

Introduction

It would have been easy to think of Carmen Rojas as a victim of globalization.¹ By the time we met in Los Angeles in 2010, Carmen was thirty-four, and she had lived in the United States undocumented for almost twenty years. She subsisted by sewing pockets on jeans, seven cents apiece. In lean times she went without food, skipping dinner so her U.S.-born son would have enough to eat. Aside from that, Carmen kept her head down. She stopped at every crosswalk. She took pride that she had never asked for anything from the state.

Carmen was one of hundreds of undocumented immigrants who came to the United States in the 1990s from a village I call “Partida,” deep in the mountains of Oaxaca, Mexico. Her parents were Zapotec farmers. For most of the twentieth century, her *pueblo* lived on the corn they grew, raising their children in one- or two-room adobe homes.² By the time Carmen was born, however, U.S.-backed policies of government privatization had pulled the bottom out from Mexico’s subsistence farms. In the 1960s and 1970s people from Partida started to leave. First, they sought work in urban Mexico. Then, in the 1980s and 1990s, many went on to Southern California. Carmen hopped a bus to Mexico City in 1988, the year she turned twelve. Three years later she moved to Los Angeles. Carmen and

her siblings, friends, and cousins crossed the border unauthorized. They had few other choices. By 2010 three-quarters of them still lacked legal papers.

Not since slavery had so many people lived in the United States with so few political rights. As of 2017 there were more than eleven million undocumented immigrants living in every state of the nation.³ Two-thirds of them had been in the country for a decade or more.⁴ Most, like Carmen, meticulously followed the law.⁵ Nevertheless, very few had a way to “get in line” for legal authorization.⁶ Their legal status kept them trapped in segregated neighborhoods and arduous, underpaid jobs. Federal laws barred them from most public services. Being undocumented also blocked them from traditional political advocacy. Without papers immigrants like Carmen could not vote or run for public office.

State violence reinforced their lack of political voice. Between 2009 and 2012, when I conducted this research, the United States deported nearly four hundred thousand people per year.⁷ Most were Latinos, and less than half had ever been convicted of a crime.⁸ Historically, immigration enforcement was considered federal jurisdiction and concentrated at the border. Starting in the late 1990s, however, federal programs began to define far more immigrants as “criminals.”⁹ The new laws also empowered police to seek out undocumented migrants and turn them over to Federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents for removal. Local police played a key role in expanding deportation, helping extend immigration enforcement into the interior of the country. As police assumed greater roles in immigration control, they brought the threat of expulsion into migrants’ everyday lives. In answer migrants like Carmen lived gingerly. Many hesitated to pick up groceries or take their children to school, let alone make claims on the state.

Nevertheless, Carmen did not play victim. Instead, she embraced what I call a *strategy of belonging*. From 2010 to 2011 I spent several days with Carmen as part of the field research for my doctoral dissertation. We talked, ran errands, and attended community events in Los Angeles and Huntington Park. The first time I visited Carmen’s apartment, I had barely come in the door when she proclaimed, “I will never go back.” For centuries Carmen’s hometown of Partida had been governed communally under indigenous laws. These customs supported direct, participatory democracy,

but they also barred women from political say. Like many of the women I came to know from Partida in my two years of fieldwork, Carmen now saw her hometown as too *machista* (patriarchal), too “stuck in the past.” She questioned its exclusion of women, as well as its participatory traditions. She insisted that coming to California was a good thing, especially for women. She hoped that long-distance pressure might bring her village “into this century,” even if it sparked backlash back home.

Carmen also fought for inclusion in the United States. She worked hard. She tried to learn English. She refused to depend on government services. And she participated in Los Angeles’s giant marches for immigrants’ rights. Yet when she did, she carried the U.S. flag. In the United States, she said, “I’m like a bird with wings. I spread my wings and I’m free.”

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Alma Sandoval disagreed. On paper Alma’s story was much like Carmen’s. Both grew up in indigenous pueblos in Oaxaca. Alma’s hometown, a Mixtec village I refer to as “Retorno,” lay less than a hundred miles from Partida. Alma also left Oaxaca by the time she was twelve. As in Partida, corn farming crumbled in Retorno starting in the 1970s, and people hemorrhaged out of the village. First they went to northern Mexico, then to Southern California. Alma also moved to the United States undocumented in the 1990s. She worked in the town of Vista, California, in a once-agricultural and now peri-urban region about thirty miles north of San Diego and ninety miles south of Los Angeles, known as North County San Diego. Holding factory jobs, she, too, kept out of the way of immigration control. Yet, unlike Carmen, Alma gave up on being undocumented in the United States.

