

Introduction

In the midst of East San Jose, which contains the largest concentration of Latinos in the Santa Clara Valley of Northern California, lies Santech, my fictitious name for a poor urban community made up of barrack-like apartment buildings inhabited mostly by Mexican immigrants. The barrio consists of six blocks in a distinct, self-contained area surrounded by a larger neighborhood made up of modest single-family homes. The residents named the barrio after a public elementary school that most of their children attend. Next to the apartment buildings, and divided from them by a concrete wall, is a housing project for low-income Mexican American, Vietnamese, and other immigrants, surrounded by several well-kept grassy playgrounds.

When I first visited Santech, I was shocked by the disrepair of the neighborhood and its buildings: five of the barrio's blocks were lined with identical, blighted two-story buildings, some of which had been condemned by the local housing authorities. Everywhere were broken windows, walls with graying paint, damaged roofs, stairs with missing steps, and decks that looked as if they were going to collapse. On the ledges above the windows were cans, piles of scrap metal, bottles and glass, broken chairs, cardboard boxes, and other old items kept by the neighbors living upstairs. The front and back yards of the buildings, which looked as if they had been lawns at some point, were covered only by bare, hardened soil. The streets and parking lots were full of pot-holes, and behind the buildings the garbage containers were overflowing with rotting trash; abandoned refrigerators, mattresses, stoves, and ripped-up furniture lay piled next to them.

What impressed me the most on my first visits to this barrio was the striking contrast between the dilapidated landscape and its lively street life: dozens of children, some barely able to walk, were playing barefoot on the sidewalks and in the courtyards; groups of men were chatting outside their apartments; women were selling fruit, jewelry, and homemade confections door-to-door; vendors with pushcarts selling Popsicle-style frozen fruit pops were walking up and down the streets in search of clients; young men and women in work uniforms were going to or coming from work; and old men were pulling cans and glass bottles from the garbage containers for recycling. In the evenings, as I walked down the blocks, a blend of food aromas escaped from the apartments, and the loud sound of TVs, CD players, and radios invaded the streets. The exciting and busy life in the streets of this barrio contrasted sharply with the quiet pace of life I had observed in most residential neighborhoods of San Jose.

I initially thought that Santech might be an anomaly, a poor barrio in a region otherwise characterized by affluent suburban communities and a buoyant economy. After all, Silicon Valley is known internationally as the capital of the high-tech industry and considered an economic model that other regions should emulate. But I discovered that Santech was not an isolated case: scattered throughout the numerous metropolitan Latino neighborhoods in San Jose, and usually hidden behind areas of single-family homes, were several neighborhoods with similarly blighted barrack-like apartment complexes inhabited by Mexican immigrants. I also realized that the existence of these immigrant enclaves was not readily apparent to the typical Silicon Valley inhabitant. Many people who live in this region have never seen or heard about these barrios, and if they have it is usually through the dramatic stories about poverty, crime, or the activities of drug dealers and street gangs that occasionally have appeared in the local media.

A number of initial questions puzzled me: Why were these poor immigrant neighborhoods growing in a region like Silicon Valley, well known for its prosperity? Who were the people living in these neighborhoods, and how did they make a living in the midst of one of the most expensive regions in the United States? What attracted them to this particular region? What living arrangements did they form in their barrios? And what did Silicon Valley's economic success mean for the future of the low-income immigrants who lived in neighborhoods such as Santech?

Approach

This book is an ethnographic study of a group of Mexican immigrants employed in low-wage jobs in Silicon Valley. Focusing on Santech, I examine how structural economic and political forces in Silicon Valley work themselves out in the everyday lives of the barrio residents, and the varied ways in which the residents respond to these forces individually and collectively. I portray the experiences of these workers and their families in their own terms, linking those personal experiences to the broader economic, social, and political changes that have made these low-wage workers a key segment of the working class in Silicon Valley.

To provide a holistic portrayal of the lives of Mexican immigrants in Santech, I focus on three main areas—namely, work, including the formal and informal occupations by which these immigrants make a living; household organization, including the variety of domestic arrangements formed by these workers and their families; and community politics, by which the immigrants struggle to improve living conditions in their neighborhood. Rather than presenting only a snapshot of life in this community, I emphasize the constant processes of change, stress, adjustments, successes, and failures that characterize the lives of most people in the neighborhood.

