

Neither here nor there:

Mexican immigrant workers and the search for home

ABSTRACT

In this article, I explore how immigrant workers have understood the shift from seasonal migration between Mexico and California to permanent settlement in the U.S. South. I suggest not only that understandings, memories, and the physicality of places are produced in tension with one another but also that the ongoing experience of migration is itself key for shaping how subjectivities and places are constituted through the contradictions embedded in them. I also argue that even as immigrant settlers become more invested in the United States, the idea and experience of a community rooted in Mexico but spanning multiple places retains its appeal in part because it plays such a powerful role in daily life in the United States. [*Mexican immigration, U.S. South, poultry, place, migration, identity, gender*]

During the 1960s, Antonio Gomez began migrating on an annual basis from Santo Domingo, a small town in the state of Guanajuato in Mexico's central highlands, to southern California.¹ Leaving wives and families, Antonio and other men from Santo Domingo would cross the border, work in seasonal agriculture for six or seven months a year, and then return to Mexico. Money earned in the United States helped sustain family, small-scale farming operations, and *pueblo* in Mexico. In broad terms, the income generated by this pattern of seasonal migration supported Santo Domingo and other towns in the region until the 1980s, when various forces conspired to make California a less attractive and profitable destination for migrants. At roughly the same time, however, Antonio began to hear rumors about jobs in the poultry industry in places like Arkansas, Georgia, and North Carolina.

The first Santo Domingan to shift from California to Arkansas did so in 1987 and immediately got a job at a Tyson Foods processing plant. Within a decade, it seemed as though the whole town was living in Arkansas; only a few who really "made it" in California remained out west. Antonio himself made the change in 1988. Although he was initially overwhelmed by the intensity of the work, and amazed by the absence of "hispanos" in the area, he nevertheless came to appreciate the lower cost of living and the employment opportunities available in northwest Arkansas and in the poultry industry.² Antonio and many of his fellow migrants saw poultry processing, with its year-round demand for labor, 40-hour workweeks, potential for overtime, and job-related benefits, as a major step up from seasonal labor in the fields of California. The shift to poultry and the South made it possible for men who had been migrating alone and seasonally to California for 20 years to bring their wives and families to Arkansas within a year of arriving.³ By pooling multiple working-class incomes (women were hired in poultry plants as quickly as men), families found themselves purchasing houses and acquiring the trappings of middle-class life within a few years of moving to Arkansas. For Antonio and other migrants, "the family" became possible in a way it had never been in California (or even Mexico).⁴

There is now a vast literature within and outside of anthropology on transnational migration into the United States, particularly from Mexico. Much of the research prior to 1980 focused on traditional receiving areas such as California and Texas and saw recent arrivals from Mexico largely through the lens of the “temporary migrant” (Piore 1979). The “typical,” often undocumented, migrant worked seasonally in agriculture and then returned to his community. Life in the United States was seen in these earlier studies largely as a work experience that had relatively little impact on the migrant’s worldview; it simply brought money into Mexican communities.

A subsequent generation of scholars recognized that this framework was inadequate in several ways. To begin with, some new arrivals, regardless of legal status, stayed in the United States. Some “sojourners” did become “settlers,” an important observation that was used to counter stereotypes about migrants. Scholarly attention then began to focus on the shift between places. How did life in a particular community in Mexico compare with life in a particular place in the United States (Achor 1978; Lomnitz 1977)? This bipolar framework generally assumed the existence of two communities—one in Mexico and one in the United States—with fundamentally distinct ways of life. What practices, attitudes, traditions, and customs did migrants bring with them, and how were these distinctive lifeways utilized or modified in the United States (Alvarez 1987)? Did first- or second-generation migrants-turned-immigrants eventually embrace, adapt to, or struggle against the new “American” cultural order?

Although this varied body of literature greatly expanded thinking about migration, scholars often assumed the existence of two relatively unified, integrated, and distinct communities, with “sending” communities in Mexico still seen in traditional and unchanging terms. Moreover, the distinction between “sojourner” and “settler” was understood in overly rigid terms. People were either temporary migrants or permanent settlers, with the latter group’s experience defined by some level of cultural accommodation in the United States.

Roger Rouse has argued persuasively that those of us who study Mexican migration not see it as a movement between distinct environments but as a “transnational migrant circuit,” whereby the circuit as a whole (and not a single locale) “constitutes the principal setting in relation to which [people] orchestrate their lives” (1991:14). What Rouse (1991, 1992) and others have observed is that many migrants do not settle in California, because of the high cost of living and their desire to maintain “spatially extended relationships” with kin in Mexico. They rarely abandon Mexico altogether and, in fact, maintain long-distance relationships as actively as “local” ones (Cohen 2001). At the same time, these migrants are rarely “temporary” in the stereotypical sense. Experience in the United States is not limited to work. Migrants

routinely return to, live in, and develop long-standing social relationships in particular communities in California (and other receiving areas) over a decades-long period. Such an understanding has proven useful not simply because a “circuit” more accurately captures what many migrants actually do but because it also allows us to sharpen our questions about how migrants understand their experiences.

