him too. He was here and sending us money. It was hard because I was used to his company and at times I felt lonely. He decided to bring me here but I had to leave my daughters behind.” Yolanda and her husband reimbursed “poco a poco” (little by little) the \$1,700 owed to a *coyote* for helping her to cross the border. When she first arrived they were sharing a room with another family in an apartment, but later transitioned to having their own room in an apartment shared with two other families. She collected cans and bottles on the street as a way to earn some cash and then worked in a cracker factory for six years until its closure the previous October. Presently, her husband is working as a painter and she as a housecleaner, but she reveals some frustration with the job because her *patrona* is always scolding her and threatening to reduce her hours.

In the six years they have been working in the United States, Yolanda and her husband have had two more children. She ago-

nizes about her family’s living situation: “I have two [children] here and it’s difficult because I want to see my other daughters [in Mexico]. I tell them ‘soon,’ but I don’t really know. We’re going to see what happens with the economy and decide whether it is better for me to stay or to return.” She is pleased that her children in the United States will benefit someday in the workplace from having learned “dos idiomas” (two languages). Previously, when she had more stable employment, Yolanda had been able to send money to her two children in Mexico every two weeks for food and school-related costs, including books, notebooks, backpacks, and clothes. While Yolanda longs to reunite with her children in Mexico, she also doesn’t want to deprive her US-born children of the privileges of citizenship. Nonetheless, a decline in wages and fewer opportunities for employment in the United States increasingly interferes with her ability to put food on the table.

On one of my visits to her home situated within a large apartment complex in Santa Barbara, Yolanda tells me that she is preparing a soup with chicken that she found discounted at the store. She explains her preference for making soups over *comida seca* (dry food), and for preparing meat in soups rather than *seca* (out of water), because the broth absorbs the flavor and the nutrition. Yolanda cuts and washes broccoli, potatoes, and baby carrots. She makes a salsa in the blender using water, tomatoes, and garlic; this salsa will provide a flavor base for the soup. She lights her gas stove with a match. Meanwhile her husband watches television in the other room and her children play outside enjoying the extra hours of summer light. Occasionally they peer into the window to watch their mother in the kitchen.

Food insecurity has been rampant in Yolanda’s household—especially four months ago, when neither she nor her husband could find work. They never go hungry because they at least

always have basic items such as bread and milk, she explains, which they obtain through vouchers from the WIC program. There have been times, however, when she has had to reduce the amount of food she gives to her children, and rarely do they have the ingredients necessary to attain her vision of a balanced diet. For these reasons, Yolanda has become extra vigilant about stretching what few resources they have to feed her family.

“DESERVING” TO CROSS BORDERS

Sukovic and colleagues call for bringing “a more prominent gendered or feminist perspective into the emerging field of food studies, especially the connection between food preparation and empowerment” (2011, 234). In the preceding pages I have argued that we should expand our analysis of gendered migration to be more attentive to how food scarcity undergirds women’s decisions to migrate from Mexico and Central America and also to how it punctuates the experiences of Mexican and Central American women in the United States.

An emerging literature underscores the politics of deservingness particularly as it relates to a moral economy of migration (Sargent 2012; Sargent and Larchanche 2011; Willen 2012). Resistance on the part of nation-states toward creating a category of “economic refugees” alongside “political refugees,” as well as the disavowal of many nation-states to recognize the impact of free trade agreements on livelihoods elsewhere, attest to how the political and the economic are often imagined as separate and distinct spheres. Certain conditions impelling people to migrate, such as war, religious persecution, or severe illness, tend to elicit more moral sympathy than do poverty, hunger, or unemployment. With moral logics shaping conceptualizations of deservingness,

not everyone who migrates is deemed worthy of entry. In her research with the *sans papiers* in France for instance, Miriam Ticktin (2011) analyzes the social consequences of France's "illness clause" through which the state delineates the terms of "morally legitimate suffering" and inclusion of those who are then eligible for legal authorization while excluding all others who do not fit these criteria, noting, "A politics of immigration based on this type of care and compassion gives papers to an HIV+ Malian woman, an Algerian child with cancer, and a gay Moroccan man gang-raped by Moroccan policemen and closes doors to most others, making these strangely desirable conditions for immigrants" (4). In asking, "Why is it that illness can cross borders while poverty cannot?" (95) Ticktin highlights the contradictions of a moral economy of suffering that prescribes deservingness differentially. Missing from this maneuvering by nation-states however, is a recognition of how disparate forms of suffering are imbricated with one another: poverty produces sickness just as sickness may also compound poverty. Food insecurity serves as one example, for despite being intimately connected with health status it has not been recognized as a legitimate basis for seeking authorized entry into countries such as the United States.

Several researchers have highlighted the importance of food for the process of resettlement, specifically in terms of women's social and cultural identities. Purnima Mankekar (2002) suggests that the inability of diasporic populations to re-create the culinary traditions of their homeland poses hindrances to the linked process of social and cultural reproduction. Mares notes that, "In the midst of dislocation, sustaining and re-creating the cultural and material practices connected to food are powerful ways to enact one's cultural identity and sustain connections with families and communities who remain on the other side of the border" (2012, 335).

Women's food preparation in the context of migration, Sukovic and colleagues (2011) argue, "serves as one of the few connections between new life in the United States and the old way of life and culture in Mexico" (237). Moreover, Van Esterik suggests, "The power women have includes the power to feed," (1999, 230).

As Mexican and Central American women encounter the "everyday violence of imposed scarcity, insecurity, and fear" (Quesada et al. 2011, 393) associated with unauthorized status in the United States, they find it increasingly difficult to meet the basic nutritional needs of their families, much less to re-create traditional foods, sociability around mealtimes, and other important food traditions. As women respond to the unevenness in food access and distribution that often translates to heightened health and nutritional vulnerabilities, they invoke a "subjective transnationalism" (Segura and Zavella 2007)—in other words, an agentic negotiation of what it means to be a gendered subject in *borderlands*—a space located in between different places and cultures. These women also actively contest the limited means of survival afforded them in these spaces of in-betweenness (Counihan 2005). While the women I interviewed often associated migration with improved capacity to nourish others through food, they also described impediments to everyday nutritional needs and thus to the long-term demands of social reproduction. In chapter 2, I examine more closely migrant women's conceptualizations of motherhood and how they navigate everyday constraints to "nourishing bodies and social ties" (Pérez and Abarca 2007, 141) while living in the United States.