In Silicon Valley, the forces of globalization and international immigration have created a new class of low-skilled immigrant workers, the contemporary proletarians of a postindustrial economy. Mexican and other Latino immigrants make up the core of this workforce—for example, the thousands of Mexicans who clean the office buildings of the large high-tech companies in Silicon Valley. For these workers, the wonders of Silicon Valley are visible and tangible but seemingly unattainable. Structurally located at the opposite end of the class spectrum from the technolite, Mexican and other Latino immigrants settled in the region as a direct response to the low-skilled manufacturing and maintenance jobs generated by the high-tech industries. Subcontracting, the process by which employers seek to reduce labor costs and enhance labor flexibility, is the central link that connects these workers with the area's high-tech companies. I argue that this organic articulation between the organization of production and immigrant labor permeates most aspects of immigrant workers' lives, from the survival strategies they develop to make ends meet, to the variety and instability of their domestic arrangements, to the severe problems they confront in barrios like Santech. The

financial insecurity that characterizes the lives of many of these workers underscores the paradox of poverty in the midst of the affluence that has become a distinctive mark of Silicon Valley.

Yet this is just half the story. At the same time, the new economy also opened new, unexpected opportunities for Mexican immigrants in this region. The demographic consolidation of recent Mexican and other Latino immigrants—who form a central component of the local working class employed in low-skilled service jobs that cannot be sent abroad—has opened new opportunities for the politics of resistance and contestation by these workers in Silicon Valley. The newcomers have transformed labor and community politics and have infused new blood into labor unions and grassroots organizations in the region. As I document in this book, the janitors subcontracted by major high-tech corporations have organized one of the most successful union drives in recent times by capitalizing on the same kin and social networks used by their employers to hire and control them, all in the midst of a region well known for its strong antiunion political environment. Moreover, in San-tech and similar neighborhoods, working poor immigrants, especially women, have mobilized through grassroots community organizations to struggle for better living conditions for their families. Union organizing and community politics are the main means by which the new immigrants make their political demands known and contest exclusionary notions of civic and political membership. In the process, they contribute to the transformation of working-class politics in the region. While the results of such political struggles are often mixed, even according to the immigrants themselves, and encounter important structural obstacles, their significance cannot be overlooked. These struggles speak of the opportunities, limitations, and contradictions created by the model of capitalist accumulation on which Silicon Valley's high-tech economy is based.

Ultimately, in this book I demonstrate the critical importance of examining immigrants' agency if one is to understand how they transform their workplaces and communities and, in doing so, affect the larger politico-economic structure of Silicon Valley. I show the multiple and complex ways in which global structural forces affect the lives of common immigrants, and how the latter respond to the consequences in the realms of their work, families, and communities. I also reveal the falsity of the claim that the new economy needs no unskilled labor, by uncovering the direct, real-life links between the glamorous world of microprocessors, virtual domains, and ever-changing computer tech-

nologies and the less-known world of mops, hard physical labor, and daily predicaments faced by thousands of low-skilled immigrants who keep Silicon Valley's economy running. My ethnographic study provides critical insights that help to elucidate the possibilities and limitations that the new economy brings to low-skilled immigrants today.

Theoretical Framework and Research Issues

Economic globalization, Saskia Sassen argues, has led not only to the transnationalization of capital but also to the creation of an internationalized labor market for low-wage immigrant workers (1999: 111). Yet economic globalization is not a unidirectional process. Along with new forms of labor exploitation, its contradictions generate new opportunities for social and political mobilization by immigrant and other disadvantaged workers (Burawoy 2000; Sassen 1999). Thus, not all low-skilled jobs in which immigrants are employed are the same. Even at the height of the information age, key regions in the United States require a large contingent of workers to create and maintain the material infrastructure upon which the new information economy is based (Sassen 1999: 101–2). Unlike many low-skilled jobs that can be and are often sent offshore when labor costs rise (e.g., in the garments industry), low-skilled jobs in the service sector cannot be so easily sent abroad. The structural indispensability of these jobs opens new economic and political opportunities for immigrants and other workers who can turn this situation to their advantage, changing globalization from an inexorable force to a resource that can advance their own interests (Burawoy 2000: 32; Sassen 1999).¹

