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Elizabeth H. LeFlore

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**The Dissertation Committee for Elizabeth Hawthorne LeFlore Certifies that this is
the approved version of the following dissertation:**

The Force of Devotion: Performing a Transnational Spirituality

Committee:

Pauline Turner Strong, Supervisor

Richard R. Flores, Co-Supervisor

Phyllis M. Correa

James H. McDonald

Martha Menchaca

Kathleen Stewart

The Force of Devotion: Performing a Transnational Spirituality

by

Elizabeth Hawthorne LeFlore, B.A., M.A.

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Dedication

Para la gente de Empalme Escobedo, Guanajuato, México

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The Force of Devotion: Performing a Transnational Spirituality

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Supervisor: Pauline Turner Strong

Co-Supervisor: Richard R. Flores

This dissertation explores the role of popular religion in a transnational community by examining the performance of devotion to local patron saints, virgin mothers and sacred crosses. Annually in May, Empalme Escobedo, Guanajuato, Mexico celebrates San Isidro Labrador (the patron saint of farmers), Maria Auxiliadora (the patroness of railroad laborers) and the Santa Cruz de Picacho (Sacred Cross of Picacho). Following the celebrations many of the male participants in the fiestas travel to Texas to work in agriculture or the service industry. Consequently, devotion to the saint(s) moves with migrants back and forth across the Mexican-U.S. border.

My thesis is that the force of devotion gives voice to the tension between the desire for solidarity (experienced through fiesta performance) and the erosion of the community by migration (experienced as absence and dissolution). What I call the force of devotion refers to the social processes, expressive culture, continuity and change that make up a transnational community's system of beliefs and practices and enable folks to understand, explain or cope with everyday life. The force of devotion is the key analytic

frame through which I interpret the articulations of spirituality and popular religion, impermanence and fragmentation, absence and hope.

The central questions posed in this dissertation emerge from the stories folks in Empalme Escobedo tell about their lives. Consultants talk about their devotion as an expression of faith, a necessary guidance through daily life and a symbol of hope. Tracking the force of devotion exposes social relationships, emotional and intimate experiences, desires and fears. Memory of and participation in the fiestas not only symbolize the force of devotion, but also serve as a connection to separated family members and place of origin. The everyday reality of the absence of loved ones and the fragmentation of the community as a result of migration amplifies the human desire for sociability and solidarity. The fiesta performance provides a space in which the consciousness of communal boundaries is heightened, thereby confirming and strengthening the experience of the social and the force of devotion.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Imagine a rural town whose dirt streets are suddenly clouded with the excess dust produced by the arrival of numerous cars. These cars are not typical to Empalme Escobedo: these are big shiny new trucks with Texas license plates. Trucks are packed full of popular U.S. electronics, clothing, medicines and foods—symbols of success in the U.S. These trucks are driven from the U.S. by migrants returning to Empalme Escobedo to celebrate their devotion to a patron saint. The town has been transformed. Overnight, families have decorated their homes or businesses for the fiesta. Plastic streamers, banners, and lights are strung from the rooftops or across balconies. Fresh coats of paint in bright pastels stand out against the dust and trash covering the unpaved roads. Clothing vendors and taco stands pop up on street corners. Families gather outside their homes to be seen and socialize with returning migrants, relatives and friends. A sense of solidarity and camaraderie is evident in the conversations and public gathering places. The market is busy and the streets are noisy and vibrant. The sense of absence that permeates daily life in Empalme Escobedo is now obscured by the bustle of activity and happiness of folks.

This dissertation explores the role of popular religion in the Empalme Escobedo transnational community by examining the performance of devotion to local patron saints, virgin mothers and sacred crosses. Annually in May, Empalme Escobedo, Guanajuato, Mexico celebrates San Isidro Labrador (the patron saint of farmers), Maria Auxiliadora (the patroness of railroad laborers) and the Santa Cruz de Picacho (Sacred Cross of Picacho). Following the celebrations many of the male participants in the fiestas

travel to Texas to work in agriculture or the service industry. Consequently, devotion to the saint(s) moves with migrants back and forth across the Mexican-U.S. border.

My thesis is that the force of devotion gives voice to the tension between the desire for solidarity (experienced through fiesta performance) and the erosion of the community by migration (experienced as absence and fragmentation). What I call the force of devotion refers to the social processes, expressive culture, continuity and change that make up a transnational community's system of beliefs and practices and enable folks to understand, explain, or cope with everyday life. The force of devotion is the key analytic frame through which I interpret the articulations of spirituality and popular religion, impermanence and fragmentation, absence and hope.

The force of devotion offers a way of weaving together the concepts of mobility, connectivity, and emotionality. Stories of spiritual devotion, the absence of loved ones, of the pull to migrate, the need to survive, or the desire to do better produce a mode of interpretation, a means of being in common and being in force that serves to sustain and constitute the Empalme Escobedo transnational community. The force of devotion is a fluid, loose process of making connections and being in common. The conditions of this force are one with belonging, with community, and with becoming. Tracking the force of devotion exposes social relationships, emotional and intimate experiences, desires and fears. Emotionality is a primary indicator of the force of devotion. As emotional social performances, the fiestas for San Isidro Labrador, Maria Auxiliadora and the Santa Cruz de Picacho are one way to represent the force of devotion. The force of folks' devotion illuminates the social practices and discourses that can explain the Empalme Escobedo transnational community's movement, connection and emotion. It is through the force of

devotion that a community makes a connection, emerges as one out of impermanence and fragmentation, and becomes visible and whole.

The central questions posed in this dissertation emerge from the stories folks in Empalme Escobedo tell about their lives. I translate and make central the voices of men, women, and children of the Empalme Escobedo transnational community. As such, I employ the force of their devotion as grounded theory. Consultants talk about their devotion as an expression of faith, a necessary guidance through daily life, and a symbol of hope. Memory of and participation in the fiestas not only symbolize the force of devotion, but also serve as a connection to separated family members and place of origin. The everyday reality of the absence of loved ones and the fragmentation of the community as a result of migration amplifies the human desire for sociability and solidarity. The fiesta performance provides a space in which the consciousness of communal boundaries is heightened, thereby confirming and strengthening the experience of the social and the force of devotion.

My relationship with the community of Empalme Escobedo and this dissertation project began in 1999 while conducting field research for my master's thesis in anthropology on the annual fiesta to celebrate San Isidro Labrador, the patron saint of farmers. Over a period of ten years I maintained and enhanced relationships with consultants through telephone and mail correspondence, visits to Empalme Escobedo, and contact with migrants from Empalme Escobedo working in Texas. In our conversations about devotion to San Isidro Labrador, consultants increasingly explained and evaluated actions in terms of the impact of migration on their lives, families and communities. Discussions of the realities of migration and the force of devotion became

intertwined with narratives of absence, pain, loss and hope. Consultants evoked memories of their separated family members and the good times by remembering the fiesta for San Isidro Labrador through our conversations and photographs. Subsequently, I established ethnographic rapport with migrants from Empalme Escobedo living in Giddings, Texas. In 2004 I began exploring the roles that popular religious narratives and practices play in migrants' daily lives in Texas and the changes experienced in the processes of migration. In May of 2005 I returned to Empalme Escobedo to conduct doctoral dissertation research. Based on nineteen consecutive months of ethnographic fieldwork in Empalme Escobedo, participation in four fiestas to honor San Isidro Labrador, and telephone, mail and internet correspondence with the transnational community over ten years I have learned from consultants that spirituality is not centered on devotion to one saint (i.e. San Isidro Labrador), nor attending Mass in Church. Rather, it encompasses praying to, asking favors of (*mandas*), and making promises to (*promesas*) several patron saints, sacred crosses and virgin mothers.

The fiesta performances to honor San Isidro Labrador, Maria Auxiliadora, and the Santa Cruz de Picacho reflect, symbolically and materially, the changes evolving in Empalme Escobedo. Accordingly, they also represent and reinforce the communal solidarity of those who have left and now return to celebrate their devotion to a patron saint, virgin mother or sacred cross. It is not the fiestas themselves that are significant but the emotions of the participants and the force of their devotion. Descriptions of the fiesta performances evoke the emotional intensity involved. In attempting to grasp the force of devotion, migration, and the processes of change and continuity in Empalme Escobedo, both formal ritual and the informal practices of everyday life present crucial insights

(Rosaldo 1996). The affective performance of devotion becomes a locus in which meanings are tested and negotiated, while emotions and memories are expressed and reinvented in relationship to the present moment (Flores 1995).

Movements are forces. Connections are forces. Emotions are also forces. Movements, connections and emotions are both charged by and discharge their forces on the outside environment, the content of the everyday. The social and the ordinary are made visible through the force of devotion: enacting rituals to San Isidro Labrador in the streets, performing devotion to Maria Auxiliadora in the home, carrying bread and alcohol from the saint's *parande* (wall of offerings) across the Mexican border to Giddings, Texas, holding photos of your wife and children close to your heart in a pocket on your worn work shirt, waiting for a call from a loved one in the *caseta telefonica* (telephone booth), remembering the absent through conversations and photographs, and pinning a *milagro* (an offering in commemoration of a miracle) inside your hat or bra as you walk to and from work, across the street, or to cross the Mexican- U.S. border. I examine the movement of this sociality. In the Empalme Escobedo transnational community it is a sociality without determinate borders. The force of devotion both creates and is useful in understanding the community's sociability and solidarity because it moves with folks and transcends boundaries and borders.

I recognize the importance of exploring the changing nature of local communities and their connections to global processes. As such, another concern of this dissertation is to explore the multiple ways in which space simultaneously connects and disconnects people, places and things. The narratives and performances of devotion to local patron saints, virgin mothers and sacred crosses open a space to track the flows of

transnationalism through the lived experiences and transformations of people and objects. Migrants of Empalme Escobedo maintain social, political, economic and spiritual connections through the action of calls, emails and cars: moving in space, the to and fro, the back and forth, the coming and going. These processes of mobility—the active exchange of prayers, money, photographs, *chismes* (gossip), food, and other commodities across the Mexican- U.S. border—reconfigure space by connecting, maintaining and reinforcing wider systems of social relations and practices (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994). Attention to such processes illuminates the practices of mobile subjects, the fluidity and fixity of borders, and the tension between the private and public spheres.

In the process of meaning-making, folks in the Empalme Escobedo transnational community decipher the memory of absence and translate their mobility into connections—being in common, being in force—whether it be through spiritual labor, the work of everyday life, or the pull of migration and the United States. The sense of impermanence and fragmentation felt in Empalme Escobedo and the consequent desire for sociability and communal solidarity can be described as a force, a pulling. This pulling is evident in men and women’s prayer requests to the local priest in Empalme Escobedo to bless the passage of family members across the Mexican- U.S. border or to ensure the quick return of a loved one from Giddings, Texas; in giving material goods to Don Pedro, the man who makes a living making connections by driving his truck between Empalme Escobedo and Grapevine, Texas; or in making calls to the neighborhood *caseta telefonica* or sending money to the Elektra in Comonfort intended for wives, children, parents, siblings or friends. This pull, the force of devotion is

transformative, a state of being, becoming and meaning-making—a means of being in common and being in force.

The force of devotion moves (just as do the people and objects) back and forth across the Mexican-U.S. border simultaneously linking and fragmenting lives and places, memories and emotions. In this introductory chapter and throughout the dissertation, I use the force of devotion as a point of departure for engaging with more general theoretical and thematic concerns: transnationalism (specifically Mexican migration to the United States), expressive culture (popular religion and fiesta performance), and the anthropology of memory, emotion and affect (impermanence and fragmentation).

THE BAJÍO REGION OF MEXICO

In the first place, its [the Bajío's] population was both heavily and mainly mestizo. Moreover its towns were industrial: Querétaro and San Miguel el Grande were New Spain's leading centers for the manufacture of woolen textiles; Celaya and Salamanca wove cotton; León made leather goods; and Guanajuato had become the chief silver producer in all Mexico. Then again, with such an extensive town market to supply, the region's agriculture greatly prospered. It was precisely this combination of urbanisation, textiles, mining, and agriculture which made the Bajío an area exceptional not merely in Mexico but in all of Spanish America. [Brading 1971:224]

Empalme Escobedo is located in the state of Guanajuato and the Bajío region of Mexico. The state of Guanajuato lies between two major chains of mountains that make up the backbone of Mexico, the Sierra Madre Occidental and the Sierra Madre Oriental. The bulk of the state consists of these large mountain chains interspersed with alluvial

valleys. The Bajío region is made up of the plains south of the Sierra de Guanajuato, in the state of Guanajuato, and parts of the states of Querétaro and Michoacán.

The state of Guanajuato has historically been one of Mexico's most wealthy. Guanajuato has both physical and economic characteristics that place it strategically within Mexico's industrial economy. The state has excellent resources of water, energy, and various agricultural and mineral raw materials that have been important factors in the development of numerous and successful industries. Guanajuato's rich and famous mines were discovered in the sixteenth century and the state continues to be a major producer of gold and silver for the world mining system (Ferry 2005). Agriculture, textile, leather and automobile production are among the state's most prominent industries.

Despite its relative wealth and natural resources, Guanajuato is one of four states with the country's highest migration rate. Close to seventy percent of Mexican migrants come to the United States from ten states, with four of the most traditional sending states being from Central Mexico: Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, and Zacatecas (Durand and Massey 2004). The state of Guanajuato has been a point of departure for migrants for over one hundred years and it continues to account for a disproportionately large share of Mexican migration to the United States and Canada.¹ In the Bajío region the international migration flow began with the construction of railways in the 1880s, progressed with the Revolution of 1910 and continued with the Cristero Rebellion, the Bracero programs and

¹ Migrant remittances are one way of tracking the number of Mexican migrants in the U.S. In 2005 Mexico received US 21.8 billion in migrant workers' remittances. In 2006, the states of Michoacán, Guanajuato, Jalisco and Mexico accounted for over one third of total migrant remittances to Mexico. This trend continued through the first semester of 2007, when Michoacán, Guanajuato, Jalisco and Mexico received 36.6% of total remittances to the country (Terrazas 2007).

the modernization of agriculture.² Mexican migration to the United States has continued at a steady pace despite passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act in 1986, post September 11 security measures, the debates over immigration reform in 2006 or the weakened U.S. economy. More than a quarter of all Mexican immigrants in the United States arrived in 2000 or later. In 2006 over 11.5 million Mexican immigrants were recorded as living in the United States, accounting for 30.7 percent of all U.S. immigrants. Men accounted for the majority of the Mexican born population living in the United States in 2006 (Batalova 2008). Migration is a social process. The process evolves because the social and economic situations of migrants change over time. The factors that influence migration depend on individual characteristics that vary from person to person and place to place. Typically these differences are rooted in varying levels of education, work history and prior migration experiences. Furthermore, migration is effected by factors in the place of origin such as the risk, benefits and distance of migration, local employment/unemployment and age(s) of employment, advances in technology, socio-economic status, politics, and social networks.

² The Cristero Rebellion took place between 1926 and 1929 and was an uprising against the then anti-Catholic Mexican government. The Mexican Revolution of 1910 resulted in the creation of the 1917 Constitution of Mexico (among other things) and reflected the country's discontent with the Catholic Church in that it revised the 1857 Constitution to include numerous anti-clerical provisions. Five articles of the 1917 Constitution were particularly aimed at the roles of the Roman Catholic Church in social, political and economic life in Mexico. Article 3 mandated secular education in schools. Article 5 outlawed monastic religious orders. Article 24 forbade public religious worship outside of churches. Article 27 restricted religious organizations' rights to own property. Article 130 declared that the church and state were separate (Bailey 1974; Meyer 1976).

Figure 1: Map of Mexico and United States



EMPALME ESCOBEDO, GUANAJUATO, MEXICO

Empalme Escobedo does not fit comfortably within narratives of “traditional,” “indigenous,” or “peasant” Mexican villages. Founded in 1903, as a railroad crossing, Empalme Escobedo’s origins lie in the modernization of Mexico. Empalme Escobedo is not a tourist attraction, despite its location on the *Ruta de Independencia* and its proximity to San Miguel de Allende and Celaya.³ In fact, many natives of the region have never heard of the town. If they have, they refer to it as “Scooby-Doo.” If you say Escobedo fast it sounds like “Scooby-Doo.” Empalme Escobedo lacks the “indigenous” history, charm, or “authenticity” of *México antiguo*, *México lindo*, or *México profundo*. It is not alluring to researchers either. Anthropologists have conducted research in other towns and cities in the region, for example, León (Brading 1971), San Miguel de Allende (Correa 1998, 2000, 2001, 2004; Craig 1999, 2008), Tierra Blanca de Abajo (Bauman 1996; Bauman and Ritch 1994), San José Iturbide, San Luis de la Paz, and Tierra Blanca (Lastra 1999; Sherzer, Lastra and Sherzer 2009; Uzeta Iturbide 2004). Only recently has Empalme Escobedo been acknowledged in popular literature: in one line of a *Mother Jones*⁴ article and in two websites. The origins of Empalme Escobedo are briefly

³ Guanajuato is proud to have produced Mexico’s independence movement and boasts its standing as the site of the planning, implementation and numerous battles for independence. On September 16, 1810 the parish priest Miguel Hidalgo declared independence in the town of Dolores with his famous *El Grito de Dolores* or *El Grito de Independencia* (Cry for Independence). The rebels took Dolores (now named Dolores Hidalgo) and continued successfully through San Miguel el Grande (now San Miguel de Allende), Celaya and finally the city of Guanajuato. This route from Dolores Hidalgo to San Miguel de Allende, to Celaya to Guanajuato is now known as the *Ruta de Independencia* (Independence Route).

⁴ Empalme Escobedo is mentioned in one line of an article on “illegal immigration” in *Mother Jones*: “First, he illegally entered Guatemala from Honduras. Then he entered Mexico illegally and boarded the fabled ‘train of death’ where migrants hop freight cars. This part of the trip is very cold, and as a result many cannot hold on to the cars. The boy saw six dead bodies by the tracks. In Empalme Escobedo,

described in a few state documents. To my knowledge only one document exists that provides a more personal and detailed account of Empalme Escobedo. A resident of the town, Ismael Vasquez, wrote a manuscript in 1961 that traces his life and experiences in Empalme Escobedo. The two-page document is archived in Empalme Escobedo's public library (and at one time was posted on the state website for the municipality of Comonfort). Recently, an amateur website was created by residents of Empalme Escobedo documenting its one hundred years of history (Jimenez 2003). In July of 2008, the Celaya Catholic Diocese created a website for its parishes, including Empalme Escobedo (Gonzalez 2008).

The lack of attention to Empalme Escobedo elucidates the emphasis Western social science places on understanding "traditional" societies and the significance and production of "history." Empalme Escobedo's apparent lack of history serves as a means to rethink and reevaluate the prevailing narratives and analytical frames of theorizing the traditional, modern and transnational. The changes occurring in Empalme Escobedo are rooted in the tangible conditions of the local while also interacting with larger social networks. When understood as separable acts in a larger process of social, economic and political transformation, the changes taking place in this transnational community acquire greater significance. One way of rethinking these acts is through the role of the force of devotion and its utility in the production of meaning.

Empalme Escobedo is located in the municipality of Comonfort. Comonfort was originally named, Chamacuero, a Tarascan word meaning "place of ruins." Don Francisco de Velasco founded Chamacuero in 1572 as an attempt to protect the region

Guanajuato, the police appeared on horseback with lariats and roped men around their necks. Some die from this experience" (Bowden 2006: 18).

from constant attacks by the Chichimec.⁵ In 1861 the Spanish declared Chamacuero a municipality. To honor General Ignacio Comonfort, the Minister of War, who was assassinated near Molino de Soria (the textile mill in Soria), the municipality's name was changed to Chamacuero de Comonfort (circa 1874).

In the nineteenth century, the Bajío's market-oriented economy demanded trade and travel. As a consequence, the Comonfort area (due to its location between San Miguel de Allende, Celaya and Querétaro) became a prime location for a railroad. The main track of the Mexico-Laredo railroad arrived in the region in 1888 (SEP 1981:62). In 1898 a plot of land was chosen in Comonfort to expand the railways and build a new station. The owner of the land and nearby *hacienda*, Juan Rocha, refused however to sell his land to the railroad.⁶ Eusebio González, who owned the Molino de Soria and the surrounding lands that became Empalme Escobedo, donated his land to lay more tracks for the railroad. The new tracks were built to serve Mexico City, Querétaro, San Luis Potosi, and Laredo. Construction of the tracks and new station took five arduous years and Empalme González (González' Crossing) was finally completed on March 16, 1903 (Jimenez 2003).

Railroad construction brought laborers from all over Mexico to the area and many remained to maintain the tracks and repair trains. The primarily male workers lived in makeshift housing (including old train cars) located behind the train station (the area that

⁵ At this time, during the Spanish conquest, the Río Lerma represented the boundary between the Tarascan Empire to the south and the nomadic Chichimec groups to the north (Correa 2001:449). Chichimec or Chicimeca is the Nahuatl name generically applied to the nomadic groups that occupied the area between the two Sierra Madre mountain ranges north of the Mesoamerican cultural area (Correa 2001:437). The Spanish called the area, the Gran Chichimeca (Great Chichimec Region). The name/word Chichimeca in Mexico can have derogatory connotations such as "primitive," "savage," or "uneducated."

⁶ It is rumored Juan Rocha did not want to sell to the railroad because of the United States involvement and ownership of the railways (Jimenez 2003).

now comprises Empalme Escobedo's main plaza). The few women and children linked to the railroad sold food or other goods to the laborers and passengers. As a primary crossing that linked the railway lines of *División Querétaro*, *División San Luis Potosí* and *División Pacífico* (Querétaro, San Luis Potosí and Pacific Divisions), the area attracted travelers from across the country. Its status as a crossing gave it a diverse population, vulnerable to vices. The crossing was considered a dirty and dangerous place: a center for vagabonds, prostitutes and criminal activity. A description of Empalme González in August of 1920 highlights its menacing reputation:

Pero, hay del pobre incauto que pasara de noche por estos suburbios; salían por lo menos sin zapatos y si la ropita lo ameritaba salían en paños menores y hasta en traje de Adán, pues además de ser albergue para vendedores, también albergaba a una bien organizada “banda de rateros.” Los demas eran barbechos, tierras de sembradío y basurero al por mayor. [Jimenez 2003]

[But, pity the poor, unwary man, who happens to pass through these suburbs at night; he would at the very least end up without shoes, and if the clothes were good, he would end up in his underwear, or worse, naked, for aside from being a shelter for street vendors, the suburbs were also a refuge for a well organized “band of crooks.” The rest were fallow or cultivatable fields and mostly dumping grounds].

By 1920 the residents of Empalme González began to build new structures and neighborhoods to combat its “suburbios de mala muerte” [unpleasant ghettos/problematic districts]. Ten permanent structures were built to better serve the community: 1) a primary school, 2) a post office, 3) a grocery store “La Ballanza,” 4) the municipal office,

5) a boarding house “La Mexicana,” 6) a cantina with groceries and rooms for rent “El Montecarlo,” 7) a pulqueria (a bar that makes and sells pulque – an alcoholic beverage made from the fermented juice of the maguey plant) “El Nido de Las Águilas,” 8) a hardware and grocery store “La Soriana” (that exists in 2009), 9) a guest house “El Fénix” and 10) a small business with no name or description (Jimenez 2003). The increase in growth and resources brought more people to Empalme González and encouraged the male railroad laborers to settle down and start families.

Empalme González did not have a parish church. To attend Mass it was necessary for the townspeople to travel to the neighboring textile town of Soria. Soria is located two kilometers from Empalme Escobedo. Despite the proximity, passage to Soria in the 1900s was difficult. The Laja River separates the towns. No bridge existed and while crossing the river by foot many folks fell in and had to wear wet clothes to Mass or experienced worse fates. During the rainy season, a canoe was used to journey to Soria in time for Mass. According to consultants, Don Irineo was one of the few men in town to own a canoe and he charged a fee for passage to Soria. Not only did the residents of Empalme González tire of traveling to Soria to attend Mass, but they also recognized the serious need for a local church to clean up their community (Gonzalez 2008).

In the late 1920’s the laborers of *Ferrocarriles Nacionales de México* (National Railroads of Mexico) began a campaign to build a Catholic Church in Empalme González. An affluent land and business owner, Sr. Don Santiago Olalde, had acquired an image of the Virgen María Auxiliadora in Europe. The Virgin, along with images of San Juan Bautista and the Sagrado Corazón de Jesús, were located in a chapel within his residence, *Hacienda de Palmillas de San Juan*. The ranch was located between Empalme

González and the municipal seat of Comonfort. Don Olalde had built a hotel in Empalme González and intended to donate the images to the railroad laborers in the effort to establish a church for the community. However, during the Cristero Rebellion and the presidency of Plutarco Elías Calles (1924-1928), Don Olalde feared for the safety of his sacred images and moved them to the church in Soria.⁷ In 1945 he built a small chapel within his hotel and moved the Virgen María Auxiliadora to Empalme González (Gonzalez 2008). Nuestra Madre Santísima María Auxiliadora became the patroness of the railroad laborers and the community.

In 1947 Empalme González changed its name to Empalme Escobedo to honor General Mariano Escobedo.⁸ On May 22, 1947 the first stone was laid in the construction of a church in Empalme Escobedo. The primary benefactor was Sr. Don Santiago Olalde. Present at the groundbreaking were the Archbishop Altamirano of the Morelia Michoacán Diocese (the Celaya Guanajuato Diocese did not yet exist), the senior priest of the municipality of Comonfort, Sr. Cura Don José Reyna, and the community of

⁷ Following the creation of the 1917 Mexican Constitution, the Mexican presidents Venustiano Carranza (1917-1919) and Álvaro Obregón (1920- 1924) carefully implemented the new anti-clerical measures. However, in 1924 the President of Mexico, Plutarco Elías Calles, strictly applied the anti-clerical laws in addition to creating his own anti-clerical legislation. In June of 1926 he signed the "Law for Reforming the Penal Code," popularly known as the "Calles Law." Calles seized church property, expelled foreign priests and closed the monasteries, convents and religious schools. In July of 1926 the Mexican bishops voted to suspend all public worship in Mexico in response to the Calles Law. The Cristero Rebellion escalated in 1927 and the majority of the opposition and resultant violence was concentrated in the states of Jalisco, Guanajuato, Michoacán, Querétaro, Durango and Zacatecas. The U.S. ambassador to Mexico at the time was Dwight Whitney Morrow, who became actively involved in the resolution of the rebellion. He assisted in drafting an agreement that allowed religious worship to resume in Mexico. Concessions were granted to the Catholic Church. The most significant compromise returned the Catholic Church the rights to use of its properties and priests recovered their rights to live on such property (Bailey 1974; Meyer 1976).

⁸ Mariano Escobedo was a Mexican army general and Governor of Nuevo León who fought during the invasion of the United States (1846-1848), defended the Plan de Ayutla (1854), and was instrumental in defeating the French and capturing Maximilian I in Querétaro (1867). He organized an uprising against General Porfirio Díaz and was exiled to the United States. He died in Mexico on May 22, 1902. During the Cristero Rebellion Mariano Escobedo's grandchildren fled to San Miguel de Allende where the family remained and contributed greatly to the success of the city.

Empalme Escobedo. Two days later, on May 24, the fiesta to honor Maria Auxiliadora was celebrated (Gonzalez 2008).

In 1951, Empalme Escobedo received its first priest, Padre José Villagómez. He worked to unite the community through the Catholic Church, established a secondary school (Colegio Cristóbal Colón), and initiated fundraisers to continue construction of the parish church. The church reached its final stage of completion and was consecrated by the bishop Sr. Obispo Don Lázaro Pérez Jiménez on December 13, 2007.

The San Isidro Labrador neighborhood of Empalme Escobedo dates to the 1920's. According to consultants, families in this neighborhood were connected to the railroad but were also farmers. These farmers and their families adopted San Isidro Labrador, the patron saint of farming, as their neighborhood patron saint. The origins of the image of San Isidro Labrador venerated nowadays are unclear, yet it is known that an image of the saint has been venerated in the neighborhood since the late 1920's. The plentiful lands adjacent to this neighborhood were cultivable: corn, beans, and alfalfa were grown. Cattle, goats, pigs and poultry were also raised. The celebration to honor San Isidro Labrador takes place on May 15 and coincides with the initiation of the agricultural cycle.

The main agrarian reform activity in the region occurred during the late 1930s and 1940s (Correa 1991). The land reform following the 1910 Revolution aimed to stabilize the disparity among the small landowning elite and the rural masses. Reform was initiated by granting *ejido* lands to communities. Phyllis Correa (1991:250) defines an *ejido* "as a government owned property over which peasant communities are conceded rights of usufruct. Beneficiaries of these lands are individual peasant producers who have

only rights of usufruct and inheritance rights over individual parcels as long as they cultivate themselves.” David Brading (1978, 1980) has documented the 17th, 18th and 19th century land holdings of the Bajío region and specifically of León, Guanajuato. Little documentation exists regarding the early land holdings of Empalme Escobedo. Presently, 17% of the cultivatable lands in the municipality of Comonfort are *ejido* lands (Presidencia Municipal de Comonfort 2008).⁹

Empalme Escobedo is a *mestizo* and transnational community, founded on notions of growth and change.¹⁰ Today, in Empalme Escobedo, neither the railroad nor agriculture can sustain the economy and well being of the community. The reduced employment by the railroad, the decreased reliance on farming, and an increase in migration to the United States affect the economy and sociality of Empalme Escobedo. Families are changed by the local underemployment and lack of access to higher education, quality healthcare, and institutional resources. Most often the result is poverty and a desire or need to migrate to the United States for work or survival. Opportunities for prosperity, security or prestige are viewed as outside Empalme Escobedo.

⁹ I continue to discuss agrarian reform and its impacts on Empalme Escobedo in Chapter 4.

¹⁰ In Mexico *mestizaje* describes the racial intermixing of the indigenous population with Europeans (Spanish). *Mestizo* denotes a person of mixed European (Spanish) and indigenous ancestry. *Peninsulares* distinguishes European Spaniards, those born in Spain, and sent by the Spanish government to rule the colony in Mexico. *Criollos* are the colony-born descendants of the Spanish who were considered the second rung of the colonial ethno-racial system of stratification. In twentieth century Mexico, *mestizo* nationalism was supported by revolutionary state intellectuals; including José Vasconcelos, a philosopher and secretary of education (1921-1924), and the anthropologist Manuel Gamio. As Ana María Alonso (2004:466) writes, “In defiance of Anglo-Saxon notions of mixture as degeneracy, Mexican official discourses promoted ‘racial and cultural intermixture’ as the only way to create homogeneity out of heterogeneity, unity out of fragmentation, a strong nation that could withstand the internal menace of its own failures to overcome the injustices of its colonial past and the external menace of U.S. imperialism.” *Mestizaje* challenged U.S. imperialism and the legacy of Spanish colonialism. *Mestizo* nationalism, despite its widespread acceptance and official canonization, was unsuccessful in elevating indigenous groups from their secondary place in the nation. For more on theorizing hybridity, see Kapchan and Strong 1999.

The differences between social strata in Empalme Escobedo are in a constant state of negotiation. Social positions are ambiguous particularly based on folk's mobility. I describe the types of businesses in the local market in order to give a feel for the local rural economy of Empalme Escobedo. The local economy is embedded within a complex regional and national economic system as well as that of the United States. Class differences emerge at these levels and typically folks in Empalme Escobedo attempt to redefine their social status in relation to the broader global economy by creating ties with the economies of urban Mexico or the United States.

The market in Empalme Escobedo forms a square of permanent and semi-permanent buildings around a central open space where the occasional Mass or rally takes place. It is a rustic and modest size market, but provides almost everything necessary to function in ordinary rural life. The market is open daily from 7:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. and is busiest in the mornings. Each year the buyers have less money to spend and the prices of items are always rising. The market is the pulse of the local economy and business continues day after day: old stalls close, new stalls open, and established stalls add services to stimulate sales. The differences in stalls, what is sold, and who is working can serve as an indicator of the levels of social strata operating in Empalme Escobedo. However, it is difficult to describe and especially to summarize the various types of items being sold on any given day, the circulation of these objects, the fluctuation of prices, and the patterns of employment.

A series of permanent connected structures built of cement, brick, rebar, and sheet metal form the outer edge of the market square. These buildings have three walls structured with rebar and filled in with cement and brick, a large piece of sheet metal that

opens and closes and a solid cement roof. A second set of structures lies between the permanent buildings and the open central space of the market, creating a type of hallway for walking and viewing the available goods. Most of these semi-permanent structures are open stalls created with metal rods and hanging plastic tarps, and some have cement blocks that serve as a counter for either selling items or prepping and serving foods. A few are covered with tin roofs or heavy plastic tarps. In the spaces that are not filled with these permanent and semi-permanent structures a third level of marketing exists: the itinerant vendors. These are typically women who come from the surrounding *ranchos* and spread cloths on the ground where they display their minimal produce and sit cross-legged on the dirty cracked floor or maybe on an adjacent small wooden stool.

The produce business is relatively large and diverse. The central market in Celaya, 25 kilometers away, is known for being the hub of some the best shipments of fruits and vegetables in the Bajío region. Accordingly the majority of vendors from Empalme Escobedo travel weekly (and some more often) to buy produce in Celaya and offer good quality and a variety of fruits, vegetables and herbs. The Martinez family operates the largest produce business in Empalme Escobedo. It is located on the outer edge of the market square and is always busy. Piles and piles of fruits, vegetables and herbs are stacked on top of each other and form a semicircle in front of two to three employees: Martinez family members, both female and male. Customer service is not top-notch (depending on the hour and number of people one might wait 10 minutes to be helped or to pay), but the selection and quantity is excellent and the prices are fair.

Luz, a 43 year-old single woman who lives with her mother, makes a living for herself and several of her family members selling produce within the open market. She

comes from a well-to-do farming and railroad family and has had a thriving produce business in Empalme Escobedo for over 15 years. Recently she was able to renovate her stall and create a small cement roofed structure where she stores her produce and other supplies as well as a refrigerator, sink, and gas stove. She also built a cement counter topped with tile and partially covered for displaying her produce. Luz is always there managing the business and talking to customers (unless she is buying produce in Celaya) and she employs two or three of her young female cousins to run the counter, weigh and bag the produce, and collect money. The customer service is friendly and efficient, the quality is high, the quantity is significantly less than the Martinez family business, and the prices are higher. To attract more customers and differentiate her business, Luz has added a juice bar in the mornings and a key-making service in the afternoons. She squeezes fresh juices and will also make a *licuado* (smoothie) that can be drunk at her counter in tall attractive glasses or poured into plastic bags and taken to go. After returning from the United States, Luz's brother, Ramón, bought a key-making machine. He now supplements his income, and stimulates Luz's business, copying and creating keys in the afternoons and all day Saturday. Seasonally, Luz's sisters sell trendy Christmas decorations and trinkets they buy from a popular U.S. catalog, ship to Celaya, and display among the produce in Empalme Escobedo.

Elena, a traveling vendor, sells minimal produce three times a week in Empalme Escobedo from her small plot of land. On average she will offer 10 to 12 tomatoes, 7 to 9 *nopales* (prickly pear cactus buds), 6 to 8 avocados, a few onions or *jicama* (Mexican turnip), and a bunch or two of cilantro or other seasonal herbs. The quality of her produce varies as do her prices. Sometimes Elena will bring a small stove that she sets up next to

her cloth lined with produce and sells *gorditas* (thick tortillas) made of corn flour and fresh cheese. Women are the primary employees and customers in the produce business.

Carnicerías (meat markets) are another popular business within the marketplace. Three exist within the market square that cut and grind the basics: beef and pork. Chicken is bought at a *pollería* (poultry shop). In Empalme Escobedo these are located on the outskirts of the market or in people's houses. Male employees dominate the *carnicerías*. Yet, women are the chief buyers of meat. Service, quality, quantity and price vary. Several larger butcher shops exist on the outer edges of the market offering specialty meats and on occasion tacos.

The Elizondo family owns the largest *carnicería* within the market. It is located in the permanent buildings that make up the outer layer of the market square and has two sheet metal openings: one facing the street and one facing the inner market. Pedro Elizondo is the butcher. On occasion, his son or nephew assists him. The Elizondo family also owns a *tienda de abarrotes* (grocery store) on the opposite side of the market. It is the most well stocked grocery store in Empalme Escobedo. The friendly family sells dry, canned and paper goods; bulk cereals, beans, corn, rice, and pet food; cleaning and farming supplies; over-the-counter medicines; dairy products; deli meats; soft drinks, water, beer, and jugs of brandy; and a small amount of fresh produce: tomatoes, onions, peppers, bananas and limes. The service is good, quantity is amazing, and the prices are average. Several of the Elizondo males share the responsibilities of managing the two businesses while also supplementing their income by migrant work in Texas. The older brothers Pedro and Carlos now stay primarily in Empalme Escobedo, while Johnny, Oscar, and Alfredo rotate their responsibilities to the *carnicería* and *tienda de abarrotes*

with migrating to Grapevine, Texas. Every time my husband and I shop in their businesses, the Elizondo brothers talk to us about life in Texas. In 2006 the Elizondo brothers opened an Internet café in an abandoned market stall (which they covered with a cement roof) adjacent to their *tienda de abarrotes*. Business was not booming: when we frequented the café, half of the computers were out of service, and the primary customers were young school children playing video games.

Representing another essential and successful business in the market are the *ferreterías* (hardware stores). Don Antonio, a seventy-two-year-old man, owns the longest running and most popular *ferreteria* in the market. In a small permanent building on the outer layer of the market he supplies Empalme Escobedo with almost every tool imaginable. Don Antonio is a Renaissance man. He is an avid reader, musician, poet, an amateur linguist (he studies English, German, Italian and Portuguese), a beekeeper, and maintains a peach orchard. As soon as Don Antonio recognized my husband and me as North Americans in the marketplace he called out in good English: “Hello friends, where are you from?” We quickly established a relationship with him and he began visiting our house weekly to practice his English, read poetry, play the guitar, and share stories about life in Empalme Escobedo and his short time in Laredo, Texas as a young migrant worker. Don Antonio’s two sons Simón and Francisco expanded the hardware business by opening another *ferreteria* directly across the street from the market location that is larger and sells bigger items such as lumber, metals, paint, cement, and a few electronics. Don Antonio’s daughter and daughter-in-law operate the families’ third successful business: a clothing and linens store. The women sell t-shirts, work shirts for men and blouses for women, jeans, skirts, jackets, underwear, bras, socks, sheets, blankets, and

towels. With both of their parents always working, Don Antonio's five granddaughters are often in the clothing store helping their mothers, reading, or doing their homework. I taught English to two of Don Antonio's granddaughters for several months.

On the inner layer of the market several other *ferretería* type businesses exist as stalls. These hardware vendors provide less quantity and quality than Don Antonio's business but have cheaper prices and often offer toys, trinkets or used goods interspersed with new tools and work supplies. Like the *carnicerías*, men are the primary employees of the *ferreterías*.

Another popular business found in and around the market is the *papelería* (stationary shop). A young couple, Isabel and Lalo, owns the largest *papelería* within the market. They are not originally from Empalme Escobedo nor do they have children and are hence the subject of gossip. Isabel and Lalo typically work in the shop together and sell stationary, school supplies, limited party supplies, and offer fax, copy and computer services. They have two computers equipped with dial-up Internet service that they rent by the minute to customers in the morning and teach school children basic computer skills in the afternoon. Next door is another *papelería*, owned by a different family, that provides a greater selection of party supplies and decorations, fabric, ribbon, and lace by the meter, as well as paper and school supplies. The two *papelerías* prices are competitive but the quantity, variety, quality and service differ. Loyalty to family or friends plays a large role in which businesses community members shop.