Even though Alma spent nearly three decades working in northern Mexico and California, she never liked it. I met Alma in Retorno, on a dusty Sunday afternoon in 2010. I had just begun doing ethnographic fieldwork in the village, and I would wander its hills talking to people about their lives. Often women leaned out of their doorways to inform me, “Our people go to your country only to suffer, only to die.” Alma concurred. While her husband and children still worked in Vista, Alma forsook the United States as hypocritical, racist, and unfair. She could not get used to the ways U.S. police and employers treated unauthorized immigrants:

“like slaves.” Economic challenges aside, she felt it was better to go back to Mexico. So Alma adopted what I call a *strategy of withdrawal*.

Shortly after Alma returned to Mexico, she joined a road blockade for the first time in her life. One day a group of protestors aligned with Mexico’s young opposition party, the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD; Party of the Democratic Revolution), formed a barricade across the highway through Retorno. They cut off traffic and trade, demanding that Oaxaca’s state government hand over resources it had promised indigenous villages but never delivered. The protestors refused to move until they received funds for irrigation, taxi licenses, and paved roads. Alma had never been in a protest before. But she was ready to do just about anything to avoid repeating the trauma she faced in the United States. The struggle was not just about resources; it was also about emigration. Debt had pushed Alma to leave. She hoped that state support might give her a means to stay. So Alma slung a *rebozo* (scarf) around her head and strode to the edge of the village, joining the fight for “the right not to migrate”: *el derecho a no migrar*.

This fight was gendered in unexpected ways. Indigenous villages like Retorno and Partida had long blocked women from civic participation. This time, however, men asked for women’s help. By the time the protests began, more than half the men born in Retorno worked in San Diego County. Like Alma, many of them were sick of U.S. policing. They hoped to return to Mexico. So they formed an organization in California that would pressure the Mexican state to give Retorno resources and help its people make a living at home. Yet because migrant men fought from afar, they needed boots on the ground. That was where people like Alma came in. Between the 1980s and 2010, many women had gone back to Retorno, whether from the agricultural fields of northern Mexico or from the United States. Migrants in the United States recruited these women to join their long-distance cause.

Alma was inspired after that first protest, and she eventually drew hundreds of other women into politics. Together with their migrant counterparts, these women won new rights to vote and hold public office in Retorno. Their movement propelled the first-ever indigenous representative into Oaxaca’s state government. It also secured funding for indigenous hometowns. By rejecting U.S. repression and using their global ties to demand Mexican state support, the people of Retorno pursued what

scholars call “alternative globalization.”¹⁰ Retorno, as Alma put it, was the place she could “be free.”

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From a bird’s-eye view, the villages of Partida and Retorno were both isolated, indigenous, and patriarchal.¹¹ At the end of the twentieth century, economic restructuring in Mexico undermined their livelihoods, driving their people to migrate within Mexico and then to the United States. Upon arrival in California both sets of migrants confronted state violence and pounding political exclusion. Ultimately, both groups also wanted the same thing: inclusion in the process of globalization that was eroding their traditional lives. As they advocated for inclusion, both accomplished dramatic gender change.

Nevertheless, their political strategies diverged. Like Carmen, most immigrants from Partida pursued inclusion in the United States. Not only did they appreciate the U.S. government, but they also poured energy into demonstrating that they belonged. Many felt that moving to California offered a form of “progress,” even for the undocumented. Women, in particular, associated gender empowerment with leaving their hometown “behind.” In other words, most of these migrants accepted the dominant terms of globalization. They also grew polarized from their counterparts in Partida. In turn, emigrants’ abandonment prompted people back in the village to reject the dominant version of globalization and defend their communal ways.

By contrast, migrants from Retorno withdrew politically from the United States. While most continued to live in California, they staked their hopes on returning home. Rejecting U.S. exclusion, they worked to build an alternative to undocumented migration. As they did, they forged a cross-border movement for inclusion on the Mexican side. Perhaps surprisingly, women like Alma led the way. In this case, both migrants and those in their hometown rejected the “American dream” and sought to create an alternative, more equitable form of globalization.

How did two excluded communities come to understand progress and “freedom” so differently? How did these perceptions translate into contrasting political strategies and modes of agency? And how did gender shape their attitudes and get reshaped by their actions? This book begins

to answer such questions. For twenty-one months between October 2009 and July 2012, I lived among migrant families in Partida, Retorno, Los Angeles, and North County San Diego (their primary destinations). In Oaxaca I spent hours with families, hanging out in their houses, participating in political meetings, and talking about their relationships to migrants and emigration. In the United States I visited migrants' homes, drove them to work and errands, and attended their community meetings and festivals. Between the four places I also conducted more than a hundred life-history interviews, tracing how each group developed its own political strategies. I rotated between hometowns and destinations, often bringing videos of long-lost families who had not seen one another in years. In each village I also scoured archives and conducted surveys to map the history of migration. Though I focus on migrant communities, my main goal is not to explain the act of migration. Instead, I seek to better understand how excluded groups develop different approaches to politics. In the process, I rethink the interplay between gender, migration, and political voice.

