IN 1957, Arthur J. Rubel began his fieldwork in a small, racially segregated town in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of South Texas that he called “New Lots.” His goal was to conduct ethnographic research about “Mexiquito,” the segregated Mexican area of town. Rubel spent the first ten days of his time in the field walking along every street in the city and entering every store. Each time he entered a place of business, he introduced himself and described his research agenda to the proprietors, clerks, and customers of the store. Reflecting on these early stages of fieldwork in the preface to his book *Across the Tracks: Mexican-Americans in a Texas City*, Rubel recalls that many Mexican Americans “expressed concern that their people were not fairly presented in the pages of the current elementary and high-school texts and asked that [he] undertake to ‘set the record straight’ as to the part played by *la raza* in the development of Texas” (1971, xxiv). Rubel responded by emphasizing the historical aspects of his research to assuage the concerns of these Mexican-origin community members. Ultimately, however, he decided to publish a standard ethnography, which, though including a chapter of broad history, was largely a synchronic account of the Mexican community in New Lots.

Over four decades later, in the summer of 2002, I began my fieldwork in La Feria, a small, previously racially segregated town in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. Like Rubel, I approached the field as a trained anthropologist. As such, my goal was to conduct ethnographic research about the social relationships between Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants in the postsegregation period. Unlike Rubel, I had a personal connection to my field site. Though I had never lived there myself, it was the town to which my family had migrated from Mexico in the mid-1940s, and it was the place where my mother was born and raised. When I arrived in La Feria, I spent my first several weeks in town establishing contacts to which I was referred by colleagues and family. I also began to engage in community life by attending
school board meetings, frequenting local restaurants, and attending Mass on Sundays at the one Catholic church in town. When I met and introduced myself to people, I made an effort to describe my research project about immigrants and Mexican Americans. Whereas in general people usually cursorily acknowledged my interest in immigration, most Mexican American people wanted to talk to me about the history of segregation in the community, often asking if my mother had ever mentioned it. As a Mexican American woman who came of age in La Feria in the 1950s and 1960s, my mother had vivid memories of the segregation she experienced, and she had indeed inculcated me with those stories. For my mother’s contemporaries who had remained in La Feria, the specter of segregation still haunted the present. Though the phenomenon of Mexican segregation was not my primary research interest, it was apparent to me that people wanted to talk about this history. Rather than pay superficial attention to their historical concerns, as Rubel had done a generation before me, I decided to examine the history of Mexican segregation in La Feria more deeply from an ethnographic perspective.

This book is the culmination of that research. It is a historical ethnography about the culture of segregation in La Feria, Texas, from 1915 through the late 1980s. I argue that there were three stages of segregation: its establishment in the first part of the twentieth century; its accommodated form in the 1940s; and its gradual unraveling after the civil rights and Chicano movements. I examine how social movements and subsequent changes to federal and state policy shaped people’s experiences of segregation throughout these different time periods. I also highlight how the ambiguous racial positionalities of Mexican people allowed some of them to be exceptions to Anglo rules of racial dominance during the era of segregation. This work concerns itself with the contradictions, inconsistencies, and indeed the messiness of Mexican segregation. I do not read these contradictions as indicative of the permeability of racial borders during the period of segregation; rather, I argue that the structure of segregation prevailed well beyond landmark national legal mandates of desegregation precisely because of such processes of selective and limited incorporation. I will demonstrate that because of the durability of segregationist structures, Mexican racial integration was necessarily pushed forward by grassroots actions in conjunction with state and federal policies. As such, this ethnographic examination of the history of Mexican segregation illuminates larger issues about race, nation, and belonging in the U.S.–Mexico borderlands.

Despite the absence of a federal or Texas state mandate, people of Mexican origin frequently faced de facto racial segregation, most acutely during the
first part of the twentieth century. Though they experienced segregation in a manner similar to blacks and other people of color in the United States, the structure of Mexican segregation differed from the strict racial divides of the Jim Crow South. My research reveals that there were several Mexican-origin people who were exceptions to the racial rule of white dominance in South Texas. While such Mexican exceptionality became more common after World War II, there were some notable exceptions to the rule of racial segregation as early as the 1920s and 1930s. Exceptional Mexican people were usually of higher socioeconomic status, had the ability to speak English, possessed a kind of Anglo cultural fluency, and were often light skinned. Very rarely, however, were these exceptional Mexican people allowed full access to Anglo society. Though granted limited opportunities within the realms of education, business, and—to a lesser degree—politics, their incorporation into the Anglo power structure was always constricted, especially in spheres that involved direct contact with the racialized Mexican body. Instances of absolute racial separation as well as the exceptions were distinguishing characteristics of Mexican segregation in South Texas. These amounted to highly complex structures of racial inequality.