The most unique business in the market is what my husband and I call the "plastic store." Two middle-age daughters of the García family (who are related by marriage to Don Antonio) own and operate a stall that has a multiplicity of cooking, cleaning and

general use objects made of plastic. We were able to find almost every kitchen and cleaning supply necessary to maintain our small home –of course made of plastic– for an excellent price. The women provide a few other kitchen supplies and electronics, like pots and pans, Pyrex dishes, and blenders. The service is superb (the women will tell you where to find something if they don't have it), quantity is excellent, the quality is decent, and the prices are cheap.

A final component of the market consists of the women who sell *tacos*, *gorditas* or *enchiladas*. These food stalls are interspersed on the innermost layer of the market and typically contain small or medium charcoal grills, and one includes a gas stove and mini refrigerator. The food stalls get the most business during the early morning hours and are frequented primarily by men on their way to work. The few women who eat in food stalls are other market vendors or mothers accompanied by children on the weekends. The food is cheap and tasty, but the preparation and cook spaces are not always clean.

The stereotypical image of the Mexican market is one of exotic difference, natural beauty, and timelessness. In reality, the Empalme Escobedo market does not materialize like the photographs of urban Mexican markets in San Miguel de Allende, Puebla or Oaxaca featuring splendid colorful displays of fruits and vegetables, women dressed in embroidered bright clothing, and men in straw hats or linen pants. Rather, the appearance of the market is dirty, dilapidated and dull, and the work is long and hard. The smells of food and cooking, the carcasses of butchered animals, the contrast of selling undergarments next to plastic kitchenware and stationary next to hardware forces the ordinary and the taboo into public view. The market is a contradictorily gendered space. Women and women's work is central in the marketplace, while men and men's work

dominate the *carnicerías* and *ferreterías*, and the market's settlement of public space makes it unfeminine.

The daily labor of buying and selling entangles vendors in every aspect of the economy. The marketplace reveals the sense of the conditional, of making do and of living in a struggling economy and community. Empalme Escobedo is not only transformed by what flows into and out of the community but also by what lies beneath the surface—the capital mobility and flexible accumulation that puts folks in uncertain positions and makes the influence of external forces more omnipresent (Rothstein 2007). In this impermanent and fragmented community and economy, the force of devotion provides a means of survival, of being in common and getting by. “Faith” can get you through economic hard times or relieve your sense of unease about the future. As Brian Massumi writes: “The ability of affect to produce an economic effect more swiftly and surely than economics itself means that affect is a real condition, an intrinsic variable of the late capitalist system, as infrastructural as a factory. Actually, it is beyond infrastructural, it is everywhere, in effect” (Massumi 2002:45). The affective performance of devotion is transversal and transformative. Despite the changes brought by history and modernity, both the railroad and agriculture maintain their symbolic significance within this transnational community. The veneration of and devotion to the patron saints Maria Auxiliadora and San Isidro Labrador further exemplify the enduring symbolism of the railroad and agriculture in Empalme Escobedo.

TRANSNATIONALISM: MEXICAN MIGRATION TO THE U.S.

People in motion, things in motion

Transnational approaches to migration and migrant communities point to the ways in which the global circulation of people, commodities, and capital give rise to new transnational identities, cultures, and communities within an “ethnoscape” marked by global plurality and cultural interconnectedness (Appadurai 1990). Migration today takes place in a global context of economic, political and social ambiguity that facilitates the construction of social networks that transcend national boundaries. The processes of production and circulation of goods, ideas, and information are embedded in circuits of global social relations that are maintained, transformed, and reproduced in families as well as cultural, religious, political, and economic institutions (Appadurai 1990, 1996, 2001; Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994; Rouse 1989, 1991, 1992).

Immigration research (in general) and studies of Mexican migration (in particular) have influenced the anthropology of transnationalism. The early social science research on immigration focused on the migration of people as a result of colonization. To a large degree, studies of migrants have been single-site projects, primarily at the receiving end, of immigrant communities and their relationship and involvement with the surrounding (dominant) society. Early research examining immigration to the U.S. (typically of Europeans) was often rooted in sociology or political economy and centered on theories of assimilation and acculturation. More recent literature on U.S. immigration continues to be tied to interdisciplinary methodologies: sociology, political economy, public policy

and law (Donato 1994; Durand and Massey 2004; Massey et al. 2002; Massey 1990; Rambaut and Portes 2001; Suárez- Orozco 2004; Wildinger and Bozorgmehr 1996). This work is often produced through collaboration. Many of these works inform immigration policy, yet ignore the everyday practices, emotional discourses, or narratives of loss, absence and uncertainty of migrants and the families they have left behind. This dissertation asks: Who are these multiply positioned subjects and how do they reconcile the impermanence of the spaces they inhabit? What allegiance do they bear to the objects found in the spaces they move between? What makes subjects local, global, national or transnational and how do they in turn forge new desires and practices?

Research suggests that people of Mexican descent constitute the largest and most continuous labor migration in the history of the United States (Rambaut and Portes 2001: 14). Some Mexican communities have experienced more than a century of transnational migration to the United States (Massey et al 2002, Massey 1990). For many Mexican nationals, conception of the labor marketplace is not restricted to a local area inside Mexico, but extends to the United States (and more recently Canada). Due to the long and complex history of Mexican migration to the United States a rich infrastructure of settlement exists, including social circuits that provide access to knowledge about successful migration and communities in the United States that provide support, jobs, and housing to many migrants. As a result, much of the scholarly literature on Mexican migration has focused on the layers of resources and strategies migrants create to live and work within the dominant society (Chavez 1998; Rouse 1989, 1992; Chapter 4). Through the use of social circuits and familial or oral knowledge of resources folks from Empalme Escobedo have established concentrated settlements in the United States. One of the

largest of these settlements is in Grapevine, Texas (located between Dallas and Fort Worth). Migrants from Empalme Escobedo have also settled in Southeast Texas: Giddings, La Grange and Houston.

In May of 2006 public protest in the form of rallies, *marchas*, and parades took place in cities across the United States to demand justice, legal recognition and human rights for the country's 12 million undocumented immigrant workers. Ironically, in Empalme Escobedo in May of 2006, a community, fragmented by migration, celebrated the patron saint of farming and enacted rituals that represent the remaining pieces of an agricultural society, culture, and political economy. While protesters marched in reaction to a U.S. House of Representatives bill that would reclassify "illegal" (undocumented) immigrants as criminal felons and call for the construction of a 700 mile wall along the Mexican-U.S. border, migrants from Empalme Escobedo working in Texas found ways to cross the U.S. border to return to Mexico in order to celebrate their devotion to the patron saint of farmers, San Isidro Labrador.

"Grand narratives of invasion" continue to linger in U.S. popular discourses of Mexican immigration and U.S. immigration policy and reform (Reiker and Ali 2008). The topic of immigration is significant enough to be used against men and women, documented or undocumented, from Mexico, Central America, Latin America, the Middle East, Africa and Asia; but not important enough to withstand conflicting interests or resolution at the federal level. In 2008 the U.S. Senate, House of Representatives, and Bush administration were divided on immigration reform. The Senate passed a bill to "toughen border security" and position most undocumented immigrants on a "path to citizenship." On the contrary, the House passed legislation that presented "no provision

for citizenship.” The U.S. House and Senate did not reconcile their bills before the end of the Bush Administration. Currently, immigration has not been a significant topic in the first one hundred days of the Obama administration. Barack Obama met with the Mexican President Felipe Calderón on January 16, 2009, days before his inauguration as President of the United States. The two leaders discussed security, immigration and the economy. It remains to be seen what will come of President Obama’s January 16 promise “to be ready on Day One to build a stronger relationship with Mexico” (Brice 2009).

The impermanence and fragmentation (“deterritorialization”) of the current historical moment invite speculation on the future of transnational migration. Ethnographic research and the force of devotion provide me the opportunity to detect the sites, discourses, and social practices in which reinscriptions of space (“reterritorializations”) unravel or fail to encapsulate experience (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994:34). In this way the force of devotion challenges notions of the transnational. The voices and practices of migrants expose not only the loss and pain but also the hope and the desire inherent in the process of transnational movement. By focusing on the lived experiences of transnationalism I hope to evoke a reaction that also moves beyond borders and barriers.

EXPRESSIVE CULTURE: POPULAR RELIGION AND FIESTA PERFORMANCE

Performing a transnational spirituality

Scholars of cultural studies explore expressive culture to gain insight into other social constructions and processes such as religion, gender relations, and ethnic or political identities. Performance-centered studies respond to scholars’ interest in leisure, desire and reflexivity.

Within symbolic-interpretive anthropology a loosely termed “performance theory” emerges. Symbolic forms have their primary existence in the action of people and their roots in social and cultural life (Bauman 1986, 1992). The structure of experience is shared. Much of the symbolic-interpretive anthropological literature on cultural performance proposes that cultural symbols and performances take shape in situations of power and dominance. As such, cultural performance can be understood as folk’s expressions or representations of their own experiences. Richard Flores (1995:7) expresses the significance of cultural performance research in his statement:

If it is true that cultural performances are cut from the same social cloth of everyday practice, then in theory, one should be able to “locate” the dialectical interplay between the performance . . . and those practices grounded in political and social life.

I seek to explore migration as a social and emotional process and a process of becoming. Migration as a process of becoming involves not a fixed position of location but positionality and locations. Expressive culture provides a space in which the consciousness of communal boundaries is heightened, thereby confirming and strengthening individual location and positionality. Similarly, cultural performance is an important means of experiencing the self as communal self. The affective performances of devotion for San Isidro Labrador, Maria Auxiliadora, and the Santa Cruz de Picacho occupy a prominent place in the social and emotional practices of its participants, through which they affirm, reinforce or expand their communal boundaries (Turner 1969). Expressive culture gains additional prominence when the actual social boundaries of the community are being undermined, blurred or weakened. The practices of migration blur the boundaries of the self, the family and the nation.

Researchers have recognized in both historical and contemporary societies the ability of festive forms to legitimate rule or revolution, to shift the ways in which histories are told, to renegotiate issues of race and ethnicity, and to produce new social imaginaries. Much of the early scholarship conceptualizes festival as the uniform expression of a collective consciousness, often describing the festival experience as "chaos," "symbolic inversion," "anti-structure," or "times out from daily life" (Babcock 1978; Durkheim 1965; Geertz 1973; Turner 1969, 1982). Often missing from these early analyses are a sense of history, space and place and an understanding of the social or political processes that motivate individuals to participate in the festive performance.

Prior research involving fiesta performance in Mexico focuses primarily on the civil-religious cargo system (Smith 1977), ritual humor and symbolic reversals in the fiesta context (Bricker 1973) and fiesta as a way to promote order and social control (Beezley et al 1994; Brandes 1988). The current scholarship focuses on the festival performance as a site for constructing and performing identities, preserving indigenous or religious practices and beliefs, and creating new social-political power structures (Correa 2001; García Canclini 1995; Najera-Ramirez 1997). My ethnographic project aims to fill in the gaps in Mexican fiesta research and to uncover the significance of fiesta performance in the Empalme Escobedo transnational community.

Expressive culture reimagines and reinvents the collective historical memory and subjectivity of the Empalme Escobedo community. Public altars, chapels and sites of miracles, tragedies, prayers or offerings convey and circulate histories often absent in ordinary discourse. These sites or altars and the offerings left behind create an intimacy with faith and doubt, absence and presence, memory and history. I focus not only on the

fiestas for patron saints, virgin mothers and sacred crosses and these sacred objects of devotion, but also on the emotion and intimacy embedded in performances of devotion, the ways in which they create sociability and solidarity, and the meanings of transnational spirituality. This dissertation directs attention to the perspective that popular religious beliefs and practices are never totalized and that the space of performance is always a contested domain.

ANTHROPOLOGY OF EMOTION, MEMORY AND AFFECT

Impermanence and Fragmentation

A particular body of scholarly literature on memory enables me to understand the dynamic relationship between individual practices of remembering and collective representations of the past and present. Marita Sturken (1997:259) refers to memory as “an inventive social practice.” Accordingly, she states:

If memory is redefined as a social and individual practice that integrates elements of remembrance, fantasy, and invention, then it can shift from the problematic role of standing for the truth to a new role as an active engaging practice of creating meaning. [Sturken 1997:259]

Memory, emotion and narrative are primary elements in the reconstruction of the personal past and meaning-making in the present. Following Richard Flores, memory does not serve as a reproduction of the past, but as an active process of remembering—a connection of the traditional past with the present social concerns through the mode of performance (Flores 1995:112). Performing devotion to the saint is an act of remembering. Memories of the cultural performances (fiestas) for patron saints, virgin mothers and sacred crosses and the emotional narratives in which they are embedded play

a dual role: they serve to authenticate a past and ameliorate the present. Their authenticating function lies in the popular religious practices of migrants themselves (Flores 1995). Emotion and memory influence the processes of constructing, telling, receiving and deriving meaning from narratives.

In anthropology, emotions are generally understood to be culturally learned, and hence inseparable from context (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990; Lutz 1988; Rosaldo 1980). Ethnographic fieldwork indicates that sites of emotion, memory and affect transcend space and time and challenge boundaries between private and public spheres, subjective and objective (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990; Behar 1996). For example, Catherine A. Lutz's ethnographic research among the Ifaluk seeks to exemplify the ways in which emotional meaning is "fundamentally structured by particular cultural systems and particular social and material environments" (Lutz 1988: 5). She argues, "emotional experience is not precultural but *preeminently* cultural" (Lutz 1988: 5, emphasis added). The cultural constructionist explanation has been criticized and revised in certain anthropological literature (Csordas 1990; Leach 1981; Leavitt 1996; Milton 2005; Whitehouse 2005). Alternative foci in an anthropological theory of emotions broadly include the body (embodiment), emotional intersubjectivity (in fieldwork), memory, ritual performance, and ecology (Ahmed 2004; Behar 1993; Bourdieu 1977; Csordas 1994; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Terada 2001).

Within the ethnographic research on performance the links to affect are numerous and complex. Likewise, a multiplicity of social, cultural, linguistic, and psychological meanings of affect exist in scholarly and popular literature. Affect is the force of things. Affects are physiological sensations created by "emotion—a psychological, at least

minimally an interpretive experience” (Terada 2001:4). Niko Besnier understands affect to be the “subjective states that observers ascribe to a person on the basis of the person’s conduct” (Besnier 1990:181). According to Edward Schieffelin (1983:181), in its cultural (rather than psychological) dimension “the experience, justification, and meaning of affect are not separable from either the role affect plays in the expressive order of interaction, or from the implications of the cultural scenarios in which it participates.” Nigel Thrift defines affect “through an approach that works with broad tendencies and lines of force: emotion as motion both literally and figurally” (Thrift 2004:59). As Besnier (1990:181) suggests, “adopting a broad (but malleable) definition of affect” is a “wise empirical stance.” I am using affect most generally in this project to explore the ways in which people and things fit together in particular ways over a certain time. The notion of affect illuminates my understanding of the multiple connections between movement and feeling/sensation.

Reading Lila Abu-Lughod and Catherine A. Lutz (1990) I explore emotion and affect by examining emotional discourses and affective performances as social practices within an ethnographic context. Ethnographic fieldwork theorizes the relationship between self and society as dialectical, a relationship that is maintained through situation specific practices and representations. Taking this view, emotional acts are simultaneously bodily movements, symbolic vehicles that reproduce and affect social relations, and practices that reveal the effects of power (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990:12). Building on this approach to emotion, Judith Butler (1990) constructs a notion of “performativity” that embodies the interplay between collective identity, cultural values for emotional display and concealment, and the disciplining historical structures that

establish and restrict the possibilities of social action. It is important to consider the close involvement of affective performance with issues of sociability and power: the “politics of everyday life.” Through ethnography it is possible to explore the multiple ways “emotion gets its meaning and force from its location and performance in the public realm of discourse” (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990: 7). Relating individual experience to an affective performance of devotion reaffirms that the ordinary of everyday life makes sense with an overarching framework of meaning. In Empalme Escobedo, the force of devotion is transformative as it circulates in public space. Through affective performance, men and women in this transnational community are bringing the self into intimate proximity with the force of devotion.

In this dissertation, I follow the general anthropological model that emotions be regarded as social and cultural practices. I seek to locate emotion in the performance of devotion. Emotion and the relationship between expressions and emotions are exemplified in the domain of aesthetics and performance (Appadurai 1990: 105). Ritual performance has the ability to affect and can create “sentimental bonds.” Sentimental communal bonds are a component of the politics of everyday life (Appadurai 1990: 110). Following Sara Ahmed (2004), I explore the ways in which the circulation of objects (specifically objects of devotion) illuminates the “sociality” of emotions. I examine the “emotionality of texts” (specifically prayers, sermons, and devotionals) by considering how texts perform or name emotions (Ahmed 2004: 13). I also consider the social and cultural construction of women’s emotions.

FIELDWORK

I came to understand poverty through Jesusa, real poverty, where water is collected in buckets and carried very carefully so it doesn't spill, where the washing is done on a metal washboard because there is no sink, where a neighbor will tap into another's electric line, where the hens lay eggs without shells, "just membrane," because a lack of sun keeps them from hardening. Jesusa was one of the millions of men and women who don't live so much as they survive. Just getting through the day is so much work, the hours and the energy lost makes life so difficult for poor people. Survival means staying afloat, breathing calmly, even if it's only for a moment in the evening when the chickens no longer cackle in their cages and the cat stretches out on the trampled earth. [Poniatowska 2001: xiii]

My husband, cat and I arrived in Mexico on May 1, 2005 after leaving our home and families in Texas. We had arranged for a place to stay in San Miguel de Allende for a few weeks while we searched for a place to live in Empalme Escobedo. Empalme Escobedo is forty-five minutes to an hour away from San Miguel by third class bus. The actual distance is closer (40 kilometers), but the bus stops every few minutes to pick up passengers along the road—making the trip longer. After several weeks of traveling daily to Empalme Escobedo from San Miguel to conduct research and search for a place to live, I found a suitable house for rent in Empalme Escobedo. Ironically, the house was for rent because the owner and his family moved temporarily—as migrant laborers—to Grapevine, Texas. The house and rent did not include a stove, refrigerator, gas or water

tanks, furniture etc., thus it took us another month to purchase the essentials and get settled in the house.

People (non-anthropologists) always ask me what my husband and I did all day while living in rural Mexico for nineteen months. I explain (but no one really understands) that we had plenty to do in order to exist: to eat, to drink, to bathe, to stay healthy. If we wanted running water, we began the time consuming process by filling buckets with water from a city faucet (which took time because the water flowed slowly and often stopped). Next we emptied the buckets of water into a *pila* – a cement structure to hold water (it is located outside and is not covered thus anything and everything falls into the collected water; it also attracts mosquitoes). Once the *pila* is full (30 or 40 buckets) a small electric pump is activated (which frequently did not work and we had to try a million tricks to get it started, including pouring water on it—an unsafe maneuver). The pump propels the water through a hose into a plastic storage container on the roof. The elevated location of the storage container provides the water with the necessary force to flow through our pipes and out of our two sinks, shower and toilet.

The first couple of months we rented the house, water from the municipality ran out of a faucet connected to our *pila*, making it easier to fill it. Next to the *pila* and created out of the same cement is a space for washing clothes—a cement washboard and place to collect water. A functioning faucet made doing the laundry slightly less complicated.¹¹

¹¹ Washing and drying the laundry was a difficult task. The clothing, sheets and towels (the latter being the most difficult, with the exception of jeans) were first soaked in a bucket of soapy water and then washed by scrubbing the item against a cement washboard. Following the scrubbing, the soapy and usually dusty item had to be rinsed – in another bucket of water. Now the wet clothes were hung to dry on a wire strung across our patio that received intermittent sun and constant dust. I quickly decided washing the laundry was a task I did not like, nor one I had time to accomplish. My husband however became very good at doing the laundry. Because I felt we did not have the time or energy (my husband disagreed) to do all the laundry we produced, as well as the potential calamity (and consequent explanation) were our neighbors and friends to discover that a male did the laundry, I located a laundromat in Celaya (twenty minutes away by bus). The

The house had three faucets connected to Empalme Escobedo's potable water supply: one in the front of the house, one in the patio and one at the *pila*. After living in Empalme Escobedo for four or five months and paying the water bill regularly, our water supply in both the *pila* faucet and patio faucet dwindled and eventually went dry. Neither the neighbors nor the representatives in the municipal office had any explanation for our loss of water. I was told that water was in short supply in Empalme Escobedo and our neighborhood was not a priority. I did receive a discount on the monthly water bill, but only by going to the office each month and pointing out that we did not have consistent running water. Despite my monthly visits to the municipal office, no one ever came by to investigate the problem or to fix it. As my landlord said time after time: "Así, es la vida en un pueblito" [Such is the life in a small town].

Electricity was also sporadic. Most of the electricity in Mexico, particularly in rural areas, is delivered by overhead cables. The deterioration of the existing infrastructure in combination with the increasing demand for electricity causes Mexico's power grid to experience numerous outages. Outages last for seconds, hours or days. Fluctuation of voltage is also frequent. Old and failing transformers (typically fastened to lamp posts) are the principal cause of localized power outages. Despite these issues, we received our electric bill without delay every two months. The CFE (*Comision Federal de Electricidad*) is always efficient at sending technicians to your house to cut off your electricity if you are late in payment (an inconvenience we experienced twice). Like the water bill, payment is made in person at the local CFE office.

embarrassment of carrying our laundry through the streets of Empalme Escobedo to the Celaya bus stop was enough to make me agree with my husband and learn to do the laundry by hand. A compromise was reached: we would do the bulk of the laundry and the more difficult items were partially concealed in market bags on trips to Celaya.

My husband and I walked each day to the market to buy fruits, vegetables and meat and the inevitable tool, kitchen utensil, or hardware necessary to fix what was broken or make work what we had. Our drinking water was supplied a couple of times a month by *Agua Santorini*, a product bottled in Mexico and owned by PepsiCo. The 20 liter plastic bottles of purified water are distributed on trucks by a traveling salesman who will slow down and yell “Agua Santorini” on each block, only waiting a few minutes for customers to run out of their homes, return their old bottles and purchase a new one. Gas is distributed in a similar fashion. Every other month it was necessary for us to replace our gas tank. The portable gas tank connected to and supplied gas to our stove and hot water heater. A gas truck maneuvered by a couple of salesmen speeds up and down the streets signaling its presence and product with an incredibly loud recording of its slogan, squeaky breaks, and the occasional honk of the horn. On numerous occasions I was forced to chase down both the water and gas trucks.

Empalme Escobedo does not have a bank, nor ATM machine, a hospital, police force, restaurant, laundromat, or what North Americans would consider a grocery store. Most folks, including myself, travel to other towns or cities to conduct business, to shop, or for leisure. Not having a car and traveling by bus made it difficult to conceal our purchases, our overnight or extended travel, or our destination. In order to get to and from the bus stop we had to walk four blocks to the center of town, past the market, through the *jardín* (central plaza) and across the railroad tracks. Based on our attire and what we were carrying—purchases, laundry or luggage—it was obvious where we were going or coming from and what we were participating in. It did not take us long to realize that our lives were intertwined with everyone else’s in Empalme Escobedo.

METHODOLOGY

A face is a field that accepts some expressions and connections and neutralizes others. It is a screen and a framework. To be confronted with a face is to envision a certain range of things that could be expressed on it and to have available a certain range of things one could address to it. One sees what one might say, what one should not have said. [Lingis 2000:43]

Often times I catch Fabiola staring at me. Her gaze reflects her worries about the United States. She looks at me as I share a beer (something she never does) with her husband, his parents, brothers and sisters on a warm evening. We sit on rudimentary chairs in the street, talking and swiping at mosquitoes and flies, and Fabiola wonders if I am like the *norteamericanas* her husband encounters in Houston, Texas. I sense her concerns and questions about my husband and me living in Empalme Escobedo. Why do we want to live there? Why did we decide upon her in-laws to constantly socialize with, ask questions of, and learn from? She is curious why her mother-in-law, Alicia, talks so freely and openly to me about the details of her life.

Lorenzo, her husband, lives half of the year in Empalme Escobedo and the other half in Houston, Texas. For ten to twelve years he has been migrating to Houston for work. Fabiola and Lorenzo have three children: two boys and one girl. Their sons are training to be soccer players. The family spends more time, energy and money on training and perfecting their sons' soccer game than on their education. The fantasy is the boys will make a professional soccer team and travel around the country, allowing them to leave Empalme Escobedo and make money for their family. Their oldest son, Lorenzo Jr., is athletic and a possibility exists for him to forge a career as a professional soccer

player. Yet, more than likely, he will join his father in Houston to build scaffolding for a company that also employs his uncles, cousins and neighbors.

Fabiola wants me to teach her boys English and occasionally I sense that she wants me to teach her to speak English. Her expressions reveal her desire to know more about the United States and her simultaneous fear and repulsion of North American people and things. Some days when Alicia and I are talking, Fabiola sits and listens: revealing her thoughts and feelings solely through her facial expressions and silence.

Fabiola has no way of knowing (other than her imagination based on Lorenzo's stories and U.S. television programs and movies) what life is like for her husband, brothers-in-law, and neighbors in the United States. Consequently, I see her playing out her imaginations on me. When she sees me all of her questions and curiosities are stirred up. It is then that she gets the look on her face—the one I instantly recognize and makes me feel uneasy. Of course she wonders what Lorenzo does in the United States. I wonder too.

My primary goal in writing the dissertation is to accurately translate and centrally locate the voices of the consultants with whom I am collaborating in this research project. I have changed the names of actual individuals in the Empalme Escobedo transnational community to protect their privacy. As “translator” I work with narrative and memory to lead readers into the lives of fiesta participants who tell stories about the force of devotion, migration, absence and hope. Spanish is the primary language spoken in Empalme Escobedo. I conducted interviews in Spanish and I translate these interviews, conversations, church pamphlets, stories and other archival data from Spanish to English. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. Also, as “translator” I place in a

social context the religious language of consultants in an attempt to extract that which is meaningful and important to the discipline of anthropology.

Interaction with community members was primarily shaped by my gender, marital status and identity as a *norteamericana*. I was aware of the transparency of the differences and similarities between and among folks in Empalme Escobedo and myself. Due to my positionality I developed stronger working relationships with women. Therefore, the project privileges the voices of women. However, in working closely with three families and through the constant presence of my husband I created good relationships with a number of men and our collaboration was possible.

To collect the data I employed ethnographic methods of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and the collection of life histories. These methods allowed me to capture the detailed complexity in narratives of devotion and the concrete processes of change in daily life. I kept extensive field notes on my observations, conversations, and interviews which served as both data and analysis. I used my positionality (outsider, Anglo-American, female, researcher) to constantly analyze my participation in activities, collection of life histories, and interpretation of data. Hence, I relied on analysis in the field as a method of refining and improving data collection.

Participant observation was essential in acquiring intimate knowledge of folks' desires, struggles, fears and hopes. It was during activities such as making tortillas, gardening, chopping vegetables, sorting beans, preparing *mole*, or gossiping and drinking a *caguama* (40 ounce beer) in the kitchen that women shared their feelings about religion and migration and memories of parents, husbands, children and community. The ordinary activities of everyday life in rural Mexico such as sweeping away layers of dust, traveling

in a crowded third class bus, frequenting the market, or waiting to make a call in a *caseta telefónica* deepened my understanding of daily struggles and practices. Women invited me to participate in social and religious functions: birthday parties, baptisms, weddings, confirmations, *quinceañeras* (a special birthday celebration when a girl turns 15), home devotionals and pilgrimages. Transnational connections were revealed to me when folks asked me to call, visit or carry objects and messages to sons, daughters, cousins or friends in Texas.

In this dissertation project I have followed George Marcus's notion that multi-sited ethnography puts fieldwork before theory. Marcus (1998:81) explains, "Strategies of quite literally following connections, associations, and putative relationships are ... at the very heart of designing multi-sited ethnographic research." He argues that multi-sited research benefits ethnographers working in "diverse places linked by global flows of people, ideas, commodities, capital and images" (Marcus 1998:81). Working in Empalme Escobedo for nineteen months and on and off in sites in Texas for six months, I discovered the benefits and challenges of multi-sited research.

For me personally and intellectually, the men and women of the Empalme Escobedo transnational community are a significant ingredient in my life, the life of my husband, and will be of my expectant child. Coming to know Empalme Escobedo over ten years has also necessitated a "multi-sited research imaginary," that is, leaving the community—physically and emotionally (Marcus 1998:3).

ORIENTATION OF ARGUMENT

This dissertation explores the role of popular religion in a transnational community by examining the performance of devotion to local patron saints, virgin mothers and sacred crosses. The object of study is not only the fiesta performances themselves, but also the emotions of its participants and the force of their devotion.

I use the theories of transnationalism, expressive culture, and the anthropologies of affect, memory and emotion to elucidate my thesis that the force of devotion both represents and gives expression to the desire for solidarity (experienced through fiesta performance) and the dissolution of the community by migration (experienced as absence and fragmentation). The force of devotion is the key analytic frame through which I interpret the articulations of transnational spirituality and popular religion, impermanence and fragmentation, absence and hope. Each chapter is positioned around devotion to a patron saint, virgin mother or sacred cross in Empalme Escobedo.

Chapter One explores place, history, and change in the Bajío region of Mexico. This historical and geographic overview situates Empalme Escobedo within the context of Mexico's modernization movement, the Bajío's agricultural production, Guanajuato's roots in the Mexican Revolution and Cristero Rebellion, and location as one of the country's richest yet also state that sends the largest number of migrants to the United States. The theoretical orientation and methodology of the dissertation project are introduced.

In Chapter Two I unpack the force of devotion. I employ devotion to the Santa Cruz de Picacho to expose the roots of popular religious beliefs and practices in Empalme Escobedo. The popular religious beliefs and practices of this transnational community do not easily fit within regional discourses. As such, I set up the problem of how to think about and discuss popular religion in a community with a history of mobility and a relatively new Church presence. This chapter engages with local stories of devotion, academic literatures on popular religion and spirituality, and regional histories of indigenous populations, the spiritual conquest and Spanish colonialism, and the Cristero Rebellion. Through conversations with scholarly narratives and ordinary voices I construct my understanding of popular religion and spirituality in Empalme Escobedo: the force of devotion.

Chapter Three traces Empalme Escobedo's origins as a railroad crossing and its consequent location within Mexico's modernization movement through devotion to the Virgin Maria Auxiliadora. I examine the mobility brought to Empalme Escobedo by the railroad. Figuratively, the train offers a means for analyzing the mobility of folks in Empalme Escobedo. I consider the intimacy of and emotion embedded in public and private performances of devotion to Maria Auxiliadora, the patron saint of Empalme Escobedo and its railroad laborers. The narratives and performances of devotion to Maria Auxiliadora open a space to track the flows of transnationalism and modernity through the lived experiences and transformations of people and objects.

In Chapter Four, I examine the histories and meanings of transnational migration. In this exploration I track the roles of the Catholic Church at the local level in everyday rural life and at the global level in international immigration reform. I also engage

discourses of agrarian reform, the *hacienda* and *ejido* systems, NAFTA, and U.S. immigration policies. I set up and attempt to understand migration in Empalme Escobedo.

Chapter Five sets into motion my principal thesis that affective performances of devotion give voice to the tension between the desire for solidarity (experienced through fiesta participation) and the fragmentation of the community by migration (experienced as absence and dissolution). I focus on the force of devotion as a performative and discursive social experience that shapes public emotions, memories and narratives. “Thick description” is employed to locate the theater of the force of devotion: in the fiesta to celebrate San Isidro Labrador. Descriptions of the fiesta performances articulate the emotional intensity involved in the force of devotion. Voices of a transnational community take center stage in the chapter.

In Chapter Six I conclude the dissertation by reflecting on my own experiences of crossing the Mexican-U.S. border and the affect of public discourses of migration and belonging. I return to the force of devotion and question its staying power and future roles in a rapidly changing, uncertain transnational community. I reiterate the significance in understanding the lived realities of migrants within the processes of modernity and transnationalism.

CHAPTER TWO: THE FORCE OF DEVOTION

How naturally we entify and give life to such. Take the case of God, the economy, and the state, abstract entities we credit with Being, species of things awesome with life-force of their own, transcendent over mere mortals. [Taussig 1997:3]

It is mid-morning and I am walking from my home in Empalme Escobedo to the center of town to buy groceries. Already the sun is blazing. The numerous flies buzzing in my ears and eyes and brushing up against my bare sweaty arms annoy me more than usual.

Rather than the ordinary dull silence pierced by the occasional whistle of the train, bike horn, and howling dogs I hear fireworks, music, and the raised voices of a crowd. I decide to skip the groceries and move towards the *parroquia* (parish church). Here I encounter at least sixty men –young and old– on bicycles. The majority of men are dressed like professional cyclists: wearing bike shorts and spandex tops, accessorized with helmets and fanny packs, yet contrasted with regular tennis shoes. This is not normal attire for men in Empalme Escobedo.

I see someone I know and ask what is going on. A group of men from Empalme Escobedo are joining other men from the surrounding towns in the municipality of Comonfort to ride their bikes to the Basilica of Guadalupe in Tepeyac. The men will ride their bikes 650 kilometers (roundtrip) to demonstrate their devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe. I am tremendously impressed.

I look the men over and wonder what the trip will be like: despite their bicycle paraphernalia, most do not appear physically “fit” and I doubt they have been “training.” I am curious what they will eat and drink, if they will take breaks, and where they will sleep. A large van is being stuffed with water and food, bags and sleeping equipment and I realize someone will be following them and “managing” the ride.

The crowd around me is getting larger and I chat with friends and neighbors. In front of the *parroquia*, the organizers and someone who looks like a Church authority (but is not the parish priest) stand in the bed of a truck and talk into a megaphone. Everyone starts chanting “¡Viva La Virgen de Guadalupe! ¡Viva Empalme Escobedo!” The crowd is alive. Men and women are passionately showing their support for these men, their community, and their devotion to the Virgin Mary.

I feel charged by the overwhelming force of devotion. Something has come over me. Tears build in my eyes. I can see, hear and feel the force of devotion—the pull that is motivating these ordinary men to ride their bikes to Tepeyac, the attraction of the community to their commitment, the surge of the crowd as the men depart on their bikes.

I can’t let them go. I hurriedly follow them as they cross the railroad tracks out of town, and stand there too long when they are gone. I understand what I am here to research in Empalme Escobedo. This is more than popular religion, this is bigger than community, this is outside of me—this is the force of devotion.

In this chapter I set up the problem of how to think about and discuss popular religion in a community with a history of mobility and a relatively new Church presence. I question how one comes to know oneself and one’s community through patron saints, virgin mothers and sacred crosses. How is popular religion grounded and expressed in

this transnational community? I seek to understand how a transnational community utilizes the force of devotion to provide the moorings for their meanings and understandings of self and community.

I am drawing on the term force as discussed by Renato Rosaldo. His employment of the term stresses the concept of the positioned subject. Rosaldo writes, “The concept of force calls attention to an enduring intensity in human conduct that can occur with or without the dense elaboration conventionally associated with cultural depth. ...The notion of force involves both affective intensity and significant consequences that unfold over a long period of time” (Rosaldo 1993:20). I use force to get at the intense expressivity and emotional immediacy at the heart of folk’s spirituality and to explain its centrality in their lives.

Empalme Escobedo, founded in 1903, is a *mestizo*, transnational and primarily Catholic community. In 1947 the first stone was laid in the construction of a Catholic Church. The *parroquia* (parish church) of Maria Auxiliadora in Empalme Escobedo was considered a work in progress until its state of completion in December of 2007. This is significant. The first Catholic priest arrived in Empalme Escobedo in 1951. Empalme Escobedo, unlike other towns and cities surrounding it, did not and does not have an indigenous Otomí or Chichimec population. However, as a part of the Bajío region it shares some of the indigenous and colonial histories of its municipality of Comonfort and the nearby Allende and Celaya municipalities.

Due to its unique histories and location in space and time, it is difficult to place Empalme Escobedo and the popular beliefs and practices of its transnational population within either an indigenous or Catholic “tradition.” I engage the problem set up in this

chapter by discussing the complexities, ambiguities and inconsistencies of a particular community's popular religious beliefs and practices as well as Catholic religious traditions and their meanings in general. Through stories and practices of devotion to the Santa Cruz de Picacho (Sacred Cross of Picacho) I uncover the ambivalence inherent in popular religion and its expression in Empalme Escobedo. I explore the persistent defense of local belief and practice in the ongoing negotiation between the Catholic Church, specifically the parish priest Sr. Cura Fernando Olivera, and the spiritual community of Empalme Escobedo over ritual performance.¹²

Based on participant observation and discussions with folks in this transnational community over ten years I have discovered that what I am witnessing and translating is both Catholicism and popular religion, and also represents a transnational spirituality. As folks in Empalme Escobedo say, "Nosotros somos una comunidad muy catolica." "Nuestra fe mueve montañas y fronteras" [We are a faithful Catholic community. Our faith moves mountains and borders]. It is this popular *dicho* (saying), "La fe mueve montañas y fronteras" [Faith moves mountains and borders] that resonates most deeply with my experiences in Empalme Escobedo and informs my understanding of and decision to call the work of Catholicism, popular religion and transnational spirituality the force of devotion.

Men and women explain to me that they do not need to attend Mass regularly or impress the Church authorities with their faithfulness. Rather, making promises to and asking favors of the saints at home, praying to God in their bedroom or kitchen, celebrating and sharing with the community, carrying Maria Auxiliadora in a procession,

¹² It was not possible for me to secure a formal interview with the priest. Therefore my knowledge of his

performing for San Isidro Labrador, decorating the Santa Cruz de Picacho with flowers, taking toys to the Niño Santo de las Maravillas, or making the sign of the cross are some of the ways in which folks in Empalme Escobedo survive daily life, deflect pain and remember the absent.

The force of devotion transcends space and time and is what keeps many people going. As expressed in Empalme Escobedo through fiesta celebrations, pilgrimages, public performances of faith, and everyday life the force of devotion blurs the distinctions between the sacred and the secular, the spiritual and the material, the private and the public. The force of devotion can be found everywhere in the spaces and actions of the everyday. Simultaneously spirituality exists in everyday lives.

The force of devotion is knowing oneself through Catholicism, popular religion and spirituality. Because popular religion in Empalme Escobedo is both practical work and symbolic work, both social and religious, it is also, at times, deeply ambivalent. Not only do folks in Empalme Escobedo express ambivalence about religion but also about hardship and pleasure, authority and autonomy, Mexico and the United States, belonging and alienation. These ambivalences are rooted in the historical, social and political forces working in Empalme Escobedo.

The work of popular religion raises certain difficult questions about the nature of physical existence (both humans and otherwise). Is the physical environment simply “natural” or is it also an embodiment or an expression of something miraculous, something else: the God behind nature, the divine in nature or the inherent spirituality of natural processes (Gould 2005:104)? Are we a part of nature or somehow separate from

practices is based on personal observation and local discourse within his parish.

it? What makes us a part of a community? Does life continue after death? The task of meaning-making circulates through these questions about nature, community and the relation of the self to both. As M. Alexander (2005: 327) writes, “The knowledge derived from faith and belief systems is not uninformed epiphenomena, lapses outside the bounds of rationality to be properly corrected with rationality, but rather knowledge about Sacred accompaniment, knowledge that is applied and lived in as consistent and as committed a way as possible so as to feel and observe the meaning of mystery, not as secret, but as elusive—hence the constancy of work.” In Empalme Escobedo, spiritual labor is understood as an alternative way of living and as a gift to be celebrated.