THE PARADOX OF UNDOCUMENTED POLITICS

In many respects, undocumented people exemplify political exclusion. State laws and coercion deny them many of the rights that are fundamental to political action. Undocumented migrants cannot participate in elections, vote, or run for office. Like ex-felons, the colonized, and racial minorities, they have few channels through which to influence the governments where they live. Contemporary states also tend to treat such groups as objects of surveillance and control.¹² Not only do undocumented migrants lack rights; they also face the everyday violence of policing and the threat of deportation.

Pessimistic observers suggest that legal exclusion and state violence condemn the undocumented to silence. Often, studies of civic advocacy look at how protestors exercise their rights as citizens to make claims on the state.¹³ Yet many migrants are too afraid of police to join the kind of emancipatory movements imagined in traditional social theory. Historically, foreign-born Latinos were among the least politically active residents in the United

States.¹⁴ More recent research also shows that xenophobic laws can make undocumented people cynical about their host government and their prospects for legalization.¹⁵ When migrants see U.S. laws as illegitimate and racially charged, some may give up on U.S.-oriented protests and focus their hopes on a future in Mexico.¹⁶

In social theory, political voicelessness is critical to migrants' social and economic marginality. Undocumented migrants are exploitable and socially excluded, most scholars argue, precisely because it is hard for them to speak out against the states and companies that oppress them.¹⁷ The consequences can be especially bad for women. Not only are immigrant women subject to state violence; some also face "patriarchal backlash" (including domestic abuse) from immigrant men: the same people who ought—in theory—to be their allies.¹⁸

Recently, however, undocumented immigrants have shown surprising political agency. In the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s, migrants' struggles brought them to the forefront of popular politics in both the United States and Mexico. By 2010 foreign-born Latinos in the United States reported *more* political advocacy than the native-born. In one survey 22 percent of Latino immigrants had participated in a protest in the past year, against just 6 percent of U.S. citizens.¹⁹ Some research suggests that instead of producing cynicism and withdrawal, nativist legislation politicized Latino identity.²⁰ Of necessity, these politics went beyond the ballot box. Immigrants in the United States marched for rights, resources, and legal change. In 2006, led by organizations in Los Angeles, Chicago, and other major cities, 3.5 to 5 million immigrants and their allies went into the streets to demand legal inclusion in the United States.²¹ Unauthorized migrants also innovated politically by coming out as "undocumented and unafraid" and declaring themselves American.²² Others joined unions or canvassed for congressional candidates.²³ Many of these activists showed an extraordinary commitment to working within mainstream U.S. policies and political practices. Like Carmen Rojas, they insisted that they were not criminals but deserving workers, families, and neighbors.²⁴ Two-thirds said they planned to stay in the United States.²⁵

Migrants have also broken the bounds of traditional politics by acting transnationally. Many send money or ideas to their homelands, and some return themselves. Others create pressure groups to mobilize for homeland

democratization.²⁶ One vehicle of such cross-border engagement is organizations called hometown associations. In these clubs migrants raise money to support local public works in their places of origin. Even though less than a third of migrants are active in transnational politics, their advocacy has had important impacts in migrant-sending countries like Mexico.²⁷ For most of the twentieth century, Mexico was ruled by a single political party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI; Institutional Revolutionary Party). In the 1990s, however, other parties began to vie for political power. They reached out to emigrants in the United States for support, sparking new forms of long-distance citizenship.²⁸ Indigenous migrants like those from Retorno and Partida were especially active in transnational politics, drawing on their strong ethnic identities, traditions of communal self-governance, and histories of resistance within Mexico.²⁹ Many joined hometown associations and began to connect their own struggles to antiglobalization movements elsewhere in Mexico and Latin America, such as the Zapatistas.³⁰

In this respect, migrants fit into a broader moment in which politics is being forged not just by rights-bearing citizens but also by the excluded and undocumented: those *outside* the formal political sphere.³¹ Hopeful scholars suggest that migrants, in particular, are uniquely positioned to navigate between states, building the kinds of grassroots, transnational movements that some imagine as a counterweight to corporate globalization.³² Like other marginalized groups, migrants exercise agency not only in visible acts of resistance or formal electoral politics but also in their day-to-day political identities, actions, and strategies. Such “everyday politics” are the focus of this book.