The contradictions in the structure of Mexican segregation actually made processes of desegregation all the more difficult. Indeed, despite major court cases that abolished the legal practice of segregation across the country beginning in the 1940s, La Feria’s original “Mexican School,” Sam Houston Elementary School, remained segregated until 1972. Segregation persisted in the local Catholic church until even later. Because Mexican segregation in La Feria was based on custom rather than law, it could not necessarily be mandated out of practice. Certainly, desegregation was buttressed by antisegregation court cases, federal mandates, incentives, and threats of noncompliance. This book pays close attention to how the Mexican community was able to push toward a racially integrated community through everyday actions supported by the emerging policies of nondiscrimination. It examines how integration occurred in practice, detailing how Mexicans and Anglos struggled with the process of integration and the ways in which they confronted, negotiated, and renegotiated power relations in different public spheres. While in some cases the process of integration was of an overtly contested and political nature, other instances revealed that integration occurred through subtle changes in everyday practice. When looking at the agents of change in the various chapters of this book, it is clear that Mexican-origin individuals and groups used their multiple positionalities—race, ethnicity, class, and gender—to promote racial integration on a local level.
The anthropologist Octavio Romano wrote the words in the preceding epigraph in direct response to the kind of research and writing that Arthur J. Rubel, his onetime colleague, conducted in New Lots. As graduate students, Romano and Rubel shared the same mentor: the then newly minted Berkeley Ph.D. William Madsen. As students, the two conducted fieldwork as Madsen’s research assistants in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. While Madsen and Rubel penned ethnographies based on their research over the following decade, Romano, buttressed by the Chicano/a movement, penned a scathing critique of anthropologists and sociologists such as Madsen and Rubel in his essay “The Anthropology and Sociology of the Mexican Americans: The Distortion of Mexican American History.” In this critical piece, Romano maintains that social scientists who conducted research in U.S. communities comprising people of Mexican origin from the early twentieth century through the 1960s perpetuated and promoted colonial and racist representations of Mexican Americans. At the heart of Romano’s critique is the refusal of then contemporary anthropologists and social scientists to engage in a historical analysis of culture. He argues that such texts represented Mexican Americans as passive victims of their own, supposedly deficient, culture, which restricted their economic, political, and social advancement. This analysis, Romano asserts, ignores a history of resistance, particularly in terms of labor organizing, the prevalence of which he documents from the late nineteenth century through the twentieth (Romano-V 1968, 48). Ultimately, Romano argues that the principal factor behind Mexican Americans’ poverty and disfranchisement was not their “culture” but rather a dominant Anglo society against which Mexicans had ardently struggled throughout their history as part of the United States.

This book likewise offers a historical analysis of culture, and it does so by weaving together the threads of ethnography left behind by scholars such as Rubel and Romano, as well as contemporary scholars in Chicano/a Studies and anthropology who have called for greater accountability and critical analysis in the ethnographies that we produce. I understand accountability
in two primary ways. First, accountability can honor the desires of our communities for research and writing that is meaningful and accessible to them. I went to La Feria with a research plan but was compelled to change that plan to respond to the stories that people wanted to tell me. It is my hope that this book respectfully treats people’s concerns about the history of Mexican and Mexican American segregation in the town. Second, I understand accountability as creating a viable space in academia for community knowledge. In her essay “Chicana/o Studies and Anthropology: The Dialogue That Never Was,” Karen Mary Dávalos writes, “Chicana/o scholarship is not simply additive but transformative. [It does] not recover the history, literature, sociology, folklore, law, and art of Mexican Americans simply to enhance library collections. The work of Chicana/o scholars calls for change” (1998, 32). This work about Mexican segregation in La Feria, Texas, is not meant to be an addendum to mainstream ethnographies and/or histories; rather, it is meant to transform and deepen the way that we understand the history and culture of Mexican segregation in the United States. In its analysis and methodology, this book heeds Romano’s call for historical analysis of culture in a way that decolonizes, or as Dávalos says, “redistribute[s] power both inside and outside the academy” (1998, 32).