Marisol, a sixty-four-year-old woman, my primary consultant and *comadre*, responds to practically every question ranging from her future to if and what time we can meet tomorrow with “si Dios quiere” [God willing/if God desires]. Marisol often theorizes life and ruminates about God and his gifts to all of us. She is very convincing: her tone is serious, devout and honest. She speaks calmly and persuasively of “los regalos de Dios” [the gifts of God], his power over us, and his miraculous ability to change our lives. She speaks of our parents being made to raise us and give us a good life, of our families’ and friends’ impacts on our lives, and the beauty of nature and of humans. Marisol prays everyday for her family and for her health. She explains that anytime you are down, it helps to talk to God. She tells me: “Yo entro mi recámara, en soldedad, y doy gracias a Dios. Doy gracias a Dios por todo lo que tengo y pido a Dios por lo que necesito . . . o yo hablo con Dios. A veces leo la Biblia o un boletín de la iglesia . . . pero no puedo leer bien y por eso escucho a los discos religiosos” [I enter my bedroom, in solitude, and thank God. I thank God for all that I have and ask God for what I need . . . or

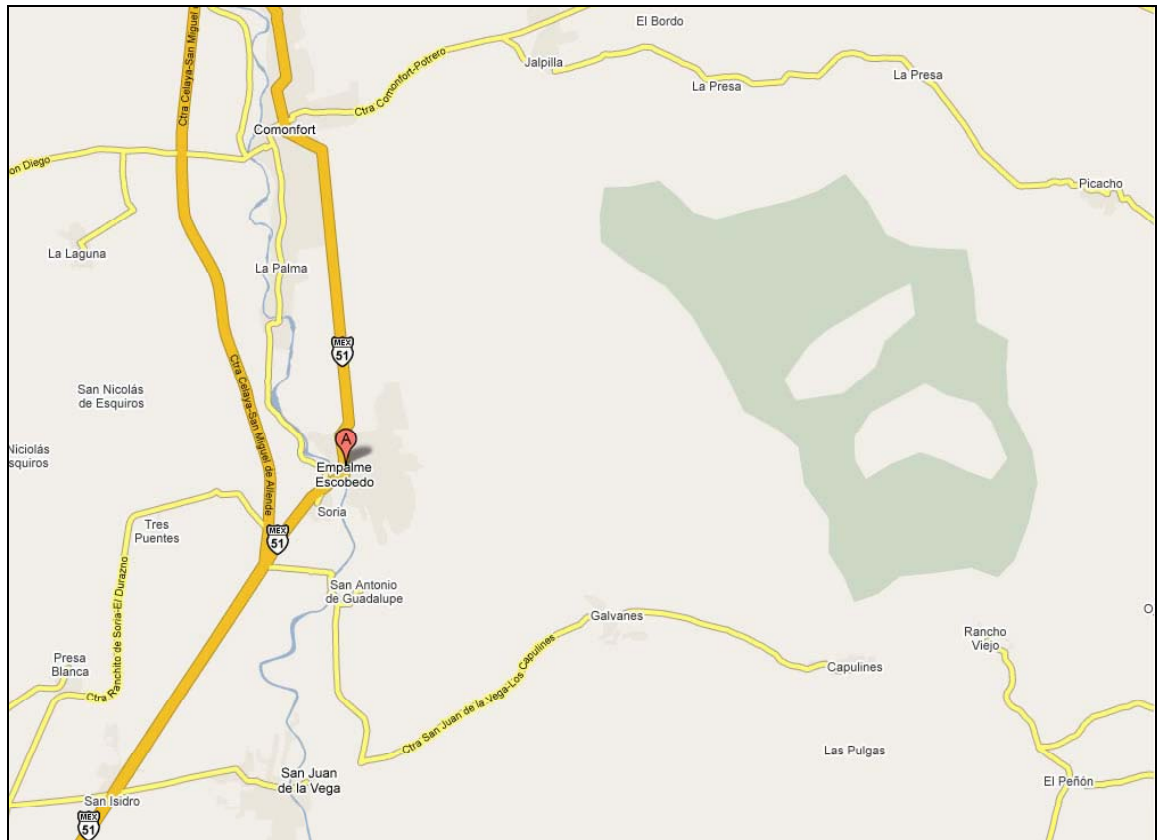
I simply talk to God. I sometimes read from the Bible or a church pamphlet ... but I don't read well so I listen to devotionals on C.D.]. Marisol talks about how “la fe gobierna la vida” [Faith rules life]. She explains: “¿Si no tienes la fe en Dios cómo te puedes terminar cada tarea diaria? A Dios tú necesitas que le guíe a través de cada evento en la vida—grande o pequeño” [If you do not have faith in God how can you complete each daily task. You need God to guide you through each event in life: big or small]. Marisol declares, “Dios es mi copiloto” [God is my co-pilot].

Faith, *la fe*, is talked about in Empalme Escobedo on a daily basis. Consultants frequently discuss the power of faith as represented in the *dicho*, “La fe mueve montañas y fronteras” [Faith moves mountains and borders]. Women tell me: “La fe es una fuerza poderosa . . . un momento de oración colocarse en el centro . . . darse energías a seguir el rastro, a vivir la vida al máximo . . . porque hoy puede ser su último día...” [Faith is a powerful force . . . a moment of prayer centers you . . . and energizes you to get back on track, to live life to the fullest . . . because today might be your last . . .].

To leave a family and a community in Mexico to search for work in the United States is “un salto de fe” [a leap of faith]. Susana, a young woman, explains: “Un viaje a los Estados Unidos nos traerá el dinero . . . Mi esposo trabajará con sus hermanos por algunos meses y podrá volver en tiempo por la fiesta para demostrar su devoción al santo.” [One trip to the United States will help get our money back in order . . . my husband will work with his brothers for a few months and return for the fiesta to demonstrate his devotion to the patron saint]. Yet, some men do not return. Hope of the return to Mexico lingers in women's and men's thoughts and actions. Hope kept alive through faith: faith in God, in a patron saint, the Virgin Mary, the Sacred Cross, prayer,

family and community. Susan Harding (2000:85) writes, “A miraculous gap or excess fails to meet worldly expectations in a way that opens up a space for supernatural action.” Following Harding, I listen to the stories of folks in Empalme Escobedo productively, not literally. As such, I attempt to locate the storied gaps—the excesses and silences that capture attention, induce interpretive action and weave semiotic webs around a transnational community (Harding 2000:98).

Figure 2: Map locating Empalme Escobedo and Picacho



“LA FE MUEVE MONTAÑAS Y FRONTERAS”

Daily life in Empalme Escobedo is interspersed with popular religious celebrations. By participating in home devotionals and public fiesta celebrations and interviewing community members on a daily basis I realized the extent and intensity of popular religious beliefs and practices. Folks in Empalme Escobedo and the surrounding towns, cities and *ranchos* are continuously engaged in a cycle of patron saint fiestas, Masses, processions and pilgrimages that mark the Catholic calendar.¹³ In Empalme Escobedo this devotion involves a large number of processions centered on the network of churches, chapels, and caretakers (*cargueros*) that makes up the municipality of Comonfort. Each town and *ranchito* in the municipality has designated patron saints and these sacred images travel from place to place. The processions of sacred objects affirm community identity and convey interconnection and interdependency of communities. Empalme Escobedo identifies itself in terms of its six patronal chapels, agricultural lands, railroad station and tracks, and procession and pilgrimage routes.

In May, fiestas related to the agricultural cycle and local patron saints are celebrated throughout the Bajío region. May 3, the Catholic Day of the Sacred Cross, begins a cycle of celebrations for crosses in homes, in chapels and at roadside shrines throughout the month in Empalme Escobedo and surrounding rural and urban

¹³ In Mexico, a predominantly Catholic country, saints are often the patrons of neighborhoods, towns, cities and regions and advocates of social causes or collectivities. Many communities are named after their patron saint and individuals are christened with the names of saints. At least four saints exist for each day of the year and thus time is often structured by the Catholic saints calendar and the relevant celebrations throughout the year.

communities. On the first Sunday in May the Santa Cruz de Picacho (Sacred Cross of Picacho) arrives in Empalme Escobedo from the mountain village of Picacho where it spends three months traveling from home to home.¹⁴ It is returned in a pilgrimage to Picacho on the first Sunday in August. Each May 15, a farming neighborhood in Empalme Escobedo sponsors a fiesta to honor San Isidro Labrador (the patron saint of farming) featuring a Catholic Mass, procession, ritual plowing of the field in invocation of fertility, and dancing performed by men costumed as lewd women.¹⁵ One week later, on May 24, the *parroquia* and railroad laborers host a fiesta for the patron saint of Empalme Escobedo and the railroad, Maria Auxiliadora. The fiesta is on a larger scale and features a carnival, a traveling *tianguis* (market with vendors from across the country), dance and vocal performances, Catholic masses, weddings, baptisms and confirmations, and a grand procession of the Virgin Mary through the streets of Empalme Escobedo. Following the celebrations many of the male participants in the fiestas return to Texas to work in agriculture or the service industry. Consequently, devotion to the saint(s) travels with migrants back and forth across the Mexican—U.S. border.

Just like the force of devotion, popular religion is an integral and dynamic component of everyday life in Empalme Escobedo. The practice of popular religion often takes place in the home or on the streets as opposed to within a church. Popular religious rituals are performed in home devotionals, community fiestas, processions and pilgrimages. Popular religion can be understood as “lived”: the embodied beliefs and

¹⁴ Picacho is a small mountainous town in the municipality of Comonfort. See map. The communities of Empalme Escobedo and Picacho have maintained a friendly (spiritual) relationship for over forty years based on their devotion to the Santa Cruz de Picacho.

¹⁵ Fiestas for the saints are preceded by a novena- the recitation of prayers for nine consecutive days to achieve a particular purpose. I discuss the novena for San Isidro Labrador in Chapter 5.

practices of individuals and communities as they navigate the multiplicity of locations and relations that make up everyday life (Espín 2006; León 2002). Phyllis Correa (2001:436) argues “that popular religion in Mexico ... is continually created and re-created as traditions are transmitted both orally and through participation in rituals and ceremonies, while it simultaneously responds and adjusts to changes caused by external and internal factors that constantly restructure the relationships and patterns of participation of individuals and groups throughout the region.”

By participating in popular religious practices, folks in Empalme Escobedo are identifying their personal struggles with those of the saints, God and their community (Goizueta 2002). These religious performances can be seen as lively transactions of emotion between persons, sacred objects, and with God. Likewise, the circulation of sacred objects of devotion throughout the community and municipality illuminates the sociality of emotions (Ahmed 2004). The display of emotion in popular religious celebrations is in keeping with the pursuit of feeling in everyday life in Empalme Escobedo, in public settings and in private ones. Participation in popular religious practices is both personal and public. It openly commits the individual to a devotional community and to a relationship with sacred objects and the Catholic Church.

The public ritual performances are not the only locations for displays of collective feeling. Waiting for the train to cross into town, interactions in the marketplace, or the unexpected situation are also locations for public performances of emotion. Likewise, emotions are displayed and shared by praying within the home, alone in a bedroom with a sacred object, or among family and close friends. Popular religious practices establish meaning through the assertion of emotion and group belonging. When folks in Empalme

Escobedo gather to cheer the completion of the gate around the parish church, wait for the train, support pilgrims riding their bikes hundreds of kilometers to Tepeyac, celebrate San Isidro Labrador, or look on in awe at the sudden occurrence of an accident they confirm and reinforce through their participation and performance social ideas for expression and concealment of emotion, and shared beliefs about the value of emotion and community.

“¿QUÉ MILAGROSO ES LA SANTA CRUZ DE PICACHO!”

A miracle is the thing seen as it is, that is, a true portrait. A true portrait, not a copy, nor an imitation, because, as much in the picture of a person, as in the representation of a miracle, what must dominate is the thing called super-realism which might be named supernatural were it not that the spirit of Mexican painting is the sober, profound recognition of reality, of an intangible, yet nevertheless a universal and essential reality; a sensitiveness to truth that makes miracles of daily happenings and daily happenings miraculous—an intimacy with facts, even when those facts are miracles. [Diego Rivera in Brenner 1929:170]

Sunday May 2, 2004 was extraordinary. “A miracle occurred.” The Santa Cruz de Picacho had recently arrived in Empalme Escobedo and was on display in the home of the Alvarez Rivera family. The females of the household sought permission weeks in advance for the honor of being the first family to host the Santa Cruz de Picacho in Empalme Escobedo. In the families’ tiny common room the Santa Cruz de Picacho takes center stage. Three dining room chairs support the weight of the cross: two hold the crosspiece and the third holds the upright stand. Fresh white lilies and yellow gladiolas adorn the cross and a white organza cloth drapes dramatically over the crosspiece.

To conceal the wear and tear, the families' two couches are covered in a clean pressed sheet. The plastic is removed from the purple upholstered corner armchair. Women and children sit close to one another on the couches. Several women kneel beside the Santa Cruz de Picacho on the smoothed cement floor. Men and some women and children sit on plastic or wood stools in the doorway of the home and in the road. At least ten of the devotees are pilgrims from Picacho who walked the seven hours carrying their cross to Empalme Escobedo and are bidding it farewell for its annual three-month visit in Empalme Escobedo. The majority of the devotees are residents of Empalme Escobedo, beaming with pride in hosting the Santa Cruz de Picacho in their village and seeking out its powers.

A small crowded kitchen overlooking the living and devotional space holds a dining room table, refrigerator, wood cabinet displaying plates, pots and pans, a sink and small cement counter top with shelving, and a gas stove. Where the living room and the kitchen intersect a narrow hallway leads to a bedroom, bathroom and the corral. The corral is large. A cow and its calf are penned in one corner, a washbasin, washing machine and wire laundry line fill the center space and a *jardin* marks the leisure space. The small entry to the corral constitutes a *jardin* due to its portable metal and plastic chairs, potted and hanging plants, variety of birds in cages, and the ubiquitous gas tank. In order to operate a gas stove (or hot water heater) in Empalme Escobedo, most homes have a refillable gas tank that connects via a soft pipe to the necessary appliances.

A meal is served to the devotees following the individual and collective prayers, recitation of the rosary, and a serenade to the Santa Cruz de Picacho. Alicia (the female head of the household), her daughter, Elena, and her granddaughter Petra stand in front of

the stove: monitoring or stirring the beans, the rice, and the *mole*. Two older daughters, Esperanza and Raquel, and their father, Ernesto, set out Styrofoam plates, paper napkins, plastic spoons and tortillas in anticipation of the food being served. Emiliano, Benito, and Lorenzo, three of Alicia and Ernesto's grandchildren, are kicking a soccer ball and playfully fighting one another in the corral.

Suddenly, the ball slams into the gas tank knocking it hard against the cement wall and causing it to explode! The force of the gas simultaneously creates an explosion in the kitchen stove. Alicia, Elena, and Petra -working at the stove- are thrown backward and burned.

The devotees are stunned. A fire erupts. The flames burn the family members in the kitchen, destroy the stove, and badly damage the kitchen counter tops, cabinets and walls. The fire spreads into the common room—burning the curtains, darkening the cement walls, and scorching the flowers and silk wrap adorning the Santa Cruz. Yet, the Santa Cruz de Picacho is not burned! A miracle occurred! The Santa Cruz is not damaged and it protected its devotees from serious harm. The story spreads as fast as the fire across town. Everyone is talking about the miraculous Santa Cruz de Picacho.

The origins of the Santa Cruz de Picacho are ambiguous. Just as Empalme Escobedo does not fit neatly into the regional histories of Central Mexico, the Santa Cruz de Picacho does not exactly fit into the regional definitions of Sacred Crosses. If you ask its devotees in Empalme Escobedo you might hear about how the Santa Cruz de Picacho has been “visiting the town since anyone can remember,” “has miraculous powers” and “survived a dramatic explosion,” or “its worship is in conflict with the Catholic Church.”

According to Phyllis Correa, in the Bajío, at the time of the Spanish conquest, “indigenous leaders legitimized their new position within the colonial order through the organization of the worship of a cross or saint from which groups derived their identity, displaying an adaptive and politically astute response to conquest” (Correa 2001:437). As such, the Otomís and Chichimecs, the primary indigenous groups in the Bajío, created a network integrating local communities into a broader social, economic, and political system that also served as the basis for a regional identity. Today, devotion to a sacred cross remains central to popular religious beliefs and practices in the Bajío region. The Catholic Church conceives of the cross as a representation of the sacrifice and death of Christ in order to forgive the sins created by humankind. In the Catholic orthodox conception the cross is not awarded its own supernatural character or properties: the object of devotion is God (Correa 2001). On the other hand, Correa writes, “Crosses, with distinct characteristics and of differing types, are central to Otomí religious traditions, which revolve around the cross as a symbol of the four winds and four cardinal directions, as well as the veneration of the ancestors and their relationship to fire, the sun, military conquest, and sacrifice” (Correa 2001: 438). In Otomí and Chichimec indigenous belief the Sacred Cross, “Parece como si fuera un ser vivo que puede sentirse triste, ofendio o alegre dependiendo de las acciones de los humanos” (Correa 1998:80). [Acts as if it is alive and is capable of being sad, offended, or happy depending on the actions of humans].

Phyllis Correa and Tim Craig’s research documents the significance of the Sacred Cross of Calderón Pass (*La Santa Cruz del Puerto de Calderón*) to the communities along the Laja River in the State of Guanajuato, including the city of San Miguel de

Allende (Correa 1998, 2001; Craig 1999, 2008). Correa relates the profound meanings embedded in the Sacred Cross of Calderón Pass to an important battle in the history of the region between non-Christianized indigenous and Christianized indigenous groups.

Correa writes,

According to the story transmitted from generation to generation, on 14 September 1531, non-Christianized Chichimecs confronted Christianized Otomí and Chichimec captains in a streambed near Calderón Pass in a bloody battle that lasted 15 days and nights until suddenly it grew dark and a shining cross appeared in the sky. Upon seeing this supernatural sign, the non-Christianized natives stopped fighting and cried out, “El es Dios” [He is God]. The supernatural appearance of the cross meant that they should surrender and accept the Catholic faith, making peace with their native brothers who had fought against them. A cross was carved out of stone and taken to the high part of the pass where a chapel was built. [Correa 2001:439]

Today the celebrations in this region to celebrate the Sacred Cross of Calderón Pass emphasize resolution and the forgiveness of offenses. The ritual act of reconciliation that is repeated each year recreates the sacred battle between the Christianized and non-Christianized groups of the Bajío region. The annual celebration commemorates the sacrifice of warriors that resulted in the creation of a new peace and represents renewal and understanding (Correa 1998).

Figure 3: La Santa Cruz de Picacho



LA SANTA CRUZ DE PICACHO: AMBIVALENCE, IRONY AND CONTRADICTION

To speak of the miraculous in this starkly secular world of concrete pill boxes, sand bags, dark glasses, and bullet-proof vests, is to merely raise, once again, the mystery of the presence of God in modernity, the mystery in other words as to the problematic nature of His death and hence the terrifying possibility that in modernity God has neither ceased to exist, nor continues to exist as God, but instead exists as Dead God equipped therefore with powers far surpassing Live God, blessed as the dead are with the capacity to possess the living, especially by means of the theatrics of the stately everyday. [Taussig 1997:149]

The arrival of La Santa Cruz de Picacho is highly anticipated in Empalme Escobedo. Annually, on the first Sunday in May, the Santa Cruz is carried by pilgrims on foot to Empalme Escobedo from Picacho- a town 18 kilometers away in the Sierra Madre and Picacho mountain ranges. The Santa Cruz de Picacho remains in Empalme Escobedo until the first Sunday in August. In a much celebrated pilgrimage originating in Empalme Escobedo, the Santa Cruz de Picacho is returned to its mountain village in August. Folks from Empalme Escobedo and the surrounding rural and urban communities walk seven hours into the Picacho and Sierra Madre mountain ranges. While walking as a community, the devoted recite prayers and sing hymns.

“La Santa Cruz de Picacho es muy milagroso”: devotion to the Sacred Cross is widespread in and around Empalme Escobedo, especially in the *barrio* of San Isidro Labrador. According to consultants (and my own observations over 4 years), the Santa

Cruz de Picacho is always present at the public performances of devotion to San Isidro Labrador during his novena (nine days of prayers and rosaries May 6-14) and feast day (May 15). To ensure that the Santa Cruz de Picacho will be present at all the events to honor San Isidro Labrador, *cargueros/as* of the Santa Cruz and of San Isidro Labrador arrange for the Sacred Cross to visit homes in the *barrio* of San Isidro Labrador during the first few weeks of its stay in Empalme Escobedo. The arrival of the Santa Cruz de Picacho in Empalme Escobedo coincides with the novena for San Isidro Labrador. Beginning on May 6 different families host the image of San Isidro Labrador in their home and the community is invited to recite prayers and a rosary in his honor. On many evenings the Santa Cruz de Picacho was either visiting (present in) the same home that was hosting San Isidro Labrador, or the family sponsoring the Sacred Cross would bring it to the home (in a procession) to be honored alongside San Isidro Labrador. A few families asked and paid for the local priest, Cura Fernando Olivera, to say Mass at their home.

During the Santa Cruz de Picacho's three month stay in Empalme Escobedo it travels twice daily to the homes of chosen families or individuals: one home in the morning (8:00 a.m.) and one in the afternoon (6:00 p.m.). Always displayed in a prominent location of the home, the Santa Cruz rests on embroidered pillows upon three chairs, is draped in satin fabrics, and adorned with fresh flowers. Depending on the families' social status, the Santa Cruz is treated to a serenade by mariachis, a brass band, or the local organ player; the host home is decorated with florescent lighting, fresh flower arrangements or a canopy of pastel cloths; and *tacos*, *tostadas*, *tamales*, *mole*, *buñuelos*, *agua fresca* or *atole* are served to guests. The participants change daily, because it is

typically neighbors or relatives of the host family who pay homage to the Santa Cruz at each location. The two daily celebrations of the Santa Cruz involve a simple procession to its chosen location, recitation of the rosary and prayers specific to the Santa Cruz, song, and silent meditation.

The Santa Cruz de Picacho is carved of local mesquite wood and weighs close to 100 pounds. Eight to ten men or women carry the Santa Cruz at a time. It is considered both a burden and a privilege to carry the cross. The “burden” and “privilege” of carrying the cross can be compared to Christ’s suffering as he carried his own sacrificial cross to the top of Mount Calvary or to a popular meaning that places prestige upon public suffering in fulfillment of community commitments.

According to Michael Taussig (1997:197), “Pilgrimage is what the people do who go to the mountain and is analogous to translation—between home and shrine, between profane and sacred, and not least, between official and unofficial voice.” I participated in three pilgrimages to Picacho. In 2005 I walked seven hours through the Sierra Madre Occidental mountain range to return the Sacred Cross to Picacho and in 2006 I walked with pilgrims to receive and carry the Santa Cruz de Picacho to Empalme Escobedo in May and to return it to its mountain chapel in Picacho in August. In May pilgrims pile into two or three buses leaving Empalme Escobedo at dawn to travel an hour to Picacho. Upon arrival in Picacho, tired, cold and hungry, we enter the chapel, ritually receive the Sacred Cross and carry it out in a procession down through the mountains toward Empalme Escobedo. The opposite occurs in August, pilgrims leave Empalme Escobedo at dawn carrying the Santa Cruz de Picacho up through the mountains to the tiny town of Picacho. Once in Picacho, exhausted devotees visit family and friends seeking food and a

possible ride to Empalme Escobedo or leave immediately in buses, taxis or with those who drove the pilgrimage route.

The pilgrimage typically follows the same route unless heavy rain has damaged the dirt roads- which was the case in August of 2006. The first stretch of the pilgrimage from Empalme Escobedo follows the railroad tracks into Comonfort, where the ascent into the mountains begins. A few miles into the mountains we pause for prayer and rest in the *pueblito*, Jalpilla. The pilgrimage swells in Jalpilla due to its status as “el punto de mitad” [the half-way point]. A second and longer stop occurs at La Presa, a dam high in the mountains, for lunch, prayer and continued growth of the group. Shortly beyond La Presa the pilgrimage is met by a smaller group carrying another Sacred Cross. The two crosses-which while in procession lay flat along the backs of those carrying them- are lifted into an upright position. The two massive crosses face each other in a solemn *Encuentro*. *El Encuentro* (the Encounter) is a popular ritual that represents the forgiveness of offenses between communities, reciprocity and renewal (and may commemorate /have its origins in the reconciliation that took place between Christianized and non-Christianized indigenous groups more than 450 years ago; Correa 2006, personal communication). Hours later, upon its arrival in Picacho, the Santa Cruz is carried in a triumphant procession into its chapel. It is placed upon the altar behind a life-size statue of Jesus Christ.

Carrying the Santa Cruz de Picacho to Empalme Escobedo in May of 2006, I follow an elderly woman who is walking arm and arm with her middle-aged daughter. The entire pilgrimage the two women are linked, supporting one another. It is close to 1:00 p.m. and the heat of the day is bearing down on us as we approach Comonfort and

the last leg of the trip. Having left the shade of the mountains and trees we walk slowly and deliberately on the railroad tracks along the highway. The fierce sun reflects against the metal of the tracks and the pavement of the highway, adding to the intense heat and our exhaustion. I am thirsty and constantly thinking about the water I shared with six individuals at our last stop. We finished the bottle and I am selfishly reflecting on this decision as a mistake. My mouth feels like cotton. The elderly woman reaches out her hand to me and offers me what she calls a “pastilla.” The gift is actually half a package of Halls Cough Drops. I thank her, take one and return the package. She refuses to take it and says “comparta con su marido” [share with your husband]. The moisture produced by sucking on the candies temporarily quenches my thirst.

As we continue to walk, we pass a group of Central Americans hanging out by the railroad tracks. More than likely they plan to jump on the train and get closer to their destination – the United States or somewhere with work. I hear numerous stories in Empalme Escobedo about “la gente de Honduras” or “los salvadoreños” [people from Honduras or the Salvadorans]. People tell me they are using Empalme Escobedo as a stopping point between destinations because of the railroad tracks. I hear these *migrantes* are always asking for tacos or money and leaving their trash around town. Walking along the railroad tracks exposes lives and stories: we see abandoned luggage, removed pieces of clothing, excessive trash, and human feces. The elderly woman stops in front of one of the *salvadoreños*. She smiles and gives him her full soft drink – a *Fanta Naranja*.

Walking on my left side are a younger man and woman who take turns carrying a baby wrapped in a thick blanket. Neither one speaks, nor does the baby make a sound. The man rests his hand on the woman’s back or she laces her hand through his arm. Each

carries plastic bags filled with drinks, snacks and baby supplies in addition to a backpack they take turns wearing throughout the pilgrimage. Bound physically and mentally, the three relinquish themselves to the spiritual journey.

A progressive ritual such as a pilgrimage requires a cooperative effort and sustained labor that, by virtue of its form, encourages an intensifying and ultimately cathartic sense of engagement in spiritual experience and community. The cumulative effect has powerful emotional and social dimensions (Rodríguez 2006:100). The pilgrimage to carry the Sacred Cross to or from Picacho emphasizes the social nature of religious activity and promotes solidarity and reciprocal commitment among the participants. The Santa Cruz de Picacho pilgrimage encourages *communitas*, yet also creates a separation between those who walk, ride a bike or horse, or travel to the destination by car. Likewise, the pilgrimage is a powerful emotional and social act even for those (myself included) who are not certain they believe in the practices and institutions that shape the ritual event. The Santa Cruz de Picacho pilgrimage offers experiences of the sacred outside the physical boundaries of the Church.

The pilgrimage is a physical as well as spiritual experience. Walking through the Sierra Madre Mountains in the heat of summer involves hardship while merging the sights, sounds, smells and other sensual experiences of travel. An intimate relationship exists between bodies, particularly women's bodies, and pilgrimage. Daniela tells me one year after carrying the Santa Cruz to Picacho she cut off her hair and left it at the sacred chapel. Many women ascend the final miles to the Picacho chapel on their knees. Numerous women carry their children as they walk the seven hours to Picacho. Both

women and men walk barefoot to or from Picacho. Everyone suffers from the heat of the sun in May and August and most have insufficient supplies of water.

Testimonies to the miraculous power of the Santa Cruz de Picacho and a vicarious sharing in that experience are central to the pilgrimage to Picacho. The physical contact of pilgrims—straining together to carry the cross, sharing water and food, walking en masse, holding each other's bags or children—engages the body at levels that are emotional and therapeutic (Winkelman and Dubisch 2005). Many perceive of the pilgrimage as an act carried out in fulfillment of a promise made (*promesa*), contingent upon a divine response to a conflictive situation to self or family members. Other devotees comprehend the Santa Cruz de Picacho as a source of explanation for loss, hope, pain and desire by focusing on their intimate and emotional relationship to the Sacred Cross as a miraculous object. The sense of connection, release, and renewal provides for a redefinition of self in relation to others at multiple levels—spiritual, social and physical (Winkelman and Dubisch 2005).

Pilgrimage is often carried out in a context in which the participants are engaged in a popular act that is in tension with established hierarchies of the Church (King 2005). As such it can be said that the pilgrimage to Picacho to receive and return the miraculous Santa Cruz exemplifies the struggle between local traditions and Church hierarchy, a struggle in which local autonomy is asserted.

Alicia, a seventy-one-year-old woman, talks about how the Santa Cruz de Picacho has been a part of the community “desde que tengo memoria” [ever since I can remember]. She remembers celebrating and honoring the Sacred Cross since she was “la edad de Jimena” [the age of Jimena]—her granddaughter, age nine. She says she does

not know “la historia” [the history] of the Santa Cruz de Picacho, only that it is “muy milagroso” [very miraculous]. Alicia explains the chapel in Picacho has been rebuilt: in the past it was very simple and they have improved the space based on the receipt of *limosnas* (offerings). Her family has directed their devotion increasingly toward the Santa Cruz de Picacho (primarily because of its miraculous powers displayed in their home during its *visita* in 2004). The Alvarez Rivera family (led by the profound devotion of Alicia) has faith in the Santa Cruz de Picacho “porque es accesible” [due to its accessibility]. Devotion to the Santa Cruz is not tied to the Church nor sanctioned and controlled by the parish priest. The Alvarez Rivera family does not trust Cura Fernando Olivera and they prefer to pray to and perform devotion to the Santa Cruz, patron saints, and Virgin Mary at home. This private home devotion is in comparison with attending Mass on a regular basis and associating their spirituality with the Church.

As such, Alicia tells me she does not believe it is important that she go to Mass to pray because she can do it at home. She prays daily at home for her sons in the United States. She believes with confidence that “mi santuario está en casa y los santos pueden oír mis oraciones” [my sanctuary is at home and the saints can hear my prayers]. She can go to Mass only when Ernesto (her husband) wants to and not without him or his permission. Alicia says, “Si él quiere ir a la misa, ya nos vamos ... y él no quiere ir, no nos vamos a la misa” [If he wants to go to Mass, we go, and if he does not want to go, we do not go to Mass]. The arrangement works for her, because she has created “un templo dentro de mi casa” [a temple within my house]. Images of the saints fill the walls of her house and figures of the Virgin Mary and the *Niño Santo Doctor* are displayed on a shelf in her bedroom. She tells me that she prays for her family’s well being. She stresses to

me over and over again that: “Yo no estoy rogando por el dinero, ni la comida, pero por la salud y la felicidad de mi familia . . . y por una vuelta rápida y segura de mis hijos en los estados unidos” [I am not praying for money, nor food, but for the health and happiness of my family . . . and the rapid and safe return of my sons in the United States].

Tension arose in Empalme Escobedo when the priest announced that he would only hold Mass to honor San Isidro Labrador, not the Santa Cruz de Picacho. In May of 2006, Cura Fernando Olivera actively spoke out against the Sacred Cross’s physical presence at the fiesta for San Isidro Labrador. It became clear that he did not support devotion to the Santa Cruz de Picacho. The Church recognizes the official Catholic day of the Sacred Cross, May 3. Yet, the local priest does not approve of popular practice that involves the Santa Cruz de Picacho. Cura Fernando Olivera has never participated in the prayers of devotion to the Santa Cruz that take place in homes in Empalme Escobedo. For the first time in as long as anyone can remember the Santa Cruz de Picacho was not present at the novenas or Masses held for San Isidro Labrador. The priest’s rejection of the Santa Cruz de Picacho angered and hurt many people in Empalme Escobedo.

Is Cura Fernando Olivera’s lack of enthusiasm and ambivalence toward his parish perceived as unfeeling or even insulting? It seems as if Cura Fernando Olivera creates a picture of himself in the stereotypical patronizing pose of civilizing missionaries. Does he believe a clandestine form of religiosity takes place in parallel with that which he controls? Or does Cura Fernando Olivera believe the “campesinos” of Empalme Escobedo are good Christians, devoted to God in their own way (Abercrombie 1998)? Is the fact that la Santa Cruz de Picacho is considered feminine and is primarily worshiped and cared for by women significant to the priest’s rejection of its devotion in public

space? Does the force of devotion emerge out of the discontent about the emotional barrenness in the *parroquia* and in response to the priest's ambivalence?

Folks in Empalme Escobedo rely more and more on the force of devotion – on the power of saints to bring them the desired results. Praying to and publicly celebrating patron saints, virgin mothers and sacred crosses creates a sense of community, sociability and solidarity more powerful than attending Mass in Church each week (with an ambivalent priest). Empalme Escobedo has had twelve parish priests from 1951 to 2009. According to consultants some of the priests have proven more sympathetic and compliant than others when it comes to local fiestas to honor patron saints, virgin mothers and sacred crosses. A priest's personal popularity depends greatly on the degree to which he encourages, promotes, and accedes to the particulars of local beliefs and practices.

Men and women explain to me that they are religious and are committed to popular ritual celebrations to honor San Isidro Labrador, Maria Auxiliadora, and the Santa Cruz de Picacho, but are not necessarily motivated to be active in the parish church. However, folks also tell me about feelings of Catholic guilt, particularly in relation to their irregular practice of confession and insufficient monetary contributions to the *parroquia*. Likewise, I have learned from men and women in Empalme Escobedo that the saints can punish for lack of or improper religious participation—relaxed devotion, inappropriate use or distribution of offerings and public drunkenness (see Chapter Five). Ambivalence breeds ambivalence.

One way to celebrate Catholic devotion is by hearing Mass. Not everyone attends Mass “faithfully” – every week. Typically folks go to hear Mass for specific reasons,

passage through the stages of life and death (baptism, first communion, funeral) and the passage from one season to the next in the cycle of patron saint's days. For specific events, typically performed outside of the parish church, such as the fiestas to honor San Isidro Labrador or the Santa Cruz de Picacho, parishioners in Empalme Escobedo must pay for Cura Fernando Olivera to say Mass. According to Catholic doctrine, by giving money to the Catholic Church, the community is making a reciprocal offering to God that ensures the success of their participation (Harris 2006:55). Typically, the (monetary) agreement of a Catholic priest to say Mass does not guarantee a time or location of Mass. Furthermore, when Cura Fernando Olivera is asked and paid to attend these fiestas he reluctantly participates. The community picks up on this attitude, his ambivalence. The ambivalence of the agreement often creates anxiety among the men and women planning the celebration. It is important to the Empalme Escobedo community and to their fiesta(s) to know the hour and location of the Catholic Mass to honor the patron saint, virgin mother or sacred cross.

In May of 2006, days before the fiesta for San Isidro Labrador, Cura Fernando Olivera would not commit to a time and place to say Mass. The community was emotional: people were angry, anxious and sad not knowing if and when the annual Catholic Mass to honor San Isidro Labrador would take place. Talk circulated about the priests' ambivalence to say Mass at the makeshift altar in the street near the chapel for San Isidro Labrador (the location of the Mass for over 50 years). It was rumored he would move the Mass to the parish church in the center of town- out of the streets and away from the San Isidro Labrador neighborhood. Cura Fernando Olivera kept the people waiting and talking for days. Hours before the "estimated time," he agreed to say Mass in

the streets of the San Isidro neighborhood—without the presence of the Santa Cruz de Picacho.

Phyllis Correa's research attests to similar behavior in San Miguel de Allende and the smaller communities in the municipality of Allende. For example, Correa describes a conflict between the *carguera* of the Sacred Cross of Calderón Pass and a Catholic priest from San Miguel de Allende. She writes,

El 3 de mayo, doña Julia la viuda de don Genaro, estaba enfadada porque el nuevo cura no quiso darle una hora exacta para la celebración de la misa. Su comentario refleja cierto recelo en cuanto a los representantes de la Iglesia: “No sé por qué se ponen así, nada más son nuestros peones; les pagamos por decir la misa.” [Correa 1998:75]

[On May 3, Doña Julia, the widow of Don Genaro, was angry because the new priest would not give an exact time for the celebration of the mass. Her comment reflects a certain mistrust of the representatives of the Church: “I don't know why they put us on like that, we are no longer their servants; we pay for them to say mass.”]

According to Correa there is a history of this kind of tension between the Catholic Church, local priests and the rural laity in the Bajío region (Correa 2006, personal communication).¹⁶ In Empalme Escobedo the tension between local and ecclesiastical control over popular religious beliefs and practices surfaced most recently and passionately during the 2006 novena for San Isidro Labrador in formal and informal conversations about precisely how the participants should conduct the home devotionals,

procession and Mass involving the miraculous Santa Cruz de Picacho. This backstage conflict illustrates the tenacious defense of local practice in the ongoing negotiation between Catholic clergy and the rural population over popular religious and ritual beliefs and practices.

In setting up devotion to the Santa Cruz de Picacho as a contested domain, the Catholic Church in general and the local priest in particular calls into question the authenticity of the community's faith. Embedded in popular religious beliefs and practices is the identification between self and community (including the community of saints). The identity shared between the devoted, the participants, their roles, the saints, the Sacred Cross, Virgin Mary, or God can be the stimulus for collective emotional reactions when particular celebrations are discouraged or prohibited by the Church (Goizueta 2002:122). By threatening this identity—"an identity that depends upon the people's ability to maintain an intimate connection with one another, their ancestors, and the divine"—the relationship between self and community is also threatened (Goizueta 2002:122). It is difficult to identify and sustain a "unified religious system" particularly when numerous points of ambivalence exist within the Church, a community and its beliefs and practices (Harris 2006:54). Olivia Harris (2006:54) argues that the objects of worship, the sources of power and popular ritual practices "seem to be duplicated to produce something approaching two parallel religious domains." Roberto Goizueta (2002:136) writes, the "extension of communal worship beyond the boundaries of explicitly clerical, parochial structures into the streets and homes calls into question any attempt to reduce liturgy to that which takes place within the physical walls of a church."

¹⁶ Various research points out the tension between the Catholic Church and the rural laity or indigenous

As such, not only can the perceived differences between popular religious celebrations and Church sanctioned worship threaten the “legitimacy” of a community’s faith but also threatens the institution of religion. Richard Flores (1995:176) writes and I agree, “The institutional structure is not willing, nor is it designed, to provide a space for the tenuous and unpredictable outcomes of *communitas*. Solidarity and sociability are forms of power and self-identification, processes that threaten institutional religion, especially its orthodoxy.”

A few popular religious beliefs and practices in Empalme Escobedo have roots in indigenous practice, but the discourses and memories they circulate are shaped by the present concerns. It is not my desire to paint a picture of the Catholic Church as always ambivalent or antagonistic toward the rural laity in Mexico. On the contrary, the long, complex and often contradictory histories of the Catholic Church in Mexico indicate the good, both spiritual and material, produced by the Catholic Church. History has proven that the Catholic Church and its clergy are not only guardians of “tradition,” but are also agents of change.

In colonial times, the presence of the Catholic Church influenced the economy. For example, clergymen introduced agricultural techniques and industries that were in many instances beneficial to the indigenous populations. The Mexican Catholic Church cultivated priests like Miguel Hidalgo, Mariano Matamoros and José María Morelos. Priests whose “sympathy for the oppressed” when translated into action shaped the end of Spanish rule (Bailey 1974:7).

populations in Mexico, Latin America and the United States, see among others Abercrombie 1998, Harris 2006, Ingham 1986, Rodríguez 2006.

In 1903 the first Mexican Catholic congress convened, setting the tone for a decade of intense Catholic social action. On May 5, 1911 the Mexican Catholic party was founded. The party, which supported Francisco I. Madero for president of Mexico, pledged to ensure “that democratic, republican institutions, especially free suffrage, would become a fact in Mexico” (Bailey 1974:18). The party demanded freedom of education as a natural right and was centered on the advancement of Catholic social aims. The Mexican Catholic party applied “Christian principles to the problems of the worker and of the agricultural and industrial sectors in general, insisting that those principles were the only ones that could effectively better the living conditions of the working class without impairing the rights of capital” (Bailey 1974:18).