As the global capital of the high-tech industries in the world, Silicon Valley is an ideal site in which to examine from an ethnographic perspective this new economy's opportunities and contradictions for immigrants employed in the low-skilled service sector. Geographically located in Northern California, Silicon Valley is often regarded a paradigmatic example of the new U.S. economy, which relies on the high-tech industry to be an engine for economic development. Over the past few decades, this region has produced some of the most important technological developments in electronics and biomedical research the world has known (Kenney 2000; Hyde 2003). In the process, it has also become one of the most affluent regions in the world, producing new fortunes at a speed rarely seen in the old, smokestack industry era. The spectacu-

lar economic success of Silicon Valley has attracted the attention of numerous scholars who have discussed the technological, economic, social, and political factors that give this region a clear competitive edge over other high-tech regions (Saxenian 1994, 1999; Kenney 2000; Hyde 2003; Lee et al. 2000). A few anthropologists as well have described what life is like for the people who work and live in this mecca of the high-tech world, especially the scientists, venture capitalists, and high-skilled immigrants who were attracted to the region by its wonders (English-Lueck 2002). But the glamour that surrounds the public image of Silicon Valley has obscured the important fact that this region has also produced a large demand for low-skilled workers. As recent critical studies have shown, along with the well-known concentration of scientists, engineers, and highly-skilled technical workers, there are thousands of Mexican, Central American, and Asian immigrants employed in low-skilled manufacturing and service jobs (Matthews 2003; Hossfeld 1990; Benner 2002; Pitti 2003; Siegel 1995; Walker and Bay Area Study Group 1990; Martínez Saldaña 1993).

Despite the voluminous literature on the wonders of Silicon Valley, on the one hand, and its darker labor history, on the other, few ethnographic studies have examined the experiences of the thousands of Mexican and other Latino immigrants employed here in low-skilled service jobs. As a result, we know comparatively little about the lives of those immigrant workers and how they contribute to the maintenance of the giant material infrastructure of Silicon Valley's high-tech industry. What is life like for the thousands who work and live there amid extraordinary wealth? What economic and political opportunities has the new economy created for them? And what do the experiences of these workers and their families reveal about the dialectic between structural forces and the responses of immigrants as local actors in key regions of the global economy like Silicon Valley?

WORK

The impact of and responses to Latino immigrants' entrance into the restructured economy of the United States, defined by the shift from traditional to light manufacturing and service industries, has been the subject of several ethnographic studies (Lamphere, Stepick, and Grenier 1994; Ibarra 2000; Mahler 1995; Torres Sarmiento 2002). The use of low-skilled immigrants as a source for cheap and flexible labor in the new economy is a common theme explored in these studies. The expan-

sion of labor subcontracting, by which many low-skilled jobs are outsourced to independent contractors in agriculture and in manufacturing and service industries, has attracted the attention of anthropologists interested in issues of labor-management control and resistance. Several authors contend that large corporations subcontract to capitalize on immigrants' social networks for labor recruitment, training, and control; to deflect the responsibility to observe labor protection and laws; and to disguise highly unequal power relations.²

More recently, other authors have started to discuss the novel forms of resistance and collective organization by which immigrants contest exploitation under these labor regimes, thus shifting the attention to their political agency. For example, countering the common assumption that undocumented immigrants are unable or unwilling to organize, some scholars have documented the growth of political union activities by Latino and other immigrant workers in the recent past (Milkman and Wong 2000; Grey 1999). Some of these studies address the important issue of how immigrant's undocumented status affects their ability to join unions (Delgado 1993; Wells 1996; Lamphere, Stepick, and Grenier 1994). Others discuss how immigrants' kinship and social networks and their social and cultural practices shape their mobilization strategies as well as the demands they include in their labor union contracts (Milkman and Wong 2000; Wells 2000; Grey 1999). Together, these and other studies call attention to the important paradox of how one the most vulnerable segments of the working class has become one of the most politically active and constitutes the fastest-growing membership of the labor union movement in the United States today.