What the experience of Antonio and thousands of other migrants suggests, however, is that the transnational migrant circuit outlined by Rouse and others is being disrupted as migrants are “pushed” out of traditional receiving areas such as California and “pulled” into the U.S. heartland. This transition cannot be reduced to a simple geographic shift from, for example, California to Arkansas. On the one hand, the shift away from California and the related extension of the Mexican diaspora into the heartland has encouraged something approaching permanent settlement in the United States. The high cost of living made settlement in California unaffordable for many migrants. By contrast, economic conditions in small U.S. towns not only make settlement financially possible but also often require longer stays. On the other hand, this shift has sped up the process by which entire Mexican towns are effectively abandoned for much of the year. This is attributable both to the trend toward permanent settlement associated with the move to small U.S. towns and the nature of the transnational migrant circuit itself. Migrants do not randomly scatter throughout the United States but, instead, follow members of their family and community to particular places (i.e., large numbers of *X* community in Mexico establish themselves in *X* community in the United States). Thus, once a few pioneers determine the viability and desirability of a new location in the United States, the circuit can shift quickly from California to, say, Arkansas. Moreover, 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. This leads to an important question: How do immigrants’ understandings and experiences of the transnational migrant circuit—of migration, community, notions of affiliation, and so on—change as a crucial site in the circuit is physically abandoned and Mexican towns become fictive locations for an increasingly large percentage of their “inhabitants”?

From California to Arkansas

Antonio and his fellow travelers from Santo Domingo have not been alone in making the shift away from traditional receiving areas into what one might call “America’s heartland.”⁵ California, in a sense, was the big loser. The cost of living there, which went from the merely outrageous to the absolutely obscene, combined with xenophobic legislation such as Proposition 187 and a saturated job market for

low-wage workers, encouraged close to one million Hispanics to leave the state during the 1990s for other destinations within the United States.⁶ As one migrant from Mexico with a sense of humor put it, "There are too many damn Mexicans in California [competing for the same crappy jobs]." Although the push out of other regions was less intense (in part because California is unique in terms of cost of living), similar pressures were at work in places like Texas and Florida. Simply put, the very factors that made these places attractive to new immigrants in the first place—namely, the presence of long-standing Latino communities with well-established practices for incorporating new arrivals—began to work against them. As immigrants quickly recognized, there were too many Mexicans and Central Americans competing for low-wage work in California, Texas, and Florida (and they were competing not only among themselves but also with a working-class mix of U.S.-born Latinos, African Americans, and whites as well as Asians, West Indians, etc.).

As a result, beginning in the 1980s, as low-wage labor markets in traditional receiving areas tightened and a series of economic and political crises in Mexico and Central America encouraged out-migration, immigrants—both new arrivals and those with long-standing patterns of migration to the United States—began looking to regions that offered both employment opportunities and a lower cost of living.⁷ On some level, the shift was as widespread as it was transformative. While California was losing Latinos, 22 states experienced a doubling or more of their "Hispanic" population during the 1990s (Cook 2001; U.S. Census Bureau 1990, 2000; Yeoman 2000). Percentage spikes are, of course, mitigated by the fact that many states started out with very few Latinos (i.e., it is not hard for a small population to increase by 100 percent). But the rapid influx of Latin Americans into parts of the United States with relatively little (recent) experience of immigration represented a profound cultural transformation both for "middle America" and the immigrants themselves (who knew quite well that Kansas or Alabama was not California).

The U.S. South experienced this new immigration perhaps most intensely. By the 1990s, the South had the fastest growing Latino population in the United States. The region as a whole received over half a million Latinos between 1990 and 2000, in effect, tripling the Latino population throughout the region. North Carolina experienced a fourfold increase in Latino residents, Arkansas was not far behind, Georgia and Tennessee each had around a threefold jump, and South Carolina and Alabama experienced a doubling of their Latino populations during the decade (Cobb 2004; Torres 1999; U.S. Census Bureau 1990, 2000).

The influx of immigrants into the South was at once widespread and concentrated. Major urban areas such as Atlanta, Georgia; Austin, Texas; Raleigh-Durham and Charlotte, North Carolina; and Birmingham, Alabama, were experiencing rapid growth in banking, high-tech sectors,

and biomedical research that, in turn, expanded the demand for low-wage labor in the service economy and construction industries. Broader patterns of economic growth also attracted Latin Americans to major cities like Memphis, Tennessee; Greensboro, North Carolina; Richmond, Virginia; Charleston, South Carolina; and Huntsville, Alabama. As these cities grew, both economically and numerically, many working-class blacks and whites moved up the economic ladder and left the most difficult low-wage jobs to Latin Americans and other foreign immigrants.⁸

Ultimately, however, what was most striking about this new immigration—both demographically and culturally—was its concentration in rural areas and small towns in both the South and Midwest. Although the recent flow of migrants began in the 1980s, relatively few small towns and rural counties in the heart of the United States had statistically significant Latin American populations prior to 1990. By 2000, few had been left untouched. Populations swelled as the percentage of Hispanics reached one-quarter, one-third, or close to one-half of a town's total residents. In many places, this change took place within a decade; in some cases, it occurred within five years. Cabarrus County, North Carolina, for example, experienced an increase of 1,300 percent, from nearly 500 Hispanics in 1990 to over 6,500 in 2000. During the same period in Galax, Virginia, the number of Latinos went from 65 to 757, an increase of over 1,000 percent. Ligonier, Indiana, saw its number increase from 321 to 1,452 in a span of a few years. In Collinsville, Alabama, a small town of 1,500, Latinos started arriving in the early 1990s to work in a local poultry plant, and by the end of the decade, they numbered over 400 (Cook 2001; Mohl 2002; South and Kenamer 2003). Individually, such population spikes might be seen as curious anomalies. Collectively, they represent a social, political, economic, and cultural revolution.

The influx of Latin Americans such as Antonio into the U.S. heartland is, of course, not solely a product of labor demand in the poultry industry. Auto plants now dot rural Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama, Mississippi, and South Carolina. Garment, textile, carpet, and furniture industries are also crucial sources of industrial employment outside of major urban centers. Even agricultural employment encompasses far more than food processing. Latin Americans are now closely identified with the planting, picking, and packing of fruits, vegetables, tobacco, shrubs, and even Christmas trees. In North Carolina, 90 percent of farmworkers are now Hispanic (Mohl 2003).