In order to offer a critical, historical analysis of the culture of Mexican segregation in this book, I have relied on methods of historical anthropology. The field of historical anthropology emerged in the early twentieth century and has undergone many incarnations; debates about when and how anthropologists should use historical methodologies continue today. In the introduction to his edited volume From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and Its Futures, the anthropologist Brian Keith Axel asserts that it is important to understand the project of historical anthropology not as a dialogue between the two fields or even as a matter of borrowing methodologies. Rather, he argues that “historical anthropology may productively deploy the tensions and conflicts of the institutionally defined relationship between history and anthropology to generate a new, critical practice of knowledge production” (2002, 12). Axel argues that while multiple methods may be used, the goal of historical anthropology is to provide a distinct way in which anthropologists can produce knowledge. He argues that this type of critical historical ethnography is essential to understanding the “production of people.” Such methods push the temporal boundaries of anthropological analysis, which largely remains ahistorical, and challenges history’s conceptions of space and time by presenting microlevel rather than broad geographical accounts of the past. The purpose of this book is to more deeply understand Mexican segregation through the dual lenses of anthropology and history in order to criti-
cally interrogate the way that this culture of segregation shifted throughout the twentieth century.

Approaching the history of Mexican segregation from an ethnographic standpoint is important because it allows for an examination of how segregation functioned in a particular local context. Such a microlevel analysis allows for a more nuanced understanding of the way that Mexican segregation functioned and allows us, as Trouillot argues, to make “better generalizations” about larger historical-social phenomena. He asserts:

> When it comes to the past . . . we often move from the general to the particular as if our historical master tropes—colonialism, slavery, racism, and the domination they register . . . —could actually help paint concrete situations on the ground. . . . Yet useful as these master tropes may be in sketching the horizon of an era and the outer limits of a social formation, they cannot convey the lived realities of actual populations, past or present. (2002, 190)

While Mexican segregation was initiated by the state in various forms of government—federal, state, and local—it was enacted and experienced as everyday practice. In La Feria, as in other communities throughout the Southwest, Mexican people’s experiences of segregation were contingent upon how they engaged with the Anglo community, the extent to which they accepted or resisted practices of segregation, and their social and economic positionals. I argue that we should not take Mexican segregation for granted as a monolith that functioned in the same way throughout the U.S. Southwest. By prioritizing a microlevel analysis, this ethnography reveals specificities that help us to understand the larger phenomenon of Mexican segregation more clearly.

In addition to an emphasis on microlevel analysis, another key aspect of this text as a historical ethnography is how practices and lived experiences of segregation changed over time. I agree with Comaroff and Comaroff’s argument that historical anthropology should be dedicated to “exploring processes that make and transform particular worlds—processes that reciprocally shape subjects and contexts, that allow certain things to be said and done” (1992, 31). In this way, historical anthropology allows for an analysis that can encompass the way that the culture of Mexican segregation in La Feria changed throughout the twentieth century. Segregation of Mexican people manifested itself differently in the early, middle, and latter parts of the twentieth century. I argue that various historical moments—defined by racial projects such as colonization, legislation by the state, and community organization—affected and changed the culture of segregation. This research reiterates Renato Rosaldo’s rumi-
nation that “change rather than structure becomes society’s most enduring state, and time rather than space becomes its most encompassing medium” (1993, 103).

As a historical ethnography that critically examines Mexican segregation, this book also engages in the field of critical race studies by contributing to the ways that we understand histories of racial formation in the United States. In their groundbreaking work *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, Omi and Winant (1994) propose that through the course of U.S. history, there have existed particular “racial formations” that have defined the way that we, as a society, understand race and racial hierarchy as a natural order. They argue that through “racial projects,” people attempt to reorient our understandings of race and often push to redistribute resources along racial lines. Such racial projects can include state mandates as well as collective action. A key part of their analysis is that racial formation is processual in nature and that we must understand racial categories as being “created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (55) as society moves from one racial formation to the next. In the case of La Feria, I outline three major stages of segregation that correspond to three distinct racial formations. It is clear that over these three periods “being Mexican” held different racial connotations. Perhaps most notably, certain categories of Mexican people were able to claim greater rights throughout the three distinct racial formations I outline in this book. These categorical differences reveal how race functioned in different ways for Mexican people throughout the twentieth century.