Yet in 1913 a coup d’état took out President Madero and threw Mexico into a fierce revolution—one in which religion became a significant issue. The irony of the second revolution’s conflict between Church and State was rooted in the fact that the Mexican Catholic Church of 1913 was different from the colonial Church. As David Bailey writes (1974:21-22), “The old Church had appeared to be the handmaiden of reaction. The new Church, independent of the State, was on its way to becoming an instrument for social reform.” A new anticlericalism prevailed.

The 1917 Constitution (a revision of the Constitution of 1857) severely limited the rights and abilities of the Mexican Catholic Church. The Cristero Rebellion, based primarily in the Bajío region, was born in this tension between the Church and State. The Cristero Rebellion did not resolve the deep-seated issues between the Mexican State and Catholic Church. However, it can be argued that Catholic spirituality has developed

intense vigor since Mexico's inception as a nation and the force of devotion continues to grow.

It is not possible nor my intention to outline the history of the Catholic Church in Mexico in this dissertation. However, I do think it is worthwhile to question whether the Catholic Church is empowering or disempowering in relation to the larger society and to look at the ways in which Catholicism can be mobilized to become empowering. In Chapter 4, I discuss the role of the Catholic Church in international immigrant rights and U.S. immigration reform. This very brief history of the Catholic Church's social and political histories in Mexico serves as an introduction to the religious activism of today's immigrant rights movements. I am interested in translating faith, popular religion and transnational spirituality into practical actions. Popular religion and Catholicism in the Empalme Escobedo transnational community provide participants with communal ritual and shared social practices. Most movements for social and political change rely on a shared culture of beliefs and practices. As such, the force of devotion has much to offer social movement actors.

Figure 4: *El Encuentro*, Pilgrimage to Picacho



SPIRITUAL LABOR

Popular religious practices illuminate the possibilities of hope for participants and open a space to reimagine and renegotiate the suffering and loss that makes up everyday life for many in Empalme Escobedo. Spiritual labor assumes a deliberateness in this fragmented transnational community. The public performances of devotion and emotion in Empalme Escobedo rely on popular religious beliefs and practices as well as sociality, and are shaped by the community's histories of migration and social change. The need for popular religion in the Empalme Escobedo transnational community makes sense when interpreted as both emerging from and essential to the changing social, economic, and political conditions of the time. Empalme Escobedo has struggled to build its parish church (completed in 2007) and has often resisted the control of the institutional Catholic Church, but it is clear the force of devotion is alive and permeates the spaces of everyday life.

Sites of miracles, pilgrimages, promises or offerings to the Santa Cruz de Picacho, San Isidro Labrador, or Maria Auxiliadora reflect and circulate histories often absent in ordinary discourse. In the public space of fiesta performance the narrative of loss and the force of devotion intersect and the drama of renewal and transformation occur. Folks in Empalme Escobedo have taught me that devotion to a miraculous Sacred Cross creates, unites and transcends community, beliefs, practices, ambiguities and borders. Popular spirituality can be a site of transformative struggle and expression, a state of being, becoming and meaning- making. The Santa Cruz de Picacho requires numerous people to "carry it." Physically and metaphorically, the individual and the community suffer in bearing the weight of the cross. Marisol explains to me what she calls "cargando la cruz" [carrying the cross]. She tells me: "A menudo cargo la cruz de Susana. Si Susana me

necesita, si su cruz, su carga, sus responsabilidades son demasiado pesadas, yo me hago cargo cuando es necesario. Esto es lo que la familia y los amigos hacen los unos por los otros. Todos tenemos una cruz que cargar, y a veces es demasiado pesada y necesitamos que uno o más gente nos ayuden a cargarla” [I often carry the cross for Susana (her daughter-in-law). If Susana needs me—if her cross, her burdens, her responsibilities are too heavy I take over for her where needed. This is what family or friends do for one another. We all have a cross to carry and sometimes it is too heavy and we need someone or several people to help us carry it].

Stories of miracles and spiritual devotion produce a mode of interpretation, a force of devotion that serves to sustain and constitute a transnational community. As Susan Harding (2000:100) suggests folks’ stories of faith “call for interpretive actions that fill in the narrative gaps” and bind people together. Rather than examining popular religion in Empalme Escobedo as fixed, formal and routinized beliefs and practices, I explore the force of devotion as a fluid, imprecise human process (Rosaldo 1993). In proposing that fiesta performances for patron saints, virgin mothers and sacred crosses in Empalme Escobedo express sociability and reiterate communal solidarity, I do not want to overlook the ways in which ambiguities and ironies in social life are also expressed through popular religious discourse and practice. Throughout this dissertation I continue to unpack the force of devotion and seek to understand the emotive capacities, affective expression and transformative qualities of popular religion.

Figure 5: The Railroad in Empalme Escobedo



CHAPTER THREE: OUR MOST BLESSED MOTHER AUXILIARY MARY, PATRONESS OF THE RAILROAD LABORERS

I am standing above the railroad tracks on the footbridge created to allow a crossing into Empalme Escobedo. A train stopped on the tracks impedes passage into town. The view from the bridge is illuminating. I can see the *parroquia*, Empalme Escobedo's parish church dedicated to Maria Auxiliadora, the ways in which the railroad tracks intersect neighborhoods, women setting up their wares in the market, the movement of men, women, and children across town, the agricultural fields and the purple outline of the Sierra Madre mountain range.

I am using my *IUSA* cellular phone to inform my mother of when she can call me at the local *caseta telefónica*. The height of the footbridge gives it the distinction of being the only place in town my cell phone receives "clear" reception. My words are audible to everyone in the surrounding area. Today I speak in English. Folks stop and stare at the sound of a foreign language. I stand out and am uncomfortable.

My mother and I quickly discuss and decide on a time for the call at the *caseta*. Receiving and making calls in the *caseta* is an experience I typically share with other females and their children: each of us hoping and waiting to get a call from loved ones in the United States. The *caseta* is operated out of a family home. The front "porch" – a raised cement slab that fronts the house but is located within the iron gates of the home – holds the two phone booths (cement enclosures with a door and small space to sit), a few plastic chairs for waiting customers, a small television, and a desk (placed in front

of/blocking the entrance to the home) where calls are supervised and money is collected. Adela, the woman who runs the *caseta*, uses the money to maintain her home, take care of her four children, and supplement the income and goods her husband sends from the United States. Her husband worked for the railroad in Empalme Escobedo, but is now a construction worker in Grapevine, Texas.

The amount of time spent waiting in the *caseta* among women and their children is significant. The *caseta* is a gendered space, one in which I feel comfortable to talk to women and accumulate observations, notes, and ah-ha moments. In the Empalme Escobedo transnational community, women's identity and spatial mobility is altered by the practices of migration and by the changing notions of the modern, home, belonging, and the sacred. On this particular occasion I wait twenty minutes. Both phones are in use when I arrive and I am aware my mom will have to keep calling in order to get through. Waiting for a call when the lines are busy creates anxiety because one wonders about the time and patience of the caller in the U.S. Finally I am called to booth two and am able to communicate with my mother.

I am assuming that the folks with whom I share this space have similarly complicated methods of arranging a call to the *caseta*. The majority of homes in Empalme Escobedo do not have private telephone lines. However, more and more families crowd the neighborhood *casetas*, purchase cellular phones and phone cards with USA plans, make the sacrifices necessary to install a private phone line, or frequent one of several new Internet cafés in town. The increased use of the telephone and the Internet are signs of the times. The action of calls and emails moving in space and the coming and

going to and from the *caseta* represent the mobility and modernity of folks in the Empalme Escobedo transnational community.

In this chapter, I relate the processes of mobility and transformation in Empalme Escobedo to the history of the railroad and its patron saint, Maria Auxiliadora. First, I examine the mobility and modernity brought to Empalme Escobedo by the railroad. The railroad represents the coming and going, the constant back and forth movement of people, things and ideas. Second, I explore the intimacy of and emotion embedded in performances of devotion to Maria Auxiliadora, the patron saint of Empalme Escobedo and its railroad laborers. Third, I discuss the roles of women in the force of devotion, a community fragmented by migration, and in the public and private spheres. Finally, I bring the conversation back to my thesis that the affective performance of devotion gives voice to the tension between the desire for solidarity and the erosion of the community by migration.

PEOPLE IN MOTION, THINGS IN MOTION

Empalme Escobedo was created by the railroad. The railroad is a symbol of mobility and progress, history and modernity, impermanence and fragmentation. I observe in the movement of the train the loss, hope, absence, presence, devotion, and strength of the community. The force of mobility is analogous to the force of the train, coming and going, the back and forth movement of people, objects and ideas crossing mountains and borders.

The railroad tracks are one of the most striking features of Empalme Escobedo. The tracks crisscross the center of town, complicating entry to the main plaza. Trains are

constantly coming and going, stopping and starting, loading and unloading. One cannot walk through Empalme Escobedo without confronting the railroad. A train will stop in midtrack for long stretches of time, forcing people to wait to cross into town.

The amount of time spent “waiting for the train” is variable. The presence of the railroad both centers and interrupts daily life in Empalme Escobedo.

My first encounter with the tracks was amusing and unbelievable. Conducting preliminary research in 1999 my primary experience in Empalme Escobedo was the railroad. After turning off the highway onto the first major street in Empalme Escobedo, I did not encounter what was expected -the main plaza- but, rather a traffic jam. I was greeted by shouting voices, honking horns, blaring music, and the smell of gasoline. A line of cars and two buses had come to a complete stop in the street. Passengers were hanging out of open car windows and doors. Gossiping men and women struggled to compete with the loud music of at least six car radios. At the edge of the railroad tracks, women were selling *tortas*, *gorditas*, *chicarron* and *aquasfrescas*. Some passengers turned off their car engines and ate lunch.

I quickly figured out I could not cross into town due to two stopped trains. In ninety-nine degree heat I waited in the car for forty minutes: twenty minutes with the engine idling and twenty with it off. Even more amusing was the train’s sporadic movement. The train would move forward creating mass anticipation of its leaving. Yet, moments later the train would stop, pause, and move again, but in the opposite direction. This sporadic movement -back and forth- coming and going- continued for the duration of the wait.

In Empalme Escobedo the railroad is a permanent fixture of the built environment, a constant reminder of mobility, of history, a representation of the back and forth movement across borders, the interruption and fragmentation of daily life. The Empalme Escobedo station and its employees are relied upon for repair of both trains and rail tracks. This contributes to the trains being stopped for extended periods of time. Repair work is done on the trains directly on the tracks at the original station, which crosses the primary road leading into the center of Empalme Escobedo.

The railroad was created in the name of modernity. It transports objects and people across mountains and borders, from *ranchos* to cities, from farm to market, from state to state, from ocean to land, from Mexico to the U.S. Modernity is linked to mobility and its promise of social connectedness. The processes of modernization and globalization are those manifested in the increased mobility of populations. The diverse effects of these processes incite questions about the interdependence of continuity and change, belonging and fragmentation (Harvey 1990). Richard Flores, building on the ideas of Louis Althusser, explains modernity as a “ ‘complex structure’ of multiple and uneven events, forces, practices, and ideologies that emerge in their own time and place and through the rhythm of their own development” (Althusser and Balibar 1979:312; Flores 2002: 2). Modernity is capable of redefining and recreating society and self. In the Bajío changes associated with modernity are discernible in its famous and complex histories of silver mining, revolutionaries, railways, agriculture, textile production, and migration to the United States.¹⁷ In the nineteenth century, the Bajío’s market-oriented

¹⁷ The state of Guanajuato has been a major producer of gold and silver for the world mining system (Ferry 2005). The railways of the nineteenth century increased the profits of the mining industry due to its transformation of transportation and export-oriented sectors of the economy. Furthermore, it benefited the production of non-precious metals such as copper, zinc and lead.

economy demanded trade and travel. As a consequence, the area that is now Empalme Escobedo became a prime location for a railroad. The main track of the Mexico-Laredo railroad arrived in the region in 1888. Eusebio González, who owned the lands that became Empalme Escobedo, donated his land to lay more tracks for the railroad. The new tracks were built to serve Mexico City, Querétaro, San Luis Potosi, and Laredo. The stretch through what is now Empalme Escobedo was completed in 1903.

Between 1884 and 1900 Mexico experienced profound economic, political and social transformation. The flow of foreign investments facilitated a rapid annual increase in the gross national product. Mexico's unprecedented rate of growth also produced unprecedented disparities. These disparities were exemplified in agriculture, between the use of modern and traditional technologies; in industrialization, between the "light" and "heavy" industries; in the varying evolution of different regions; and between domestic and foreign control of the economy. The United States and other foreign investors were given generous concessions to invest in the construction of railways across Mexico (Bethell 1991:70-75). In late 1880 the Mexican President, Porfirio Díaz, granted three concessions for the construction of lines by U.S. companies. Fewer than 700 miles of track had been completed in 1880. By 1884, due to the impact of concessionaries, the Mexican railroads operated 3600 miles of track. Railroad construction across Mexico continued for the next twenty-five years, but with great fluctuation as it depended upon available capital and competitive enterprise monies (Cumberland 1968:214-216).

Figure 6: Railroad Tracks in Empalme Escobedo



Nineteenth century railroad employment profoundly affected the movement of Mexicans North (to the Mexican-U.S. border region and into the United States). According to Barbara Driscoll (1998:19) the effect of the railroad upon the movement of Mexican people during the *Porfiriato* was significant.¹⁸ She writes:

Since the roadbeds passed through harsh, unpopulated desert areas, railroad builders had no choice but to recruit and transport construction workers from central Mexico; many of these individuals never returned home. Second, the completed lines offered seasonal maintenance employment to those in the central plateau who could use the work as a strategy to reach the border. Likewise, middle-class migrants with funds at their disposal could simply purchase passage to Ciudad Juárez. [Driscoll 1998:19]

Scholars debate the merits of the profound changes in the economy during the *Porfiriato*, yet it is generally agreed that the late 1890s and early 1900s in Mexico were years of dramatic modernization.¹⁹ Despite the enormous changes in Empalme Escobedo

¹⁸ Not only did the United States invest in the construction of Mexican railways, but also the U.S. railroad industry recruited Mexican migrant workers for track construction and maintenance. According to Barbara Driscoll (1998:17), the systematic recruitment of Mexican immigrants for U.S. railroads began in the 1880s. Driscoll argues that a second phase of the migration of Mexican railroad workers began in the 1900s: employment in the U.S. Southwest. She writes, "Even if larger absolute numbers of Mexicans were hired by southwestern agriculture, the largest proportion of Mexican immigrants in 1900 were found among southwestern track crews. More specifically, in 1900 Mexicans constituted 15.1, 35.5, and 14.6 percent of the section crews in New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas. Twenty years later, the percentages had increased to 32, 81, and 48" (Driscoll 1998: 20). I address migration from the Bajío to the United States in Chapter 4.

¹⁹ Some scholars argue that the great transformations of the economy during the *Porfiriato* "created the basis for the evolution of Mexico into a modern, independent state on the model of Western Europe or the United States" (Bethell 1991: 81). However, other scholars maintain that Mexico emerged from the *Porfiriato* as a country that depended heavily on foreign interests. The demise of the *Porfiriato*, the outbreak of the 1910 Revolution, the global economic depression, the *bracero* programs, Mexico's long-term shortage of capital, political dominance of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), powerful railway strikes, development of Northern *maquiladoras*, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), immigration, drug wars, a change in political parties with the election of Vicente Fox of the *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN), the "age of terror" and U.S. immigration policy "reform," and the contested election/ "parallel presidency" of Felipe Calderón and Andrés Manuel López Obrador (to name

brought by migration, politics, and the economy over numerous years, agriculture and the railroad remain integral to the community's history, sociality and spirituality. The veneration of and devotion to the patron saints Maria Auxiliadora and San Isidro Labrador further exemplify the enduring symbolism of the railroad and agriculture in Empalme Escobedo. Devotion to the patron saint of farming and the patroness of the railroad give meaning to participants' lives in a global world where numerous forces advance the fragmentation of self and community.

IMPERMANENCE AND FRAGMENTATION

Migrants in Empalme Escobedo are moving back and forth across the Mexican – U.S. border to make money, fulfill a *manda* or *promesa*, realize goals, please a wife, mother, or child, and carry out their vision of the American dream. According to Alphonso Lingis (2000:29), “the speeds, slowness, and turns of our movements come from movements we meet about us.” Movements are durations. Movements shift, settle, collide with other things or set things in motion (Lingis 2000: 29-30): The constant movement of the train, the changing seasons, movements of hands kneading corn for tortillas, churning the milk of the cow to create cheese, forming the sign of the cross, the movement of Maria Auxiliadora from house to house collide with the need to work, the need to eat, the desire for play, pleasure, and the planting of crops.

The migration of folks from Empalme Escobedo to the United States creates an actual loss, a gap, an absence. The circulation of loss, the persistence of absence and the

only a few factors) have dramatically affected the economy and modernization of Mexico. It is not the purpose of the dissertation to address all of these factors in detail yet I intend to integrate the significance of Mexican history into the stories of devotion and migration in the Empalme Escobedo transnational community.

gaps in logic pop up in sites of impermanence and fragmentation throughout the community: The railroad tracks, the abandoned railroad station, the place where an image of Christ appeared in the dampness on a wall left over from a rain storm. The makeshift shack on *Calle Acambaro* filled with empty liquor and beer bottles and an abandoned mattress. The dilapidated market— stuck in a semipermanent state of reconstruction. The unpaved roads and unfinished houses, and the opening and closing of small businesses—an internet café, a clothing store, an ice cream parlor, a vegetable stand, a bakery and a taco shop.

Sites of fragmentation invite affective investment. These neglected structures symbolize the past, the present and the future. They produce emotional discourses and conjure up images of the excess of the Porfirian period, the heyday of the railroad, times of poverty and ruin, the excitement of the Mexican Revolution and the unease of the Cristero Rebellion. Engagement with these structures enables a sense of a shared history (Szmagalska-Follis 2008). Migrants crave a collective history, public structures and annual celebrations that create sociability and solidarity. As Kathleen Stewart (1996:95) writes, “In the image of a trembling space, then, a reality that exceeds the constraints of history is born of the very remembering of unfulfilled possibilities. The arresting image provokes the participation of an audience as if collective survival depends on the contagious spread of a melancholic poetics of place.”

Places in the Bajío landscape are more than constant reminders of mobility but also tell the stories of history and modernity, of ancestors and the miracles of local patron saints, virgins and crosses. Places capture the emotion, intimacy and memory of the relationships between people and their place of origin. I am not talking about “migrant

nostalgia for home” but the practices of re-membering, emotional discourses, the fragmentation of community and the subsequent desire for sociability and solidarity.

Building on the work of Bruno Latour, Nigel Thrift writes, “Space is no longer seen as a nested hierarchy moving from ‘global’ to ‘local.’ This absurd scale-dependent notion is replaced by the notion that what counts is connectivity and that the social is ‘only a tiny set of narrow, standardized connections’ out of many others” (Latour 1993; Thrift 2004:59). I seek to identify the uneven effects of flows. Emotions, words and memories circulate and produce effects. We move with them.

“DEBE SER AFECTIVO Y EFECTIVO”

Maria Auxiliadora is the patron saint of Empalme Escobedo. Because Empalme Escobedo’s origins center on the railroad, the railroad laborers adopted Maria Auxiliadora, *Auxilio de los Cristianos* (Help of Christians), to represent their struggle and hope. Maria Auxiliadora is not celebrated only on May 24, but every day of the year. Three images of the Virgin Maria Auxiliadora exist and circulate in Empalme Escobedo. The primary image is housed permanently in the *parroquia* in the center of Empalme Escobedo. Two secondary images travel to every neighborhood and desiring household in Empalme Escobedo and the surrounding *ranchos*. According to the Catholic Church (Diocese of Celaya):

Maria Auxiliadora rescues children who are in danger and consoles those that are suffering. She is there for the people to ease sorrows and wash away tears.

Because there is no place immune to pain and crying, Maria Auxiliadora will be carried to each domestic dwelling. Carrying her to the home is like taking her to

her throne, her own house. The opportunity for this domestic family worship of Maria Auxiliadora cannot be greater or more obvious. Most of the fruits that this spiritual devotion is called to produce will not be known, because not even the soul that receives the operations of grace are often aware of it. But you can already guess what will happen within each family. [Parroquia de Empalme Escobedo, Guanajuato, n.d.]

On Monday, December 5, 2005 I participate in *la visita domiciliaria de Maria Auxiliadora*. In late November I accept the invitation for the Virgin Mary to visit my home. Therefore I have time to learn of my obligations and necessary preparations. By talking with the women in my neighborhood and observing several “home visits”/devotionals for local saints I understand the importance of creating a special location (*nicho*) in which to place the image. I am aware the devotees will need a space within my home to pray, talk and sing to the image of the Virgin Maria Auxiliadora. Additionally, it is customary for the host family to provide refreshments to the devotees.

Creating the *nicho* for the image of Maria Auxiliadora proves to be the most difficult task. Women explain to me that any home adornments in honor of Maria Auxiliadora must be in the colors of light blue, pink or white. A typical *nicho* for Maria Auxiliadora is created out of blue or pink curtains, hung in a sort of canopy, wherein her image is placed. Blue, pink or white crepe paper flowers, three- dimensional stars, or twinkle lights often surround or adorn the curtain canopy. Not having in my possession either curtains or blue or pink sheets, I am advised by a female neighbor to create a curtain-like backdrop out of blue and pink crepe paper cut into strips. Being neither artistic nor trained in cutting paper into flowers, I resort to asking my neighbor’s daughter

to make the crepe paper flowers. Because the living room furniture consists of only four plastic chairs and a table, clearing a space for Maria Auxiliadora is quick and easy. After much debate and anxiety my husband and I decide to serve homemade oatmeal raisin cookies and hot apple cider, rather than the expected *buñuelos*, *tostadas* or *tamales* and *atole*, *choco-mile*, or *ponche*.

At 5:30 p.m. a procession of ten devotees arrives at our home carrying the image of Maria Auxiliadora, fresh and plastic flower arrangements, candles, a donation box, and a handful of prayer and song sheets. After the image of Maria Auxiliadora is placed in her *nicho*, the flowers arranged and the candles lit, I am asked to read a pamphlet from the church that welcomes the Virgin Maria Auxiliadora to our house. Over a period of an hour, three *cargueras* lead the devotees in a rosary, song and prayer specific to Maria Auxiliadora. Following the prescribed devotionals, individual personal prayers are recited: women ask the Virgin to bring their husbands home safely from the United States, to bless their sons working in Texas or to protect their relatives crossing the border with a *coyote* (human smuggler) and without papers. I share one of the written prayers:

El amor para ser verdadero no solo se debe sentir sino que se debe demostrar.

Debe ser Afectivo y Efectivo

Como el fuego en las entrañas de la tierra, irrumpe en su encierro, abriéndose paso para salir al exterior con desahogo.

Con esto queremos decir que los amantes de Maria Auxiliadora no se contentan con amarla en su corazón, sino que sienten la imperiosa necesidad de explayar su querer y su devoción. [Parroquia de Empalme Escobedo, Guanajuato, n.d.]

[Love, in order to be true, not only should be felt but also must be displayed.

It must be Affective and Effective.

As the fire in the core of the earth breaks through its confinement, opening its way to its exit, to its outside relief.

By this we mean that those who are affectionate of Maria Auxiliadora do not merely love her in their heart, but feel the urgent need to expound their love and devotion].

The composition of devotees changes over the course of the hour, but consists primarily of seven children and nine young and elderly women. My husband and three young boys are the only male participants. At the end of the organized hour of devotion to Maria Auxiliadora, I serve cookies and hot cider. The majority of the devotees promptly leave, while a few, including the *cargueras*, stay to pay personal respects to the Virgin or to socialize.

For twenty-four hours the Virgin Maria Auxiliadora is a guest in our home. She occupies the center of our room and the center of our house. A public icon enters our most private and intimate space. Upon being left alone with Maria Auxiliadora my husband and I are uncertain what to do or how to act. My husband kneels naturally in front of her image. Perhaps he is praying, asking something of her, welcoming the Virgin Mary to our home, thanking her for his health and well being, asking for forgiveness or to bless our families (far away in the United States). I observe. How do I perform devotion without an audience? In public, I participate. I recite the prayers, make the sign of the cross, and kneel in front of sacred images. In private, I am skeptical and still.

The prayer tells us our devotion to Maria Auxiliadora “debe ser Afectivo y Efectivo” [must be Affective and Effective]. It is “urgent” that we perform our public

and private devotion to the Virgin Mary. Lila Abu-Lughod and Catherine Lutz (1990:7) write of the importance of considering the close involvement of affective performance and emotional discourses with issues of sociability and power: the “politics of everyday life.” Relating individual experience to an affective performance of devotion reaffirms that the ordinary of everyday life makes sense with an overarching framework of meaning.

Intimacy and emotion influence the processes of constructing, telling, receiving and deriving meaning from narratives. Emotion and intimacy, privacy and community not only shape how stories are told in Empalme Escobedo but also the way I, the outsider ethnographer, interpret and construct their meanings. According to Lauren Berlant (2000:1), “to intimate is to communicate with the sparest of signs and gestures, and at its root intimacy has the quality of eloquence and brevity.” She explains further . . . “the inwardness of the intimate is met by a corresponding publicness” (Berlant 2000:1). Berlant seeks to reframe intimacy in order “to engage and disable a prevalent U.S. discourse on the proper relation between public and private”—spatial categories that are “considered by many scholars to be archaic formations, legacies of a Victorian fantasy that the world can be divided into a controllable space (the private-affective) and an uncontrollable one (the public-instrumental)” (Berlant 2000:3).

The notion of intimacy is connected to home (Boym 2000). In Empalme Escobedo women are the primary organizers and participants in home devotionals. Intimacy in Empalme Escobedo is elaborated in part by the gendered sharing of spiritual experience and life concerns through female face-to-face interaction within the home. A

more generalized intimacy also exists based on the common commitment to spiritual labor amongst women and the community (Csordas 1997).

The materiality and intimacy of religious experiences are linked to the roles of sacred objects. Women, as “caretakers of houses” in Empalme Escobedo, are often involved with sacred objects. Many women keep and are devoted to sacred objects within their home. It is common in Empalme Escobedo for women to take these sacred objects (statuettes, paintings, or photographs of patron saints or virgin mothers and hand held crosses) from their home to be blessed by the priest at a particular public Mass of importance to the family, such as the annual Mass in honor of San Isidro Labrador or the Virgen de Guadalupe held outside of the *parroquia*—in the streets or the market. Following the Mass, the priest typically walks through the crowds on the streets holding a container of Holy Water, which he throws toward the people and their objects in a sweeping motion—blessing everything in its path.

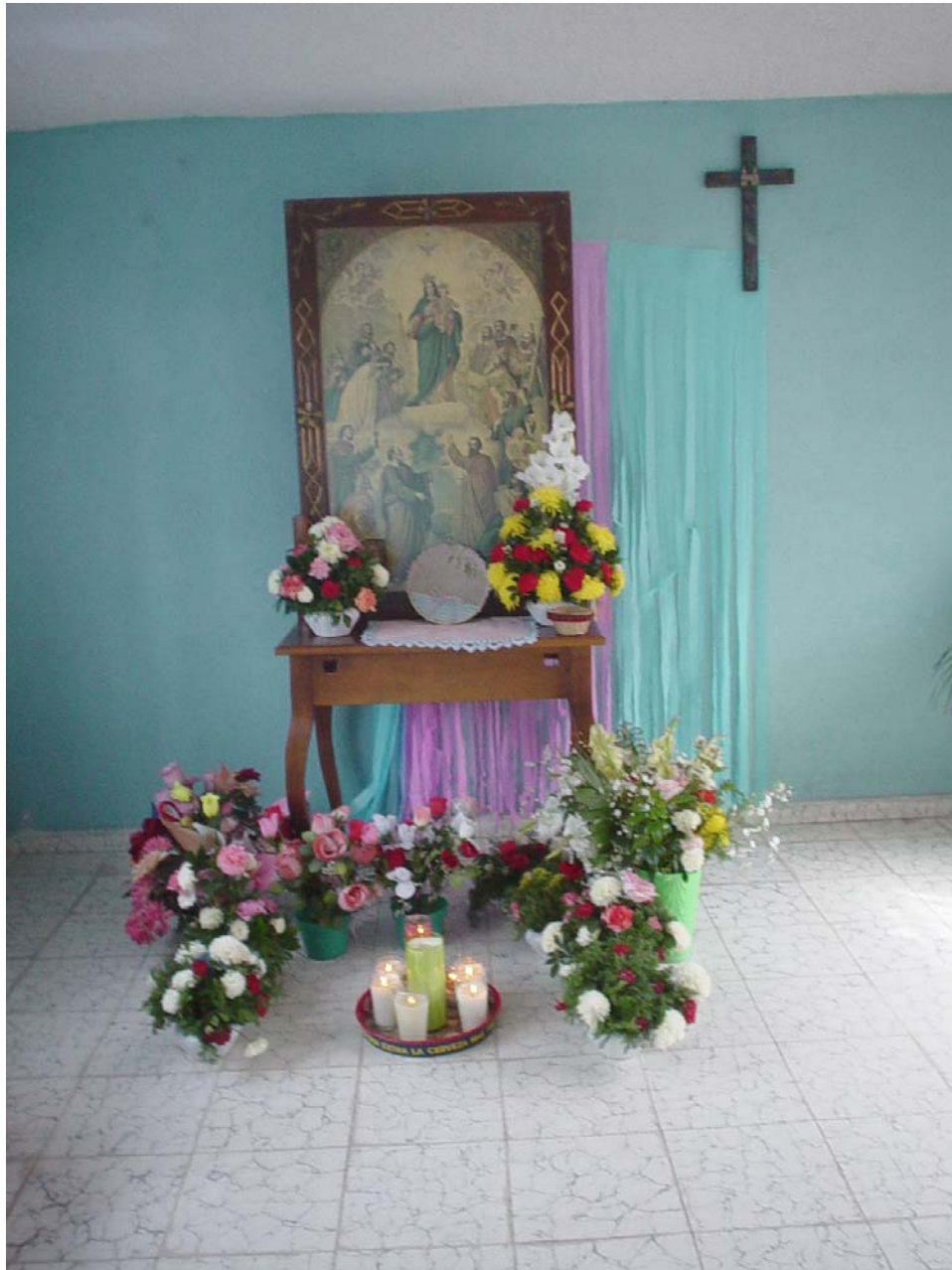
In Empalme Escobedo, the public and private spheres are fluid, flexible categories, particularly when related to the circulation of sacred objects. Ethnographic research among the devoted in Empalme Escobedo suggests that sites of intimacy, emotional immediacy, and intense expressivity transcend space and time and call into question boundaries between private and public spheres, subjective and objective.

MODERNITY, MOBILITY AND CHANGE

One of feminism’s primary projects has been to question distinctions between the public and private and to expose how this separation has served to devalue and constrain women’s work and social roles. [Fernandes 2003:53]

Current ethnographies on gender and Mexican migration focus on the changing conjugal relations within transnational families and communities and the transformation of so-called patriarchal systems into social organizations based on greater gender equality (Hirsch 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Levitt 2001; Segura and Zavella 2007, Zavella 1987, 2002). For example, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo's (1994:13) ethnographic research highlights the increased capacity for changes to patriarchal gender relations in regions of Mexico with marked U.S.-bound male migration. Speaking to an increase in female agency she writes, "As women expand their activities and skills, they develop identities that are both enabling and increasingly independent of their husband's patriarchal control" (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994:66). Julia Pauli's research on women's spatial mobility in a Mexican transnational community focuses on women's changing domestic roles in households where males are absent due to migration, and women's subsequent decision making in regards to the "home." She argues the "recognition of female public activity (and male private activity) does not signal an end to women's involvement in their homes and houses. In fact, domestic involvement is an important expression of women's agency and creativity" (Pauli 2008:185). Women's spatial mobility is altered by the practices of migration and by women's changing domestic roles and notions of "home." Women are constantly in a position of negotiation as they work to represent men's absence and help generate their migrant status as modern, capable providers. Mexican migrant modernity has not yet engendered a radical rethinking of roles within the modern (Pessar 1999). In Empalme Escobedo, the need to construct oneself as a social person makes this more difficult for women when selfhood is relational and respect remains largely linked to social roles idealized through the family (Malkin 2004).

Figure 7: *La Visita Domiciliaria de Maria Auxiliadora*



How are women in Empalme Escobedo renegotiating Catholic influenced patriarchal practices? Has Catholicism in Empalme Escobedo insinuated itself into every aspect of sexuality and the family domain? What is the range of experiences and strategies for creating alternative ideas of womanhood? Can popular religious practice be a means of locating a fragmented self or realizing oneself through self-transformation?

Questions of sociability and cultural tradition reveal the variety of mexicana feminist experiences that dislocate the normative images of Mexican migrant lives. In the transnational community of Empalme Escobedo, the Mexican gender stereotypes of the suffering, passive female and the active, public male are negotiated through popular religious practices. *La visita domiciliaria de Maria Auxiliadora* exposes and sets in motion the desire for sociability and the erosion of the community by migration. The force of devotion depicts the intimacy between the subject and object of devotion. Devotion to Maria Auxiliadora involves the public expression of the emotional connection between devotee and sacred object.

By examining particular sets of discourses and practices (specifically home devotionals, popular religious fiestas and pilgrimages) ethnography exposes the different notions of womanhood expressed through rituals and symbols. As Richard Flores (2002: 156) explains, “Symbols serve not only as a way of reflecting on the world but also as a way of shaping social reality and social identities.” In the Empalme Escobedo transnational community, it is in the women’s unfolding narratives that we see their multiple senses of self and the strategies and positionings utilized in locating meaning. By locating themselves in the familiar arena of the symbolic they can contextualize their choices and agency within a clear and safe setting (Russel y Rodríguez 2008).

As a symbol, the Virgin Mary is positioned to represent the social and spiritual needs of the Empalme Escobedo community (c.f. Flores 2002). It is through the circulation of prayers and objects of devotion that meanings and emotions work to generate effects (Ahmed 2004). Maria Auxiliadora and the prayers and songs performed out of devotion to the saint circulate throughout the community: starting and stopping, like the motion of the railroad. The diverse and complex meanings and significance of the Virgin Mary in the “spiritual conquest” and colonial rule of Mexico are reimagined to serve the social and spiritual needs of the current Empalme Escobedo transnational community. The need for a popular icon (popular religion more widely) in Empalme Escobedo makes sense when interpreted as both emerging from and essential to the changing social, economic, and political conditions of the time (Flores 2002).

MARIAN DEVOTION

The Virgin Mary acts as an intercessor to God and to the Catholic Church. Maria Auxiliadora travels to families’ homes in Empalme Escobedo and she serves to aid and comfort struggling individuals and families. According to the Church and as written in the prayer to honor the Virgin, emotional attachment to Maria Auxiliadora “not only should be felt but must also be displayed” (Parroquia de Empalme Escobedo, Guanajuato, n.d.). The Catholic Diocese of Celaya and parish of Empalme Escobedo call Maria Auxiliadora, “Nuestra Madre Santísima” [Our Most Holy Mother]. The tendency to emphasize aspects of the Virgin Mary that make her similar to ordinary women (and appealing to women and men) is exemplified in multiple ways at the popular level, principally through the emphasis on her motherhood. Relating to Mary as “our mother”

or the “mother of all” opens a space to construct an intimate spiritual relationship to the Virgin Mary.

Marian worship is well documented in Latin America, particularly the symbolic significance of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico. Scholars have documented the meanings of images of the mother, “our” mother (universal mother), mother goddess, “holy” mother, and their relationships to women’s roles and practices and social and cultural understandings of maleness and femaleness (machismo and marianismo) in general and specific contexts. Additionally (and most pertinent to this dissertation), social scientists have addressed the role of mother goddesses (specifically the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico) as agents of modernity, change, and revolution, as well as the role of Marian devotion in the struggles between the Catholic Church (institutionalized religion) and popular religion (Campbell 1982; Christian 1981; Kurtz 1982; LaFaye 1976; Padden 1967; Rodriguez 1950; Taylor 1987).

Various literatures consider the suggestion that the Catholic Church and the colonial economic system in Latin America instilled a dichotomized sexual division of labor (an arguably flawed assumption particularly in its disregard of class and race). Moreover, the concept of marianismo is contested. Marianismo is typically discussed as a set of behaviors attributed to the Virgin Mary: mothering, healing, silence, long suffering, virginity and passivity. The impacts (positive and negative) of Marian devotion on women are debated in feminist and theological literatures. Social scientists argue that the Virgin Mary represents an unattainable ideal for women: women are not merely passive victims of oppressive forces, women are not unproductive or economically marginal, and Marian devotion concentrates on the positions of Mary that make her least like “real

women.” (Behar 1987; Brading 2001; Cantú and Nájera- Ramírez 2002; Sánchez 2008; Stevens 1973; Warner 1976; Wolf 1958) Ethnographic research makes it possible to ask women devoted to the Virgin Mary how they make sense out of normative constructs and when and how do they conceptualize alternatives.

I emphasize the fluidity in local expressions of womanhood in the Empalme Escobedo transnational community. Stereotypes of mexicana womanhood abound in both academic and popular literature, discourse and the media. Rather than attempt to discuss or relate the numerous and diverse expressions of mexicana femininity, I use the stories of women in Empalme Escobedo to demonstrate women’s multiple (complex and often contradictory) subject positions within local cultural traditions.

SEXUALITY, SIN, SAINTLY DEVOTION

Guilt, shame, and a willingness to confess everything were what mattered; . . .the interaction of confessor and confessed became a process of transforming desire into discourse, or in the words of Michel Foucault, of “passing everything having to do with sex through the endless mill of speech.” [Behar 1987:36]

Ethnohistorical accounts of gender roles, the Catholic Church, and Marian devotion in colonial Mexico reflect the ambiguity inherent in Spanish rule and religion. The Catholic Church taught that sexuality should be confined to marriage and the Spanish colonizers were encouraged to elevate holy matrimony to a Christian ideal. Yet, as analyses of the Mexican Inquisition demonstrate, “illicit” sexual unions prevailed in Mexico (Behar 1987: 35). Ruth Behar (1987:35-36) writes,

In marriage, women of all social levels lost most of their legal autonomy, owing total obedience to their husbands, who assumed they had the right to physically punish their wives if they deviated from proper female norms. ...At the same time, men of all social ranks felt free to have illicit affairs; the double standard was even condoned by Hispanic law, since it was thought that “indecentry [was] less condemnable and offensive in a man than a woman.” [Arrom 1985:65, 235-238; Boxer 1975:109-112 as cited in Behar 1987:35-36]

The Catholic Church almost immediately linked itself with the domain of marriage and sexuality. Colonial women were expected to take seriously the notions of devotion, sin, guilt, and confession put forward by the Church. Women, especially rural, lower class and married women had minimal political and economic control and were often victims of a male’s physical or emotional abuse (Behar 1987). As a result of their (doubly) subjugated position and the influence of Catholicism, many women in colonial Mexico developed a strong devotion to the Virgin Mary as well as constructing “a rich symbolic language of beliefs and acts for resisting, punishing and even controlling the men who dominated them” (Behar 1987:42). As William B. Taylor explains, the Virgin Mary in New Spain (to both Spaniards and Mexicans) “was not a grim messenger but a sympathetic advocate for her believers. ...Part of her appeal was that she did not seem to play favorites. She was mother and mediator for all . . . she gave country people a stake in the colonial system” (Taylor 1987: 11, 20, 21). Women and men, just as in Empalme Escobedo today, directed their oppression and public and private (domestic) conflicts into a religious dialogue and saintly devotion.