Latin Americans did, however, arrive in remarkable numbers to work in poultry, and the industry has served to both concentrate and keep immigrants in regions of the South that had little previous experience with a foreign labor force.⁹ Unlike agriculture, poultry processing is not seasonal. Processing plants operate nearly all day, every day, and require a permanent labor force (with enough excess workers to replace those who cycle in and out of plants). Traditionally,

poultry workers were drawn from the local population. But by 1990, as the southern economy expanded, local workers became increasingly unwilling to take on jobs in the plants, at least at prevailing wages. Consequently, poultry companies turned to Latinos.

In short, poultry did for the South what meatpacking has done for the Midwest. It not only brought foreign workers like Antonio into the heartland but it also made permanent settlement in the United States possible, attractive, and in some cases almost unavoidable for a growing number of migrants. Poultry plants require a year-round commitment if workers want to keep their jobs and benefits, a commitment that became increasingly attractive as migrants found it more and more difficult to cross the border because of increased security. Longer stays were strongly encouraged by outside forces. The irony is that many migrants, including Antonio, had concluded long ago that living “permanently” in the United States was either impossible or simply not part of a plan that saw wage labor in the United States as part of a broader strategy of supporting family-run farms and businesses in Mexico.

In this respect, what is happening here cannot be reduced to a simple geographic shift in migration patterns from, for example, California to Arkansas or North Carolina; or to a demographic transformation represented by the influx of Latin Americans into the U.S. South or Midwest; or even to the cultural transformation of what had until recently been seen as quintessentially “American” spaces. These processes are all happening (unevenly and incompletely), are vitally important, and are worthy of the scholarly attention they have received. What is perhaps most central, however, is that this shift has transformed migrants who had been going “back and forth” for decades with the intention of supporting life in Mexico through wage labor in the United States into permanent settlers who have been forced to rethink strategies, understandings of community and home, social relationships, and their place in the world.¹⁰

This is not to suggest that the older, bipolar, frameworks for understanding migration were right all along. As the following discussion makes clear, it is far too simplistic to suggest that the move toward “permanent settlement” (a concept fraught with spatial and temporal problems) means that migrants will eventually experience a shift in orientation from one integrated community (in Mexico) to another (in the United States). Neither should one conclude that the uneven and generally incomplete shift from migrant to immigrant, from sojourner to “permanent” settler, will be definitively and seamlessly worked out with the passage of time or generational succession (something like: the first arrivals retain some of their “old” ways, the second generation struggles with the old and new, and then the third finally abandons its attachment to “homeland” and embraces a consistent orientation toward the new community defined by a single locale).¹¹ As I subsequently show, this process has

been filled with too many contradictions and ironies to be neatly resolved over time (Rouse 1991).

Nevertheless, what is occurring is the partial reconfiguration of the “transnational migrant circuit.” The uneven pattern described by Rouse and others is more or less what Antonio and friends had developed over a 20-plus-year period. It is defined by two fundamental features. First, relatively few migrants in this circuit settled in California permanently. Almost all men from Santo Domingo spent some time in the United States, some for brief periods, others for extended stays, but few left Mexico altogether. This was attributable both to the nature of life in California (high cost of living, little potential for upward mobility, etc.) and to the fact that most saw migration as a way of supporting enterprises in Mexico, particularly small-scale farming. Second, migrants maintained and developed social relationships all along the circuit, with some of the most important relationships occurring between people who lived great distances apart. In this sense, migrants were not moving between two distinct communities; rather, a single community, fraught with divisions, tensions, contradictions, and dependencies, was constituted across a variety of sites.

Antonio’s shift into the U.S. heartland challenges this pattern in fundamental ways. As more and more men moved to Arkansas, and as more and more families followed and settled “permanently,” the circuit was disrupted on both ends. Most importantly, the town of Santo Domingo became physically abandoned in a way that decades of (periodic) out-migration to other regions in Mexico and the United States had started but never really accomplished. Statistics provide a rough picture. Two-thirds of Santo Domingo’s approximately 100 homes are now completely closed during virtually the entire year—that is, their occupants, whole families, live in the United States. Another 20 percent are maintained by a generation of grandparents, many of whom once lived in the United States but have successfully retired to Mexico (although they periodically return to the United States). The working adults and children in these families almost all live in the United States, leaving Santo Domingo essentially empty during the year. Of the remaining households, all had at least two people in the immediate family living in the United States. When one includes the growing number of Santo Domingans who were born and reside in the United States, a clear picture emerges. Over 80 percent of those who identify themselves as Santo Domingans now live in the United States, the vast majority in Arkansas.

To be sure, Santo Domingo represents something of an extreme in that both “push” and “pull” factors have been particularly intense. As life in Santo Domingo became increasingly difficult because of the decline of small-scale agriculture, migrants were forced to work harder and earn more in the United States to maintain life in Mexico. At the same time, northwest Arkansas has been particularly attractive because of its ample employment and decent housing

market. In cases in which the push out of Mexico is less intense or the landing in the United States less soft, the abandonment of Mexican towns would surely be slower and less complete (although ample anecdotal evidence suggests that Santo Domingo is less an anomaly than one end of a continuum).

Moreover, it is the relatively extreme nature of Santo Domingo's depopulation that makes it such an interesting case study. Even here, where an entire town of migrants became immigrants in a relatively short period of time, little evidence suggests that folks are about to abandon Santo Domingo, even though the shift toward permanent settlement in the United States has altered the continuous flow of people, money, goods, and information that had defined the transnational migrant circuit for decades. Likewise, although early pioneers came to Arkansas with familiar goals of supporting life back in Mexico, the arrival of families, the purchasing of houses, and the schooling of children in the United States inevitably altered immigrants' relationships to "American" places, each other, and Santo Domingo. But these activities have not made them "Americans," as an earlier generation of scholarship suggested.