Finally, gender is critical to contemporary resistance. States often rely on ideas about gender to underwrite their strategies of control.³³ For instance, one might think of how U.S. government officials have invoked images of criminal, immigrant “bad *hombres* [men]” as it deports vast numbers of Latinos, most of them men.³⁴ Meanwhile, women often lead grassroots mobilization, even in historically patriarchal communities.³⁵ As Carmen’s and Alma’s stories suggest, migrants’ activism can remake gender in dramatically different ways. To make sense of these distinct political strategies and their gendered effects, I compare and contrast the contexts in which they emerge.

UNDERSTANDING MIGRANTS' POLITICS THROUGH
RELATIONAL, CROSS-BORDER COMPARISON

This book traces the stories of Partida and Retorno from the mountains of Oaxaca, Mexico, to the barrios of Southern California and back. To understand how Carmen, Alma, and their communities built different strategies of activism, I set their recent histories side by side. Using what ethnographer Michael Burawoy (2009) calls the “extended case method,” I pay special attention both to broader politics and to the local context. Studying four different field sites, past and present, posed significant practical challenges.³⁶ My answer was twofold: first, I concentrated on building close relationships with two relatively small communities (sets of people). Second, I triangulated observations with interviews, surveys, and others’ accounts, which helped to extend my data beyond the reach of a single scholar. In this section I describe the cases of Partida–Los Angeles and Retorno–North County San Diego, as well as my approach to studying them. In the “Methodological Appendix,” I go into more detail about how I got to know these communities and how my identity as a white, U.S.-born woman created dynamic tensions that helped to guide my analysis.

I focus on communities, meaning hometowns and their migrants, as key sites of political contention and collaboration.³⁷ The pueblo is the core of political and economic life in Oaxaca. Village networks also structure migration in Mexico and around the world, as migrants follow others from the same hometown and cluster together in the same destinations.³⁸ While not everyone in a migrant community shares the same political attitudes, individuals make sense of their experiences in relation to their families, friends, and enemies. Working through communities gave me access to migrants’ backstage conversations about police, the state, work, and politics. It also enabled me to put multiple people’s stories together, fleshing out how each group’s strategies evolved over time.

I contrast *two* communities to illuminate the effects of different political contexts. Most ethnographers focus on a single case (sometimes transnational). Meanwhile, broader, statistical studies of immigration tend to use aggregate data to represent immigrants as a whole, homogenizing the undocumented experience. In contrast, I take variation as the point of departure. I use comparison to understand how conditions on the ground

shaped internal community dynamics, leading two groups to interact differently with similar macrolevel dynamics.³⁹ Comparison also helps identify points where marginalized groups may gain leverage. Even in the context of neoliberal globalization and a xenophobic U.S. state, it shows, migrants are not inherently voiceless or condemned to exclusion.

I consider this book a *relational comparison*. I adopt this term from Gillian Hart (2002, 2016) and Fernando Coronil (1997), who emphasize that communities are not bounded units that can be divided and ranked as “better” or “worse” but interact with one another and evolve historically. Like many ethnographers, I find it almost impossible to control the complexities of the social world or hone in on a single cause for human action. Thus, my approach does not have the tight logic of some comparative studies of immigration, in which either the sending or receiving site is held constant.⁴⁰ Instead, I argue that hometowns and destinations are part of the same process: hometowns shape where migrants go, and destinations influence migrants’ engagement with their natal homes. My goal in bringing two cases together is not to freeze one part of this process but to draw out communities’ relationships to each other and to broader political and economic forces.⁴¹ Thus, I compare their processes of migration as a whole.

The processual approach poses some limitations. For instance, I cannot conclusively weigh the impact of each individual place on migrants’ journeys. Nor can I present a snapshot in time; migrants’ histories are still in progress. Nevertheless, juxtaposing migrants’ whole trajectories brings out critical turning points, in ways that an apparently controlled comparison would not. I use two key tools to identify the impacts of a given context: (1) I look at how the two migrant streams diverged as they encountered distinct destinations, and (2) I pay special attention to times when migrants adopted political strategies that would have been unexpected based on their prior histories. Thus, I show how inequalities do not just begin at the point of origin but also accumulate and shift over place and time.

Oaxaca and California as Iconic Sites of Migration

I focus on Oaxaca and California because they are iconic sites of undocumented migration, but they also have significant local-level contrasts that allow for comparative analysis.