Despite the important contributions of these studies of labor control and the resistance of immigrant labor, other important issues have received scant attention. For example, little is known about how labor subcontracting affects client companies' ability to control and discipline their workers, and immigrants' ability to respond to managerial control. Also, while recent studies of union organizing by immigrants help us understand the structural conditions under which collective resistance takes place and may or may not succeed (Sherman and Voss 2000; Bonacich 2000; Zabin 2000; Fisk, Mitchell, and Erickson 2000; Delgado 1993; Wells 1996; Waldinger et al. 1996; Cranford 2000; Johnston 1994), they provide little information about how immigrants themselves experience this process, what motivates them to engage in this particular form of political action despite their precarious economic and political status, and what they expect from the unions they join.

In Silicon Valley, subcontracting is the principal form by which high-tech firms benefit from access to abundant, cheap, and flexible immigrant labor, which is accompanied by both authoritarian forms of labor control and modern forms of managerial control. Yet after several decades in place, this labor regime has generated its own limitations and contradictions, opening new economic and political opportunities for Latino immigrants. For example, the newcomers have colonized the building-cleaning industry by capitalizing on the opportunities provided by labor subcontracting and using its logic to their own advantage as the basis for collective mobilization. Working together with experienced Chicano leaders, recent immigrants have successfully organized into labor unions at the heart of one of the most politically antiunion regions in the country. Rather than taking immigrant workers' labor flexibility as a given, I discuss how work flexibility is constructed in the workplace, what specific mechanisms management uses to optimize immigrant labor, and how immigrants have responded to such methods of labor control by capitalizing on their own indispensability in order to unionize and fight for their labor and civil rights.

Another major labor market exists for many Mexican workers in Silicon Valley: the informal economy. For example, in San Jose, a city with low-wage and insecure jobs, as well as housing and living costs that are among the highest in the country, many Latino immigrants have few choices but to search for additional sources of income in the informal sector (Dohan 2003). The importance of the informal economy for immigrant workers in the United States has been extensively recognized in ethnographic anthropological and sociological studies (e.g., Stepick 1989; Fernández-Kelly and García 1989; López-Garza 2001; Briody 1986; García 1992; Moore and Pinderhughes 1993; Dohan 2003). From a broader theoretical perspective, some scholars maintain that labor subcontracting is a major force behind the growth of small, informal companies that employ undocumented workers. For example, the garment industry in Los Angeles relies on Mexican and Central American women employed in sweatshops or at home (Bonacich and Appelbaum 2000). Other authors highlight the role of the informal economy in supplying goods to immigrants and other low-income workers in poor urban neighborhoods (Sassen 1994; Raijman 2001). And still others interpret petty informal economic activities as a form of entrepreneurship for immigrants who are either left out of the formal sector or prefer them to low-paying and rigid jobs in the formal economy (Portes 1995: 30). In low-income Latino

immigrant communities, most studies agree, the informal economy represents an important source of employment for undocumented workers and is a vital part of the survival strategies for working-poor families (López-Garza 2001; Chinchilla and Hamilton 2001; Dohan 2003; Zlot-niski 1994; Moore and Pinderhughes 1993: xxxviii).

But while these and other ethnographic studies identify the conditions under which informal economic activities seem to flourish, they say little about the reasons that immigrants choose them and how immigrants themselves explain their choices (but see Dohan 2003; López-Garza 2001). Moreover, we know comparatively little about the internal organization of these activities and the complex labor arrangements behind them. I argue that the same forces that have propelled the growth of technologically advanced firms in industrial parks in Silicon Valley have also fueled the proliferation of informal economic activities in immigrant neighborhoods like Santech. The existence of the informal economy in this barrio is largely a result of the inadequacy of income from work in the formal sector as a viable path to financial stability and mobility. However, the informal economy in this neighborhood is not homogeneous but reveals a wide range of activities and workers: some workers run family-operated businesses, others are employed by local companies while disguised as independent sellers, and still others are immigrants with professional occupations who work underground. While for many immigrants the informal economy represents a source of supplemental income, for others it is an alternative to low-wage jobs in the formal sector. By examining some of these informal activities, I highlight the organic connection between these two sectors and explain how immigrants themselves respond to the comparative opportunities and limitations that jobs in both sectors offer.