In the following discussion, I explore this reconfigured transnational migrant circuit at its most reflective and dynamic moment: the trip "home" to Mexico. Having traveled with poultry workers and their families back home to Santo Domingo, I explore how the shift from seasonal migration to permanent settlement in the U.S. South has been understood by an immigrant working class.¹² How do immigrants' understandings of place(s), as well as of their own place in the world, change as they experience this transition?¹³

Most Santo Domingans living in Arkansas now understand home in contradictory ways that are shaped by migration and life in the United States, experiences that are themselves profoundly influenced by gender and age (among other factors).¹⁴ On the one hand, Santo Domingo is seen (esp. by men) as an almost mythic place where Mexicans are relatively independent, autonomous, and "free" from the exploitation, racism, and overbearing legal system that defines their lives in the United States. The pueblo is a place where they not only can be themselves but they also can display their success through conspicuous consumption, thereby converting the symbolic and material capital of migration while relishing the role of hard-working and long-suffering migrant (Malkin 2004). On the other hand, immigrants, especially those who struggled for years in California before achieving relative stability in the southern United States, often devalue Mexico as a place that is stuck in the past—where nothing works, the government is corrupt, people are lazy, and there is no future. Not surprisingly, immigrants' understandings of Arkansas are similarly contradictory and produced in tension with their understandings of migration, Santo Domingo, and even California. Arkansas is at once a promised land filled with employment and educational op-

portunities and a place where immigrants are not only exploited but also cannot possibly be themselves—where they cannot even be "Mexican."¹⁵

This research suggests two things. First, not only are understandings, memories, and the physicality of places produced in tension with one another but the ongoing experience of movement—migration is also itself key for shaping how subjectivities and places are constituted through the contradictions embedded in them (Anderson 1983; Appadurai 1996; D'Alisera 2004; Gordillo 2002, 2004; Harvey 1989; Hoffman 2002; Massey 1994; Raffles 2002). As Gaston Gordillo notes, "The study of these contradictions is crucial to dismantle the appearance of places as well-bounded entities, for it reveals, first, the fractures and struggles that make them ongoing, unstable, and unfinished historical processes, and, second, the relations that integrate them with other geographies" (2004:5). A ritual for thousands of Mexicans every year, the trip "home" serves to intensify and highlight the tension between place and movement that defines immigrant working-class lives.

Second, as immigrants make the uneven transition from "sojourners" to "settlers," their sense of belonging does not necessarily shift from one community (in Mexico) to another (in the United States; Cornelius 1992). It is not simply that people can and do remain more or less committed to multiple communities (a common enough experience). Immigrants such as Antonio have long understood the "community" to include several locales. What is interesting about this particular case is that even as Santo Domingo itself is turned into a near ghost town for much of the year, even as the physical space of the pueblo is experienced only rarely by most Santo Domingans, and even as immigrants become more and more invested in the United States, the idea and experience of Santo Domingo as a community (spanning multiple places) to which one belongs has nonetheless retained its hold, in part because this identification continues to play such a powerful role in daily life in the United States (Anderson 1983; Appadurai 1991; Chavez 1994; Gupta and Ferguson 1992).

On foreign ground

We are at the border. Carlos, Adolfo, and myself.

The trip has not gone as planned, which is to say it has gone exactly as expected. Several months ago, Eduardo Gomez and I agreed to drive to Mexico sometime around Christmas. Eduardo is a fellow poultry worker, and his mother (Maria), uncle, and two cousins all work in the plant. A Tyson family through and through. Maria, nearly 60, has put in almost ten years at Tyson, most of it on the same line. Her wrists are permanently damaged by years of work characterized by intense repetition. Eduardo's father, Antonio, now in his sixties, has done his time. For two decades he migrated back and forth between Guanajuato and the

United States, picking fruit in California for seven months a year, before moving to Arkansas. He spent nearly a decade at Tyson before his body gave out. Antonio still talks about returning to Mexico to retire but knows it is a false hope. Arkansas may not be home, he says, "but everyone I know lives here. Now that I don't work what do I do? Watch TV all day? My family has a better life here. Work, school, a house. But it is not a good place to retire. I don't drive and so there is nothing to do during the week. I go crazy. But there is nothing in Mexico either."¹⁶

Eduardo and his cousin, Lucila, are the family's present. Both are around 30, unmarried, and without kids. Eduardo is nearing his ten-year anniversary at Tyson. A decade in Arkansas. He, too, is ambivalent about the United States: "Life is better here. We have work and a house. But, man, do we work. At first I thought this job was great. I was able to buy a car, other things, the stuff I dreamed about when I was in Mexico. Now I know. But how to get a better job? Over ten years in the states and I still don't speak English. Chicken is all there is here."¹⁷

Lucila also lives with the Gomez family. She put in five years at Tyson before making a break: "It's not just the chickens who die in a poultry plant. People die, little by little. My hands still hurt, but I got out before I was no good. Now I am a nurse's assistant at a retirement home. It's crappy work too, but a bit easier on my body. I am studying so I can eventually become a nurse and make real money. You need an education here."¹⁸

The trip to Santo Domingo is an annual ritual for the Gomez family. That is not to say it happens every year. Money, getting time off from work, transportation, and the sheer distance of the journey make it difficult to get back. And yet, in a sense, the trip does happen every year. It is planned, discussed, debated, imagined, and longed for, often for the whole year. Regardless of whether it actually occurs, the journey home occupies an immense space in the lives of immigrants. Long-distance relationships depend on imagination. Two weeks in Mexico, no matter how much one jams into them, cannot possibly make up for 11 and a half months in the states. One has to believe.