I employ methods that include local archival research as well as field research to develop this historical ethnography. I approached the former ethnographically and the latter to inform historical questions. Comaroff and Comaroff assert that “historical ethnography . . . must begin by constructing its own archive” and urge anthropologists to “work both in and outside the official record” (1992, 34). In constructing an archive for this book, I relied heavily on historical sources from La Feria, Texas, such as school board minutes, city commissioner records, yearbooks, local newspapers, and property records. Within this local context, the archives formed a narrative about the town that posited Anglos as the dominant social actors of history. There was so little mention of Mexican-origin people in these historical materials, it appeared as if they did not exist. Meanwhile, the burgeoning agricultural industry, which was the backbone of La Feria’s economy, was being propelled forward on the backs of Mexicano labor. Mexican people’s invisibility in the official town records became significant to my analysis of segregation because it indicated how completely Anglo members had marginalized Mexican people. In creating an archive of local town issues, Anglo settlers actively
“imagined” a community devoid of Mexicans. In order to address this bias in the historical record, and in order to understand the way Mexican people experienced segregation in La Feria over time, I conducted oral history interviews with several Mexican longtime residents of the community.5 Chicano/a and feminist scholars have often relied on oral history narratives to reconstitute subjugated historical perspectives.6 Oral history narratives often provide an alternative account of historical events, which can be corroborated using archival sources. Vansina (1985) argues, however, that the value of oral sources is not their “testimony of fact” but rather the ways that they testify to the values of a people. Put another way, Alessandro Portelli states, “Oral sources may not add much to what we know, for instance, of the material cost of a strike to the workers involved; but they tell us a good deal about its psychological costs” (1998, 67). Oral history narratives tell us about the histories that people experience, but they also talk about what people choose to remember, how they remember, and the impact of that memory on their current lives. Oral history narratives are key to this project because as Comaroff and Comaroff insist, within historical ethnography, the “methodological concern is less with events than with meaningful practices” (1992, 37). For this book, I relied on twenty-eight qualitative interviews with lifelong residents of the town. These interviews were geared specifically toward generating Mexican and/or Mexican American perspectives about La Feria’s past. During my initial year of fieldwork, from 2002 to 2003, and in the decade afterward, I conducted several other interviews about contemporary issues for Mexican people in the community, and I engaged in countless conversations with townspeople about the history of segregation and its legacy.

As an anthropologist, my goal has been to read the archive that I have constructed about Mexican people in La Feria ethnographically. Guha advises us to “distinguish different types of documents and their relations to the forces of domination they purported to represent” (quoted in Axel 2002).7 The Anglo perspective represented in the local historical records, as well as the Mexican perspective represented in the oral histories that I have collected, has been culturally and historically constituted. I have paid specific attention to how Mexican people were represented in local archives (if at all) and to the privilege that the writers of the records enjoyed in the early history of the town. On the other hand, the oral histories I use in this book illuminate what Mexican life was like within the context of a racially segregated town. Many people remember the same things, corroborating each other’s stories. Much of what people remember corresponds to archival material. In my analysis of oral history narratives in this book, I look for historical content, but also the ways that people interpret their own stories. Remembering the era of Mexican
segregation and instances of racial discrimination was difficult. While some of my interviewees spoke openly and, at times, angrily about what they had endured, others scarcely mentioned it, focusing instead on their positive life experiences and how the community had changed for the better. I navigate these narratives carefully, with an abiding desire to respect the perspectives of the people who lived through segregation, but also with an abiding desire to shed light on this difficult aspect of Mexican American history in Texas. The significance of these oral narratives lies not only within the particular history they delineate but also in the way that they reveal the emotional impact of segregation, both then and now.

Finally, my engagement in periods of fieldwork in La Feria over the past ten years has had a major influence in the way that this historical ethnography has taken shape. The opportunity to discuss documentary sources and oral histories with local people has influenced both my narration and my analysis of Mexican segregation in La Feria. As I shared with people what I found by way of local history, Mexican American people often “spoke back” to archival sources, encouraging me both to critically interrogate the official historical record and to think beyond it. Even among the oral histories that I collected, my research collaborators would ask questions about what I had learned from other interviews and offer their own analysis as to why people had interpreted historical moments in particular ways. In terms of the many contradictions within the culture of segregation, Mexican people offered varying explanations as to why racial discrimination occurred in some arenas while in others it did not. Often people differed as to ideas about when practices of segregation finally abated. Engagement with local people about historical sources was thus a key aspect of my methodology and sociohistorical analysis.