Mexico is the key source of unauthorized U.S. migration: more than half of the undocumented migrants in the United States were born there. Within Mexico, Oaxaca is one of the largest sending states, as well as one of the poorest and most patriarchal.⁴² Almost 60 percent of the state's population identifies as indigenous, and indigenous villages tend to be even poorer and more isolated than their mestizo (mixed-race) counterparts.⁴³ They are also notoriously patriarchal. As of 2004, 75 percent of indigenous villages in Oaxaca excluded women from voting, and only 9 percent had accepted a woman in public office.⁴⁴ Indigenous women faced Mexico's worst gender disparities in education and health, and roughly 75 percent had survived gendered violence.⁴⁵

In the 1960s downward pressure on corn prices drove Oaxaca's rural population to begin emigrating within Mexico and to the United States. Due to their poverty and lack of networks, most Oaxacans moved within Mexico first, then to California, in what scholars refer to as a "stepwise" pattern.⁴⁶ By the 1990s Oaxaca was one of the top migrant-sending states in Mexico. By 2004 its primary sources of income were no longer corn farms but (1) remittances, (2) tourism, and (3) Mexico's national welfare program, *Oportunidades*, in that order.⁴⁷ As of 2010, roughly a million indigenous Mexican migrants lived in the United States.⁴⁸ Almost all of them crossed the border undocumented, and almost all worked in manual jobs.

Within Oaxaca, however, local political dynamics and migration patterns varied dramatically. Oaxaca lies at the gnarled convergence of Mexico's two massive mountain ranges. For centuries Spanish colonists and the Mexican government used divide-and-conquer strategies to control its indigenous people. This combination kept villages so isolated that some neighboring communities could not understand one another's spoken dialects. Long-term state neglect also left indigenous people to run their own affairs under a system known as *Usos y Costumbres* (Ways and Customs). In 1995 Oaxaca formalized this system, giving roughly three-quarters of its municipalities the right to run their own elections and staff their own governments. *Usos y Costumbres* is often associated with communal governance, in which members make decisions by democratic assembly and rotate into local civil service posts. However, self-government also left room for dramatic variation. In some places, village elites co-opted *Usos y Costumbres*, so their pueblos came to look more like the despotic

haciendas that predominated elsewhere in Mexico.⁴⁹ Thus, even though indigenous villages were subject to the same state and federal laws, local practices ranged from collective governance and landholding to elite control and dispossession. Because Oaxacan villages were isolated, each community also followed a relatively independent pattern of migration.

Southern California is also an emblematic site of undocumented Mexican migration. The region is an immigrant gateway: until the 1990s, 85 percent of Mexican migrants went to California, Texas, or Illinois.⁵⁰ In 2010 almost 40 percent of California's population was Latino. That same year Los Angeles and San Diego were among the top ten counties in the nation by total number of immigrants. Roughly one in ten working adults in the area was unauthorized, the largest concentration of undocumented immigrants in the United States.⁵¹ This early experience with undocumented immigrants put cities in California at the vanguard of local immigration policy and enforcement.

As in Oaxaca, California's practices diverged at the city level.⁵² When this book went to press in 2018, California was arguably the most immigrant-friendly state in the country, offering undocumented immigrants benefits like drivers' licenses and student financial aid. Yet it was not always so welcoming. In fact, in the 1990s California passed some of the nation's most restrictive policies. When I conducted this research in 2009–12, California had a Republican governor and little statewide legislation around immigration, leaving room for local variation. Cities like Los Angeles, Escondido, and Vista had created their own local immigration policies starting in the 1980s and 1990s. Other cities and states later followed suit, passing thousands of local immigration laws in the first decade of the 2000s.⁵³ On one end of the spectrum, places like Maricopa County, Arizona expanded policing and passed laws to target immigrants. On the other end, Los Angeles was among the first of what are now more than five hundred "sanctuary cities" in the United States, including New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and most other major metropolitan areas. While "sanctuary" is not a legal designation, most such cities promised not to share information about people's legal status with federal immigration agents. Many also extended services to immigrants.⁵⁴

On the ground, police, service providers, and other state agents also exercised significant discretion toward immigrants. During the period of

this study, ICE had only about six thousand agents dedicated to deportation, so it relied on local police to identify migrants for removal.⁵⁵ Formally, programs such as 287(g) and Secure Communities charged police with reporting undocumented immigrants to ICE.⁵⁶ In practice, however, some city police used these programs to pursue immigrants, while others refused to participate altogether.⁵⁷ Though Los Angeles and North County San Diego both adopted 287(g) and Secure Communities, Los Angeles police refused to check detainees' legal status until after criminal conviction. In contrast, North County police frequently checked people's papers right at their stops in the field. Likewise, even though federal laws blocked undocumented immigrants from most public services, providers in some areas extended education, health care, and welfare to the unauthorized.⁵⁸ To do so, they framed immigrants as hardworking and law abiding. In such areas migrants were significantly better protected from crime, labor violations, and domestic violence.⁵⁹ By contrast, as scholars such as Seth Holmes (2013) and Leah Schmalzbauer (2014) demonstrate, migrants in rural, agricultural, and anti-immigrant communities faced far harsher exclusion. Because cities in California created local immigration policies before most other parts of the United States, they may hint at dynamics in the pipeline in newer destinations.