This year has not been an easy one for the Gomez family, and I have been worried that Eduardo might pull out of the trip at the last minute. This happened two years ago and is the reason I am now at the border with Carlos and Adolfo. The earlier trip had been planned for the first Christmas after I had worked with Eduardo and his relatives at a Tyson Foods processing plant. I was living in North Carolina and had planned to meet Eduardo and his family in Mexico. They were to drive from Arkansas but cancelled their trip at the last minute. I nevertheless flew to Guadalajara and worked my way to Santo Domingo. Santo Domingo was as Eduardo described. A *ranchito*. Very small. Fewer than 100 families. I had not been in the town square ten minutes when I heard someone yell in English:

"Hey man, where are you from?"

"Arkansas," I proudly responded.

"No way, I'm from Rogers [Arkansas]. My name is Carlos. What the hell are you doing here?"

"I'm visiting a friend, Eduardo Gomez."

"You're early man. He has not arrived. Most will arrive in a few days. And then after the fiesta on January 7th and 8th everyone will leave and this will be a ghost town. [Laughing] Once the chickens call, everyone returns to Arkansas. Welcome to Santo Domingo . . . Arkansas!"

Carlos was right. The town was empty and, indeed, is empty for most of the year. Poultry has not only transformed parts of the southern United States but it has also transformed Santo Domingo. Everyone, it seems, is in Arkansas processing chicken.

Now, two years later, I am on the border with Carlos. We left Arkansas 12 hours ago as part of a chicken caravan led by the Gomez family. Carlos and Adolfo were last-minute additions. The road warriors consist of my 1989 Buick Century, Eduardo's slick Ford F150, and his cousin's new Chevrolet Suburban. Their trucks are expensive, well adorned, paid for by poultry dollars, and ready to go.¹⁹ My vehicle is filthy and dented but, after a new torque converter, is not stalling out at every stoplight.

The caravan is safer and more fun than traveling alone but also a bit unwieldy. Eduardo leads. There will be no sight-seeing. Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas are obstacles to be passed through as quickly as possible. Gas up and go. The constant traffic between Dallas and San Antonio makes high-speed pursuit difficult. By Waco, we have lost the others.

We are on the border. Carlos, Adolfo, and myself.

On the surface, the border is a largely Mexican affair. Mexican American border patrol agents wave us through on the U.S. side. Their disinterest reminds us that anyone can leave the United States. The most visible sign that we are at the border is the long line of Mexicans waiting to get into the United States and have their documents checked and their cars searched. Entering Mexico, one passes no checkpoint, welcome sign, or tollbooth. We are in Nuevo Laredo before we know it, quickly passing by the *taquerias*, *casas de cambios*, and *cantinas* that line the streets. The journey back into the United States will be an entirely different affair.

For Carlos, Adolfo, and myself, the passage into Mexico remains something of an adventure. This is not uncharted territory, but we are excited and a bit scared. It is midnight in Nuevo Laredo. Our only concrete fear is of Mexican police, a not entirely unfounded one, as we soon find out.²⁰ But we also share a touristy kind of excitement. Despite our long-standing, although quite different, relationships to Mexico, we are touristlike, a fact that even Carlos and Adolfo acknowledge. They are tourists in their own country, not simply in the sense of being on vacation, but in the sense of experiencing

Mexico as something that is frequently foreign and unfamiliar.

Carlos and Adolfo were born, and spent their first 10 to 12 years, in Santo Domingo. They are Mexican nationals. Yet they went to junior high and high school in Rogers, Arkansas, are legal immigrants, work in the United States, and have very few relatives who live year-round in Mexico. They insist, a bit too frequently, that Mexico is home, that they are not Chicanos (whom they see as being too American and too uppity). Yet they are on shifting ground. Arkansas is home. Mexico is home. In neither place do they feel entirely at ease. Even when they are not at the border—the line that physically separates Mexico and the United States—they forever inhabit a border zone, a densely racialized space in which two (or more) histories, cultures, traditions, economies, and political–legal systems are at once intimately entangled and diametrically opposed. Inhabiting such a space is never easy, but they have become quite skilled at negotiating this complex field. The border itself, however, is unfamiliar and uncomfortable territory. Unlike their fathers, who accumulated vast experience crossing the border both legally and illegally, they have not lived lives characterized by constant border crossings. The border sharply reminds them that their lives are fractured, that they do not fully belong in either Mexico or the United States. Carlos and Adolfo are eager to cross into Mexico, to be home, but they have little desire to linger on either side of the border itself.

Because they have spent so much time in the United States, there are many Mexicos that Carlos and Adolfo do not know. Their Mexico is part reality, part imagination, and part hope. Nations are always imagined, but Carlos and Adolfo's Mexico is imagined from afar and directly experienced only rarely. As a result, their image of Mexico is often overly simplistic and defined by extremes. Mexico is everything or nothing. It is perfect or pitiful, the mirror opposite of the United States. Depending on mood or context, Mexico can be an oasis that offers time for interpersonal relationships, community, family, and a cold beer. As such, it stands in stark contrast to its sterile, work-obsessed, and hyperlegal northern neighbor. At other moments, Mexico is oversimplified into a place where nothing functions, which languishes in opposition to a United States that knows nothing about corruption, imperfection, or human error.