The tools of ethnography, history, and critical race studies have been essential for breaking open the representation and the analysis of Mexican segregation in Texas during the twentieth century. Though the patterns revealed in previous studies of segregation are apparent here, as a historical ethnography this book enables a more intimate understanding of the way that Mexican people experienced and responded to segregation in their everyday lives. It demonstrates the messiness of Mexican segregation, which was a direct result of the myriad ways that Mexican people were racialized during the twentieth century. In addition to noting the contradictions and inconsistencies relevant to the treatment of Mexicans, this book also reveals those nonnegotiable spaces where Mexicans were never allowed, thus exposing the true depth of the racist ideologies that undergirded practices of segregation. Finally, this book helps us to understand how practices of segregation endured well past the passage of major civil rights legislation. By examining the impact of the
The racial ambiguity of Mexican people on their experiences of segregation, this book provides a unique perspective about the history of segregation and racial integration, serving to complicate our understandings of the history of race and racial formation in the United States.

**Organization of the Book**

*The Borderlands of Race* is organized into two main sections. Part 1, “The Culture of Mexican Segregation,” explores how the culture of segregation was established in La Feria, Texas, and how over the first five decades of the twentieth century, it was sustained through practices of limited incorporation of Mexican people into Anglo-dominant spheres. Chapter 1, “The Borderlands of Race and Rights,” introduces relevant discourses about race and the Texas-Mexico border in the early part of the 1900s in order to frame the phenomenon of Mexican segregation in La Feria. This chapter also introduces theories of cultural citizenship as a way to understand how people of Mexican origin created cultural space for themselves within segregated spheres, thereby broadening the scope of belonging in town. Chapter 2, “Establishing a Culture of Segregation,” focuses on the period from the town’s incorporation in 1915 through the 1930s, when, because of its general development, the town established structures and practices of segregation. This chapter looks at the patterns of racial exclusions that emerged in the town’s social, economic, and political spheres. Chapter 3, “Formal and Informal Mexican Education within the Context of Segregation,” examines the struggle over education within a segregated community. While Anglo people controlled the education of children at the segregated Mexican elementary school, Mexican community members enacted forms of public pedagogy as a counterpoint to Anglo education and as a response to racist Anglo ideologies. Chapter 4, “An Accommodated Form of Segregation,” highlights the historical moment when the structures of segregation shifted to enable some flexibility around previously strictly drawn lines of racial exclusion. Focusing on the period beginning in the late 1940s, this chapter ethnographically examines the contradictory experiences of segregation and the durability of racial thinking that led to the maintenance of a racially stratified community.

Part 2 of the book, “Processes of Racial Integration,” examines the uneven process of desegregation in the community. Because of the selective incorporation of Mexican people into Anglo spheres, a sweeping legal reform of race relations was untenable. This section demonstrates how racial integration occurred at the grassroots level of individual and group actions. Chapter 5, “Troubling the Culture of School Segregation: Mexican American Teachers
and the Path to Desegregation,” examines the experiences of the first Mexican American teachers employed at the “Mexican School” in town and the impact that they had on their students as an opening toward integration. Chapter 6, “Surgiendo de la Base: Community Movement and the Desegregation of the Catholic Church,” demonstrates how Catholics of Mexican origin used popular religious practices to create a culturally relevant space for themselves in the local Catholic parish. This chapter demonstrates how Mexican people’s cultural and micropolitical actions served as a basis for the desegregation of the church.

This examination of the culture of Mexican segregation builds upon and challenges our understandings of the interplay between race and rights in the United States. In this historical ethnography, we see the way that race was mediated by socioeconomic status, skin color, and culture, which led to varied experiences of segregation among Mexican-origin people. Despite contradictions present within the structures and practices of segregation, both Anglos and Mexicans commonly understood La Feria’s racial hierarchy for much of the twentieth century. Buttressed by civil rights legislation of the late 1960s and 1970s, everyday people took actions that ultimately challenged racial/racist ideologies and created meaningful spaces for Mexicans in historically dominant Anglo spheres. The Borderlands of Race testifies to the changing culture of Mexican segregation and the myriad ways that people claimed rights and created meaningful space for themselves in a South Texas border community.