The Cases of Partida–Los Angeles and Retorno–North County San Diego

I selected Partida–Los Angeles and Retorno–North County as case studies because they exemplified the variations in Oaxaca-California migration. Using Mexican census data, I created a list of migrant-sending communities to use as possible cases.⁶⁰ After visiting roughly a dozen pueblos, I chose Retorno and Partida because the hometowns were similar in size and status, but their experiences of migration diverged.

From the economic and demographic perspectives often used in migration research, Partida and Retorno resembled each other and other rural pueblos in Oaxaca. Both villages had roughly 1,500 inhabitants in 2010, and both were located just over fifty miles from the nearest city. Both were also municipal seats, held communal titles to their land, and self-governed under *Usos y Costumbres*. When I began researching this book, more than

60 percent of people in Retorno and Partida still lived in homes with dirt floors.⁶¹ For most of the twentieth century, women in both hometowns had been blocked from attending political meetings, beaten at home, and required to ask their husband's and father's permission to work or leave the house.

The people of Partida and Retorno also migrated at similar times and volumes. While almost all Oaxacan villages now send migrants to the United States, these communities were among its earliest "high-expulsion" pueblos (as defined by the Mexican census), enabling me to study their dynamics over time. Like most indigenous migrants, their members lacked the money or social networks to go directly to the United States.⁶² Instead, they migrated within Mexico in the 1960s and 1970s. Both began coming to the United States in the 1980s, with U.S. migration peaking in the early 1990s and declining in the first decade of the 2000s as border control intensified. By 2011 roughly two-thirds of respondents surveyed in each hometown had an immediate family member living in California.

In the United States, migrants from Partida and Retorno concentrated in nearby cities, with 99 percent of those from Partida settling in Los Angeles and 65 percent of those from Retorno moving to North County San Diego.⁶³ As was typical among Oaxacans, more than 95 percent of both groups crossed the border undocumented. By 2010 just over 70 percent remained unauthorized. The other 25–30 percent had become lawful permanent residents, almost all of them in mixed-status families. Both sets of migrants settled in cities where the population was roughly 50 percent Latino as of 2010 (50 percent in Los Angeles and 48 percent in Vista and Escondido).⁶⁴ They also lived in segregated neighborhoods where almost everyone spoke Spanish. In turn both encountered relatively similar cultural influences, including Spanish-language radio, television, and social-media sites.⁶⁵

But Partida and Retorno also exemplified two contrasting streams of unauthorized migration from Oaxaca to the United States: one of permanent migration to Los Angeles, largely of Zapotecs, and the other of circular movement to rural California, mostly of Mixtecs.⁶⁶ While other scholars have puzzled over these differences, this book traces the contrasts to hometown power dynamics. I note that while these patterns tended to break down along ethnic lines, there were exceptions as well. Some Mixtec

communities flouted the trend by moving to Los Angeles, while some Zapotec groups migrated to rural California.⁶⁷ Ethnicity alone could not explain their divergence.

As destinations, Los Angeles and North County San Diego also stood at opposite (if not extreme) ends of a continuum of U.S. cities, from pro- to anti-immigrant. Los Angeles had a long history of Chicano and Mexican immigrant organizing. It was the original and most vibrant site of the contemporary immigrants' rights movement, which is now represented in every major city in the United States. In the 1990s in particular, pro-immigrant organizations in Los Angeles, including the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, the Central American Resource Center, the Instituto de Educación Popular del Sur de California, and the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán, among others, began collaborating with unions, faith organizations, and left-wing academics to expand local support for immigrants, including labor protections and access to state services.⁶⁸ In 2006 LA-based advocates built on these long-standing ties to lead the national immigrants' rights movement, mobilizing more than a million local residents to march in the span of two months. Starting in the 1990s Los Angeles also extended significant labor protections to undocumented workers.⁶⁹ Finally, migrants to Los Angeles tended to live in heavily Mexican neighborhoods like Koreatown, Echo Park, South and East Los Angeles, and Huntington Park, which was 94 percent Latino as of 2009. Although these cities did police, exploit, and deport large numbers of migrants, the local social context mitigated federal-level exclusion.