Doña Rosario Blanco Espinosa is a seventy-one-year-old woman. She has given birth to and raised twelve children. She continues to raise her grandchildren. Rosario is well respected in the community. She was born and raised in Empalme Escobedo. Her family owned a significant amount of land in the *campo* (countryside) above Empalme Escobedo. The family's relative wealth, generosity and religiosity has brought them respect and prestige in the community.

Doña Rosario married a man from the community – a railroad laborer, whose family is associated with the railroad and the origins of Empalme Escobedo. His family, Espinosa, is respected but does not have an equivalent reputation to the Blanco family. Don Juan worked for the railroad and also maintained the lands of Rosario's family. He is now retired from the railroad but continues to work the land. Ties to the land earn respect and stature in the barrio of San Isidro Labrador, a traditional farming neighborhood.

Doña Rosario and Don Juan grew up and continue to live in the San Isidro Labrador neighborhood. They have always been involved in the fiesta to honor San Isidro Labrador as well as devotion to and celebration of Maria Auxiliadora. The Blanco Espinosa family has sponsored large meals, music and drink to honor the patron saint of farmers and the patroness of the railroad laborers and hosted the regional bishop, local priests and community members in their home. Their children and grandchildren have grown up with a profound devotion to the patron saints and Virgin Mary and are faithful Catholics.

Rumor has it that Don Juan was never faithful to one woman. Doña Rosario and their daughters talk to me about his womanizing and his *otra familia* (other family). He

lives with another woman in Empalme Escobedo with whom he has several children. Most meals and nights are spent in the home of the other woman and family. It is assumed he supports them with his railroad pension and profit made from working Rosario's lands.

Don Juan is almost always present publicly and at home on the occasions of their children's birthdays, grandchildren's baptisms or confirmations, weddings of relatives, funerals, and the fiestas to honor San Isidro Labrador, Maria Auxiliadora and the Santa Cruz de Picacho. His family- his mother, sisters, brothers, and their children- are cordial to Doña Rosario and often stop by her home for a visit. Rosario's children are friendly with their father's other family (at least on a "need to" basis). For instance, Juan's mistress fell ill in November of 2006 and a few of Rosario's children decided to go and visit her in her home and pray for her recovery.

Don Juan's drinking, second family and emotional abuse affect his wife and children. Doña Rosario is deeply divided by her feelings about her husband and their private and public relationship. In the company of female relatives (myself included) she admits her feelings of disgust for her husband – for hurting her and for publicly abusing her by cohabiting with and giving children to another woman.

Doña Rosario is aware that as a "good Catholic" she cannot divorce him, nor should she hate him. She is torn. She wants to confess to the Church (priest) that she forgives him for his sins against her, and to ask forgiveness for her sin of abhorrence for his abuses. However, it is her hurt and anger that plagues her daily – a force stronger than her desire to forgive and be forgiven.

Sara Ahmed discusses “how the subordination of emotions also works to subordinate the feminine and the body” (Ahmed 2004:3; Jaggar 1996; Spelman 1989). She explains the importance of the work of feminist and queer scholars who consider the ways in which “emotions can attach us to the very conditions of our subordination” (Ahmed 2004: 12; Berlant 1997; Brown 1995; Butler 1997b). Moreover, Catherine Lutz argues,

Because emotion is constructed as relatively chaotic, irrational, and antisocial, its existence vindicates authority and legitimates the need for control. By association with the female, it vindicates the distinction between and hierarchy of men and women. And the cultural logic connecting women and emotion corresponds to and shores up the walls between the spheres of private, intimate (and emotional) relations in the (ideologically) female domain of the family and public, formal (and rational) relations in the primarily male domain of the marketplace. [Lutz 1990: 87]

Women in Empalme Escobedo are invested in spiritual labor. Women pray in private and in public, organize and lead devotion to the patron saints, virgin mothers and sacred crosses, and facilitate the circulation of sacred objects. Yet it is the men in Empalme Escobedo (and the male Church) who are typically in the public eye and receive credit for spiritual labor. How are women in Empalme Escobedo inhabiting but also contesting these gendered spaces? As Saba Mahmood (2005:7-8) points out the female agent seems to stand in for a sometimes repressed, sometimes active feminist consciousness. Mahmood argues for the need of scholars to problematize “the universality of the desire...to be free from relations of subordination and, for women,

from structures of male domination” (Mahmood 2005:10). Women in Empalme Escobedo construct complex identities that are shaped by a history of repressive discourses, and express their own notions of desire shaped by their experiences. Women’s experiences in Empalme Escobedo need to be understood within local spaces and within the realities of ordinary life.

Institutional and popular interpretations of Maria Auxiliadora have a gendered dimension. The Catholic Church tells us Maria Auxiliadora “consoles suffering” and “is there for the people to ease sorrows and wash away tears” (Parroquia de Empalme Escobedo, Guanajuato, n.d.). The Church (as well as popular perception) places her within the home. Maria Auxiliadora takes on an earthly form, the form of a woman who can be seen and spoken to by human beings. The community of Empalme Escobedo is taught, “the opportunity for this domestic family worship of Maria Auxiliadora cannot be greater or more obvious” (Parroquia de Empalme Escobedo, Guanajuato, n.d.). Maria Auxiliadora is materialized in the popular religious imagination. When Maria Auxiliadora is material, the community can direct prayers to her and share her transformative power. The home devotionals celebrating Maria Auxiliadora can be seen as a meeting with the Virgin Mary—a meeting in which her image is physically present, and where it is possible to interact with and talk to her (Gemzöe 2005). As such, home devotionals (like pilgrimages and popular religious fiestas) offer experiences of the sacred outside the physical (and male) boundaries of the Church.

The job of caring for the images of Maria Auxiliadora is divided among several women (*cargueras*). One of the women, Andrea, is a single mother—bringing up a daughter who is studying English in Celaya. Andrea, like the image of Maria Auxiliadora

that she cares for, travels every evening to a different home. She prays the same prayers and sings the same songs for Maria Auxiliadora. Andrea knocks on the doors of (familiar and unfamiliar) homes asking whether the family would like to host a devotional for Maria Auxiliadora. She maintains a calendar documenting each of Maria Auxiliadora's home visits. If anything is wrong with the image of Maria Auxiliadora—the glass is broken or the wood is unpolished—Andrea solves the problem. Each night she counts the money donated to the patron saint and makes sure the Church gets the cash.

Andrea is a daily witness to the spiritual devotion, emotion and inexplicable blessings of Maria Auxiliadora. This position makes her an authority on devotion to Maria Auxiliadora. Her knowledge of the prayers, songs, and stories of devotion to Maria Auxiliadora gives her inner strength as well as a public reputation as an activist for her faith. She is a layperson acting as a member of the clergy. In displaying her spiritual knowledge and leadership ability Andrea serves and unifies her community (as would a priest). Her femininity and publicness stand in contrast to perceptions of the male hierarchy of the Catholic Church.

Andrea has relatives in the United States and a daughter who wants to work there. She and her family (and their lives) are divided by migration. Andrea tells me that her devotion to Maria Auxiliadora and involvement with the Church brings her a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction and heals her pain. She explains that she constantly wants to experience and know more: more prayers, more stories of devotion, more about *el otro lado* (the other side). After getting to know my husband and me Andrea invites us to her home—she wants us to meet her daughter, to help her learn English, and to translate the Lord's Prayer and the Rosary from Spanish to English. Every night we see

her carrying the Virgin Mary to “her throne,” “her home” and every night she tells us about her daughter and something else she wants to learn (Parroquia de Empalme Escobedo, Guanajuato, n.d.).

Knowledge is power. Community is power. Just as Doña Rosario looks to saintly devotion to resolve her own ambivalence towards sexuality and infidelity, Andrea’s spiritual knowledge and leadership in the Church fills in a gap otherwise invaded with pain and loss. A fragmented sense of self is integrated through popular religion and community unity.

The responsibility, respect, and wonder that come with hosting the Virgin Mary in your home is powerful. Being in the moment and now thinking back to that night I am filled with awe. My husband and I were rendered speechless. We did not talk about what was happening in our home and to our emotions. The respect earned in the community and personal satisfaction in holding a community meeting with Maria Auxiliadora is enormous. Will I ever have that kind of experience or opportunity again? Did I handle it right? How does one know if they are performing spirituality correctly? Should that matter? In welcoming Maria Auxiliadora and our neighbors into our home I experienced the force of devotion. I am witness to its strength.

CHAPTER FOUR: TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION

Marisol, Juana and I take a day trip to Dolores Hidalgo: we go to soak up the history, eat the famous ice cream, and visit Marisol's cousins. A slightly unconventional trio, we meet mid-morning in the San Miguel de Allende *Central de Autobuses*: Marisol, a woman in her mid -sixties from *el campo* (the countryside, Empalme Escobedo) as she says; Juana, a woman in her early seventies from the city (Celaya); and myself, a woman in her mid-thirties from the United States. The second-class bus from San Miguel de Allende to Dolores Hidalgo travels through agricultural fields and small towns, stopping along the way to pick up passengers needing to conduct business or purchase necessities in the municipal seat (a bus from Celaya or Empalme Escobedo to Dolores Hidalgo does not exist; several transfers must be made to reach the *Cuna de Independencia Nacional* (Cradle of National Independence). Marisol and I sit together and Juana sits across the aisle to our right.

Migration is on my mind. It is the first day of May, International Labor Day, a national holiday in Mexico that commemorates the Mexican worker's union movements. Protestors are calling on Mexicans to boycott American companies and products like Wal-Mart, McDonalds and Coca-Cola in an act of solidarity with their undocumented countrymen working in the United States. Today in the U.S. many immigrants are participating in a one-day work boycott. The protests are a continued reaction to a U.S. House bill that imposes criminal penalties for undocumented immigrants and proposes building hundreds of miles of additional fencing along the Mexican-U.S. border. In

December of 2005 the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Border Protection, Anti-terrorism and Illegal Immigration Control Act, H.R. 4437, authored by James Sensenbrenner, R (WIS). The bill, which did not pass the Senate, sparked the largest demonstrations (taking place in March and April of 2006) in favor of immigrant rights in U.S. history. I am particularly reflective about the fact that the Catholic Church in both Mexico and the United States is adding legitimacy, voice and presence to the movement. The bishops of the border cities of Nuevo Laredo, Tijuana, Mexicali, Reynosa, Piedras Negras and Ciudad Juarez endorsed today's May 1 "Great American Boycott."

I casually bring up my thoughts to Marisol and we discuss the significance of this day and the U.S.'s proposed policies. Marisol expresses anger with the U.S. She does not place any blame on the Mexican government for the unjust treatment of migrant workers and the harsh U.S. immigration policies. She argues, "El gobierno de los Estados Unidos y los norteamericanos tienen la culpa" [The U.S. government and the American people are at fault]. Marisol tells me, "No tengo esperanzas de que los asuntos de inmigración se resuelvan... y sé que los Estados Unidos ya está construyendo muros en la frontera... en Ciudad Juárez" [I do not have hope that the issues of immigration will be resolved . . . and I know that the U.S. is already building walls on the border ... in Ciudad Juarez]. We sit in silence. Our conversation ends partially because I have not formulated what I consider an appropriate response and primarily due to my intense motion sickness. For me the hour-long bus ride requires an unobstructed forward facing view and concentration on relaxation techniques to not succumb to nausea.

Upon our arrival in the bus station located close to the municipal market the three of us make our way to the historic district. Stopping first at the *Museo Casa de Hidalgo*,

where we all happily receive free admission (Marisol and Juana with their senior citizen cards and I with my student identification), I enjoy learning the women's interpretations of the independence movement and state's history. The historic house is beautiful and we especially like the kitchen and the courtyard. Marisol, an avid gardener, pulls out the buds and roots of a flower she admires blooming in the garden of the famous courtyard (a species she can never find and wants to plant in Empalme Escobedo) and we quickly make our exit.

The bus travel and museum make us hungry. We have time to kill before lunch at Marisol's cousin's house so we head to the *plaza principal* for ice cream. Dolores Hidalgo is legendary not only for its historic attractions but also for its ice cream. What distinguishes the ice cream is the multiplicity of unique flavors: avocado, shrimp, *mole*, corn, whiskey, *chicharrón*, tequila, honey, *pulque* or tropical fruits. We eat the fast-melting ice cream in the tree and plant-filled plaza facing the *Parroquia de Nuestra Señora de Dolores*, where Father Miguel Hidalgo issued the *Grito*. Hot, perspiring, and oozing pride in Mexico with the flavors of our ice cream, we converse and share our prepared travel snacks (fruits and leftover salads) with folks in the plaza until it is time to shop for lunch. We quickly buy what we need for a simple lunch and ask directions from several men, women and children until we figure out what city bus to take and in which direction to arrive at Marisol's cousin's home.

A long and confusing journey by bus and on foot takes us to Marisol's cousin's house, where we are greeted as unexpected guests by her niece. Through talk and offerings of food we feel comfortable and welcome. Marisol makes lunch while Juana and I get to know Marisol's niece and play with her children. After lunching on

chicharrón (fried pork skin) tacos and day old beans spiced up with fresh salsa, the conversation turns to immigration.

Marisol's niece, Lourdes, who is recently married, has already lost her husband to the United States. He left soon after the wedding to work with his male family members in a plant nursery in Denton, Texas. It's good work and he makes \$1500 a month. Marisol and Lourdes begin gossiping about their family. I interrupt. I want to know more about their family's migration to the United States. Lourdes tells me her brothers are in Indiana: "Han vivido allá por varios años; y uno se casó con una *gringa*, Nicki, con quien tiene una hija, y Nicki está embarazada otra vez" [They have been living there for several years; and one married a *gringa*, Nicki, they have a daughter and Nicki is pregnant again]. Lourdes's father is also in the United States. She says, "El único varón de la familia que queda en México es mi hermano Paco, y tiene planes de ir a los Estados Unidos pronto" [The only male family member remaining in Mexico is my brother Paco and he has plans to go to the US soon].

Juana politely asks Lourdes what she plans to do, "Una joven recién casada con un bebé y un niño pequeño?" [A newly wed young woman with an infant and a toddler?] Lourdes explains, "Mi esposo firmó un contrato de arrendamiento por 6 meses y no puede regresar a México hasta enero" [My husband signed a 6 month lease on an apartment and cannot return to Mexico until January]. She tells us of her desire to join him with her children and of her mother's disapproval of the idea. Her uncle tells her she should go, that she should not be here without a husband. He tells her stories of husbands/men who never return to Mexico from the United States. What if this is the case with her husband?

The room is silent and we begin to clean the kitchen. Pretending to watch a *telenovela* Juana sleeps in a worn chair in front of the television. Lourdes's mother and aunt arrive and the greetings, gossip and eating start again. Someone goes to get a *caguama*, we get comfortable, and pass around the 40-ounce bottle of cold beer. Now it seems safe to talk again about migration.

The women agree, “No obstante que el viaje es peligroso y arriesgado los hombres van de todas formas. ...Y quizá también nosotras. No nos preocupan las nuevas leyes ni la llamada reforma migratoria. Si nos encontramos al amigo indicado que nos lleve, o un buen *coyote*, entonces iremos...así de simple” [The trip to the United States is dangerous and risky, but the men are going to go anyway. ...And so might we. We are not concerned about the new laws or so called immigration reform. If we come across the right friend to take us, or a good *coyote* we will go...just like that]. Lourdes admits, “Estoy preocupada por el camino y sus peligros, pero estoy segura que viajaremos con gente buena y valiente... y sé que los hombres que van son nobles, y seguiré porque mis razones son correctas y nobles” [I am worried about the journey and its dangers, but I believe we would travel with brave and good people . . . and I know the men who go are noble and we would follow for good and noble reasons].

MEXICAN MIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES

In this chapter I examine the ways in which mobility, borders, identity and belonging are understood and re-constructed through international agricultural restructuring, immigration policies, faith based activism and the stories of folks in Empalme Escobedo, Guanajuato and Giddings and Grapevine, Texas. I seek to identify

the sites that shape the emotional responses of migrants to their experience of migration and its discontinuities.

I recognize the importance of exploring the changing nature of local communities and their connections to global processes. Attention to the processes of mobility illuminates the practices of transnational subjects and the fluidity and fixity of borders. I explore the lived experiences of transnationalism and the multiple and simultaneous connections and disconnections between people and things. The voices and practices of both migrants and non-migrants in the Empalme Escobedo transnational community expose not only the loss and pain but also the hope and the desire inherent in the processes of transnational movement.

The significance of migration is shaped by the historical, social, cultural, political and economic context in which it occurs. Mexican migration has always taken place in the context of U.S. domination. The processes of capitalism, modernity, and globalization have simultaneously bound the bordering countries together and highlighted their distinctions. Hence, Mexican migrants have been crossing a landscape divided not only by a border and real and implied cultural differences, but also by profound asymmetries in wealth and power (Rouse 1989:5).

Folks have been moving between Empalme Escobedo, Guanajuato and communities in Texas for over twenty years. A formation of social networks provides knowledge regarding jobs, support, and housing in particular locations. Typically, male individuals “make a living” working on private ranches in Giddings and La Grange, Texas or work in the service industry in Houston or Grapevine, Texas.

The history of Mexican migration to the United States is long and complex. Mexicans began migrating to the United States following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 when the United States used a war to assume control over the northern half of Mexico. Mexicans already living north of the “new border” became U.S. citizens and those who continued to come from the south became “transnational migrants” (Rouse 1989:13). During the U.S. imperialist conquest of 1846-1848, Mexico lost half of its territory. By 1900, Anglo-Americans assumed economic and political dominance over the majority of the Southwest. Seeking to control the land and livelihood of independent ranching communities (typically through force and without legal rights) the Anglo-Americans sought to create a “new dependent labor force” to work the fields and build the railroads in the region. Consequently, Mexican nationals and Mexican Americans dominated the agricultural labor force of the Southwest—contributing significantly to the expansion of American capitalism in the region. Many people of Mexican descent became bound to contractors and owners in a status barely above peonage (a system that has not exactly changed in 2009) (Blauner 1987:153). Mexican migration has continued at a relatively steady pace since the 1890’s, excepting the 1930’s when Mexicans were deterred from entering the United States due to thousands of forced repatriations and during the Great Depression when the prospects of migration were diminished by the lack of U.S. economic stability. Many Mexican families spent time in sites on both sides of the border. Hence, as Patricia Zavella argues, “notions of ‘reterritorialization’ are fraught with the history of Mexico’s having lost one third of its territory to the United States and the multiple economic, kin, and political ties Mexicans have established in both countries” (Zavella 2002: 226).

Susana talks to me about the pain and difficulty of living with the fact that her son is in the United States. He left Empalme Escobedo three years ago at the age of seventeen to work in Grapevine, Texas- a suburb of Dallas. She tells me about the day he left- it was a few days after Christmas. She pleaded with him not to go, but he did not listen. He wanted to go and ultimately it was his decision. Now that he is gone, she is not sure what part of the situation is the most difficult: she can't stand not being able to see him nor talk to him with any frequency. She worries if he will ever return: "Cada año promete regresar para la Navidad o la fiesta de San Isidro Labrador pero no lo ha hecho—no puede hacerlo—no tiene papeles y salir de Texas para venir a Empalme Escobedo solo pondría en riesgo la buena vida que tiene en Grapevine" [He promises each year to return for Christmas or the fiesta for San Isidro Labrador but he has not – he can not – he does not have papers and leaving Texas to visit Empalme Escobedo would severely jeopardize the good life he has in Grapevine]. Susana feels helpless – she repeats and repeats: "¿Qué puedo hacer? Lloro a menudo" [What can I do? I cry often] and she does so as she tells me about her son.

The second child of the family, Erika, completed middle school in Empalme Escobedo. Rather than continuing her education, Erika has been working various jobs in San Miguel de Allende and Celaya. She is currently working at a Nissan factory in Celaya. She works the night shift and makes 600 pesos a week. Susana tells me the job is a good opportunity for Erika. She explains, "Los dueños son americanos y mucha gente que trabajaban en la fábrica son de los Estados Unidos y hablaban inglés." [The owners are Americans and many of the people working in the factory are from the United States and speak English]. Nissan is offering contracts for the Celaya employees to work in the

United States for two or three months. The company will pay for the travel, housing, meals and working wages. According to Susana, “El trabajo es difícil, pero el dinero es bueno” [The work is difficult, but the money is good]. Erika is interested but she does not want to leave her family and home. Susana avoids thinking about losing another child to the United States.

Mariana, Susana’s 11-year-old daughter, sits and listens to our conversations with a sad look on her face. She rarely talks in front of her mother. In private, when we are on the street together or when she comes to visit me at my house, Mariana talks about her brother in the United States. She tells me about “las cosas” [the things] her brother has in the United States: “Una cámara telefónica, un carro Neon, él vivía en un tráiler, él trabajaba en un restaurante popular americano” [A camera phone, a Neon car, he lives in a trailer, and he works at a popular American restaurant]. Mariana explains to me that her family is remodeling their house with the money her brother sends from the United States. They are adding a second story that will be his room. She mentions that the room is not complete because he is not home. The way in which she states this indicates that they are waiting for his return to complete his room: as if their lives are on hold until his return to Mexico.

TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES

No matter the circumstances, migration is a stressful, emotionally charged experience of discontinuity and rupture difficult to imagine for those who have not been through it. [Ewing 2005:225]

Transnational families, following Leo R. Chavez, are “families with one or more members in the United States and one or more members ‘back home’ in another country”

(Chavez 1998:121). Chavez argues “such split families experience emotional, financial, and physical stress as a result of the migrant’s absence” (Chavez 1998:121).

Geographically and physically migrants are separated from their places of origin, however emotionally many often retain a strong bond. While migrants may not sever family ties, those ties are stretched across time, space, and national boundaries (Chavez 1998). As Chavez (1998:64) argues of Mexican migration to the United States:

Leaving home to migrate north initiates a profound and serious separation. Those left behind realize that sending a loved one off to the United States is an event whose outcome is in the hands of fate, and that some will pay an awful price for the privilege of earning minimum wage in a foreign country. ...Family members left behind by migrants live with the knowledge of such risks and potential dangers. They are part of an underlying tension created by separation.

Geographic separation also strains relations between family members, especially spouses, but also between migrating parents and the children left behind. These fears, tensions, and emotional stresses contribute to the pressure families feel to join members residing in the United States.

Many migrants not only leave behind the daily emotional support of relatives and friends, but they also often leave behind the social status and prestige earned in their place of origin. In a project centered on “engendering transnationalism in food processing” in Watsonville, California and the Bajío of Mexico, Patricia Zavella argues Mexican migrants experience “peripheral vision” (Zavella 2002:239). Zavella proposes Mexicans who had never migrated to the United States as well as those who lived in California after “successful” migration “imagined their work situations and their family lives in terms of a comparison with what was on *el otro lado* (the other side)—across the

U.S.-Mexican border” (Zavella 2002:239). Zavella (2002:239) calls this “‘peripheral vision,’ for it originates in the periphery, in the power imbalance between Mexico and the United States and the disempowerment of Mexicans in the United States.” Consequently, many Mexicans are frequently reminded of the uncertainty of their economic and familial situations. Zavella found many families living in “*casas tristes* (sad homes)” or “*casas divididas* (divided homes)” with individuals in the United States and in Mexico in frequent communication and social exchange. These families living on both sides of the border relentlessly worry about one another, consider possibilities for migration, and cross the border numerous times (Zavella 2002:238).

Magdalena has finally secured a tourist visa to travel to Grapevine, Texas and visit her two daughters and granddaughter. Ana and Lupita have lived in Grapevine, Texas for over five years. They left Empalme Escobedo as young adults (17 and 19 years old) with a male cousin who had established social and labor networks in Grapevine. Ana’s husband left Empalme Escobedo for the United States shortly after they were married. Finally Ana was ready to join her husband and start a family in Texas. A single woman, Lupita, wanted to accompany her sister and discover what life was like on the other side. Soon after their arrival, Ana gave birth to a daughter – a U.S. citizen. The women each secured two jobs, settled together in a modern apartment, and participate in the Grapevine transnational community that links them to Empalme Escobedo (a place to which they have not returned and now only remember through stories, photographs, videos and relationships with friends and relatives).

Being her first trip to the United States (and out of her country), Magdalena decides to travel by truck with a neighbor who has made a business out of driving back

and forth across the Mexican-U.S. border carrying objects and messages between Empalme Escobedo and Grapevine. She hopes to stay with her daughters in Grapevine for a month, but she worries how this will affect her family and work in Empalme Escobedo. It is difficult for Magdalena to live in a family divided. In Empalme Escobedo, she cares for her husband, two sons and two daughters, and one grandchild (all of whom live with her); maintains two homes (one is under construction and promises to be larger for her growing family) and an apartment she rents out for profit in Celaya; and fulfills responsibilities to her sisters' produce business, community and Catholic Church. Her daughters, Ana and Lupita, live in Grapevine, Texas. She has not seen them for five years and has never met Ariana, her granddaughter. Because her granddaughter is a U.S. citizen, Magdalena hopes to bring Ariana to Mexico and introduce her to her family and heritage.

Magdalena's first trip to Grapevine, Texas coincides with a trip I am making to Dallas, Texas from Empalme Escobedo to secure an FM3 Visa and paperwork for the United States Department of Education (Fulbright-Hays DDRA). We excitedly exchange dates, phone numbers and addresses ahead of time in Empalme Escobedo in order to meet in Grapevine, Texas.

After arriving in the United States Magdalena and I talk by phone to arrange to get together. It becomes clear that my mom's house in Dallas where I am staying is not far from their apartment in Grapevine. My mom too is anxious to meet Magdalena and her family and we decide on some food items to bring and head northwest on TX 114 to Grapevine.

Finding the apartment is not difficult and I am very happy to see Magdalena and meet her daughters and granddaughter. They show us around their apartment—two bedroom and two baths, divided by a living and dining area and kitchen. The apartment is new, very clean and nicely decorated with hand made pink frilly curtains and matching pillows on the couch, mementos of Mexico and a big television and DVD player.

Magdalena talks about her first experience in the United States. She tells us that she accompanied her daughters to the local grocery store (a Carnival chain) and encountered numerous friends from Empalme Escobedo. The neighborhood bakery, where her daughters shop, is owned by a family from Empalme Escobedo—whom she is happy to see. In the bakery too Magdalena runs into folks from her hometown. Magdalena explains that this makes her feel comfortable and happy. She instantly feels better about where her daughters are living and better understands the way they live in the United States.

At this and other visits (including two in 2007 once I had returned from the field—at which time Lupita had a baby boy and the girls had moved into separate apartments in a new complex) Magdalena, her daughters and I discuss the pain and difficulty of the space separating her family. Tears fill Magdalena's eyes as we discuss her scheduled departure to Mexico. Magdalena tells me how hard it is to leave her two daughters and granddaughter in Texas. She is aware of her daughters' need for her help while they work two jobs. Ana and Lupita tell me: "Mi mamá cuida a Ariana, cocina, va de compras, limpia y proporciona apoyo moral" [My mom takes care of Ariana, cooks, shops, cleans and provides moral support]. Magdalena explains, "Por más que quiero quedarme y acostumbrarme a vivir en Estados Unidos, me siento culpable por mi familia que está en

México, los extraño, y quiero... necesito regresar a México” [As much as I want to stay and could get used to living in the United States, I feel guilty about my family back home, I miss them, and I want ... need to return to Mexico.]”

Magdalena’s daughters understand their mother’s pain. They discuss their desire to return to Mexico and the suffering caused by their absence from family, friends, home and *mexicanidad*. Their return to Mexico is nearly impossible. Ana explains, “Siendo indocumentada, arriesgaríamos todo si regresáramos a México. Inclusive Ariana, quien nació en los Estados Unidos, ahora necesita un pasaporte para viajar a México” [Being undocumented, we would risk everything if we returned to Mexico. Even Ariana, born in the United States, now needs a passport to travel to Mexico].

The good news is Magdalena’s visa will allow her to visit the United States several more times: at this writing, she has taken Ariana with her twice to Mexico, and her son Oswaldo and mother Rosario have also applied for a travel visa to visit their family in Grapevine, Texas.

TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNITIES

Due to the long and complex history of Mexican migration to the United States an intricate infrastructure of settlement exists, including social circuits that provide access to knowledge about successful migration and communities in the United States that provide support, jobs, and housing to many migrants. The levels of resources and strategies that migrants create to work within the dominant society are often based on the individual, on the family, and on a social circuit of “*parientes* (relatives), *camaradas* (comrades), *paisanos* (fellow countryfolk), *amigos de confianza* (trusted friends), and *vecinos*

(neighbors)” (Chavez 1998: 137). Roger Rouse, whose research focuses on migration primarily to Redwood City, California from the rural *municipio* of Aguililla in Michoacán, Mexico, highlights the importance of “transnational migrant circuits.” Rouse (1989:304) argues that through “the continuous circulation of people, money, goods, and information made possible by years of uninterrupted migration and greatly facilitated by technological advances in transport and communications, places in Mexico and the United States have become woven together so tightly that they can no longer be considered distinct.”

Research by Rouse and others has documented that migrants do not settle randomly but, instead, follow members of their family and community to particular places. Over a twenty- year period, the research of Rouse and others proved that many migrants were not settling permanently in the United States. Temporary settlement was attributed, in particular, to the patterns of life in California (i.e. the high cost of living, discrimination and little potential for upward mobility) and to the fact that migration was viewed as a way of supporting enterprises in Mexico, particularly small- scale farming. Moreover, the research uncovered that migrants maintained social relationships all along the circuit, with some of the most significant relationships occurring between people who lived large distances apart. Migrants were not moving between two distinct communities. What began to occur was movement between a single community: a community constituted across a variety of sites and characterized by tensions, divisions, dependencies and contradictions (Rouse 1992; Striffler 2007).

Rouse’s explanation has proven useful in migration studies not only because a “circuit” more accurately represents what many migrants actually do, but it also provides

a space for anthropologists to ask and improve questions about how migrants understand their experiences. Recent research, however, demonstrates that a partial reconfiguration of the “transnational migrant circuit” is taking place. Steve Striffler’s (2007:675) ethnographic research in Arkansas demonstrates that it takes only a few “pioneers” to “determine the viability and desirability of a new location in the United States” and the circuit can shift quickly from one city or state to another. He writes, “if this geographic shift also involves a transition to (more) permanent settlement, it can lead to the relative and rapid abandonment of entire Mexican towns, as community members not only shift destinations but also remain in the United States for most of the year” (Striffler 2007:675). Scholars argue that this shift has transformed migrants (who for decades had been crossing the border with the intention of supporting life in Mexico through wage labor in the United States) into permanent settlers (who have been pushed to reimagine their understandings of “home” and “community,” social relationships, and strategies for survival). However, this research does not suggest that a move toward “permanent settlement” (a notion loaded with spatial and temporal problems and subject to change in the face of recent U.S. immigration policy and economic recession) will eventually shift to movement from one integrated community in Mexico to another in the United States (Striffler 2007).

Migrants in Empalme Escobedo have long understood the “community” to include several locales. The continued maintenance of subsistence and kinship practices by folks in Empalme Escobedo made possible the opportunities to occasionally resist wage labor or reconfigure wage relations. If men (and women) can migrate to Texas and return to Empalme Escobedo with regularity to their families and their family agriculture

they retain kinship ties and alternative subsistence strategies that provide a base on which to build their personal assets or business enterprises. Hence, migrating becomes not simply a matter of where the jobs are but also what opportunities they can create for themselves. As Frances Rothstein (2007:11) writes, “The flow of capital influences [migrants] movements, but so too do social relations that derive from a different non-capitalist, subsistence imaginary. That non-capitalist imaginary sees family reproduction as more important than capitalist profit.” As such, folks in Empalme Escobedo are not producing a different capitalism or a noncapitalist pattern, but instead are using their lived experiences as a family-based economy to influence their movements.

May 2004

Prior to May 22, 2004 “el rancho,” Giddings, Texas was as much a figment of my imagination as it was of the men and women who described it to me. While discussing migration to the United States during preliminary research in Empalme Escobedo, I carefully attempted to elicit detailed information on the locations of this migration. Each person I talked to described “el rancho” differently, who lived there, for how long, and their employment opportunities. Furthermore, “el rancho” was equated not only with Giddings, Texas but also La Grange and Houston, Texas. I was unable to get a clear answer. Were Giddings, La Grange, and Houston imagined as a continuous landscape? Finally, while in Empalme Escobedo for the May 2004 fiesta for San Isidro Labrador I was given the opportunity to know the real “el rancho.” Alicia, the female head of the household asked me to take gifts back to the United States for her daughter, Isabel Alvarez Torres, living on “el rancho.” Not only did I see this gesture as part of the

gradual development of a trusting relationship with the Alvarez family, but also I now have a “real” and “imagined” familiarity with the ranch located in Giddings, Texas.

Traveling by bus and subject to numerous patrol stops and hours at the border while each passenger was questioned and every bag searched, I successfully crossed the Mexican-U.S. border with Alicia’s three wheels of handmade cheese, six loaves of bread home made for San Isidro Labrador that had been placed on his *parande* (wall of offerings of bread and alcohol), two bottles of tequila (also originally offerings to the saint), red and white carnations taken by Alicia from the Sacred Cross of Picacho to rub on Isabel’s baby in times of sickness, a new blouse and pant outfit for Isabel, new *huaraches* (leather sandals) for the baby, and family photographs. A few days after my return to Austin and several phone conversations with Isabel, I traveled to Giddings, Texas.

I learned that only Isabel and her husband from Empalme Escobedo, Jaime Torres, his two sons from a previous marriage (in Empalme Escobedo) and their young daughter, Lulu, live on the ranch in Giddings, Texas. The ranch is owned by a Houston physician and is run entirely by Jaime. The Alvarez Torres family now lives in the ranch owner’s original house on the property (they previously lived in a trailer in Giddings). Two of Jaime’s brothers, his ex-wife, one of Isabel’s brothers and many relatives and friends live in La Grange, Texas. Two of Isabel’s brothers and two nephews live in Houston, whereas her father and another brother are currently in Empalme Escobedo but plan to return to Giddings, La Grange or Houston.

December 2004

Isabel, Jaime and Lulu leave the ranch in Giddings, Texas in a new truck packed full of electronics, clothing, toiletries, and Bud Light for Lulu's first trip to Empalme Escobedo and Isabel's return to her family after two years in the United States. Jaime and Isabel have been working with an attorney to legalize Isabel's status in the United States as the wife of a permanent resident of the U.S. and the mother of a U.S. citizen. The frustrating and slow moving legalization process kindled the decision to return Isabel to her country and her family where she could raise Lulu with communal support and without fear.

Empalme Escobedo offers more for Isabel and Lulu as a first time mother and developing child. Isabel and Lulu settle in Jaime's parent's home in the barrio of San Isidro Labrador, a few blocks from Isabel's family home. Living in Mexico, Lulu has grown accustomed to the constant attention and companionship of her cousins, grandparents, aunts, uncles and neighbors. She continues to ask about her father and the ranch. Her status as a *norteamericana*, extraverted nature, and the time lost from her Mexican family shape her development and experiences and she is rapidly changing.

July 2006

In July 2006 Lulu is three and a half years old (turning three is a significant rite of passage in Mexico) and Isabel now wonders if her daughter's greatest opportunities are in the United States. Living with her in-laws has been a challenge for Isabel. She is grateful that her family lives only a few blocks away and it is with them and in their home(s) that she and Lulu spend the majority of their time. However Isabel does not want to destroy her already strained relationship with Jaime's parents.

In explaining the situation to me, Isabel and her mother Alicia describe Jaime's parents as "chapado a la antigua" [old fashioned, lost in another era]. I learn that Isabel's mother-in-law rarely cooks for or offers food to her granddaughter and daughter-in-law. When she does cook it consists of "los frijoles muy feos y arroz de ayer" [dirty beans and day old rice]. Isabel has lost weight and worries about her daughter's nutrition. When she cooks (typically a healthy and complete meal), her mother-in-law refuses to eat.

Isabel cleans and helps around the house, but is never acknowledged. Furthermore, when Jaime calls the house from the United States, his mother is the first to answer and claims Isabel is not home (whether she is or not). Isabel encourages Jaime to call her parent's house and she purchased a cell phone to communicate more privately with him.

Jaime's father is one of the few men remaining in Empalme Escobedo who works exclusively as a farmer. Due to years of manual labor in the hot sun his body is deteriorating. Isabel tells me he is currently struggling with a terrible infection from wounds on his legs that will not heal. On several occasions a doctor has cleaned the wounds, but he refuses to keep the wounds bandaged or to limit his work in the fields. The dirt, sun and daily wear of unwashed clothes keep the wounds in a constant state of infection.

August 19, 2006

A decision has been made: Isabel and Lulu will attempt to return to Giddings, Texas. From the Celaya bus station they will board a bus that will take them to Matamoros, Texas. Jaime will be waiting for them at the border. He and Lulu can cross freely across the Mexican-U.S. border, Isabel cannot. Jaime has arranged and paid for a

woman to take Isabel (illegally) across the border. Isabel was jailed years ago after her first attempt to cross into the United States failed. She is hesitant and fearful of the crossing. Yet as she packs up and prepares to leave her family again in Empalme Escobedo, she appears calm and self-assured.

The departure is serious. The majority of the Alvarez Rivera family is gathered on the street in front of the house, sitting and talking like every evening. Lorenzo's grey work truck is parked in front of the house and provides additional seating and a little privacy as the family stares at Isabel and takes turns holding Lulu. Isabel's luggage (a large worn duffle bag and small diaper bag) sits in the bed of the truck. Conversation is upbeat and primarily revolves around the weather and the abundance of flies—not Isabel and Lulu's departure. Finally, Lorenzo gets up—indicating it is time to leave—and Isabel and Lulu receive brief hugs and kisses. As the truck pulls off for the twenty-minute drive to the Celaya bus station, Ernesto (Isabel's father) and a couple of kids jump into its bed.

August 26, 2006

One week later, Isabel and Lulu are back in Empalme Escobedo. The trip is not successful.

Figure 8: Agriculture and the Railroad in Empalme Escobedo



INTERNATIONAL AGRICULTURAL RESTRUCTURING AND MIGRATION

Following the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917) many folks in Empalme Escobedo received *ejidos*—land granted under the agrarian reform. During the 1920s, 30s and 40s small landowners were able to subsist on *ejidos*, through the cultivation of corn and beans. These *campesinos*, who relied predominantly on subsistence agriculture, made up a significant portion of the population of Empalme Escobedo.²⁰ The 1930s in Mexico were dominated by President Lazaro Cardenas’s “nationalist-populist” policies.

Beginning in the 1940s policies heightened that favored import substitution industrialization. Chiefly since the 1940s, the Mexican state has followed a path of capitalist development that has increasingly been advantageous to the few over the majority. For example, state programs gave support to industrial growth over agriculture and preferred large-scale agriculture over small-scale subsistence cultivation. As a result, small-scale cultivators received minimal support from the government. In spite of the 1940s land reform, the Bajío maintained its position in the modern national economy. The high quality lands and irrigation resources of the region made the Bajío an ideal location to establish state programs to develop and modernize Mexican agriculture. For example, in the 1950s the Bajío was used to test the reorganization of Mexican agriculture and in the 1960s the regions’ rich agricultural lands supported the efforts of

²⁰ The Spanish term *campesino* translates into English as farmer, farmworker, rural person or person of the countryside. Another possible English translation is peasant, typically meaning one who relies on simple or subsistence farming to survive rather than generate a profit (Diccionario de la Lengua Española 2001).

the Green Revolution with the development and introduction of high yielding grains (Palerm and Urquiola 1993).