Once we arrive in Santo Domingo, our collective reaction is something akin to arriving at an amusement park only to find it closed. Carlos says what we are all thinking as the Buick crawls along the dusty, bumpy, dirt street: "The pueblo hasn't changed a bit. If anything it is smaller and uglier than I remember. That is one long drive to end up in place like this." Carlos is, of course, joking, at least partly. But the reaction is a metaphor for the entire trip. "Home" is beautiful and unbearable at the same time. It is a place the men have longed for all year, a place where they belong. At the same time, they are instantly and constantly reminded of why they

left Mexico in the first place. Santo Domingo is wonderful in all the ways that small-town Mexico is, but it also appears to be dying. The northern migration of its most capable citizens has taken its toll.

The homes of Carlos and Adolfo are paid for through years of hard work in the United States. With remarkable success, a few homeowners have imitated U.S. suburbia, complete with lawn, fence, and two-car garage. But Carlos's and Adolfo's homes, like most in town, are nondescript, one-story dwellings surrounded by uninviting cement walls and iron gates. Time and money are all invested on the inside. The effort has paid off. Both homes are neatly tiled throughout and open into small, interior courtyards containing (neglected) fruit trees and patios. Each includes the required assortment of Mexican wall hangings: crucifixes along with photos of awkward-looking family members posing in their Sunday best. Both homes are well equipped not only with furniture but also with linens, appliances, kitchenware, and other consumer items designed to make life easier while reminding everyone of the rewards of hard work and the sacrifices of the migrant (Baker-Cristales 2004; Malkin 2004). Neither house has been opened for almost a year, however, and the dust and dirt are as thick as the air is stale. The tables, beds, and dressers are covered with blankets and sheets of plastic. We make a futile attempt to connect the gas to Adolfo's hot water heater and then resign ourselves to two weeks of cold showers. This is home.

Carlos and Adolfo seem determined to experience everything that Santo Domingo has to offer on our first day. This is not hard to do. The script is already written. Before we have the car unpacked, one of Carlos's neighbors, who arrived from Arkansas the day before, sends a young boy to fetch a case of beer. Part of what makes drinking on the street so enjoyable is its familiarity and ubiquity. For men, one is not truly "home," in Mexico, until one is sharing drink and laughter on the street corner in one's town. After 26 hours on the road, this ritual is particularly refreshing.

Virtually all the men we meet in these street gatherings actually live in Arkansas and work in poultry. Many I already know from having worked in a processing plant. The "princes," those men between the ages of 20 and 45 who live in the United States, buy the beer and dominate the discussion during these street gatherings. They have the money, the cool clothes, and the cars and tend to be good soccer players. Consequently, they have the best stories. Most stories revolve around themes that bind men the world over: drink, women, and sports. Yet one's ability to drink, attract women, and participate in sports is directly related to life in the United States. Tips on jobs, how and where to buy houses, get documents, or find a nice car are all on the table. In these departments, the princes rule.

Boys under the age of 12 or 13 fetch the beer and, if lucky, receive some form of acknowledgment from one of the princes. Those between the ages of about 13 and 18 hang on

the perimeters of the group. They are too old to be sent off for beer, yet not old enough to have the experience of work and women that might give them the money, the stories, or the confidence to be full participants. They are also a bit out of their element. Most in the 18-and-under crowd were born in the United States and know Mexico only through vacations and their parents' accounts. In the United States, they are the future and have a much wider range of options available to them than the princes, most of whom never became fully proficient in English, dropped out of high school to work, and are employed in poultry plants. Teenagers, by contrast, are pretty thoroughly Americanized, speaking English, finishing high school, and thinking about college. For these two weeks, however, they are on the margins. To them, everything is foreign. They complain about food, stomach problems, the TV, the housing, the town, the street dogs, the pigs, and so on. Cultural relativism is a foreign concept to the teenage crowd. For the teenagers, Santo Domingo is a tolerable enough place to visit, but it is patently clear that everything is better back "home."

Older men wander in and out of the group. They are immediately offered beers and always treated with respect. They were, after all, the pioneers in California and Arkansas. They discovered poultry. Without them, there would be no princes. But they are marginal to the conversation. It is not simply that they are past their prime. They are the past. A generation or two ago, in a town like Santo Domingo, all conversation would have revolved around this older group. They controlled land, income, and information. They made all the major decisions. To be sure, vestiges of this patriarchy still exist and shape daily life. Yet, once in the United States, each of these older men is only one income among many, and they quickly go from being the ones who know everything to those who are heavily dependent on their English-speaking and street-savvy children.

There are also "locals," men about the same age as the princes who never made the passage north. Because they are so few in number in small towns such as Santo Domingo, their continued presence is explained less by sociological factors than personality quirks. At some point in the not-so-distant past, it may have been the case that only those with economic resources, ambition, and savvy had what it took to make the journey north. This is no longer the case. Virtually everyone under the age of 60 with any sense has long since departed. Santo Domingo is many things, but for most it is a vacation spot and the locals are the entertainment. Like Mexico, those who stay behind are idealized and pitied at the same time.

Despite their marginality, the locals are absolutely central to street rituals. They are part of the scenery, reminding everyone that Santo Domingo is still alive, if only barely, during the rest of the year. For those living in the United States, the locals are an important part of what Mexico is. They help sustain the illusion that Santo Domingo is a traditional com-

munity with a natural and enduring connection to a fixed place and a timeless culture. Those left behind remind the travelers that they are home while simultaneously confirming that their decision to leave was justified. The locals are allowed to participate in the street rituals, but as the audience. They listen intently to the princes and admire their cars, clothes, and dollars. This is as close as they will get to the United States. They move from street corner to street corner, from baptism to wedding in search of booze, food, companionship, and a piece of the United States. Their movements are restricted to Santo Domingo or neighboring towns, however, because once the princes move beyond the ranchito in search of women and fiestas, the locals are left behind. They lack the clothes, wit, look, and money to warrant space in one of the prince's Suburbans, F150s, or Mustangs.