In contrast, Escondido, Vista, and other towns in North County San Diego were at the vanguard of restrictionism. Unlike Los Angeles, San Diego County lies within a hundred miles of the Mexican border. In this "zone of exemption," Border Patrol officers have license to search for undocumented immigrants without warrants or probable cause. In the 1980s and 1990s, while most of the United States turned a blind eye to undocumented migration, San Diego County's Border Crime Prevention Unit became notorious for murdering migrants. During the 1990s thousands of unauthorized immigrants in San Diego County lived beside the fields where they worked and were persecuted by immigration control.⁷⁰ North County San Diego also had far fewer pro-immigrant organizations than Los Angeles. Instead, Republicans and vocal anti-immigrant activists

dominated local politics. Driven by these militants, cities in North County became some of the first in the nation to pass exclusionary local immigration measures, such as requiring that employers electronically verify workers' identities, criminalizing day labor, and prohibiting parking in Latino neighborhoods. Escondido also integrated ICE agents directly into its police department, and area police often used regular traffic stops to detain the undocumented.⁷¹

A study of two communities cannot represent the experiences of all Oaxacans or of Mexican migrants to Los Angeles, North County San Diego, or the United States as a whole. *Partida* and *Retorno* do not stand in for all communal or exclusionary villages, nor Los Angeles and San Diego County for all tolerant or restrictive sites. There may be hybrids between them as well as more extreme cases, particularly as the United States has grown more openly polarized. Nevertheless, their contrasts offer a starting point to understand how local state practices affect migrants' cross-border politics.

Methods and Data

To tell this story, I draw on almost two years of ethnographic fieldwork, 104 oral histories, original hometown surveys, archival research, and background from historical and ethnographic studies. I began my fieldwork in the hometowns of *Partida* and *Retorno*. In the fall of 2009 I took collective taxis to each village, asked town leaders for permission to do research, and began wandering around introducing myself.⁷² After I had spent several months in each hometown, villagers put me in contact with their friends and relatives in Los Angeles and North County San Diego. Many U.S.-based respondents opened up when they learned I knew their families back home. Working through close-knit communities also made it possible for members to "check up on" me with one another, reinforcing their trust. Finally, going through migrants' hometowns enabled me to study their political attitudes independently of their participation in schools, service providers, NGOs, activist organizations, or labor unions.⁷³

I lived in each field site for a total of about five months. In the villages I stayed with families. In California I rented apartments in Vista and Echo Park, Los Angeles.⁷⁴ In each place I joined community festivals and

political meetings; visited members' homes; tagged along on errands, hospital visits, and school pickups; and had hundreds of conversations about people's experiences of migration, politics, gender, and work. Because most unauthorized migrants avoid U.S. government officials, I rarely observed direct interactions with state agents. Instead, I analyzed migrants' relationships to the state through hearsay and perceptions, paying special attention to (1) migrants' discussions about the police and bureaucrats, (2) their "backstage" reactions to officials, and (3) their "legal consciousness," or expressed, commonsense understandings of the law.⁷⁵

Interviews brought my observations into dialogue with migrants' own voices. I conducted twenty-eight in-depth interviews in Partida, twenty-eight in Retorno, twenty-five in Los Angeles, and twenty-three in San Diego County. I focused on interviewing key players in each community who could remember its biggest accomplishments as well as its biggest fights. I then used surveys to check that I had interviewed people who reflected the distribution of age, legal status, and migration experiences in each community. Interviewees ranged from age twenty to seventy, 57 percent were women, 62 percent were married, and 68 percent lived in or had previously migrated to the United States. Over 70 percent of the migrants were undocumented as of 2011. They averaged six years of schooling, and less than half had completed primary school. Because I was concerned with unauthorized adults, I focused on people who arrived in the United States as teenagers or older.⁷⁶ Throughout, I treated respondents as participants in a common process rather than individual units that could be aggregated.⁷⁷ For instance, I often included several members of the same family, comparing their stories. By playing accounts against one another, I helped counter the bias of memory and reconstruct each community's history as a whole.

I conducted interviews in Spanish at a time and place of migrants' choosing, usually their homes.⁷⁸ Before each interview I visited respondents several times, getting to know them and their families. During the interviews I asked about their decisions to migrate or not, perceptions of policing and social services, feelings of belonging, ideas about gender, and political actions. While respondents may have been inclined to present rosier views of the United States to me than to their peers, comparison served as a resource. Even if both groups tempered what they said to me, I could gain insights from the differences between them.

I used systematic surveys or censuses in each hometown and snowball surveys in each destination to map their migration paths. In January 2011 I joined about forty faculty members and students from University of California, San Diego (UCSD), and the Universidad Autónoma de Benito Juárez de Oaxaca to conduct a census of adults age fifteen to sixty-five in Retorno (N = 717) and snowball surveys of Retorno's migrants in North County San Diego (N = 121).⁷⁹ The survey lasted about an hour and asked about migrants' histories, occupations, family relations, experiences in the United States, and political participation. It also gathered migration histories of respondents' family members (N = 1924). The team also conducted more than fifty in-depth interviews in Retorno and North County, augmenting my own qualitative research. The following month I hired six undergraduates from the Universidad Autónoma de Benito Juárez de Oaxaca and replicated UCSD's survey in Partida. We selected every third household and randomly identified a member age fifteen to sixty-five to participate (N = 121). I then did a snowball survey of Partida's migrants in Los Angeles (N = 51), gathering family members' migration histories on both sides of the border (N = 686).⁸⁰