In the 1920s Empalme González (changed to Escobedo in 1947) was just beginning to take shape as a town –rather than solely a crossroads, as a function of the railroad. Permanent structures were built (school, post office, grocery store, boarding house, cantina, municipal office) that increased Empalme Escobedo’s population and decreased vagrancy and crime. Families were forming and many became farmers who took advantage of Empalme Escobedo’s location both in fertile lands and as a railroad crossing. In 1947 construction of a church began in Empalme Escobedo. The first Catholic priest arrived in Empalme Escobedo in 1951. Marisol Sanchez describes her life growing up in the San Isidro Labrador neighborhood of Empalme Escobedo in the 1950s as “muy duro... pero tranquilo” [very hard ...but peaceful]. She tells me, “Mi padre y mis hermanos eran campesinos, pero todos trabajábamos la tierra—mi madre, mis dos hermanas y yo. Nuestro ejido estaba pequeño y arriba en el cerro sobre del pueblo y caminábamos temprano cada mañana a trabajar en el sol fuerte. Por la tarde mi madre, mis hermanas y yo regresábamos a casa para moler el maíz por tortillas y hacíamos gorditas ... llena de cualquier cosa estaba en la cocina ... nopales, frijoles, o queso fresco. Llevábamos diario las gorditas a la estación del tren en el centro del pueblo y vendíamos la comida a los pasajeros y trabajadores del ferrocarril. Trabajábamos así durante muchos años y ayudó a mi familia a sobrevivir” [My father and brothers were farmers, but we all worked the land—my mother, two sisters and myself. Our plot of land was small and up in the hills above town and we walked early each morning to work in the hot sun. In the afternoons my mother, sisters and I would return home to grind corn

for tortillas, and we would make *gorditas*... filled with whatever we had...cactus, beans or fresh cheese. Each day we took the *gorditas* to the train station in the center of town and sold food to the passengers and railroad laborers. We worked like this for many years and it helped my family to survive].

The changes to agriculture in the Bajío beginning in the 1930s until today have coincided with change and labor reform in the United States to significantly contribute to Mexican migrant farm labor in the United States in particular, and migration from the region to the U.S. in general. Following the land reform of the Cardenas administration, ejido family farmers in the Bajío became primary suppliers of labor for agribusiness in California (Palerm and Urquiola 1993:313). In the 1930s and 40s the Mexican state did not provide the new ejido tenants with financial or technical support, thus many folks were unable to adequately farm their allotted land. Most ejido farmers in the Bajío lacked the farming equipment, draft animals and seed that in the past had been provided by *hacendados* (rural estate owners) through sharecropping and tenant arrangements (Brading 1978; Palerm and Urquiola 1993:322). Domestic households with access to ejido plots in Empalme Escobedo struggled to survive by producing subsistence crops (corn and beans) and by trading small amounts of farm surplus in local markets.

World War II put a strain on the United States agriculture and manufacturing industries. In July 1942 the United States and Mexico reached an agreement that inaugurated the Bracero Program. The program was initially designed as an emergency measure to replace U.S. domestic farm workers (taken from agricultural employment by the war effort) with Mexican contract labor. However, following World War II, California growers sought an extension of the agricultural labor program that resulted in

the 1951 Public Law 78, which transformed the temporary emergency measure into a fixed arrangement that lasted until 1964 (Menchaca 1995; Palerm and Urquiola 1993:323). In 1942 hundreds of Mexicans assembled at the recruitment centers, first in Mexico City and later in Irapuato, Guanajuato. The majority of braceros became contract farm workers with more than half working for California growers (Palerm and Urquiola 1993:326). Some braceros were employed to work for the railroad.

In 1964 the United States unilaterally revoked the Bracero Program. The next decade (1965-1975) was marked by the numerous efforts of the United States to break down the interdependency between itself and Mexico. For example, the United States promoted the replacement of farm labor with machines in California and encouraged the development of Green Revolution programs in rural Mexico. The United States assumed that California agribusiness and Mexican *ejido* farms would develop independently of each other based on their own improved resources (Alarcón 1994, 1999; Palerm and Urquiola 1993).

By the late 1970s and early 1980s it became clear that the efforts to dismember the U.S. and Mexico's farm economies had failed. 1976-1989 is characterized by prevalent economic woes advanced by the energy crisis and Mexico's recession. In 1986, the United States approved the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), a special legislative measure created to stem and control migration from Mexico. The act made it illegal to deliberately hire immigrants who did not possess lawful work authorization, required employers to validate their employees' immigration status, and created a path toward legalization to certain agricultural seasonal workers and immigrants that had worked and resided continuously (although without documentation) in the United States

since January 1, 1982. According to Juan Vicente Palerm and José Ignacio Urquiola (1993:352), the passage of the IRCA debilitates “the possibility of creating a stable and reliable source of domestic workers by eroding employment and wage conditions in agriculture, to the extent that only an external peasant labor supply and/or destitute immigrants can accept farm jobs.” In the Bajío, for example, the IRCA impacted the agricultural production of key crops. Prior to the 1980s the primary crops in the Bajío were corn and sesame (*ajonjolí*). Following the IRCA, the Bajío saw a substantial reduction in the cultivation of rain-fed land affecting the profitable production of corn and sesame. Consequently, the cultivation of sorghum increased. The production of sorghum (unlike corn and sesame) primarily benefits the cattle industry of the Bajío rather than the economic market (Alarcón and Santibáñez 2008).

As a consequence of years of development and dependence between Mexican migrant farm workers and California agribusiness the inequities of political and social power and the unequal distribution of citizenship and belonging are entangled in long-standing social structures, normalized in institutions, and naturalized in the everyday experiences of Mexican migrants in the United States (Benson 2008). A precise count of migrant farm workers does not exist in the United States. Yet, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, half of all agricultural workers are migrants (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2007). Furthermore, ninety-five percent of migrant farm workers are of Mexican descent and more than half of all agricultural workers are undocumented (Oxfam America 2004:7-8).

In the early 1990s the mood in Mexican political and business circles was drastically improved. It was a time of major structural reforms in Mexico and of

particular interest were the negotiations between Mexico, the United States and Canada in relation to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Advocates saw NAFTA as another major stage in Mexico's modernization movement. Presidents Carlos Salinas de Gortari, George H. W. Bush and Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney argued that NAFTA would bring consumers cheaper food, more efficient producers, and a decrease in Mexican immigration to the U.S. as the developing economy of Mexico converged with the powerful U.S and Canadian economies.

The United States, Mexico, and Canada, in creating and passing NAFTA into law in 1992-1993, claimed to acknowledge the severe disparities in agricultural development among the three countries and hence negotiated fifteen years for Mexican growers of "sensitive products," like corn, to achieve competitive status. However, many Mexican farmers continue to rely on oxen, mules, and plows or older models of Ford and John Deere tractors, putting them at a disadvantage to their counterparts in the U.S. and Canada—who primarily use the latest, costly equipment to work their farms. If NAFTA was successful in increasing trade between Mexico, the United States and Canada, it also increased the gaps between social and economic classes as well as racial and cultural divisions. Substantial agricultural imports have displaced an estimated two million farmers in Mexico, as subsidized grains from the United States take over their local and regional markets (Carlsen 2007). With few new jobs in manufacturing or other sectors, many of these former farmers now work in the agricultural and service sectors of the United States—largely as undocumented and exploited laborers.

In January of 2008 the remaining controls and tariffs on corn imports (as well as on beans, sugar and powdered milk) implemented under NAFTA were removed, greatly

affecting the Mexican market. Mexican consumers and producers are now subject to the world's biggest corporations. For example, in the Bajío well-known transnational companies use its agricultural potential to produce export fruit and vegetable commodities. Consequently, January was marked with anti-NAFTA protests across Mexico. On January 18, 2008 a group of farmers protesting NAFTA drove their tractors toward Mexico City. The group, organized under the Francisco Villa Campesino Resistance Movement (MRCFV), wants the administration of Mexican President Felipe Calderón to renegotiate the agricultural section of NAFTA in order to shield corn and beans from foreign competition. The farmers of MRCFV as well as supporters of the "No Corn No Country" National Campaign argue that: "The government of Felipe Calderón has refused to protect corn and beans, basic foods for Mexicans and sources of employment, survival and cultural reproduction of three million farmers and their families as well as 56 ethnic groups in the country" (Patterson 2008).

The 2008 anti-NAFTA protests expose Mexico's fury and vulnerability under the NAFTA economy. Key federal senators and deputies from the PRI and PRD parties verbally support the call by the MRCFV and its allies to renegotiate NAFTA'S agricultural clauses. The National Campesino Confederation (CNC), an enduring influential force in rural communities, which supported NAFTA under the Salinas de Gortari administration, is also demanding a revision of the trade pact. In Guanajuato, farmers are legally pursuing challenges against NAFTA on the basis that the accord violates sections of the Mexican Constitution that protect the economic well being of citizens. Interestingly, however, the Roman Catholic Church is divided over the free trade treaty. Whereas the nine bishops of the Mexican Episcopal Conference urge a thorough

reexamination of NAFTA's agricultural sections, Mexico City Cardinal Norberto Rivera is against reopening a trade agreement that he believes is reaping benefits for his country (Patterson 2008).

Since the passage of NAFTA the Mexican economy has relied more and more on its non-renewable resources (oil and gas), the informal economy, remittances from migrants in the United States and drug trafficking. The United States contributed to and must share the responsibility for the unemployment, poverty, and out-migration in Mexico. Although immigration was not included in NAFTA it was nevertheless made worse by an agreement that failed to take into account the needs of vulnerable sectors of the Mexican economy. Immigration is a significant force of globalization. However, immigration violates human rights when the prospects in the home country are not viable and migrants are regarded as criminals in the receiving country.

THE MEANINGS OF ABSENCE AND PRESENCE

Most folks from Empalme Escobedo living in Texas now understand home in contradictory ways that are shaped by migration and life in the United States, experiences that are influenced by their faith, gender and age. Migrant men in particular see Empalme Escobedo as a place where they are not controlled by the legal system, racism and exploitation that shapes their lives in the United States. Similarly, migrants' understandings of Texas are produced in tension with their perceptions of Empalme Escobedo, migration, and family. Texas is imagined as a "land of opportunity" offering employment, education and material goods. Yet, migrants are typically excluded from what counts as "community" in the United States. Migrants in the U.S. are often seen through a lens that frames them and the spaces connected to their lives and work as

“other” and belonging on the “outside” (Benson 2008: 620). “Mexico”—the imagined space and time of migrants—is viewed in the United States as inferior. It is difficult for Mexican migrants to fully identify with communities that are so ambivalent about their presence. As such, migrants’ survival in the United States (their ability to make a living and send a remittance back home) depends on inhabiting a space that could never be a “home” (Striffler 2007). Hence, the idea and experience of Empalme Escobedo as a community (spanning multiple places) where one belongs remains significant, especially because this identification continues to be a dominant force in everyday life in the United States (Anderson 1983; Appadurai 1990a; Chavez 1994; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Striffler 2007).

The tension between migrants’ understandings and memories of Mexico and the United States and the materiality of these places plays an important role in migrant identity formation and senses of belonging. Moreover, the continuous experiences of transnational migration and its economic, social and political necessity are also significant in shaping subjectivities and places. The stories people tell in Empalme Escobedo highlight their fragmented lives and the meanings of absence and presence.

The Mexican- U.S. border symbolizes the impermanence and fragmentation of migrants’ lives. For folks from Empalme Escobedo, their understandings of both Mexico and the United States are part hope, part reality, and part imagination. “Home” is simultaneously attractive and unpleasant. Empalme Escobedo is a place many have desired all year, a place where they belong. Yet, migrants are also constantly reminded of why they left Mexico for the United States.

In Empalme Escobedo, it is during fiestas and the stories and preparations surrounding them that understandings of home, belonging, identity and nationality are given intense expression. Faith and returning to Empalme Escobedo each year to celebrate devotion to a patron saint underscores the tension between mobility and place that shapes migrants and their families' daily lives. The celebration and re-creation of community through fiestas in Empalme Escobedo revives the hope that migrants will permanently return to Mexico and renews the sense of belonging and Mexican identity for those who must immediately return to the United States. It is significant that migrants from Empalme Escobedo choose to return in May to celebrate the fiestas for San Isidro Labrador, Maria Auxiliadora and the Santa Cruz de Picacho, rather than at Christmas when most have vacations and a period frequently documented for migrant travel to Mexico. The communal sociability and solidarity produced in the Empalme Escobedo May fiesta performances cannot be recreated or matched through the enactment of popular religious rituals in Texas or elsewhere.

Migrants' social practices and interpretive strategies shape the experience of and responses to their changing environments and relationships. Katherine Pratt Ewing argues, "migration is an affectively highly charged and fluid situation, which makes particularly visible the role that social and interpretive practices play in producing specific manifestations and experiences of emotion" (Ewing 2005:226). Increased mobility and the positionality of migrants facilitates the emergence of new social and cultural practices, particularly in emotionally stressful situations generated by existing structures of power and inequality (Ewing 2005). In Empalme Escobedo, subjective acts of meaning-making such as performing devotion to a patron saint encourage folks to look

at their desire, pain, and each other in a particular way. Neither the place of Empalme Escobedo nor devotion to a local patron saint has lost its potency as a source of identity. This can be attributed to a multiplicity of factors, including the force of devotion, the meaning of absence, the desire for home, and the reality that meaningful presence (belonging) in U.S. communities is not a reality for most Mexican migrants.

The process of transnational community formation and the understanding of community it constructs are important. How Empalme Escobedo is understood as a place and an identity has become more flexible. As Striffler (2007: 684) writes, “both community and ‘its’ places are creatively imagined because the experience of migration is itself so complex.” The notion of community that is developing among migrants from Empalme Escobedo is grounded in a common experience of impermanence and fragmentation. What ties migrants together are common experiences and understandings of faith and family as well as the impossibility of being either here or there, of remaining in Empalme Escobedo, while at the same time making it difficult to be in the United States, to meaningfully belong in U.S. communities where they are marginalized by nationality, ethnicity and language.

SANTO NIÑO DE LAS MARAVILLAS

The patron saint in Empalme Escobedo most associated with migration is the Santo Niño de las Maravillas. Men go to the *capilla* for the Santo Niño de las Maravillas before leaving Empalme Escobedo and crossing the border into the United States. Lorenzo, a member of the Alvarez Rivera family who works more than half of the year (typically August-May) in Houston, Texas tells me he annually takes offerings of toys to

the Santo Niño de las Maravillas before leaving for the United States. Lorenzo makes a promise to the Holy Child and has faith that in return the Santo Niño will protect him while in the United States and keep his family healthy in Empalme Escobedo. Lorenzo considers himself a religious man and prays daily to his patron saints whom he relies on to protect he and his family (in Mexico and the U.S.). His devotion to patron saints gives him the strength to endure his work in Texas and fulfills a sense of belonging and identity lacking in his daily life. He is a significant contributor (monetarily and through time, devotion and dedication) to the maintenance of San Isidro Labrador's image and *capilla* (across the street from his home in Empalme Escobedo) and the annual fiesta to honor the patron saint in May. Lorenzo returns every year to celebrate his devotion to San Isidro Labrador. Looking forward to the fiesta and his return home in May is also a significant source of hope and strength in his work and daily life in Houston, Texas.

In Empalme Escobedo, my husband and I live in the Barrio del Santo Niño. The neighborhood is named for the Santo Niño de Las Maravillas. The image of the Santo Niño de Las Maravillas is housed in a *capilla* less than a block from our home. Lining the walls of the *capilla* are photographs, pieces of paper with *testimonios*, requests and promises written on them, material remembrances of loved ones, and offerings of flowers, candles and toys to the Niño Santo. The story of the Santo Niño de Las Maravillas is based on the Santo Niño de Atocha.

Devotion to the Santo Niño de Atocha originated in Spain, most probably in Atocha, a barrio of Madrid. Originally devotion was directed to the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Atocha. The Virgin Mary of Atocha was known to have a miraculous infant.

Prior to praying to or asking something of the Holy Child, the petitioner must ask permission from his mother, linking their devotion.

According to the myth, many men in Atocha were imprisoned based on their faith (Ball and Hinojosa 2006). The jail did not provide food to the prisoners and thus in order to eat, food had to be provided by their families. However, an order was issued that only children would be permitted to bring food to the prisoners. The women of Atocha prayed to the Virgin Mary asking her to help them feed the imprisoned men. Days later the prisoners without children to feed them were being fed by a young boy. The boy's identity was unknown, yet his water gourd was never empty nor was his basket of bread. According to the story, the young boy came at night to the jail, slipping past the sleeping guards or charming those who were awake. Devotees to Our Lady of Atocha suspected the work as that of the Holy Child of the Virgin Mary. Upon visiting the image of the Virgin Mary and her child, folks noticed that the shoes of the Holy Child were dirty and worn. Devotees quickly replaced the shoes of the young child, but when they returned the shoes were again dirty and worn (Ball and Hinojosa 2006). The continuous cycle of replaced and dirty shoes of the Santo Niño was taken as a sign that he went out every night to help those in need. To this day, devotees believe that the wandering Santo Niño performs numerous miracles.

Devotion to Our Lady of Atocha and the Santo Niño was brought from Spain to Mexico. In Plateros, a small town close to the silver mines of Fresnillo in the state of Zacatecas, a church was built in 1690 to honor Santo Cristo de los Plateros (a miraculous crucifix) and in a side altar was placed an image of Our Lady of Atocha and her Holy Child. According to the story, the original statue of Our Lady of Atocha in Plateros held

the Holy Child in her left arm (Ball and Hinojosa 2006). The child was made to be removable and at an unknown date the original image was lost. The image was recreated as more representative of its devotees, the skin was brown and its body was life-size and life-like. The parish priests began to take the Santo Niño in procession during major religious celebrations in neighboring villages and in the city of Fresnillo.

By late colonial times, devotion to the Santo Niño in the region had surpassed that of Our Lady of Atocha and the Santo Cristo de los Plateros. Consequently devotion to the miraculous Holy Child expanded to other parts of Mexico. In 1838, the Santo Niño was moved to a niche in the main altar of the church in Plateros. According to an inventory taken at that time the Holy Child had received twenty-nine outfits and thirty-two *retablos* (painted wood or tin relief panels to show devotion, express gratitude or ask for help from a patron saint) (Ball and Hinojosa 2006). The church, despite its location in a small mountainous town, became an important Mexican pilgrimage site. The Santo Niño received so many offerings from devotees that a building was annexed to the church in 1883 (*el salon de los retablos*) to house the offerings and now serves as a museum.

In 1848 a pilgrim from Guanajuato, Don Calixto Aguirre, wrote a novena to honor the Santo Niño de Atocha in return for the saint healing him from a serious illness. After traveling from Guanajuato to Plateros, Zacatecas, Calixto Aguirre transcribed nine miracles from *retablos* found in the church, using each as an inspirational theme for the daily prayers. The novena portrays the Holy Child as a little wanderer rather than an infant king. The miracles described in the *retablos* and recorded by Aguirre aided prisoners, miners, immigrants, the seriously ill and men and women subjected to poor labor or economic conditions and violence. Aguirre's novena was widely distributed in

Mexico as well as in Central America and the United States (in particular New Mexico) (Ball and Hinojosa 2006). I include a prayer from the *novena* that is recited in Empalme Escobedo.

To the sick and imprisoned,
You lovely Child,
Protect and assist,
With your great power,
And you do not abandon,
Anyone with pain,
You give the imprisoned,
Liberty and return,
And also to the sick,
Who, if not you, could do this?
Different miracles,
Loving Child,
You do daily,
And I am requesting,
That you please grant me,
What I am asking for,
With all my wishes,
To obtain said miracle,
That I am hereby requesting from you.

[Parroquia de Empalme Escobedo, Guanajuato, n.d.]

In Empalme Escobedo, the Santo Niño de las Maravillas is also known to work miracles for those in need, particularly children, farmers and migrants.

Figure 9: El Santo Niño de las Maravillas, Empalme Escobedo



The image of the Santo Niño in Empalme Escobedo is life-size, with life-like features and brown skin and is dressed in a light blue gown draped in embroidered lace. The Holy Child is seated on a wooden chair and his head—adorned in a cold crown—rests on a white eyelet pillow. His shoes must be frequently replaced because of their constant wear and tear due to the Santo Niño’s wandering in the fields and streets of Empalme Escobedo serving his devotees. Folks are often visiting his *capilla* to ask him for aid, make promises to him and leave him offerings (typically toys because he is a child). The Santo Niño de las Maravillas is known to give aid to migrants crossing the Mexican-U.S. border.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND IMMIGRATION POLICY REFORM

In April and May of 2006 millions of people in cities across the United States marched in the streets to protest U.S. immigration policies and show their support for immigrant rights. The enormous participation in cities such as Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, Miami and New York resulted in the largest immigrant rights mobilization to date in the United States.²¹ Carrying American flags, Mexican flags, banners representing

²¹ The Dallas, Texas *Mega March* took place on Sunday April 9 2006. It is estimated (by the Dallas police) that 350,000 to 500,000 people marched peacefully through downtown Dallas in solidarity for the rights of immigrants. The march is the largest civil rights demonstration in the history of the city of Dallas. My mother attended the Dallas *Mega March* and I learned of her experience over the phone at the *caseta* in Empalme Escobedo. In our conversation she explains that the march began at the Cathedral Shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe between Ross Avenue and Pearl Street (in downtown Dallas). She was immediately struck by the “warm energy and reverence of the group.” Around 1:00 p.m. the group began walking slowly from the Cathedral west on Ross Avenue “radiating passion, chanting ‘Si se puede,’” and producing cheers, claps and drumbeats. Many marchers carried U.S. flags and banners declaring rights for immigrants. Once the group reached City Hall, they paused to listen to several speakers. Among the well received was Bishop Charles Grahmann of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Dallas (resigned April 2007). My mom was moved by her participation in the march that she describes as a “peaceful spiritual movement.”

the Virgin of Guadalupe, crosses and signs proclaiming “Si se puede,” or “Hoy marchamos, mañana votamos,” men, women and children protested a proposed federal bill (HR4437) that sought (among other things) to make it a felony to aid undocumented immigrants. The protesters who were primarily immigrants and predominantly Latino, were joined by prominent leaders from labor unions, civil rights organizations, the media, religious and ethnic groups and ordinary folks to show their support for immigrant rights and demand policy reform that would resolve the liminal legal state of an estimated twelve million undocumented immigrants living and working in the United States.

Religious leaders were visible and vocal in the marches for immigrant rights. Many of the marches began and ended at churches. Cardinal Roger M. Mahoney (leader of the nation’s largest Catholic archdiocese –Los Angeles, California) is credited with organizing half a million people in Los Angeles, including many undocumented immigrants. In an article in the *Washington Post*, 2 April 2006, the author John Pomfret argues, “the efforts of the Cardinal made people feel safe enough to participate in one of the largest demonstrations in Los Angeles history.” Cardinal Mahoney is quoted as calling the December House bill (HR4437) “blameful, vicious legislation” and “vowed a campaign of civil disobedience in the archdiocese’s 288 parishes if it becomes law.”

Likewise, San Francisco’s Archbishop George Neiderauer participated in the city’s largest demonstration for immigrant rights and publicly criticized the December house bill to impose criminal penalties for illegal immigrants and build a fence along the Mexican-U.S. border. The archbishop is quoted in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, 24 March 2006, as calling the bill “very shortsighted and even mean-spirited.” The article reports that prior to the immigrant rights march George Neiderauer “led a crowd of

mostly Latino Catholics in an interfaith prayer service” and concludes that many who attended the San Francisco rally chose to participate because of the archbishop’s involvement.

The San Antonio Archbishop, José H. Gomez, expressed his opinion on the rights of immigrants in a *San Antonio Express News*, 5 April 2006, editorial: “I write to all people of faith and good will to raise their voices and settle for nothing less than an approach to immigration that brings families together, provides migrants with the opportunity to find work with dignity and recognizes the right of people to flee economic oppression to seek a better life and provide for their family.”

Similarly, in Mexico, the Roman Catholic Church has voiced an opinion on and created a presence in the immigration reform movement. For instance, the bishops of the border cities of Ciudad Juarez, Tijuana, Mexicali, Nogales, Reynosa, Nuevo Laredo, and Piedras Negras endorsed the May 1 “Great American Boycott.” In various parts of the country, labor unions, regional and local business groups and ex-bracero associations supported a one-day boycott of U.S. products and businesses. In the state of Guanajuato, the city of San Miguel de Allende simultaneously participated in the boycott and held a rally for immigrant rights in the U.S. The flyer for the boycott in the San Miguel de Allende English language newspaper, *Atención San Miguel*, 28 April 2006, reports, “Mexicans and North Americans Shoulder-to-Shoulder . . . Peacefully support the Day of Action of our brothers and sisters in the U.S.”

In January of 2006 Mexico’s Roman Catholic Church called on the administration of President Vicente Fox to take a stronger stand against the United States in the debate over immigration policy. Church officials demonstrated concern about the internal effects

of migration, particularly the ways in which migration impacts family unity. The director of the Archdiocese of Mexico's culture commission, Mario Angel Flores, expressed the Church's concerns regarding migration and the family in the following statement:

We are also before another phenomenon that is not being addressed: many families are disintegrating; generally, one goes, and little by little the others follow, and we find out that we have families scattered. ...The answer should not only be in the economic sphere, but also in the family one. It's a complex problem. [Patterson 2006]

Concurrently Mexican bishops and priests increased their public roles in the pro-migrant movement. In Empalme Escobedo the priest often integrates migration into his sermons by asking the community to pray for the safety and fair treatment of migrants in the United States. Many families request that Cura Fernando Olivera pray for and name specific migrants in the United States at a particular or various masses.

In 2006 the Fox administration was in its final year and political criticism was abundant as the country prepared for the July presidential election. Early in his term President Vicente Fox made a new immigration accord a major goal in his relationship with the United States and the Bush administration. However, the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States greatly affected U.S. –Mexico relations and any goals for immigration reform on both sides of the border. Critics accused Fox throughout his administration for appearing weak against the United States and not following through with his promises to boost the economy, improve job creation and retention, and reform immigration. Furthermore, Fox's free-market reforms were hindered due to popular and congressional opposition. At a press conference on January 9, 2006 at Los Pinos (the Mexican equivalent to the White House), Fox administration spokesman Rubén Aguilar

Valenzuela stated that “cultural factors” were a major cause of Mexican migration to the United States:

En algunos casos tiene que ver con problemas reales de pobreza, y en otros responde a otro tipo de intereses de las personas. Las estadísticas revelan que un número muy, muy alto, de las personas que emigran a los Estados Unidos tenían trabajo en México, no emigran por no tener trabajo, sino emigran por otra serie de condiciones también de carácter cultural, porque esperan una mejor condición de vida a pesar de que aquí tenían trabajo, no se están yendo porque no tengan trabajo en México. [Presidencia de la República 2006]

[In some cases it [migration] has to do with real problems of poverty, and in others it answers to other types of personal interest. Statistics reveal that a very, very high number of the persons who migrate to the United States had work in Mexico. They don't migrate to get a job, but they migrate for another series of conditions also of a cultural character, because they hope for a better condition of life despite the fact that they had work here. They aren't going because they don't have work in Mexico].

Mexican Cardinal Norberto Rivera Carrera criticized Rubén Aguilar's statement that “culture” was a factor in the decision to migrate. He argued that the Fox administration should leave animosity behind and place firm demands on the U.S. government to respect the rights of Mexican migrants. Likewise, Archbishop José Guadalupe Martín Rábago of León, Guanajuato spoke out against the Fox administration arguing that the majority of migrants travel to the United States out of economic necessity and not because of “a desire for adventure that poses so many risks” (Patterson 2006).

Faith based activism in support of immigrant rights can be understood in the context of the hostile reception of new immigrants in the U.S., and the role of religion in the daily lives of new immigrants and in U.S. public culture.²² Immigrant rights activists are reacting to at least two decades of deeply entrenched anti-immigrant legislation and practice. Since the 1980s, public ambivalence and hostility toward new and future immigrants has grown in the United States. Many people in the United States view “migrants,” “farmworkers,” “Mexicans,” and/or “day laborers” as people who belong to a fundamentally different and devalued “culture,” “an essentializing way of seeing that links up to national efforts to criminalize ‘illegal’ immigration” (Benson 2008:594). As Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (2008:8) writes, “The 1980s, the 1990s, and the postmillennial period immediately following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, have featured U.S. restrictionist immigration policies fueled by economic anxieties, racism, nationalism, and national security concerns.” These policies and the forces behind them are embedded in the media, U.S. public culture, and the legislation of the Bush administration. Mass media images, popular stereotypes and political discourses help to create a “generalized category of the ‘Mexican’ as a temporary, ‘illegal,’ deplorable

²² The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a statement in 2000 in favor of antirestrictionist immigration reform. The group declared, “We advocate for just policies that respect human rights of immigrants” and are opposed to policies that attempt to stem migration but do not “adequately address its root causes” (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops 2000). In 2003 they issued another significant pastoral letter together with the Mexican Bishops entitled “Strangers No Longer: Together on a Journey of Hope.” The letter focused on Mexican migration to the United States and integrated scripture from the Old and New Testaments of the Bible as well as Catholic social teachings to make a clear statement in favor of migrant rights. The bishops proclaimed their belief that people who cannot find employment in their home societies “have a right to find work elsewhere in order to survive. Sovereign nations should provide ways to accommodate this right” (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops 2003). Based on their beliefs and these statements, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops created the Justice for Immigrants campaign in June of 2004. Furthermore, in November of 2006 Pope Benedict XVI asserted his support for migrant family rights in his message on the 93rd World Day of Migrants and Refugees. He appealed to world governments to sanction “the international legal instruments that aim to defend the rights of migrants, refugees and their families” (ZENIT 2006).

subject who is said to be linked to a natal country and, therefore, not properly a part of the local or national society” (Benson 2008:602; Chavez 2001). The ways in which people see and differentiate the Other contributes to the legitimization and legalization of patterns of social subordination, spatial segregation and economic exploitation (Benson 2008).

Contemporary anti-immigrant assaults can be traced back to the Simpson-Rodino and Simpson-Mazzoli bills of the 1980s, which proposed criminal sanctions and fees for employers who knowingly hired undocumented workers. The 1986 Immigrant Reform and Control Act (IRCA) institutionalized employer sanctions. The IRCA also included provisions that gave legalized status to close to three million immigrants in the United States (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2008:10). Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (2008:11) explains that, “although employer sanctions remain on the books, these have never been fully enforced—and neither undocumented migration nor employer willingness to hire unauthorized workers has ceased.” As a result of these bills and their lax enforcement, among other factors, many undocumented workers in the United States are employed in secondary positions, face exploitation, racism and xenophobia, and work long hours, under harsh conditions for low wages. It is not only agribusiness but also the restaurant, hotel and cleaning industries, construction work, poultry and beef industries and manufacturing sectors that rely on “institutionalized” undocumented immigrant labor. According to Peter Benson (2008:594), “The view of undocumented immigrants as a threat to U.S. nationalism leads to harsh policy approaches that do not acknowledge realities of societal integration and the dependence of U.S. economic growth on low wages paid to Mexicans and other immigrants.”

“¿Algunos gringos quieren mexicanos y otros no quieren . . . no?” [Some gringos like Mexicans and others do not, right]? On this particular morning Alicia and I are discussing my mother’s participation in the Dallas, Texas *marcha* for immigrant rights. Alicia explains to me that she is not aware any *gringas* are interested in immigrant rights—or actually anyone for that matter—in the United States. Nor does she understand why someone would participate in that type of protest anyway.

The female head of the Alvarez Rivera family, Alicia, has four sons and a husband who have worked on and off in central Texas for over ten years. Currently four sons are working in Houston: Güero left Mexico for Texas last week, Juan has been in Houston since December, Lorenzo since August, and Carlos has been in Houston with his teenage son for several years. Alicia reports that her sons in Houston, who call regularly (she got a home phone line in August 2006), are worried about their jobs at a local factory (where they have all worked on and off for over ten years). According to her sons, “La migra ha comenzado a deportar empleados de la fábrica y no saben si sus empleos están seguros” [U.S. immigration officials have begun deporting employees at the factory and they have no idea whether their jobs are secure]. Lorenzo, who is a *carguero* for the fiesta for San Isidro Labrador, has been planning his May return to Empalme Escobedo since he left for Texas in August. He is now reconsidering the timing of his trip back to Empalme Escobedo. According to Alicia, it is possible he will travel with Jaime, his sister’s husband, who lives and works on a ranch in Giddings and is a U.S. permanent resident. Lorenzo hopes to be home by May 8 to participate in the majority of the preparations and celebrations for the fiesta for San Isidro Labrador, yet if he travels with Jaime he will not arrive until May 13 or 14—only a couple of days before the primary

fiesta celebrations and performances. Jaime can't get away any earlier due to his work on the ranch, and a recent shortage of food for the cattle due to the dry climate in central Texas.

Beyond these concerns, Alicia is worried about her sons' (and their families) futures. She questions what her sons will do if they cannot work in the United States. She believes "Mis hijos no pudieron encontrar un trabajo en Empalme Escobedo para sostener a sus familias, y por no haber tenido un empleo estable por años en México, no tendrán derecho a una pensión de jubilación" [My sons could not possibly find work in Empalme Escobedo that would support their families, and without having worked a steady job for years in Mexico they will not be eligible for a retirement pension]. Alicia explains that her husband now supports herself, two daughters and a granddaughter (who live with them) on his retirement pension he receives from having worked for the railroad for over twenty years. One of her sons working in Texas owns a small *terreno* (plot of land) in Empalme Escobedo with four head of cattle. He sends his family \$100 a month to care for the land and cattle. His wife sells the cattle's milk from her home, as well as using the milk to make and sell cheese. Yet, as Alicia says, "No sé cómo mi hijo puede sostener a su familia de cuatro personas con su pequeño terreno en Empalme Escobedo" [I do not know how my son can support his family of four working solely on his small plot of land in Empalme Escobedo].

When we returned to the discussion of immigration policy reform and debates in the U.S., Alicia argues, "El gobierno de Estados Unidos y los norteamericanos no están siendo justos. Los norteamericanos no pueden hacer los trabajos que mis hijos y otros mexicanos hacen. Los norteamericanos no poseen las habilidades para trabajar el metal,

colocar losas, trabajar en casas, en la agricultura o en la construcción... ni saben hacer estas cosas, ni quieren hacerlas... entonces por qué los mexicanos no pueden seguir haciendo estos trabajos; tienen la habilidad y trabajan duro” [The U.S. government and American people are not acting fairly. Americans cannot do the work my sons and other Mexicans are doing. Americans do not have the skills to work metal, lay tile, work on houses, work in agriculture or construction . . . they do not know how to do these things, nor do they want to do them . . . then why can’t Mexicans continue to do these jobs; they are skilled, hard workers].

MEXICO’S LOSS IS THE UNITED STATES’ GAIN?

Mexico's loss is the United States' gain. Mexico loses the best of our people, young people, working people, and audacious people, strong people- people who leave Mexico because they don’t find the opportunities here. [Felipe Calderón, 2 February 2007, *Dallas Morning News*]

It is nearly impossible to represent the experience of migrants from Empalme Escobedo without discussing the debates and protests over immigration policy and reform in the United States in 2006-2008. Nor is it possible to ignore the roles of transnational spirituality, the Catholic Church, or the force of devotion in the discourse and practices of U.S. and Mexican citizens, policymakers, and migrants themselves. As such, in this chapter I represent these multiply positioned subjects and the ways in which they reconcile the impermanence of the spaces they inhabit and I address the role of spirituality, law, policy, and public discourse in constructing migrant identities, as well as

the ways in which these forces are implicated in migrant's struggles over personhood and legitimacy.

Mobility, identities, and understandings of home and community are shaped through immigration policies and the discourses surrounding them in both the United States and Mexico. Immigration laws and policies and their related discourses affect the identities of migrants as well as the nature of movement, the meaning of absence and presence, and the legitimacy of existence (Coutin 2000:10).

It is estimated that there are twelve million undocumented workers in the United States. These immigrants make up ten percent of the workforce. More than half of these workers come from Mexico. The Bush administration's proposals for immigration reform fell short of addressing labor and human rights for immigrant workers. Failing to address the issues serves to further delegitimize and criminalize individuals whose work is an essential part of the U.S. economy. As Peter Benson writes, "Recent efforts to criminalize undocumented individuals and militarize the border reflect a narrow understanding of immigration that seeks to punish individuals—employers and employees—and overlooks the role of macro forces of liberalization in driving transnational labor ..." (Benson 2008:620).

At the end of 2008, immigration discourse in the United States focused on the ways in which the economic recession and tighter border controls (including the controversial wall) slowed the passage of undocumented peoples. However, the year ended without a solution to "problems" of the twelve million undocumented peoples in the United States. Politicians, the presidential candidates and the newly elected President Barack Obama have largely ignored and avoided issues of immigration. Before the end of

an eight-year term, the Bush administration increased the deportations and incarcerations of undocumented migrants in the U.S. and vowed to complete construction of a 670-mile wall along the Mexican- U.S border.

It remains to be seen if 2009 and a new administration in Washington will bring “reform” to immigration policy. A unilateral system of immigration policy will no longer work. In Mexico, government officials are developing policy to address the U.S. raids against Mexican immigrants, mass deportations of Mexican nationals, and the U.S. immigration policy. Two groups specifically working to address these problems with the help of President Felipe Calderón are the *Instituto de los Mexicanos en el Exterior* (Institute of Mexicans Abroad) and the *Primer Parlamento de Líderes Migrantes en Estados Unidos* (First Parliament of Migrant Leaders in the United States). These groups plan to use money earmarked in the 2009 Mexican federal budget to lobby for the human rights of Mexican immigrants (before Congress) in both the U.S. and Mexico.

Faith based activism and grassroots social movements are useful in organizing social and political responses that avoid stereotypes and go beyond narrow framings of blame to bring social systems into account (Benson 2008; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2008). In May of 2006 public protest in the form of rallies, *marchas*, and parades took place in cities across the United States to demand justice, legal recognition and human rights for the country’s undocumented immigrant workers. Simultaneously in Empalme Escobedo, Guanajuato a transnational community celebrated the patron saint of farming and enacted rituals that represent the remaining pieces of an agricultural society, culture, and political economy. Demonstrating the force of devotion, migrants from Empalme Escobedo

working in Texas in May of 2006 risked their jobs, security, and possibly their lives to cross the U.S. border and return to Mexico to honor and celebrate San Isidro Labrador.

CHAPTER FIVE: PERFORMING A TRANSNATIONAL SPIRITUALITY

It is 6:00 a.m. on May 15. It is dark and the streets are quiet as I walk from my house to the San Isidro Labrador neighborhood and chapel. Approaching, I hear the now familiar sounds of a brass band. Gathered in front of the open chapel a band from San Miguel de Allende serenades the saint with *las mañanitas* (birthday song). The impact of the action hits me. The band is performing exclusively for San Isidro Labrador—a synthetic image of a saint standing inside of a glass case. Goosebumps break out on my skin. I am amazed—only the saint is listening. My husband and I are the only other audience. The force of devotion is overwhelming.

Every May 15, San Isidro Labrador's official Catholic saint day, Empalme Escobedo celebrates the patron saint with a fiesta in his honor. Empalme Escobedo has celebrated San Isidro Labrador on May 15 for as long as anyone can remember. The chapel to honor San Isidro Labrador has been in Empalme Escobedo at least sixty years (prior to the existence of the *parroquia*). Consultants in their seventies vividly remember celebrating San Isidro Labrador each May and caring for his image and chapel. May is the month when farmers prepare their fields for cultivation. May is also the month that the Virgin Maria Auxiliadora, the patron saint of Empalme Escobedo and the railroad laborers is celebrated. Furthermore, in May the Catholic day of the Sacred Cross is celebrated and the Sacred Cross of Picacho arrives in Empalme Escobedo. The Santa Cruz de Picacho is often present during novena prayers for San Isidro Labrador in homes

or the streets. Likewise, San Isidro Labrador is often present in processions to honor Maria Auxiliadora.