HOUSEHOLD ORGANIZATION

The second focus of this study is the household.³ In the field of immigration studies, the household has traditionally occupied a privileged place (Pessar 1999; Brettell 2000; Chávez 1990, 1992). For one thing, focusing on the household makes it possible to move beyond the image of immigrant workers as passive victims of economic forces beyond their control and to see how the household serves as a mediating institution between those structural forces and the choices and decisions of individual people (Pessar 1999: 55). Making the household a unit of analysis also allows us to examine family survival strategies and how the family serves to protect its members from hostile forces from outside (Pessar

1999: 60). It is not surprising, then, that the concept of “family economy” has been widely used to explain the adaptive strategies of low-income Mexican and other Latino immigrants.⁴ More recently, however, this perspective has been criticized for romanticizing the family and ignoring important processes of gender inequality and social stratification (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Pessar 1999; Rouse 1989). Challenging the dominant paradigm of the family as an indivisible unit coalesced around altruistic economic and kin ties, several studies contend that it also serves as a unit of exploitation and is often fraught by important inequalities along gender, generational, and immigrant status lines (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Menjívar 2000; Mahler 1995; Rouse 1989). For example, Patricia Pessar maintains that anthropological studies of the survival strategies of immigrant families should focus not only on the broad economic context in which immigrant labor is inserted but also on the narrow political economy of the household itself (1999: 57).

Inspired by this approach, I examine the internal economic and social arrangements of the families of Santech’s Mexican workers who are employed in low-skilled jobs in Silicon Valley. Global and regional forces penetrate as far down as the household level, producing a set of interrelated and unsettling effects. Most Mexican workers in Santech who are employed in low-wage formal and informal jobs live in extended family households, not because of cultural preferences, but to compensate for their low earnings and to cope with the high housing and living costs that prevail in this region. These extended family households absorb much of the cost associated with the subsistence and reproduction of cheap and flexible immigrant labor. Yet often, rather than becoming stable and well integrated, these domestic households remain in permanent flux, with kin, fellow countryfolk, friends, and boarders frequently moving in and out. In addition, immigrant families in Santech are often plagued by issues of exploitation, power inequality, and economic stratification that cannot be ignored without distorting the internal dynamics within these households. Moreover, for undocumented immigrant women, the household can be both a bastion of resistance against hostile external forces and an arena of inequality and exploitation at the hands of family and other kin.

COMMUNITY POLITICS

Beyond the workplace and the family, the local community constitutes a major arena around which the everyday lives of Mexican immigrants

in Santech revolve. Despite their precarious financial and legal status, or perhaps because of it, many of the people of this barrio actively participate in grassroots organizing activities to improve education, housing, and safety in the community. While in the field, I was surprised by the commitment, determination, and passion with which many neighbors in Santech, especially women, engaged into different community organizing activities. My surprise resulted from the fact that Mexican immigrants, especially the undocumented, are commonly portrayed as people afraid or unwilling to participate in political activities.

Since the early 1990s, however, two bodies of literature have challenged this view. The first is the literature on transnational immigrant communities, one of the most recent and influential theoretical approaches in the interdisciplinary field of immigration studies. Studies informed by this model have shown immigrants' ability to develop novel forms of political organization that trespass national state boundaries in an era characterized by massive labor migration flows.⁵ A second body of literature consists of the studies of local, nonelectoral, grassroots community activities conducted by Latino and Latina immigrants, especially women, to channel their political demands (Pardo 1998a; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Hardy-Fanta 1993; O'Connor 1990; Delgado-Gaitán 2001). As these studies show, women often use preexisting social networks of mutual support to mobilize for political purposes. Politics is thus deeply embedded in their kin and social networks, which play multiple economic, social, and political roles.⁶ These studies challenge the image of immigrants, particularly women, as passive subjects and show the importance of community organizing as an arena for collective resistance and political mobilization by disempowered peoples around issues other than labor concerns (Pessar 1999: 65; Brettell 2000: 112). Despite the accomplishments of these contributions, however, studies on grassroots political activism by Mexican and other Latina immigrant women often tend to romanticize these activities and underestimate the structural limits that undocumented immigrants face in their civil struggles. Moreover, issues such as how undocumented immigrant women go about engaging in these political activities, and how women's political activism affects their position in the household, have often been overlooked.