Finally, I drew on archives and secondary sources to understand how Partida and Retorno fit into the landscape of Oaxaca and U.S. migration. A vast body of ethnographic research about Oaxaca and its migrants in the United States provided context, enabling me to start fieldwork from what other scholars already knew.⁸¹ I also checked respondents' recollections against records at Oaxaca's National Agrarian Registry, its National Institute for Statistics and Geography, and Partida and Retorno's municipal archives. This mix of sources extended my reach beyond a single field site, making it possible to trace communities' pathways as a whole.

PATHWAYS TO POLITICS

Based on these data, I make three key arguments about migrant communities' politics. First, local-level practices of power mediate migrants' decisions to move, as well as their attitudes about U.S. exclusion. Second, political agency is processual, evolving as migrants navigate their local

histories and their particular destinations. Third, gender informs both state control and migrants' fights for inclusion.

I refer to these gendered processes as *pathways to politics*. Like a path through the woods, migrants' pathways are shaped by "landmarks," which mold their twists and turns. Political scientists refer to such landmarks as "critical junctures," points where two similar groups diverge. For indigenous Mexican migrants, key landmarks include local power dynamics in their hometowns as well as in their destinations in the United States. A political pathway is similar to other scholars' idea of "path dependence" in that it uses historical trajectories to help explain present actions.⁸² But in a pathway migrant communities are not just driven by historical legacies. Rather, their politics reflect a *series* of local conditions.

A "pathway" is also a sequence or course of action. On one hand, people from Partida lived in places that set them on a path of relative inclusion—from a communal starting point to a comparatively tolerant destination. Those from Retorno, on the other hand, faced one exclusion after another, from a hierarchical hometown to a hostile U.S. extreme. Yet migrants not only face different interplays between sending and receiving sites; they also engage with and react to those conditions. Their actions shift the trajectories one might have expected at the outset. For instance, given Retorno's exclusion of indigenous villagers and its abuse of women, outsiders might assume that migrants like Alma would never return. Instead, they came back to remake the village. Understanding such shifts requires examining how migrants respond to both the places they go and the places they leave behind.

Modes of State Control

As Carmen's and Alma's stories suggest, unauthorized migrants confront distinct practices of power, both in their hometowns and in the United States. State policies also intertwine with the local economy, shaping people's experiences at work. I call these local contexts *modes of control*. Different modes of control, I argue, inspire distinct attitudes about the homeland and the United States. Partida and Retorno demonstrate how.

Before people migrate abroad, local power dynamics in Mexico influence who leaves and why. For instance, Partida's redistribution of land and political power enabled villagers to avoid agricultural labor and hold out for urban jobs. Young people—especially women—were able to leave to seek opportunity. In urban areas, in turn, women built the social ties to connect their community to Los Angeles. By contrast, Retorno's local inequality forced its residents into the hands of farm recruiters. There, local political bosses appropriated power and land for themselves, driving poorer villagers into debt. Whole families often left to work on Mexico's industrial farms. While there, women suffered so much that many returned to the village, leaving only men to move on to California. Farm recruiters brought these men from Mexican ranches to the then-agricultural area of North County San Diego.

Once migrants arrive in the United States, contrasting local modes of control mold their political identities. Los Angeles represents one extreme, in which migrants perceive state treatment as *conditional* on their behavior. Observing a combination of deportation and state support, migrants think of the policing as punishment for “bad” behavior, while associating services with “being good.” For those from Partida, such good/bad contrasts offered a sense of control, diminishing fear and promoting belonging, particularly among women. Yet the binary also encouraged them to act according to state norms of hard work and self-sufficiency. Many, like Carmen, strove to distance themselves from their “bad” counterparts and Mexican roots. North County San Diego, meanwhile, exemplifies a different, more *arbitrary* mode of control. There, migrants from Retorno believed that police and bureaucrats targeted migrants by race, regardless of their behavior. Most felt terrified and powerless. Many resigned themselves to perpetual exclusion, even as they continued to live in the United States.

Local modes of control also shape migrants' experiences at work. Migrants from Partida entered Los Angeles through the service sector, while those from Retorno came to North County through farmwork. By the time of my research, however, most people in both sites worked in factories or domestic service. Still, each city's political environment conditioned the bosses' treatment. In Los Angeles employers were regulated by local labor controls, so they often used rewards or competition to motivate workers. At work as in public, migrants tended to believe hard work would