A novena for San Isidro Labrador is always held in Empalme Escobedo before the fifteenth of May. Typically different members of the San Isidro neighborhood host the patron saint in their homes for one night. Community members (devotees) gather in the home to pray, socialize and typically eat a light meal. San Isidro Labrador spends the night in the host home. The following evening, the patron saint travels to another home to be honored in the next novena. This continues for nine nights. However, certain hosts decide to honor the patron saint in different ways. Often times a family will pay to have the priest come and say a Mass for San Isidro Labrador. On these occasions a makeshift altar is created in the streets of the San Isidro neighborhood or even in the soccer field creating a more public setting for the novena.²³ A band is often hired to perform and more food and drink is served and consumed. The ninth and tenth days, May 14 and May 15, are celebrated in the street in front of the chapel for San Isidro Labrador and in the adjacent fields in the neighborhood named in his honor. Formal ritual, sociality and solidarity mark each novena session. The excitement and elevated moods of folks builds over the ten-day period of prayer and devotion. Whereas the celebrations (live music, dancing, ritual plowing of the fields, feats of strength and firework displays) on May 14 and May 15 to honor San Isidro Labrador are primarily organized and led by men, the novenas are typically more of a female centered ritual.

²³ Several types of Catholic altars exist: 1) “permanent, consecrated altars inside churches” and chapels, 2) “permanent altars in private homes, known as house shrines,” 3) “temporary indoor or outdoor altars constructed for special ritual occasions” (Rodríguez 2006:107). The basic characteristics of altars include a white or off -white cloth (often embroidered or lacy), a cross, candles, flowers and/or other small sacred objects placed on tables.

The cultural performance for San Isidro Labrador reflects, symbolically and materially, the changes evolving in Empalme Escobedo. It represents the effects of history, modernity, migration and globalization. Accordingly, the cultural performance to honor San Isidro Labrador also represents and reinforces the communal solidarity of those who have left and now return to celebrate their devotion to the saint. Drawing on the stories of devotees, the texts of prayers, and participant observation, in this chapter I examine the religious and social meanings embedded in the performance of devotion (enacted rituals) to San Isidro Labrador. I question and seek to understand the ways in which devotees to San Isidro Labrador find meaning in their own and others performances of devotion as individuals and as a community. I map the meanings of the cultural performance for San Isidro Labrador in order to explore the roles of spirituality, absence, and memory in the changing social and political conditions and daily practices of a transnational community.

In Empalme Escobedo, participation in the fiesta to honor San Isidro Labrador includes yearlong organization and anticipation, the novena in May, processions, feasting, and daily devotionals that require a significant time commitment and emotional engagement. Participation in religious devotion and ritual has cumulative social and emotional effects. San Isidro Labrador is a symbol of the force of devotion, but also of identity and community—a constant in the day-to-day relations and transactions of people and objects. Ritual enactment is a primary means by which Catholicism both teaches and engages devotees. Devotees to San Isidro Labrador construct the social meaning and purpose of their lives as members of a community out of sacred and secular practices. In Catholicism, devotees take a saint as a protector and a spiritual role model.

San Isidro Labrador is well respected and received as a protector and a spiritual role model in Empalme Escobedo because, as folks say, “San Isidro es un hombre del campo como nosotros” [San Isidro is a common man/farmer like us]. As the patron saint of farming in a community of *campesinos*, the fiesta to honor San Isidro Labrador makes public the fact that farmers are equally parishioners/devoted religious individuals. Praying as a community places importance on the social nature of religious activity and encourages solidarity and reciprocity among participants. In creating sociability and solidarity amongst its participants, the fiesta for San Isidro Labrador, links this sense of community to a larger socio-religious purpose (Rodríguez 2006).

Don Ruben, a farmer in Empalme Escobedo explains: “La devoción a San Isidro Labrador nunca morirá. Es una gran fuerza... una fuerte fe en el santo perdura debido a que los campesinos continúan contándole a sus hijos sobre él... la fe es transmitida de generación en generación. Nuestra devoción por San Isidro Labrador está en nuestros corazones, nuestras mentes, y nunca nos dejará. Lo necesitamos para sobrevivir” [Devotion to San Isidro Labrador will never die. It is a strong force . . . a strong faith in the saint endures because farmers continue to tell their children about him . . . this faith is passed down from generation to generation. Our devotion to San Isidro Labrador is in our hearts, our minds, and will not leave us. We need him to survive].

Figure 10: San Isidro Labrador, Empalme Escobedo



SITUATING DEVOTION TO SAN ISIDRO LABRADOR

A web of railroad tracks traverses the pockmarked streets lined with dwellings and businesses painted in bright pastels. A small *plaza* (public square) holds a new church, a few cement benches and a neglected garden. An iron and brick gate is under construction that will eventually surround the church and create a grand entrance. On several corners small convenience stores (the front rooms of peoples' homes) advertise *refrescos fríos* (cold soft drinks), *helados y paletas* (ice cream and popsicles) and *cerveza para llevar* (beer to go). Hinting at a celebration is a small carnival set up in the streets of a *barrio* a few blocks from the *plaza*. Blue and white paper and plastic streamers line three streets of the *barrio*, blending with the blue sky dotted with white clouds. Colorful flowers of plastic and small objects made of foil adorn the streetlights or hang from the plastic streamers that cross the rooftops of homes. The town of Empalme Escobedo is celebrating the fiesta for San Isidro Labrador. May 14, the day preceding San Isidro Labrador's official Catholic saint day, is marked with feats of strength, music and dancing. Men participate in what consultants call *las carreras* (the races) or *los pollos* (the chickens), and what I call displays of masculinity or feats of strength.

The descriptions and images in my work are not constructed to resonate with stereotypical discourses and narratives of Mexican men and women, *machismo*, or migration. The descriptions and images themselves have the power to communicate, to evoke the force of devotion. The fiesta cultural performance reveals and magnifies the social tensions inherent in ordinary life in the Empalme Escobedo transnational

community. Men, just as in migration, are the primary actors in this drama. Women, just as in daily life, appear on the sidelines but are the force behind devotion, the fiesta performance, and the circulation of people and objects. In writing these descriptions (translating my visual observations and oral/aural understandings) I am performing the uncomfortable gaps and built up tensions embedded in the fiesta performance and consequently in everyday life in Empalme Escobedo. The emotional immediacy, sexual intensity, and performative force are overwhelming.

Around 3:00 p.m. San Isidro Labrador is carried on a litter from his chapel to the agricultural fields at the end of *Calle Acambaro* (Acambaro Street). The Santa Cruz de Picacho accompanies the patron saint of farming. The hired band (a ten piece brass band from San Miguel de Allende has been paid to perform May 14 and 15) plays while the two sacred objects are carried in a procession along a trail of pine needles and palm leaves. A house at the end of *Calle Acambaro* and facing the field has created a sacred space to place the patron saint and sacred cross. A large decorated area rug has been tacked vertically to the exterior of the house and two bright yellow curtains hang down from above it, creating a niche for the sacred objects. Men, women and children stand or kneel in front of the images, asking favors or making promises. Donations are accepted. A few feet to the left of San Isidro Labrador and the Santa Cruz de Picacho are fifteen to twenty roosters. A rooster is the prize for the winner of each game.

Hundreds of men and boys on horseback are gathering in the fields and adjacent street. Almost all are dressed as *vaqueros* (cowboys), wearing cowboy hats, boots, western shirts, and fitted jeans. Typically the audience consists of families from the

barrio of San Isidro Labrador, but folks from other neighborhoods in Empalme Escobedo as well as from nearby towns often show up to watch the events.

A long thick string has been tied from the rooftop of the house to a tree eighteen feet away. A red and white plastic basket is attached to the middle of the string. A young man stands on the rooftop of the home where he will monitor the basket's movement by pulling the string each time a horseman grabs for it.

In the first feat of strength –*correr la canasta* (the basket pull)– the male participants range in age from twenty to forty. Each year I recognize some of the same men competing, in particular a pair of brothers, one or the other who almost always wins. Most of the male performers dress in western wear, but a few wear tank tops or are shirtless.

The players, usually seven to nine at a time, ride on horseback to as close under the string and basket as they can get. Rising in their stirrups the men attempt to grab the basket. The act is made more difficult because the cord is jerked as the horseman rises. Because seven or eight horses are all crowded together in a small space their pressed bodies create support for the men. While in this position, a few men attempt to stand on the backs of their horses and jump for the basket using each other for balance. This makes grabbing the basket somewhat simpler but also angers the horses. How the horses endure being cramped together and stood upon by big men is beyond my understanding.

Once two people have successfully grabbed the basket they compete against each other in a race. The two winners line up their horses, a gun is shot, and they run at top speed to the end of the street. As they near the end of the race, the men lock arms trying to slow or knock one another down. The winner is the fastest and the strongest. A large

choice rooster is awarded to the best man. The game begins again. The winner will race the next man to grab the basket. This performance continues for one to two hours.

Lining up in the adjacent field are more men on horseback. These men prepare to compete in another feat of strength, *correr el gallo* (the rooster pull). A live rooster is buried feet first in the ground. Men on horseback sweep down and attempt to pull the rooster out of the ground. Those who succeed in acquiring the animal keep it. Many men end up wringing the rooster's neck, which is still considered a win, and the participant is awarded the animal.

On the adjacent street, young boys compete against each another jumping in corn sacks. The brass band plays music and enlivens the crowd. The men and boys are rowdy and tease each other, provoking the audience to howl and cheer on the sidelines. Older women are not present. Young single women and young wives of the male participants and their children watch hesitantly on the sidelines, occasionally flashing a smile, whispering and giggling with each other. The games arouse a strong sense of competition in the men. Celebratory drinking has already begun for some of the participants, generating an intense contest and atmosphere.

Around 6:00 p.m. the band surrounds San Isidro Labrador and the Santa Cruz de Picacho. The sacred objects are lifted up and carried back in a procession to the neighborhood *capilla*. Most folks go home to rest for an hour before the scheduled dance performance. A dance troupe from the *Casa de Cultura* in Comonfort arrives at 7:00 p.m. The professional troupe performs numerous regional folk dances, including *El Zapateado de Veracruz*, *Los Viejitos de Michoacan*, *Sones Jaliscienses*, *el Son de la Negra*, and versions of the Northern polka and *ranchero* dances. They also perform the wildly

popular international cancan. Fireworks erupt to mark the end of the performance.

Tonight ends relatively early because tomorrow is the grandest celebration for San Isidro Labrador.

The date is May 15. Noisy fireworks announce the start of the day and the fiesta. As the sun rises, a brass band serenades San Isidro Labrador with the familiar birth or saint's day tune of *las mañanitas*. Women and children arrive at the *capilla*, bringing *ofrendas* (offerings) of fresh flowers, hand crocheted and embroidered runners, and candles to place around the image of San Isidro Labrador. The music ceases after an hour, but the activity around the *capilla* continues as the devotees prepare for the mid-day procession and Mass to honor the saint.

Shortly after 8:00 a.m. women begin picking up trash in the streets and sweeping in front of their homes and San Isidro's *capilla*. Men begin assembling the stage that will serve as the makeshift altar during the Mass to honor the patron saint as well as the platform for the evening's dance performances. The stage will allow the Mass to be performed in the streets and observed by a large crowd. Women and men work to create the sacred space for the performance of the public afternoon Mass. The altar –a dining room table– is covered in a white cloth embroidered with red crosses and lace around the edges. Sitting upon the altar are two brass candelabras, a small brass cross, and several bouquets of red and white roses. Dining room chairs are spread out across the back of the stage to serve the needs of the Mass officiates. Another table covered in a white lace cloth holds the image of San Isidro Labrador and fresh cut flowers and candles neatly surround his case.

The surface of the altar is covered in sawdust dyed to depict four bouquets of red roses and green petals. Tangerine and pink curtains are draped from the rooftop of the *capilla*, creating a colorful canopy over the stage. Another large piece of pink fabric hangs down the front of the *capilla* wall forming a backdrop to the altar and designating the sacred space from the exterior of the *capilla*. Typically present at the Mass for San Isidro Labrador is the visiting and much revered Santa Cruz de Picacho.²⁴ The Santa Cruz de Picacho is draped in a lavender embroidered cloth and covered in an assortment of fresh cut flowers. The large, heavy, wooden cross is propped up against the front of the stage and rests on another piece of fabric lying on the street. This cloth serves to designate sacred space and extends the space of the altar into the street where chairs and plywood kneelers are placed.

Around 1:00 p.m. fireworks erupt signaling the start of the Mass to honor San Isidro Labrador. Cura Fernando Olivera, an attendant, and the *mayordomo* (manager) of the fiesta occupy center stage. Anticipating the special Mass, close to one hundred people are pressed against each other in front of the stage under a glaring sun. Those not inclined to cram in front of the stage look on from the rooftops or the doorways of adjacent homes.

The Mass begins with a brief prayer from Cura Fernando Olivera. He quickly takes a seat behind and to the left of the altar, and Don Andrés, the *mayordomo*, proudly comes forward to stand behind the altar. Don Andrés reads a prayer for San Isidro Labrador. He reads with confidence, pronouncing each word, and directing the message both to his patron saint and his community. His performance creates the impression that

²⁴ Each year I observed the fiesta for San Isidro Labrador (1999, 2004, 2005) the Santa Cruz de Picacho

the saint comprehends and hangs on each word. Through this charismatic performance Don Andrés confirms his devotion to San Isidro Labrador and his ability to serve his community.

Don Andrés makes the sign of the cross and steps down from the stage. In sharp contrast, appearing exhausted and annoyed, Cura Fernando Olivera continues the service from his chair. The priest looks down as he reads and rarely changes his tone of voice. He constantly mumbles—his words lost in the heavy black dye of his moustache.²⁵ Cura Fernando Olivera rambles on about the *campesino* San Isidro Labrador: “Un campesino con un carácter muy hermoso y generoso . . . un campesino lleno de serenidad . . . nunca se enojó . . . un amigo para todo a la gente de todas las clases sociales . . . un santo y un ejemplo para la comunidad sobre todo a los más hombres” [A farmer with a very beautiful and generous character . . . a farmer full of serenity . . . never was he angered . . . a friend for all to the people of every social class . . . a saint and an example for the community especially the men]. Finally, the priest announces, “De pie, por favor” [On your feet, please], and he too stands.

At the altar, Cura Fernando Olivera begins the Gospel Acclamation: “Señor Alleluia . . . Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.” He then reads *el evangelio de San Juan* (the gospel according to John). Following the gospel that discusses the immense love and power of Jesus and Mary, the priest’s homily returns to the honored farmer, San Isidro Labrador. Cura Fernando Olivera states, “Oyenos, te rogamos, Señor . . . A Dios rogando y da gracias a San Isidro Labrador . . . Este campesino en el viento, el sol, el aire, y la tierra descubrió el misterio de Dios . . . obedeció los mandamientos de Dios y San Isidro

was present, with the exception of 2006 (see Chapter 2).

Labrador cumplió perfectamente los mandamientos de Dios” [Hear the prayer of your people, O Lord . . . Put your faith in God and give thanks to San Isidro Labrador . . . This farmer discovered the mystery of God in the wind, the sun, the air and the land . . . He obeyed God’s commandments and San Isidro Labrador fulfilled the commandments of God].

Cura Fernando Olivera prepares the table and the gifts for the Liturgy of the Eucharist. This year a First Communion will be performed. Three girls dressed in lacy white gowns wait next to the altar to receive their First Communion on this special day. Receiving First Communion or being married on May 15 lends even more significance to these rituals for those devoted to San Isidro Labrador. Staring at the altar are the now familiar to me faces of the men, women and children of this faithful community. Many are dressed in their best clothing: pressed shirts, blouses, pants and skirts. Umbrellas and hats block the heat and folks appear solemn as they await the Holy Communion. Together we recite the Lord’s Prayer and enact the sign of peace: “Pueden darse fraternalmente la paz” [May the peace of the Lord be with you]. Amidst the whispers of “paz, paz, paz,” we shake hands, hug and kiss one another. Apart from the three young girls, roughly twenty worshipers accept “Del Cuerpo de Cristo Jesús viviente y glorioso y la Sangre del Señor en la obra salvadora” [The Body of Christ and the Cup of Salvation].

Cura Fernando Olivera returns to his chair. He pauses and then gestures at the audience asking folks to raise their hands if they are *campesinos*. He calls out the names of a few men he recognizes as *campesinos*: “Don Francisco, Pedro Angel, Don Andrés.” He asks: “¿Todavía hay campesinos aquí? ¿Mujeres, les ayudan a trabajar la tierra?” [Are

²⁵ Consultants confirm that even in their native language Cura Fernando Olivera’s words are mumbled and

there still farmers here? Women, do you help work the land]? The priest reads a final prayer and the blessing of the people. In a seemingly out of character act, he stands and shouts, “Viva San Isidro Labrador, Gracias a San Isidro Labrador . . . Un aplauso . . . Banda, nos da un tambor y nota para el santo campesino!” [Long live San Isidro Labrador, Thanks be to San Isidro Labrador . . . Band, give us a drum roll and note]! We clap. But there is no music. Everyone is taken off guard, including the band members—who are on a break- and a gentleman grabs a portable stereo from his home and plays a C.D. The music is stimulating and suddenly we are standing, greeting one another and preparing to leave.

The quiet and solemnity of the Mass is over. The shrill sound of bike horns pierce the air—announcing that cotton candy, peanuts, and balloons are for sale. Fireworks erupt. A blue uniformed man on foot carrying a soft-sided cooler advertises, “Bon Ice, Bon Ice, mango, fresa, uva, dos cincuenta, Bon Ice!” [Bon Ice, mango, strawberry, grape, \$2.50, Bon Ice]! Neighborhood women bring out tables from their homes to fill and sell plastic bags with chips, pretzels, cut fruit, and soft drinks.

On one corner a group of men are gathered. Most of the men are dressed as women. *Machos*, as the folks of Empalme Escobedo call them.²⁶ Some of the men are helping each other with their hair: adjusting wigs, placing barrettes and fastening ponytails. Two men mock the schoolgirl uniform—wearing plaid short skirts, tight white blouses and knee-high socks. Several men wear what looks like their mother’s clothing.

difficult to comprehend.

²⁶ The majority of folks I asked in Empalme Escobedo called the men dressed as women *machos*. *Macho* is a loaded Spanish term defined today in contradictory ways. For example, it has been used to connote men who are strong, responsible, and provide financially and otherwise for their families. *Macho* has also been associated with male chauvinism. Furthermore, as possibly revealed in this case, *macho* may be identified ironically with non-aggressive (“womanly”) behavior (Gutmann 1996:222-3).

The most lewdly dressed men wear extremely short skirts, lacy or low cut tops (exposing fake breasts), body hugging dresses, and high heels. A young man (who is openly gay and works in a local hair salon) circles the men touching them up with lipstick, blush, eye shadow and mascara from his makeup bag.

On the opposite corner several men are carefully raising the *castillo* (a tall structure of thousands of connected fireworks) to its upright and ready position. Two horses and a donkey are tied to a lamppost at another corner. The band is warming up under a plastic tarp across the street from San Isidro Labrador's chapel. Kids take turns staring at the *machos* and the band and chase each other up and down the dusty streets.

Lorenzo pulls up in his green Ford truck and summons the *machos* to get in. A couple of men run to the chapel and get a framed photo of San Isidro Labrador. Lorenzo's sons bring two donations boxes. A cousin carries a boom box. A second truck arrives and the men and boys pile into the two beds. The trucks drive slowly through the streets of Empalme Escobedo, blaring music and stopping periodically (or when flagged down) to display the *macho's* dance moves, the image of San Isidro Labrador, and ask for donations to the patron saint of farmers.

At each stop, folks greet the image of their patron saint and joke with the *machos*. Most ask San Isidro to protect them, sometimes making a *promesa* to the saint. Many families are unable to give monetary donations. According to a female consultant, some families contribute "a grown and ready to eat chicken or even a young one, a duck, and sacks of corn. Little birds have even been given as gifts to San Isidro." Others donate liquor, soap, corn flour, toilet paper, soft drinks, toys, or games. Many of these items will

be placed as treasure at the top of the greasy pole. After the successful elicitation of donations and participation, the group returns to the *capilla*.

Back in the *barrio* of San Isidro Labrador, many families are beginning or finishing big meals, typically consisting of chicken *mole*, *barbacoa*, *carne asada* or *pozole*. The band begins to play. Energized by the procession and their community, the *machos* strut their stuff and dance with one another in front of San Isidro Labrador's *capilla*. It is 4:00 in the afternoon and more and more folks begin gathering in the streets. Blowing kisses, curtsying and twirling pieces of long blond hair, the *machos* enter the chapel. They emerge from the tiny *capilla* carrying the Santa Cruz de Picacho and the image of San Isidro Labrador whose large wood and glass case has been placed on a litter. The *machos* and the community's sacred objects proceed slowly down *Calle Acambaro* to the *campo*. The experience is zany: men dressed as women carry a patron saint on a litter and a huge wooden cross (draped in pastel cloths and covered in flowers).

The noise level increases as more and more people line the streets. Exploding fireworks echo over excited and rushed conversations, screaming children, barking dogs, laughter, and the clicking of horse hooves on pavement. Sounds and smells emanate from the large open field. Here, abundant foods and beverages are being sold: sweet breads, peanuts, popcorn, ice cream, cotton candy, *gorditas*, *churros* and *chicharrón*, washed down with *refrescos*, *aguas frescas*, and *cerveza*.

Again a type of stage or altar has been set up to display San Isidro Labrador and the Santa Cruz de Picacho. Blue and pink curtains are draped around a large table where the patron saint is placed and three dining chairs will support the Sacred Cross. A few women get situated to sit with the sacred objects and collect donations from devotees.

San Isidro Labrador and the Santa Cruz de Picacho face the fields where the farmers and the *machos* perform devotion to their patron saint.

Figure 11: The *Machos* Carry San Isidro Labrador



“Performing devotion to the saint,” the *machos* display themselves and dance provocatively in front of San Isidro Labrador, the Santa Cruz de Picacho, and the farmers in *el campo*.²⁷ The eight *machos* playfully grab male spectators to make them their dance partners, especially the apprehensive. It is difficult to resist smiling (awkwardly or wholeheartedly) as we watch these “macho” men holding each other tight and dancing sexily. Following each song played by the brass band, the men solicit money to pay for the next dance. They adhere to a strict “no pagamos, no jugamos” [no pay, no play] policy. Money collected for the music goes to San Isidro Labrador.

Emerging thick clouds of dust now rise above the adjacent field. Dispersed throughout the field are men on horseback and horses attached to wooden and steel single plows. More than twenty of these plow horses are beautifully decorated with offerings of food, drink, and flowers. Hanging around the necks of the horses are strings of limes and lemons. The horses’ yokes are also decorated with strung bright green and yellow fruits. From the horses’ saddles and strings of limes dangle bottles of soft drinks, beer and tequila. Fresh and paper flowers adorn the manes and tails of the horses. The vivid embellishments create a striking contrast against the animals’ dark coats and black of the soil in which they stand.

²⁷ Men’s only explanation for their performance as women is as “an act of devotion to San Isidro Labrador . . . a practice passed on by our grandfathers, fathers and brothers.” Both the participants and audience members I interviewed insist the men’s performance as women is strictly out of devotion to San Isidro Labrador and does not contain hidden meanings. I refer to Renato Rosaldo’s (1993:15) question, “Do rituals always reveal cultural depth?” I am unable to uncover cultural depth in men’s ritual performance as women. The men’s words when questioned and practice when observed do not reveal for example an inherent desire for the same sex nor a deep rooted need to publicly mock or degrade women. Using anthropological theory I analyze the men’s ritual performance as women at length in my MA thesis (Hawthorne 2000). However, based on the men’s reluctance to discuss their ritual performance, I do not probe the men’s explanation or attempt to interpret their performance in this dissertation.

Figure 12: Plow Horses Decorated with *Ofrendas*



Stealing attention from the *machos*, another performance has begun. The participants are all men, ranging in age from twenty to sixty. The men on foot lead the plow horses to the center of the field. The men on horseback follow in a single file line. The crowd is silent. This movement is unusual, particularly in contrast with the previous chaos in the field and the men's performance as women. The picture is still and stoic: men and horses lining up in the center of a field with the Picacho mountains and the outline of Comonfort behind them.

Breaking the calm, the men begin to lead the plow horses deliberately through the field. Dust and dirt swirls in the air as the men on horseback competitively chase one another back and forth across the field. Two groups of horsemen are emerging. One group attempts to steal the *ofrendas* from the plow horses. Another group, distinguished by age (these men appear older) endeavor to catch those who steal the *ofrendas*. My fellow spectators identify these horsemen as *la policia* (the police). If caught the young men are dragged by the reins of their horses to the sidelines. Here they are publicly reprimanded by the older men and charged a fine of twenty *pesos*. The fine is donated to the patron saint of farmers. The children lining the field receive the stolen *ofrendas*.

The exuberance is contagious. All ages fill the streets, greeting friends, eating snacks, drinking *refrescos* or alcohol, laughing and straining to see the men dressed as women and the plowing of the field. Participating from above are families spread across the overlooking rooftops and young boys perched in the trees. A *parande* is set up under a tree near the field. A piece of wood is cut in a long diagonal and fifty round loaves of fresh baked bread wrapped in plastic are stapled to it. Six men stand around the *parande*

collecting money. Devotees who make a donation to San Isidro Labrador receive a loaf of bread and their name and monetary amount will be displayed on the poster board propped next to the *parande*.²⁸ At the end of the night the money collected will be stapled to the poster board and displayed with the name of devotees in front of the *capilla*. Throughout the activities, families kneel to kiss, touch, and offer respect, objects or money to the image of San Isidro Labrador and the Santa Cruz de Picacho. It seems the whole town has gathered together in honor of the saint.

Around 8 p.m. the sky darkens and the temperature finally drops. The wind is picking up and it looks as if it might rain—a favor the farmers always ask of San Isidro Labrador. The case containing the image of San Isidro Labrador is placed on a litter and carried back down *Calle Acambaro* to the neighborhood *capilla*. A procession follows, composed of the band members, the rest of the *machos* carrying the *Santa Cruz de Picacho*, children, horses, and hundreds of participants.

The band continues playing as the procession winds to the corner of the street where the greasy pole has been erected. While San Isidro Labrador and the Santa Cruz de Picacho are returned to the chapel for the night, folks set up chairs in front of their homes and search for a good spot to see the greasy pole, music, and dancing. A few children have turned on a portable stereo and are on the stage in front of the *capilla* performing a dance routine. Tied to the top of the greasy pole are prizes (gifts donated to the fiesta for San Isidro Labrador): toys, plastic balls, toilet paper, liters of soft drinks, corn flour, and soap. The metal pole has been slathered with lard. Young boys line up to be the first to try to reach the top. The boys range in age from eight to seventeen. Typically the taller

²⁸ The poster board reads: “Parande—Donado por voluntarios de San Isidro Labrador. Escribe su nombre y

leaner boys succeed, but not always. It is captivating and amusing to watch the boys pull themselves toward the top. Some develop strategies, like removing their t-shirt or pants to wipe down each portion of the pole above them as they slowly inch up. Others wait patiently until enough contestants have fallen and take advantage of the less greasy pole. Once a young man makes it to the top and grabs a hold of the prizes he has won. The game usually goes on for one to two hours.

On the opposite corner from the greasy pole stands the *castillo*. It's almost 11:00 p.m., and the crowd buzzes with anticipation as the *castillo* is lit. One by one, its' spinning, flaming wheels throw sparks all over the street until the top section shoots off, up and away. This dramatic act marks the end of the fiesta ritual performances, but the carnival rides, music and evening fun will continue well into the night.²⁹

SAINTLY DEVOTION

According to the doctrine of the Catholic Church, saints are persons who lived virtuous lives and went to Heaven. The saints are considered intercessors between God and human beings and as such they complete God's work. Devotion to the saints partially consists in the emulation of their virtues – the saints themselves followed the commandments of God. Devotion is also expressed in appeals for the saint's assistance and is articulated in thanksgiving and praise.

\$\$\$” [*Parande*—Donated for San Isidro Labrador's volunteers. Write your name and \$\$\$].

²⁹ The later and later into the night the fiesta progresses the more unruly it becomes. Most women and children retire to bed and many men exceed their typical drinking limits. Fights often break out and the police from the municipality of Comonfort are called to take control. In 2006 I stayed in Marisol's house following the fiesta. Her home is located three houses down and across from the *capilla*—on the corner where the greasy pole and *castillo* are placed. The room where I slept did not have windows but faced the street (*Calle Acambaro*). I was kept awake a good part of the night listening to shouts, distinguishing voices, and both hearing and imagining the unpleasant and undesired.

In Catholic iconography, San Isidro Labrador appears as a man guiding an ox-drawn plow with an angel at his shoulder. In other images, the angel is doing the plowing. In Empalme Escobedo the statue in the *capilla* represents an angel plowing the fields next to San Isidro Labrador.

San Isidro Labrador is popularly known as the “farm-servant or husbandman” (Butler 1962:323). He was born in Madrid, Spain around 1080. He is now the patron saint of Madrid. As soon as Isidro was old enough to work, he became a farm laborer on the estate of Juan de Vergas in Torrelaguna, outside of Madrid. Isidro spent his entire life in the service of one employer.

Isidro’s life is considered a “model of Christian perfection” (Butler 1962:323). Every morning before work he went early to church and “all day long, whilst his hand guided the plow he would be communing with God, with his guardian angel or with the holy saints” (Butler 1962:323). Isidro was always kind to others and generous with his time and resources. He did not, however, escape criticism. According to a popular myth, his fellow workmen complained that his regular attendance to church caused him to be late to work. To test the truth of this accusation, his boss, Juan de Vergas, hid to watch his workers. Indeed, De Vergas saw that Isidro arrived after his fellow laborers. Upon approaching Isidro to reprimand him, De Vergas was “surprised by a second team of snow-white oxen, led by unknown figures, plowing beside that driven by Isidro” (Butler 1962:323). As De Vergas stood watching the oxen team they disappeared. In “awe,” he realized angels were assisting Isidro. Thus, Juan de Vergas came to revere Isidro, who was soon known throughout Spain “to work miracles for the benefit of his employer and family” (Butler 1962:323).

The prayers read and praise sung during his novena and fiesta celebrations tell the story of San Isidro Labrador:

NOVENA EN HONOR DE SAN ISIDRO LABRADOR
[NOVENA IN HONOR OF SAN ISIDRO LABRADOR]

Abandonabas el campo
Por ir al templo a rezar,
Derramando tierno llanto
Ante el venerado altar
[You abandoned the fields
To go to the temple to pray,
Shedding your tender cry
Before the holy altar].

CONSEJOS
[ADVICE]

Los que desean alcanzar por la intersección de San Isidro Labrador el socorro de sus necesidades, debe imitar sus virtudes.

Para hacerla con beneficio, convendrá confesarse y comulgar en alguno de los nueve días; tener algún rato de oración; a María Santísima, a quien tiernamente amaba San Isidro; dar limosnas en obsequio al Santo, y pedir con fervor, confianza y perseverancia las gracias que necesita, conformándose con la voluntad de Dios.

[Those who wish to obtain help for their needs through San Isidro Labrador, must imitate his virtues.

To succeed, they must go to confession and take communion during one of the nine days; dedicate a moment to prayer; to Holy Mary, whom San Isidro loved tenderly; give alms in the Saint's honor, and ask for what you need with fervor, trust and perseverance but always accepting God's Will].

TIERNAS ALABANZAS
[TENDER SUNG PRAISE]

San Isidro Labrador,
Cantando por todo el Orbe
Alabado sea tu nombre,
Que eres nuestro protector.
Tú fuiste por excelencia
El gran siervo del Señor
Pues tu humildad y paciencia

A los cielos te llevó.

San Isidro...

Tú cultivaste las siembras
Cual nadie las cultivó,
Y en las humildes arenas
Nacer a la flor se vió.

San Isidro...

Fuiste perfecto modelo,
Modelo de santidad,
Por eso emprendiste el vuelo
Al Empíreo celestial.

San Isidro...

Fuiste sublime marido
Como ya no habrá otro igual,
Por eso, Isidro te pido
Nos des la paz conyugal

San Isidro...

En la iglesia te veían
Orando con gran fervor,
Implorando día con día
Perdón para el pecador.

San Isidro...

Abandonabas el campo
Por ir al templo a rezar,
Derramando tierno llanto
Ante el venerado altar.

San Isidro...

Tu patrón te reprendió
Porque mucho placticabas;
Después con asombro supo
Que con el Señor te hallabas,

San Isidro...

Hiciste tantos Milagros
Que es imposible contar;
Pues no salió desairado
El que te supo invocar.

San Isidro...

Después de gloriosa muerte
Grandes prodigios hiciste,
Con tal dicha, con tal suerte,
Que al Rey su vida devolviste,

San Isidro...

Tus reliquias invocó
Hizo que se las llevaran,
Y con asombro se vió
Que el Rey su vida salvaba.

San Isidro...

En fin, adorado Santo
De todo mi corazón,
No olvides mi tierno llanto
Y mi ardiente devoción.

San Isidro...

[San Isidro Labrador,
Singing for you all over the world

Praising your name
You are our protector.
You were par excellence
The greatest servant of God
Indeed your humility and patience carried you to heaven.

San Isidro...

You cultivated the crops
That no one else cultivated,
And in the humble earth
A flower blossomed.

San Isidro...

You were a perfect model
A model of holiness,

For this you flew
To the celestial realm.
San Isidro...
You were the most exalted husband
You did not have an equal,
For this Isidro we ask
For conjugal peace.
San Isidro...
You went to church
Praying with great fervor,
Imploring daily
For the forgiveness of sins.
San Isidro...
You abandoned the fields
To go to the temple to pray,
Shedding your tender cry
Before the holy altar.
San Isidro...
Your boss reprimanded you
Because you talked so much;
Later he was amazed to know
That you were with God.
San Isidro...
You realized many miracles
That is impossible to deny;

That those who knew how to invoke you

Were not snubbed.

San Isidro...

After such a glorious death

Great wonders you performed

With such fortune, with such luck

That you restore the King his life,

San Isidro...

He invoked your relics

Sent them away

And it was seen with amazement

That the King's life was saved.

San Isidro...

Finally, my loved Saint

Of all my heart,

Do not forget my tender cry

And my burning devotion.

San Isidro...]

ORACIÓN A SAN ISIDRO LABRADOR
[PRAYER TO SAN ISIDRO LABRADOR]

¡Oh gloriosísimo Señor San Isidro!, son tantas tus virtudes y tantos tus ejemplos de santidad, que juzgo muy pobre mi pensamiento para descubrirlos ¿pero quien ignora que fuíste celosísimo siervo del Señor, inimitable protector de la claridad, modelo de esposo y venerado en las cortes de España y en todo el mundo, por tus estupendos milagros? Por esto, ¡Oh glorioso Señor San Isidro! Te suplico tu

intercesión para con su divina majestad, pidiéndole te conceda todas las peticiones que te hacen tus innumerables devotos; como son la abundancia y fertilidad de los frutos en el corriente año, la salud de los enfermos, la paz y el buen tratamiento en los casados, la conformidad en la pobreza, el abatimiento en el orgullo y el premio en la humildad; te lo pedimos por esa ardiente caridad que ejerciste durante tu vida con todos los mendígos que recurrían a Ti en sus más urgentes necesidades. Este es el fin de mi oración y espero que su Divina Majestad te escuche y sean obsequiadas nuestras suplicas. Así mismo te ofrezco tres Padrenuestro y tres Ave María, con alabanzas a Dios Nuestro Señor Jesucristo.

En el nombre del Padre, del Hijo y del Espíritu Santo. Amén.

[Oh most glorious Lord Saint Isidore!, your virtues are so many and so are the examples of your sainthood, that I find my judgment too poor to uncover them but who could ignore that you were a devoted servant of the Lord, an inimitable protector of light, an exemplary husband and revered in the courts of Spain and the entire world due to your wonderful miracles? Thus, ¡Oh glorious Lord Saint Isidore! I beg you to intercede with your Holy Majesty to grant the requests of your countless devotees; such as an abundant and fertile harvest in the coming year, health for the sick, peace and good treatment of married people, resignation to poverty, discourage pride and reward humility; we beg for the passionate charity that you exercised all of your life over the beggars that came to you in their most urgent needs. This is the end of my prayer and I hope that the Holy Majesty listens to you and grants our requests. Furthermore, I offer you three Lord's Prayers and three Hail Marys, with praise to our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen].

Figure 13: *Correr la Canasta*



INTIMACIES OF DEVOTION

The fiesta for San Isidro Labrador is a neighborhood based celebration. Masses for the saint are held in the *barrio's capilla*, and his image is protected there throughout the year. Other residents of Empalme Escobedo attend and celebrate the fiesta, but do not play a substantial role as monetary contributors or as active participants. The primary reason for sponsoring the saint or even for actively participating in the fiesta is to fulfill a *manda* or *promesa* made to San Isidro Labrador. Participation is seen as a devotional act.

Consultants describe this devotional act as a way of paying honor to San Isidro and a means to ensure his blessing in the form of a good agricultural season—hence, the popular refrain “San Isidro Labrador, trae el agua y quita el sol” [San Isidro Labrador, brings the water and takes away the sun]. Migrants increasingly ask the saint for his blessing before traveling to the United States and to protect the family he or she leaves behind in Mexico. Other consultants explain their participation as an act of thanksgiving to San Isidro for a particular blessing, such as increased work or recovery from an illness. Acts of devotion such as lighting candles, reciting prayers, decorating the streets, preparing and sharing food, or engaging in fiesta activities (e.g., men dressing and performing as women, competing in feats of strength, and the ritual plowing of the field) fulfill a *manda* or *promesa* made to San Isidro Labrador. Some community members, particularly those who organize the fiesta, are motivated to publicly express their devotion to the saint in an act to maintain a family and community “tradition,” taking

responsibility for a celebration that unites and benefits the community, while also defining a family's place within society. A few community members participate simply for the religiosity and enjoyment of the fiesta experience.

The importance of the *mandas* and *promesas* to those who make them in Empalme Escobedo is especially relevant to the fiesta experience. Whether one vows money, time, objects or performance, the primary experience of the devoted is not trivial (Flores 1995). Despite the fact that many of the men who perform for San Isidro are migrants, living in the United States, they invariably return to Empalme Escobedo to celebrate San Isidro Labrador. The participants in the fiesta strongly believe their devotion to San Isidro Labrador will increase crop production, keep themselves and families healthy, and prove their self worth. The relationship between the individual and the patron saint, virgin mother, or sacred cross –exchanges influenced by reciprocity– can be interpreted as transactions of emotion.

Not all blessings are free of curses. San Isidro Labrador has also been known to punish devotees in Empalme Escobedo. Celia, a woman in her seventies who has lived in the barrio of San Isidro Labrador her entire life confesses “San Isidro Labrador me castiga” [San Isidro Labrador punishes me]. Celia explained that unlike the past 50 years (in 2005) she had not participated in the neighborhood efforts to decorate the streets and the chapel for San Isidro Labrador. Consequently, on May 15 she lost electricity in her home. Because she was the only one in the neighborhood to lose electricity, Celia presumed that San Isidro was punishing her relaxed devotion. Furthermore, another lifelong devotee to San Isidro Labrador, Maria, revealed to me a more extreme punishment brought on by the patron saint: death. Maria explained that seven years ago

one of the primary *cargueros* of San Isidro Labrador did not fulfill his responsibilities or promises to the saint. Not only did he drink too much and lose sight of his obligations to the saint and his community, but he also stole the donations made to San Isidro Labrador and spent the money frivolously. According to Maria, the patron saint did not let him get away with this inappropriate behavior and he died of natural causes a few days after the fiesta for San Isidro Labrador.

Reciting prayers and singing praises to San Isidro Labrador are also deliberate devotional acts. Devotees believe they receive something in return for their prayers and praise of San Isidro. Significantly, devotees apply the prayers to what they know best—the content of their daily life. The texts of the prayers and sermons in honor of San Isidro Labrador reveal the beliefs of the community and the ways in which those Catholic beliefs are embedded in both (sacred) religious practices and (secular) agricultural and labor practices. The prayers, hymns, and ritual celebrations to honor San Isidro Labrador represent an ideal of reciprocity. The text and ritual practices demonstrate the benefits of a reciprocal relationship between the saint and devotee, between men and women, between generations, between kin, and between neighbors and community members. Everyday bonds are elevated through prayer and ritual and the saint is seen as a behavioral ideal or model (Rodríguez 2006).