Local political activities constitute the third focus of immigrants' lives in Santech.⁷ Like union organizing, grassroots community organizing constitutes a central avenue through which low-income Latino immigrants channel their basic civil and political demands as residents of Sili-

con Valley. Community organizing aimed at local political structures, rather than labor organizing aimed at the region's industrial structure, represents an important but overlooked form of political mobilization by disadvantaged immigrants in regions like Silicon Valley. Generally organized in an informal manner, these grassroots community movements are essential to understanding the political agency of the working poor, representing one of the "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1985) for immigrants in this region. Working mothers are the main organizers and leaders of these groups, often building coalitions with larger, well-established grassroots organizations with more experience and political clout, through which they channel local demands for the benefit of their families. In examining these grassroots community activities, I show how Santech's residents have become politicized, and discuss the opportunities and structural constraints that low-income immigrants and their families encounter while trying to integrate as full members of the local society in Silicon Valley. Examining the dialectics between these sets of opportunities and limitations helps us to move beyond rival theoretical models that portray immigrants either as passive subjects in the hands of structural capitalist forces or as active political actors able to contest and successfully circumvent the control of nation-states.

Together, work, family, and community reflect the opportunities, contradictions, and limitations generated by the structural dependence of Silicon Valley's low-skilled service sector on Latino immigrants. In this book, I show how global forces incorporate immigrants as an integral part of the working class through flexible labor regimes. This, in turn, opens new possibilities for workers to advance their financial goals and political claims. At the same time, I show that optimistic interpretations of this phenomenon are usually unmerited. Enormous structural barriers prevent this segment of the working class from capitalizing on such opportunities, and it is difficult for them to translate structural indispensability into power.

Organization of the Book

The book is divided into six chapters. In chapter 1, I situate this study by providing a brief history of the development of the high-tech economy in Silicon Valley and discuss the major factors that characterize the political economy of the region. Then, combining information gathered through ethnographic fieldwork with census data, I provide a brief

portrayal of life in the barrio and its central demographic, economic, and social characteristics, contending that Santech is first and foremost the product of the growth of the high-tech industries and the demand for cheap immigrant labor in the region.

In chapter 2, I narrate the experience of a group of Mexican immigrants employed as subcontracted janitors by one of the largest high-tech corporations in Silicon Valley. I describe their working and labor conditions, their struggle to unionize, and the results and consequences of their actions. In so doing I discuss the relation between global forces that connect high-tech corporations to low-skilled immigrants, and the set of economic and political opportunities and constraints these workers face in this region.

Chapter 3 focuses on cases of immigrant workers employed in informal occupations in Santech and elsewhere in San Jose. I provide a full description of these activities, their inner organization and dynamics, the dilemmas these workers confront in the informal sector, and the motives that lead them to work in these occupations. In addition to illustrating the complex and rich variety of informal economic activities developed by Mexican workers, I discuss the critical role that such activities play for the subsistence and reproduction of immigrant labor employed in the formal economy of Silicon Valley.

Chapter 4 examines the household types formed by low-income Mexican immigrants in Santech. In it I describe the subsistence strategies organized by the members of these households, as well as the internal inequality, stratification, and exploitation that characterize some of these households. Through specific and detailed case studies, this chapter illustrates the multiple ways in which structural forces that characterize Silicon Valley's political economy penetrate and throw out of balance the households of Mexican workers, as well as the different ways that the members of these households respond to these unsettling effects.