Because people are constantly arriving from the United States, there is always a reason to share a case of beer with friends. Nevertheless, for Carlos, Adolfo, and those who have spent considerable time in the United States, these rituals quickly get old for the simple reason that they are so constantly observed. While one is in the United States or making the trip south, "drinking in the streets" in one's hometown takes on almost mythic status. With few exceptions, it is what Mexican men living in the United States say is the best thing about Mexico. "In Mexico there are not so many laws. In the U.S. there is a law for everything. There is no freedom. Here, in Mexico, you can drink in the streets and no one will bother you."

Yet, once in Mexico, drinking in the streets loses its luster after the first day or two, becoming more of a social requirement than an enjoyable ritual. Most men "live" for returning to Mexico, drinking in the streets, and being "free," if for only two weeks. But few have the illusion that they will ever live in Santo Domingo again. For the younger men, such as Carlos and Adolfo, these rituals also happen to lack one of the key ingredients that bring them to Mexico in the first place: women.²¹ And so, they move on to larger towns in the region. For the older men, these rituals become a point of contention with their wives, who are tolerant but have a somewhat different idea about what vacation entails.

Vacationing at home

The trip to Mexico is a vacation of sorts. Time spent in Mexico allows immigrants to forget their daily reality and to escape. Depending on whether one is young or old, male or female, these escapes take different forms. But two basic themes run through them. First, travelers want to go to a place not only where they fit in and are "normal" but also where their travels serve to place them a notch up on the social ladder; where, if only for a moment, they are not only unmarked by race, language, and occupation but also hold the elevated status of successful migrant. For Carlos and Adolfo, both of whom went to junior high and high school in Arkansas

and now work in poultry processing, this trip is about being twentysomething men. As they freely admit, their two weeks in Mexico resemble spring break for U.S. college students. For this brief period, they can afford booze and the most expensive food that small-town Mexico has to offer, and they are the most eligible of bachelors. As Carlos, who is very good-looking and always well dressed, once confessed: "When I go out on Dickson Street (the college strip in Fayetteville, Arkansas) I tell girls I am Italian. You know, the Italian stallion. I don't want them to know I am Mexican. If I am European then they think I'm sexy. But my accent and English usually give me away. Here I can just be myself. And the *mexicanas* like us because we have money." For once, Carlos and Adolfo are not on the outside looking in at U.S. bars and restaurants. For two weeks, they are the princes.²²

For members of an older generation, such as Antonio and Maria, going home, being normal, is about returning to a place where they are respected, where age means something, where their knowledge and experiences of Mexico force their younger relatives to turn to them in search of answers. In the United States, where anything that is not new is old, Antonio and Maria represent a past with little use-value to the younger generation. For the older generation, the trip is also partly about a hope that they will one day return to Mexico to retire, a hope that is increasingly difficult to maintain as the years slip by.²³

Not surprisingly, this search for normalcy means something different for men and women. Simply put, the trip home to Mexico works to temporarily reinforce traditional gender roles, roles that migration has often weakened. Male migrants often experience Arkansas as emasculating, as a place that is not only *puro trabajo* (nothing but work) but where work itself is also highly exploitative, intensely supervised, and devoid of respect (Malkin 2004). As a result, perhaps not surprisingly, the trip to Mexico is in part about affirming their masculinity, about being "free." They drink more, eat more, spend more, cruise in their trucks more, and, above all, dominate public spaces in ways that they never could in the United States. Younger men rule the streets, the fiestas, and the bars. Once home, older men are again the patriarchs. Their stories about the town's past are suddenly valued by immigrants in search of the authentic Mexico.

Women's experiences and actions are somewhat more ambiguous. Older women, such as Maria, relish the time in Mexico, this return to normalcy, because it is one of the few times during the year when the family resembles the family. It is a rare moment when a woman like Maria is comfortably situated in her role as matriarch. Even when she complains, she does so with a certain boys-will-be-boys nostalgia. "Yes, the men are crazy when they come. But it's good to see them behaving like real Mexican men again. We are home here. Things are how they should be."

Younger women's experiences and understandings of the trip are much more critical, in part because the trip home

entails a return to traditional gender roles (roles that are not exactly unfamiliar but nonetheless seem increasingly foreign to this younger group). Women do not experience the "freedom" of Mexico to the extent that men do; to the contrary, men's freedom (in the streets, bars, etc.) often seems to come at the expense of women (Malkin 2004). A small group of women in their late teens and early twenties (like the princes) see this return trip through the lens of spring break. They have jobs, no husbands or kids, and come for the fiestas. Their main complaint is the sudden restriction placed on their movements. Rosa, who by all accounts is a pretty good kid, put it like this:

In Arkansas I have a car, a job, money, and I pretty much come and go like I want. When I am here I just want to party. There is nothing else to do. Look at this town. But here my parents are saying things like: "Mexican women don't drink. Don't dress like that. Where are you going? You can't go to town. Be back early." What is this about? All of the sudden they know everything and I am supposed to be this perfect Mexican woman. I should just stay in Arkansas.²⁴

Slightly older women, those in their twenties, thirties, and forties who have families and are not spring breakers, view the return to Mexico with greater ambivalence. As Carmen put it,

I love Mexico. I do. I hate to say that I don't like coming back. I think it is good for the kids. And my parents, they are so lost in Arkansas. But it is not really a vacation for me. I spend weeks getting ready for the trip. We have to bring everything. You know how Mexicans travel. Then the trip. Dios Mio! Over twenty-four hours in the car with kids. And then we get here and we have to clean the house. Does my husband help? No. We haven't even opened the door and he has bought a case of beer. But the men need this. Perhaps more than the women. And my husband is better than most. He works all year—overtime, Saturdays, sometimes two shifts. Tell me, how this is vacation? (Laughing) I work less at Tyson. But I love Mexico. Where else could Mexicans like us go on vacation? Disney World?²⁵

