

'Intimate Migrations: Gender, Family, and Illegality among Transnational Mexicans by Deborah Boehm'
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Boehm, Deborah A. 2012. *Intimate Migrations: Gender, Family, and Illegality Among Transnational Mexicans*. New York: New York University Press. 188 pp. Hb.: \$49.00, ISBN: 978 0 8147 8983 4.

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Deborah Boehm's *Intimate Migrations* begins and ends with stories of transnational Mexican families that highlight the intersection of intimacy and 'illegality' in deeply personal ways. The stories underscore what is at stake for families whose lives and homes are divided by the U.S.-Mexican border. This evocative ethnography is based on 13 years of transnational fieldwork among familial networks stretching between states in the U.S. West and Southwest and the Mexican states of Zacatecas and San Luis Potosí. While contributing to the growing literature on everyday lived experiences of transnationalism, it advances the study of the state, intimate interactions, and transnational migration.

Central to Boehm's argument is that the migration of individuals cannot be disembedded from the families of which they are members. In particular she highlights that the grandfathers and fathers of current migrants were part of the U.S. government's Bracero Program (1942-64), which contracted Mexican men to provide agricultural labor, and set in motion a pattern of primarily male-led migration that continues today. In grounding the desire of transnational families to move freely between Mexico and the United States in the long-standing interdependence of these economies and families, her work attests to the value of adopting a historical perspective in migration studies.

The book is divided into three similarly structured parts, each with two chapters: one chapter on emic understandings of kinship, gender, and age/ generation, and the subsequent chapter on how the U.S. categorization of (im)migrants as “legal” or “illegal” penetrates these understandings and mediates their lives. In Part One Boehm discusses family reunification, using as a departure point the fact that the need for families to be reunified arises precisely because the U.S. state divides them. Drawing on De Genova’s work (2002) on “illegality,” she details numerous ethnographic examples of “borderland families” of mixed migration status living in various residential arrangements across the U.S.-Mexico border; for instance, one family consists of undocumented parents and adolescents, a daughter who is a U.S. citizen by birth, and aunts and uncles who are undocumented, permanent U.S. residents, and naturalized U.S. citizens.

In Part Two, Boehm shifts her attention to gendered subjectivities and relations. She shows how the predominant familial configuration of men living in the United States and women and children living in Mexico that arises from migration complicates gendered norms and practices. Contributing to the literature problematizing the notion that migration inevitably leads to women's liberation, Boehm argues that masculinity is both “reasserted” and “compromised” through migration, and this at once “frees” and “constrains” women (p. 89). For instance, men face tremendous pressure to migrate to provide for their families and thus demonstrate their masculinity, while women who remain in Mexico must assume male responsibilities, prompting one woman to proclaim “Now I am a Man and a Woman!”. Though the U.S. state shapes who migrates and through which routes in gendered ways, Boehm also shows how, in cases of domestic

violence, some migrant women use the state to have their abusive husbands deported and/or travel to Mexico with their children, knowing that their undocumented husbands cannot follow them without risking their ability to return. These stories provide important glimpses into tensions *within* families, not just vis-à-vis the state. Further discussion of the ways in which internal familial conflicts articulate with migration processes would perhaps add greater nuance to this already complex picture.

With its focus on age, generation, and migration, Part Three makes an important contribution to studies of transnational childhood. Boehm argues that the lives of young people in undocumented (im)migrant families or mixed status families highlight the intersection of spatiality and belonging. Within a wider framework of “contingent citizenship” (p. 130), Boehm uses Ngai’s term (2004) *alien citizens* (“here/ not here”) to show how U.S. citizens are constructed as aliens through their family relations; for example, a child who is a U.S. citizen lives in Mexico because her undocumented parents are concerned that their status could jeopardize her security if she were to live with them in New Mexico. Conversely, Boehm proposes the term *citizen aliens* (“not here/ here”) to refer to undocumented children who are “de facto members of the nation” (p. 136), living in neighborhoods, attending school, and working, but who are not recognized by the state. Through such examples of partial, relational, and contingent national membership, *Intimate Migrations* demonstrates the enduring salience of place in shaping the lives and senses of belonging of transnational Mexican families and underscores the persistent power of the U.S. state in shaping their social reproduction over time.

References

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