In chapter 5, I discuss some of the community political activities conducted by Santech residents. I explain how these community struggles first started, how they unfolded over time, and the role that women played as community activists and leaders. Without painting a romantic portrait of immigrants' grassroots politics, I document how Mexican immigrants who are excluded from electoral politics struggle against racial and class discrimination, develop a sense of community, and seek to build a better future for their families and children. In so doing, they redefine their civil and political rights in the region.

In the conclusion, I summarize the major findings presented in the book and discuss their implications for immigrant workers at the heart of the low-wage sector of the new economy in global regions like Silicon Valley. In the epilogue, I document the most important changes that have taken place in the region since this study was conducted and focus on how the economic crisis of the high-tech industry that started in the year 2000, combined with the anti-immigrant backlash after September 11, has affected the lives of Mexican immigrants in the region.

Methods

This book is based on several years of ethnographic fieldwork I carried out among Mexican immigrants in Santech and other Latino neighborhoods in San Jose, the largest city in the Santa Clara Valley. The use of ethnographic methods allows the collection of detailed information about the history, lives, and experiences of undocumented immigrants who are difficult to reach with traditional research techniques, such as surveys and structured interviews (Chávez 1992; Mahler 1995; Dohan 2003). In addition to offering accessibility, ethnographic methods bring the human dimension of immigrants' experiences to the forefront, one of the trademarks of anthropological research on immigration (Foner 1999: 1269; Brettell 2000: 118). By documenting the creativity and ingenuity of immigrants' actions, ethnographic studies also counteract the excessive emphasis on macro-level processes that characterize structuralist-oriented approaches to immigration.

I conducted my first and most intensive stage of fieldwork between the fall of 1991 and the fall of 1993, during which I lived continually in San Jose. The second stage took place between 1994 and 1998; during the first year of this period, I returned frequently to Santech for additional fieldwork, and after 1995 I returned less frequently. Finally, I conducted follow-up fieldwork in San Jose in July 2004, when I examined the effects of the economic downturn and restrictive immigration policies on the lives of the people presented in this book.

I started my fieldwork by exploring different San Jose neighborhoods with sizable populations of Mexican immigrants, most of them located on the east side of the city. After touring these communities, I decided to focus on Santech for several reasons. The first was a practical one: I had already developed several contacts in this barrio and was becoming familiar with a number of workers and their families and the

public officials working in the neighborhood. Second, unlike old Mexican American neighborhoods in San Jose, Santech was a modern barrio resulting from the population explosion that accompanied the high-tech industrialization of the Santa Clara Valley, which began in the early 1970s. The majority of people in this barrio were employed in the kind of low-wage service jobs that became a magnet for new immigrants in Silicon Valley in the 1980s and 1990s, just the kind of context in which I was most interested. Third, Santech was a small barrio with relatively well-defined physical boundaries that seemed to residents and city officials alike to have its own identity, which made it an attractive and manageable working site for an ethnographic study of this kind.

I originally gained entrée to Santech through a local government program that sought to address the problems of drugs, housing, and safety in this and other low-income neighborhoods in San Jose. Through the community meetings sponsored by this program, I met many residents in the barrio, who in turn introduced me to kin, friends, and neighbors in Santech. Soon afterward, I established my independent presence in the community by several means. For example, I helped people in the community with translations; immigration-related paperwork; job applications; government, school, and other official forms; and other matters, which contributed to my visibility in the neighborhood. I also taught English as a second language to a group of adults in Santech at their request, which further helped to establish a strong bond with them. All in all, this enabled me to build a large network of informants, contacts, and acquaintances in the community, a network that kept expanding over time. Although I selected my informants from the individuals I met through this snowballing technique, rather than through a statistically representative random sampling, I sought a selection that would illustrate the variety of cases and situations I encountered in Santech. Thus in addition to the vicissitudes of each particular case, my informants illustrate the common dilemmas, problems, responses, and situations experienced by people in this community.

In the field, I maintained an informal approach in my interaction with informants.⁸ Participant observation, hundreds of informal conversations, and numerous open-ended interviews were the main techniques I used to gather the bulk of the information presented in this book. I spent most of my time interacting, observing, and participating in the daily routines of my informants in Santech. I visited them at their homes on a regular basis, accompanied them to their jobs whenever possible, and participated in many of their social and leisure activities.