The text of the prayers and *alabanza* balances intimacy and formality. In the *alabanza* the devotees address San Isidro directly, using the familiar form, *tú*. The familiarity and intimacy with which the devotees address the saint in this hymn is in line with their statements that they feel comfortable with San Isidro Labrador because he is also a hard working farmer, of lesser or little means— “a common man like us.” At the

same time, in the prayers, the devotees venerate and appeal to the saint calling him “Gloriosísimo Señor San Isidro” [Most Glorious Lord Saint Isidore]. Kneeling on the ground and touching and kissing the images indicates the intimacy and emotional intensity of the relationship between devotee and sacred object. The force of devotion disrupts oppositions between the material and spiritual worlds.

The prayers as well as Cura Fernando Olivera’s homily speak to an intimacy of a lived experience in which the spiritual is embodied. Several interrelated elements are embedded in the meanings of the prayers and homily. One message is that saints (sacred beings/objects) intervene in the daily lives of humans. Saints are present everywhere and at specific moments. In another lesson, saints mediate a process of interdependence, where one becomes oneself in the process of discovering the mystery of God, in serving God, and becoming one with God. Finally, it is communicated that saints manifest their sacredness in nature (as well as in their relationships with human beings) (Alexander 2005).

The fiesta takes place in a public space. The streets and an open field are the stage and the performers move freely through all of these spaces. A makeshift altar is erected on the street in front of the *capilla*, extending the sacred space of the chapel into the streets and close to the doorways of homes. The processions with San Isidro Labrador and the Santa Cruz de Picacho are observable public events with an embedded text. They unfold in space and enact a place. Such cultural texts are about those who perform them. The processions symbolically traverse natural and cultural features of the landscape, connecting community-family-*capilla-campo* in a sacred space (Rodríguez 2006). The

fluidity of sacred and public spaces is indicative of the fiesta's ability to mediate between the past and the present, continuity and change, presence and absence.

The distinction between public and private fiesta celebrations is complex. The space of public social interaction belongs to the organizers and sponsors of the fiesta for San Isidro Labrador. Public social interaction especially occurs in particular places and times of year: in patron saint's neighborhoods and chapels, and on certain dates in the Catholic calendar (Abercrombie 1998). In Empalme Escobedo, outsiders attend the fiesta, particularly the celebrations that take place in the most public places—the church and streets. Home devotionals and novena vespers only remain private celebrations until a musician or band is hired, fireworks are set off, or food is served in front of the home. The numerous personal stories I heard and practices I participated in within the living rooms and kitchens of homes seemingly correspond to a private domain. The intimacy of certain information is not a result of silence but of contextual appropriateness and cultural understandings. Enacted devotion and ritual performances are demarcated by the Catholic calendar and schedules of proper place and time of performance, as well as by notions of intimacy and inclusion as to what is performed and who attends. However, spiritual beliefs and practices are not separated into subjects of relatively open and relatively closed forms of discourse, and do not follow a strict opposition between public and private spheres (Abercrombie 1998). As such, M. Jacqui Alexander explains how to position the personal as spiritual. She writes:

But the designation of the personal as spiritual need not be taken to mean that the social has been evacuated for a domain that is ineluctably private. While different social forces may have indeed privatized the spiritual, it is very much lived in a domain that is social in the sense that it provides knowledge whose distillation is

indispensable to daily living, its particular manifestations transforming and mirroring the social in ways that are both meaningful and tangible. [Alexander 2005: 295]

The force of devotion is not to be found on one or the other side of the boundary between the public and private domains but at the border itself.

PERFORMANCE AND PRACTICES OF REMEMBERING

Memory and narrative are key elements in the reconstruction of the personal past and comprehension of the present. Ethnographic studies of memory suggest that sites of memory transcend space and time and challenge “boundaries” between private and public, subjective and objective (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990; Behar 1996). Michel de Certeau (1984:86-87) writes, “remembering is an act of alteration because the invisible inscriptions that make up memory become visible only through new circumstances.” If memory, as Ruth Behar proposes, “always takes place elsewhere,” if it is always “other,” then memory as a form of knowing “is at the heart of the reflexivity that defines anthropological knowledge” (Behar 1996:82).

Following Richard Flores, memory does not serve as a reproduction of the past, but as an active process of remembering—a connection of the traditional past with the present social concerns through the mode of performance (Flores 1995:112). Accordingly, performing devotion to the saint is an act of remembering. Memories of the fiesta for San Isidro Labrador and the stories in which they are embedded play a dual role, serving to both authenticate a past and ameliorate the present. Their authenticating function lies in the religious and ritual practices of migrants themselves (Flores 1995).

The works of art displayed in the fiesta for San Isidro Labrador, although they often involve intensive labor and considerable expense, are not intended to last beyond the lifetime of the occasion. Pathways, where the procession bearing the saint will pass, are constructed of perishable materials. The palm leaves and pine needles that give off a pleasant aroma as the faithful walk upon them will be swept away hours later. The sawdust carpet covering the altar lasts only as long as the Mass. Fresh cut flowers given as offerings to San Isidro Labrador will wilt within days. The vivid colors of the paper and plastic decorations hanging across the rooftops of homes will fade from the heat of the sun.

Other ephemeral arts that are essential to the fiesta experience are fireworks, candles, incense, altars, and special foods and drink. Fireworks provide not only visual excitement but also sound. The explosive noise of fireworks is used to announce important moments during the fiesta. In particular, the grandiose *castillo* ends the fiesta with colorful sparks that fly in all directions. Candles and incense in burners stimulate the sense of smell. Many candles are made especially for the patron saint celebration. Temporary altars are set up both inside homes and outside in the streets and as such are capable of connecting the private and public spheres. The fiesta (Mass, processions, prayers, singing, dancing, feasting) takes place in relation to these sacred sites (altar, chapel, field), which, whether permanent or ephemeral, are situated in meaningful places.

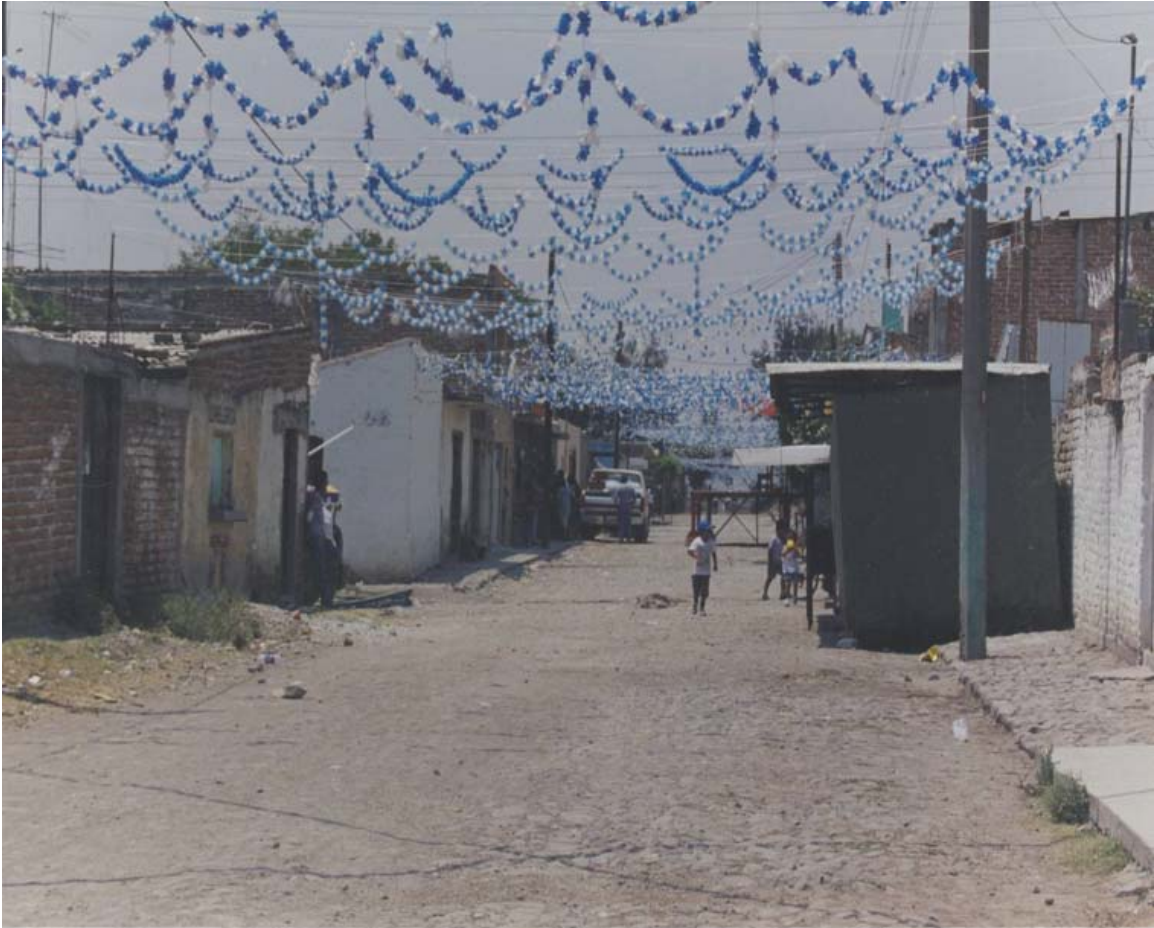
These impermanent works of art—a sawdust carpet covering the altar, pine needle walkways for the saint's procession, elaborately decorated breads and candies, *papel picado*, niches or altars for the saint, fresh flowers and fruits, costumes, candles, fireworks, music and dancing—become fragments of the community's memory after the

fiesta. Similarly, many of the participants who promptly return to the United States to work, themselves become much like memories of the fiesta for San Isidro Labrador.

The impermanence of the objects is significant because rather than the objects remaining as reminders of the fiesta experience, individuals are forced to rely on personal and collective memories of the cultural performance to maintain their faith throughout the year. As such, the cultural performance and aesthetic practice of the fiesta for San Isidro Labrador becomes a significant spiritual memory that can fill in the gaps of logic, absence, loss, struggle, and hope on both sides of the border.

Migrants move between physical territories and between real and imagined spaces and communities and their religious beliefs and practices help them make these journeys. As Peggy Levitt (2007:12) writes, “Religion is the ultimate boundary crosser.” Religion provides devotees with rituals, symbols, and stories that can be used to fashion alternative sacred spaces and communities. Performing devotion to a patron saint and practices of remembering enable folks in Empalme Escobedo and their migrant relatives and friends in the United States to celebrate and transform their pain, fear and desire into the basis of their strong sense of belonging to a transnational community. In the process of transnational community-making, migrants and their families decipher the memory of absence and translate the meanings of their mobility into the language of God (patron saints, virgin mothers and sacred crosses) and faith. The force of devotion transcends the boundaries of time. In a transnational community, religious belief and practice depends on memory and connects San Isidro Labrador’s devotees to a past, a present and a future (Levitt 2007).

Figure 14: Impermanence and Fragmentation



TRANSNATIONAL SPIRITUALITY

An ethnographic analysis of the fiesta for San Isidro Labrador cannot be separated from its historical significance or religious intent (Flores 1995). The participants in the cultural performance for San Isidro Labrador in Empalme Escobedo view their devotion against the reality of migration, which, though it does not explain it in a causal sense, places it in a cognitive and affective sense (Geertz 1973).

According to Emile Durkheim (1965:352), “If religious ceremonies have any importance at all, it is that they set collectivities in motion; groups come together to celebrate them.” Durkheim explains religious phenomena as ritual and belief: “rituals are particular modes of action” and “belief refers to discourse and representation” (Durkheim 1965:34; Fortuny-Loret de Mola 2002:42). The celebration of the fiesta to honor San Isidro Labrador “constitutes the highest representation of a moral community in Durkheimian terms because it is able to provide the membership with a ‘collective conscience’ in the emotional, cognitive and normative meanings of the term” (Durkheim 1965:34; Fortuny-Loret de Mola 2002:42). In performing devotion to the saint, participants express emotion through actions in common. Patricia Fortuny-Loret de Mola (2002:42) writes, “It is the physical community and *communitas* that produces and reproduces a sacred, forceful energy, which in turn transforms religion into a powerful force, a source of dynamism.”

The force of devotion can be measured by the *communitas* it produces, rather than by the authenticity of the link between the private emotions of the devotee and the

object(s) of her or his devotion (Appadurai 1990b). It is the emotional effects of devotion that are significant. The performance of devotion builds a mood of admiration or adoration that unites the devotee, the object of devotion and the audience (Appadurai 1990b). The performance of devotion is a complex interpretive and affective act. Yet, in everyday life the performance of devotion is not always a matter of admiration, adoration or communion. As demonstrated in the fiesta for San Isidro Labrador, performing devotion may reflect the pain of absence, inappropriate desire, or resentment of authority (the Catholic Church, the State).

The devotion, emotion and physical time and money put into the fiesta for San Isidro Labrador in Empalme Escobedo demand an impressive degree of individual and community discipline. The enacted devotion and performed rituals are an effective, yet arduous, means of protecting sacred aspects of daily life and connecting a fragmented community. The fiesta speaks to ordinary life. But it does so in a dramatic and affective space of enacted devotion, ritual performance and transnational spirituality. The emotional immediacy of the fiesta experience is manifest in men and women's enacted devotion and ritual performances. The ritual performances can be interpreted as statements of desire: desire for change, desire for the same, desire for each other and for community.

Devotees to San Isidro Labrador experience spirituality in action. The spirituality of everyday life (in action) takes place in simple acts of recognition (appreciation): making the sign of the cross, attending to sacred objects and their holy spaces, prefacing each desire with "si Dios quiere," blessing food and nature, building a home altar, practicing reciprocity, and participating in collective ritual. Alexander (2005: 307)

argues that it is the spiritual actions within daily life that instigate “the necessary shifts in consciousness, which are produced because each act, and each moment of reflection of that act, brings a new and deepened meaning of self in intimate concert with the Sacred.”

The fiesta performance for San Isidro Labrador can be considered transitory. The actual fiesta is fleeting but its memory, the performative force, and the *mandas*, blessings and miracles of the saint do not escape the consciousness of the devoted. Long distance relationships depend on imagination and memory. Two weeks to two months in Mexico does not account for nine to eleven months in the United States. One must have faith.

The fact that the fiesta for San Isidro Labrador occurs every year in Empalme Escobedo creates a connection to place and origins. Returning to Empalme Escobedo to celebrate devotion to a patron saint is a central moment in an uneven process of community formation. Rather than solely assuming an allegiance between a particular place and a particular set of shared values, the notion of community that develops through this cultural performance is rooted in a common experience of spirituality, the force of devotion, impermanence and fragmentation.

Practices of remembering comprise an ongoing process of reconstruction shaped by the immediate necessities of the present (Lambek 1996). Remembering the “good” in the fiesta performance for San Isidro Labrador entails a desire to find meaning in the losses experienced in migration. The spiritual memory reflected in the cultural performance for San Isidro Labrador is a “memory of absence” constructed from losses endured in migration and its affect on both sides of the border. Memory becomes “the instrument of redefinition” in a transnational spirituality—a saintly devotion that transcends national boundaries (Mesa-Bains 1993:9).

In the fiesta for San Isidro Labrador, the participants' enacted devotion and the text of the prayers, hymn and homily demonstrate the ways in which religious beliefs and practices and the language of God and faith are translated into a transnational spirituality. The force of devotion fills in the gaps created by the separation of folks due to migration and the persistent memory of absence.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

BORDER CROSSINGS

Marisol, my husband and I are crossing the Mexican-U.S. border. Marisol is crying and we are all trying our best to look and act normal. It is July 13, 2007 and my husband and I are returning to the United States with Marisol Sanchez after driving to Empalme Escobedo to reunite with the community.

At the culmination of my fieldwork in December of 2006 Marisol and I arranged that following my first return trip to Mexico she would, “si Dios quiere,” [God willing] accompany me to the U.S. For months Marisol works on securing the papers to travel to the United States: amassing the necessary identification cards, bank records, home and business titles, and traveling to Mexico City to interview for a nonimmigrant visitor visa (B-2) at the U.S. Embassy. Marisol’s visa is approved. The nonimmigrant visitor visa “allows a foreign citizen, to travel to a United States port-of entry and request permission of the Department of Homeland Security immigration inspector to enter the U.S. A nonimmigrant visitor visa does not guarantee entry into the United States” (U.S. Department of State 2009). Marisol tells me she received the visa out of “pura suerte” [pure luck], but also believes it was due to the fact that she is over sixty and owns a home and a business—proving her strong ties to Mexico.

The decision to drive to Empalme Escobedo is based on our bringing Marisol back to the United States with us. At the end of several days, catching up with friends in

Empalme Escobedo and Celaya, Campbell, Marisol and I prepare for a trip to the United States. It is more difficult than imagined to get on the road early and we stop in Comonfort for Marisol to get a stipend from the National Campesino Confederation (CNC)—where she stands in line for two hours. Hence, we only drive as far as Saltillo, Coahuila. We get started a little earlier the next day, and with only one break for gas we arrive giddy at the Gateway to the Americas International Bridge in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas. Navigating through Nuevo Laredo is a dizzying experience and not even blasting the C.D. and singing the lyrics to Doug Sahm’s *Nuevo Laredo* makes us feel any better. Before getting in line at the border we must return our Temporary Import Permit at the Mexican customs office. Tourists traveling to Mexico by car must have a valid driver's license and a certificate of title or vehicle registration. Current Mexican government regulations require foreigners to apply for a Temporary Import Permit, complete a Vehicle Return Promise and to post a vehicle bond, ensuring that the vehicle be returned to its country of origin. All of these procedures are fulfilled at the border before entering the country. When you leave Mexico you must return the documents that were issued when entering. “Sanctions will be imposed to persons who fail to do so” (Mexico Connect 2007).

Having taken the necessary measures to ensure our proper return to the United States, we make several funky turns landing us at the International Bridge to cross into Laredo, Texas. Marisol begins telling us about her youthful days as a single parent crossing the Mexican-U.S. border monthly to purchase goods in Laredo and sometimes San Antonio, Texas –mainly jewelry, clothes and Tupperware– to sell in Empalme Escobedo, Celaya and San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato. As she recalls and retells the

stories of a difficult youth—poor, alone and constantly working hard to raise her son—she begins to cry. She explains that the memories are rushing back to her as we wait to cross the Mexican-U.S. border and she is sorry and embarrassed by her sudden overwhelming emotion. I listen and talk to Marisol while Campbell tries to stay focused on the border crossing: what is the purpose of our trip, what we are carrying across the border, why is Marisol traveling with us, and how long will she be a visitor to the U.S.?

The differences between and among us are rising to the surface. What different places we come from and live in. Here we will cross more than a border.

Perhaps while living in Empalme Escobedo for nineteen months our differences were less palpable. Were they somewhat concealed as we lived the lives of our Mexican friends and neighbors? Now Marisol is observing and participating in our lives. Here—at the border—the differences are tangible.

Relief. Nothing really happens at our first stop: the officer asks us the most general required questions—the purpose of our trip and our custom declarations—and directs us to cross the border, stop again and park, and send Marisol to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security office. We do as we are told.

I accompany Marisol to the Department of Homeland Security office. We wait in line with around seventy Mexican nationals and other “foreigners,” looking over their paperwork and chatting nervously. A woman in line begins talking to Marisol and me: asking us what we are doing in the U.S., and what we know of this crossing process. Marisol explains that she is in the U.S. to visit me, but makes it clear this is not her first time to cross the Mexican-U.S. border. I explain that Marisol and I met in Empalme Escobedo, Guanajuato in 1999 while I was conducting ethnographic research and that my

husband and I lived in Empalme Escobedo for close to two years. Marisol interjects that we are “como familia” [like family]. It feels good to hear her tell this to a complete stranger (something we discuss often amongst ourselves).

Finally, it is Marisol’s turn to meet with the immigration inspector. I walk up to the booth with her –annoying the inspector –and I immediately move away. Moments later the inspector motions for me to step forward, annoyed again that Marisol does not understand his line of questioning. I serve somewhat as translator —providing a little of myself, including my student status and address—and he sends us off with a sigh and a shake of his hand.

Back in the car, the three of us are silent for a long time. Tired and lost in our own thoughts, affected by crossing the border.

Marisol’s trip to the United States brings up numerous issues for me. I am depressed upon returning from the field and her presence now reminds me that I do not exactly feel better about the United States and my place within it. I think constantly about Empalme Escobedo. I long for the community, for the tranquility of rural life, for the sincerity and warm embrace of Mexican female friends, for the challenge of speaking in the Spanish language, to taste the fresh and fiery ingredients of Mexican cuisine, to hear the sounds of the local animals and street vendors, to smell the flowers, herbs, and vines in the *jardin* and growing wild in unexpected places, and to be moved by the force of devotion. In this fantasy, am I forgetting the poverty of rural Mexico, the effects of migration, the thick dust covering everything and making its way into daily conversations as a source of illness, the pain of absence, the mosquitoes and flies constantly circling my food, blanketing the ceilings of kitchens, buzzing in my ears and biting my extremities,

the difficulty of communicating in another language, the inconveniences of lacking a car, a telephone, an internet connection, a television or a bank, mangy or dead dogs lying in the street, dirty water, stagnant water, or no water, and men carrying machine guns at random checkpoints and unusual locales, or men passed out on street corners barely clasping a bottle of alcohol? I am angry at the United States. I am angry at Mexico. U.S. politics, public culture and even my American friends disgust me. I find myself obsessively comparing U.S. evangelism to Mexican popular devotion and Catholicism. I am confused. How will I translate the voices and stories of the Empalme Escobedo transnational community? How will I represent their experiences, my experiences of Mexico, or the force of devotion?

I can't escape the numerous *dichos* I have been told by men and women in Empalme Escobedo, the conversations I have heard, news clippings I have read, blogs I have scanned, songs I listen to, books I read or movies I watch which seem to always relate and bring me back to Mexico.

“...Yo nací llorando...”

“...Saint behind the glass has a baby in his arms...”

“...Memory is desire satisfied...”

“...Soy santo, somos santos, santo como él...”

“...Who are your people? ...”

“...La vida tiene sus maneras de enseñarnos...”

“...Xenophobia is defined as a fear of strangers or of immigrants who possess traits and characteristics that some consider foreign to a nation's culture, language and heritage...”

“...Todos somos iguales...”

“...The defendants admitted that they beat, robbed and killed Miguel Vega in Yonkers, New York because they thought that the 32 year old Peruvian was a Mexican...”

“...Our review of economic research finds immigrants not only help fuel the Nation’s economic growth, but also have an overall positive effect on the income of native-born workers.”

“...La vida tiene sus maneras de confundirnos...”

“...Equal membership in American communities is simply not an option for Latin Americans...”

“...Saint behind the glass watches me while I sleep...”

“...These acts of intimidation and violence are occurring even though 85% of premiere U.S. economists agree that the presence of undocumented Mexican workers in this country is having a net-positive effect on U.S. society...”

“...All stories are partial, all meanings incomplete...”

“...Home is beautiful and unbearable at the same time...”

“...We don’t need ‘reform’, we need enforcement. These aren’t immigrants, they are illegal aliens. Deport them...”

“...La vida tiene sus maneras de cambiarnos...”

“...Who was Juan Diego? Indigenous or mestizo icon? Architect of a native theology or creation of the Church?...”

“...Mandado, mandado, quieres un mandado?...”

“...The process is everything...”

“...I am really confused why there is any debate to this ‘issue’ at all. The term is **ILLEGAL** immigrant. What part of ‘they broke our laws’ don’t people understand anyway?...”

“...Cuando Claudia y Paco llevan una cruz y no pueden llevarla, yo les ayudo...”

“...Saint behind the glass tells mother not to cry...”

“...Bringing money from the United States is not the same as working, living, and developing Mexico itself...”

“...La vida tiene sus maneras de asombrarnos...”

“...The dust is so thick and the air is so dry, people are dying. Diseases are sucking people up, more people are dying everyday...”

“...Todo esta igual aqui en Escobedo, Liz...y Picho anda borracho...”

“...I think the march is a way of defending the culture of the men and women of the countryside...”

“...La vida tiene sus maneras de herirnos...”

“...If there’s a wall, I’ll go over it. I’ll go under it. But I’m going back to the United States...”

“...A cualquier dolor, paciencia es lo mejor...”

“...Mexico is a lawless state with the great potential to harbor terrorists, like Al- Qaeda...”

“...They live *a la fuerza*—by force—by their determination to keep

going...”

“...Si, es una peña, pero la peña con pan es bueno...”

“...Some Mexicans are leaving the U.S., planning never to return...”

“...La vida tiene sus maneras de curarnos...”

“... We don’t confront the Church, we overcome it. We subsume it in relation to our people...”

“...Todo depende de Dios...”

“...La vida tiene sus maneras de inspirarnos...”

“...Viva Empalme Escobedo, Viva San Isidro Labrador...”³⁰

TRANSNATIONAL SPIRITUALITY, MODERNITY AND DIFFERENTIATED MOBILITY

The discourses I encountered in the field as well as those that I engage in and overhear within academia and the mainstream media have affected my perceptions of Mexico, the United States, migrants, and myself. In this dissertation I share a fraction of life in Empalme Escobedo as seen through the eyes of a white, female ethnographer and heard through the voices of *mestizo* male and female farmers, migrants, railroad laborers, mothers, fathers, daughters and sons, and attempt to make sense of the force of devotion that captivates and situates a transnational community and myself. In performing the stories of men and women through my words I expose the emotion and intimacy embedded in popular devotion to patron saints, virgin mothers and sacred crosses,

³⁰ The use of fragments and quotations is influenced by the writing style of Carlos Fuentes in *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (Fuentes 1964:255-257).

enacted in public and private daily life, and moving back and forth across the real and imagined Mexican-U.S. border.

Empalme Escobedo does not fit neatly within regional histories or narratives of Central Mexico, indigenous practice or Catholicism. Unlike other towns in the Mexican Bajío region, Empalme Escobedo has not received any ethnographic or literary attention. This dissertation seeks a deeper understanding of this transnational community and places Empalme Escobedo within the literature as an example of a modern, transnational community.

In the preceding chapters I demonstrate the centrality of popular religion, specifically the force of devotion to local patron saints, virgin mothers and sacred crosses in transnationalism. Despite the fact that for some migrants it is difficult to return to Empalme Escobedo, the affective force and emotional and intimate meanings of popular religion keep them connected to “home.” The force of devotion is a way of hearing, interpreting, thinking and talking about stories of spirituality and translating popular religious language in a performative and affective manner. Men and women in the Empalme Escobedo transnational community are open to the force of devotion in order to grapple with the conditions of history, modernity, impermanence and fragmentation. In this transnational community, the force of devotion and the work of migration contribute to the making and unmaking of familial, communal, national and transnational identities and boundaries.

On numerous occasions, as performed in this dissertation, I was struck by the force of devotion. I experience the force of devotion in witnessing a sunrise serenade to San Isidro Labrador, in hosting a devotional to the Virgen Maria Auxiliadora and being

trusted with her image within my home for twenty four hours, in observing a crowd gather and move as one to carry, dance for, and celebrate their patron saint, in being accepted as a member of the family and community to partake in a meal prepared all day to honor the Sacred Cross of Picacho, and in participating in a seven hour pilgrimage on foot through the Sierra Madre mountains. Folks in Empalme Escobedo live *a la fuerza*, by force.

Living by force is the outcome of “continuous interpretive labor”—of grappling with loss, responsibility, uncertainty, and the dissolution of a community (Harding 2000: 100). San Isidro Labrador, the patron saint of farming, is celebrated in hopes of a productive agricultural season. Maria Auxiliadora, the patroness of the railroad laborers, is honored as a representation of Empalme Escobedo’s ambiguous histories and communal struggles. The Santo Niño de las Maravillas is relied on to ensure migrant’s safe crossing of the Mexican-U.S. border and quick return to Empalme Escobedo. In the face of impermanence and fragmentation patron saints, virgin mothers and sacred crosses remain symbols of desire and hope for survival. I maintain that the force of devotion represents and gives expression to the desire for solidarity (experienced through fiesta performance) and the dissolution of the community by migration (experienced as absence and fragmentation). Popular religious beliefs and practices provide migrants the ideational and material resources, the sense of belonging, and the narratives to move in transnational spaces. Participating in the annual fiestas to honor San Isidro Labrador, Maria Auxiliadora, the Santo Niño de las Maravillas or the Santa Cruz de Picacho in Empalme Escobedo can be understood as the time and space where men and women construct and reconstruct the meanings of life and where they regain hope and desire for

their everyday activities. Currently migrants from Empalme Escobedo in Texas are not recreating the fiestas to honor San Isidro Labrador, Maria Auxiliadora or the Santa Cruz de Picacho in their communities in Giddings, Grapevine or Houston, Texas.

The circulating images of patron saints and virgin mothers are not just icons, but a means of devotion, of composing one's forces. The prayers that surround the images circulate too, and so do the discourses and emotions they are attached to, moving from house to house in Empalme Escobedo and back and forth across the Mexican-U.S. border. Moving together, facing one another, both requires and creates connection. To exist in the Empalme Escobedo transnational community is to find a connection, a belonging, an identity in moving with others—being in force.

Returning to Empalme Escobedo to celebrate devotion to a patron saint is a central moment in an uneven process of self and community formation. While Mexico becomes a site of “life” –of family, belonging and meaning– the United States is a space for work. For migrants in the United States, Mexico is imagined as a totally different world: Empalme Escobedo is simultaneously described as “muy tranquilo” [very laid back, peaceful] and the site of “pura pachanga” [constant parties/partying]. Similarly, the United States is imagined (for nonmigrants or first time migrants) as different—as a place where money can be made and an individual or families' problems can be solved. These kinds of romanticized notions of *patria* and *gringolandia* that often idealize “home” or “the other side” and make one better than the other are just as frequently only imagined to be true. These idealized locations should not be understood as opposites, but as the social constructs for understanding Mexican histories and modernities that are constantly changing.

The knowledge of modernity tied to the migrant experience is significant. Many migrants in Empalme Escobedo attempt to convert their migrant experience into symbolic capital that will generate respect and prestige. Migrant communities in Guanajuato have a long history of connection to a global economy, challenging the dichotomy of tradition versus modern. However, many folks in Empalme Escobedo think of themselves as outside of the modern as progress surpasses them. Notions of modernity are aroused by the actual experiences of migration as well as the reconstructed discourses and images about *el otro lado* and migrant life. The enactment of modernity is made possible through social relationships and the circulation of objects within the transnational space. The family, community and the force of devotion in Empalme Escobedo are defining features of social agency. The division of this transnational space into places that serve varying functions allows sociability and solidarity, as well as the shaping of personhood and belonging to remain rooted in Empalme Escobedo and in local ideas of sociality, spirituality and respectability. These processes and struggles neither necessarily begin nor end in Empalme Escobedo. Yet they always bring migrants and myself back to Empalme Escobedo.

Mobility does not always involve freedom of movement or separation from roots. Nor does mobility always imply transcendence or transformation. The transnational movement of people, things and ideas have transformed notions and experiences of home and belonging, while also maintaining that in Empalme Escobedo mobility is dependent on origins and does not contradict experiences of “rooted belonging” (Ahmed, Castañeda, Fortier and Sheller 2003:3). Moreover, the perception of freedom of mobility often hinges on the powers of border controls, social categories, and enforcement of belonging

or not belonging (Ahmed, Castañeda, Fortier and Sheller 2003:3). The greatest movements often occur within the self, the home or the family.

The self and the community are imagined products of a continuous process (Lambek and Antze 1996). The production of sociability and solidarity does not require giving up the local or transnational but finding ways of working with both dimensions, and with what moves between them. The affective qualities of home and the work of memory in their making cannot be divorced from the materiality of objects, rituals, and borders that are tied to the processes of movement. Those that stay behind in Empalme Escobedo are not divorced from movement.

Folks' experiences of movement, connection and spirituality are everyday processes of self-making and being in common that shape their lives as mobile, transnational, and religious beings. Thus, while this dissertation is focused on the daily experiences of folks in the Empalme Escobedo transnational community and the force of devotion to specific patron saints, virgin mothers and sacred crosses it is also a reflection on the wider implications of mobility, connectivity and spirituality for immigrants and U.S. citizenship and the ways in which these forces affect understandings of transnational communities. I identify the everyday practices of subjects who are acted upon and who act on their own behalf in following ideals and resources that may oppose the ones allocated to them by the dominant society. For the folks of the Empalme Escobedo transnational community, the tension between movement and connection is a central force in the project of becoming transnational and belonging in the U.S. or Mexico. The transition for Mexican migrants from a spiritually influenced understanding of daily life and strong reliance on family and community to an emphasis on profit-making and

individualistic principles is a disconcerting experience. This impermanence and fragmentation creates ambivalence.

I have tried to bring into focus the ambivalent meanings and ambiguities of absence and presence, popular religion, and belonging that shape the lives of men and women in the Empalme Escobedo transnational community. Aihwa Ong argues that the Mormon Church offers to Cambodian refugees in Oakland, California an “alternative modernity to that of secular state institutions, seeking to inculcate modern methods of discipline and situate newcomers within a sacralized global hierarchy of ethno-racial positioning and possibilities” (Ong 2003:197). In Empalme Escobedo, popular religious beliefs and practices teach folks about being a part of a community as well as the kind of self-discipline and daily habits that are a part of being a modern subject. Folks are attracted to but simultaneously seek to overcome the Catholic Church as a requisite structure of power that provides the social means to achieve upward mobility and modern belonging. Popular religion, as an alternative modernizing force, both represents and creates a social world and has the ability to elucidate and ameliorate the changes occurring in the Empalme Escobedo transnational community. Ong asks, “As processes of deterritorialization lateralize conditions of living and working, of power and of oppression, across national borders, what is the basis on which claims of solidarity can be made?” I answer that in Empalme Escobedo it is the force of devotion that creates sociability and solidarity despite the erosion and deterritorialization of the community by transnational migration.

I turn to Richard Flores who explains the textual meaning of *Los Pastores* as the “human desire for completeness, expressed and experienced through ritual enactment,

against the all too real encroachments of the social world experienced as alienation and fragmentation” (Flores 1995:171). His work provides an understanding of the “complex, yet real, relationship between the Utopian impulses of religious practices and cultural productions alongside the putative forces of social dissolution” (Flores 1995:172).

Building on Flores’s ideas I demonstrate that the force of devotion to patron saints, virgin mothers and sacred crosses in Empalme Escobedo is a means of creating sociability and solidarity—connecting and being in common—that shapes the transnational community’s social identity. The affective performance of devotion is a socially significant and symbolic act. The force of devotion has the ability to be powerful, contested, and potentially political.

Folks in the Empalme Escobedo transnational community turn to the force of their devotion for lessons in differentiated mobility. San Isidro Labrador, Maria Auxiliadora and the Santa Cruz de Picacho both inhabit and exceed the same spatial and temporal spheres as their devotees. Folks recognize San Isidro Labrador and the Virgin Mary’s superior positioning as modern subjects in the temporal spatial order. These saints, virgin mothers and sacred crosses already embody and surpass the kind of modernity and transnational mobility that many men and women aspire today in Empalme Escobedo. Moreover, the final completion of the Empalme Escobedo *parroquia* in December of 2007, the pavement of certain streets, renovation to and creation of small businesses in the market, and the building of large *norteamericano* style houses in Empalme Escobedo symbolize transnationalism and differentiated mobility. Just as Julie Chu discusses for a transnational Chinese community, the state of construction or vacant interiors of these new residences or businesses in Empalme Escobedo serve as reminders of the greater

mobility and modernity of absent community members with dual lives in the United States and Mexico (cf. Chu 2006).

Transnational subjectivities are enacted in embodied and material ways through the circulation of not only migrant bodies but also objects of devotion, prayers, money, goods, and media across the Mexican-U.S. border. The relationship between religious devotion and sense of self is dialectical. As such, the force of devotion provides the opportunity for folks to move their bodies in such a way as to practice, to enact, idealized selves and social relationships. As demonstrated in the fiesta for San Isidro Labrador, folks move their bodies and their emotions in specific ways, inhabiting ways of being. Positionality is an emergent quality of movement (Massumi 2002). The performance of devotion obliges the community to come together, to coordinate their movements, and to perform emotion, submission, hierarchy, intimacy, gender and community. Folks in the Empalme Escobedo transnational community are moving as one and as such are creating a sense of belonging, of being in common.

Through descriptions of popular religious beliefs and practices and the force of devotion I have led readers into the lives of fiesta participants and community members who tell stories about migration, pain, absence of loved ones, family, hope, or devotion to San Isidro Labrador, Maria Auxiliadora, the Santa Cruz de Picacho and the Santo Niño de las Maravillas. Using the experience of stories and the ways they layer, conjoin and linger I employ the force of devotion as grounded theory. Men and women in this transnational community emerge from and as the products of their stories, just as their stories emerge from their lives (Lambek and Antze 1996). This dissertation is significant because it exposes the voices and stories, memories and emotions, fears and desires of

men and women in the Empalme Escobedo transnational community and reveals the force of their devotion.

EPILOGUE: LEAVING THE NEST

Patricia Gonzalez talks to me about her seventeen-year-old son in the United States. She tells me: “Se fue con mi hermano a trabajar construyendo el andamio en una fábrica donde mis hermanos han trabajado muchos años. Al principio me preocupaba por él todos los días, lloraba mucho y me sentía enfermo –de preocupación por él. Pero ahora lo veo diferente. Está tomando su vida en sus manos, madurando y aprendiendo a volar. Pienso en él como un pájaro que está creciendo. Al principio la cría se queda un tiempo en el nido al cuidado de su madre y aprendiendo a sobrevivir. Finalmente el pájaro aprende a volar y podrá dejar el nido. El pájaro que sabe volar posee la libertad para hacer lo que desea. Mi hijo es como el pájaro – tiene el poder de tomar sus propias decisiones. Su decisión es dejar el hogar y trabajar en Estados Unidos. Su ausencia todavía me afecta, pero lo comprendo, porque yo también un día abandoné el nido y volé para aprender nuevas cosas.”³¹

³¹ English translation: “He went with my brother to work building scaffolding in a factory where my brothers have worked for many years. At first I was worrying about him everyday, crying a lot and feeling sick to my stomach- aching for him. But now I see it differently. He is taking his life into his own hands, growing up, learning to fly. I think of him as a developing bird. A young bird stays for a time in its nest, being cared for by its mother and learning how to survive. Eventually the bird learns to fly and can leave the nest. The bird that knows how to fly has the freedom to do what it wants. My son is like the bird—he has been given the power to make his own decisions. His decision is to leave his home and work in the United States. His absence is still difficult for me, but I understand his decision to leave the nest. I too left my nest and flew away to learn new things.”

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VITA

Elizabeth Hawthorne LeFlore was born in Dallas, Texas on December 15, 1972. Her parents are Susan Carnahan Hawthorne and Douglas Derwood Hawthorne. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree in May 1995 from the University of San Diego in San Diego, California where she majored in Anthropology. She received a Master of Arts degree in Cultural Anthropology from The University of Texas at San Antonio in San Antonio, Texas in May 2000. She entered the doctoral program in Folklore and Public Culture in the Department of Anthropology at The University of Texas at Austin in 2001. She was a lecturer at The University of Texas at San Antonio and a teaching assistant at The University of Texas at Austin. She is the recipient of fellowships from the College of Liberal and Fine Arts at The University of Texas at San Antonio, The Mexican Center of the Teresa Lozano Long Institute for Latin American Studies at The University of Texas at Austin, the United States Department of Education, Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Program, the Graduate School at The University of Texas at Austin, and the Philanthropic Educational Organization (P.E.O.) International.

Permanent address: 5003 W. Hanover, Dallas, Texas 75209

This dissertation was typed by the author.