Even these annoyances serve the trip's second, and perhaps, greater theme. Like a paternalistic pat on the back, the trip home reminds people that the decision to migrate was a good one; that they were a little more clever, a little smarter, a little more ambitious than those who stayed in Mexico; that the humiliation, hard work, and sacrifice were worth it; that it all paid off in the form of two weeks of conspicuous consumption and ostentatious display. Narratives about the greatness of Mexico, its food, climate, fiestas, and liberal laws regarding public drinking are quickly followed by rather pointed statements about corrupt governments,

the economy, lazy Mexicans, and the general unlivability of Mexico. As one Mexican Arkansan woman put it,

Everything is better here in Mexico. Here, we are free. We can drink in the streets. In the U.S. it's all work. Puro trabajo. I have to come here for two weeks if I am to survive on the other side. For me, it is life. This is home. [laughing] Well, at least for two weeks. I'd like to stay a month, but more than that I would go crazy. No one lives here, there is no one, no work, nothing. *The only thing sadder than not coming to Mexico every year is actually living in Mexico.* Who do you think paid for the streets in this ugly town? The government? No. We did. Those who live in Arkansas. Everything in the U.S. is better. The government, the work. Our children have a future there. They are Americans.²⁶

Shared widely, this contradictory (if logical and rational) sentiment is interesting on multiple levels. What is most striking, however, is that even immigrants who are very critical of the physical space of Santo Domingo and insist that there is no future in Mexico, in general, nonetheless see themselves as part of a broader Santo Domingan community. In short, the community endures even as the physical place itself withers.

The party is over

Life in small towns such as Santo Domingo during the two weeks surrounding Christmas and New Year's Day revolves around fiestas, including both annual fiestas held by the towns themselves and the more common "private" fiestas to celebrate weddings, baptisms, or *quinceañeras* (coming-of-age parties for 15-year-old girls). It is during fiestas, as well as the endless discussion that swirls around them, that issues of belonging, home, nationality, and affiliation are expressed most intensely. Fiestas literally dominate this brief period in Mexico; for those who live year-round in the United States, the experience and allure of Mexico are in large part a product of the fiestas.

Fiestas used to be held throughout the year. A town's annual fiesta generally corresponded to some historical date, such as the town's founding, whereas baptisms, weddings, and quinceañeras followed the natural rhythms of life. Today, the timing and scale of these rituals have been thoroughly captured by the rhythms of migration. Fiestas of all types are jammed into the two-week holiday period. One particularly thoughtful person reflected on the relationship between fiestas and belonging in the following terms:

No one wants to have a fiesta in Arkansas. For one, it's more expensive. But the main thing is that it's more fun here. People are in the mood. And you can be outside, in the streets. There are better bands. And everyone is here. People from Arkansas return. For us [who return] it is a chance to be home, to forget about the U.S., to

forget about chicken. It is really a chance to be Mexican. That is what fiestas are for me. For those who are here, it is when the town is alive again. It lets them be Mexican too. We [those in Arkansas] cannot be Mexican all year. But neither can those who stay. We need each other.²⁷

The trip home is filled with contradictions. On the one hand, it is an attempt—like vacations around the world—to escape from the daily grind. In this case, the escape takes the form of a nostalgic return to the past that is infused by hope for the future. Poultry workers and their families temporarily resuscitate dying towns through fiestas and animate the illusion that migrants will one day return and permanently invigorate small-town Mexico. At the same time, the escape is never complete. The attempt to prove that life is more than work is successful, but only partially. The absent presence of poultry is palpable during the entire trip. Immigrants travel thousands of miles, but they can never fully escape the industry they sustain. They produce processed chicken in amazing quantities, but chicken also (at least partly) produces them. Their work in poultry funds the trips home, the fiestas, and even the construction of homes, streets, and town squares in places like Santo Domingo. Work seeps into virtually all aspects of life, even shaping the timing and scale of fiestas and rituals. But even as poultry invigorates and sustains Santo Domingo, it contributes to its slow death. Bringing money from the United States is not the same as working, living, and developing Mexico itself. Most of the benefits from immigrant labor go directly to "American" communities and consumers. Towns like Santo Domingo—towns without people for much of the year—have a tenuous future. Money earned in poultry keeps the town marginally viable, but at a considerable cost.

At the same time, as I suggest below, these trips work toward two ends. They are not simply about maintaining—however effectively—ties with Mexico. The trip, the fiestas, the drinking on the street, and so on, are also about creating and reproducing social relationships that support life in the United States. The trip home to Mexico is part of a process of immigrant class formation that is increasingly based in the United States but is forever entangled with changing experiences and understandings of nationality and locality rooted in Mexico.

Our last day in Santo Domingo is the final day of the town's annual fiesta, an event largely organized and paid for by immigrants to Arkansas. It is why we came. We push our stay to the limit. We all need to be back on the other side of the border, but missing the biggest fiesta is inconceivable. The fiesta is good one, although the specter of our return to the United States haunts the festivities. We leave at two in the morning. The fiesta is still roaring, although much of the town is scrambling to get back to Arkansas. Kids need to be in school, and chickens need to be processed. We have gotten our fill.

Carlos, Adolfo, and almost all of the others are ready to return. No one really wants to go back, but neither do they want to stay.

We are at the border. Carlos, Adolfo, and myself.

We wait in line for over three hours. There is little traffic, but for most of the time we are not even moving. When we finally get to the border, the officer who checks our documents seems completely puzzled.

"What was the purpose of your trip?"

"Vacation," I respond.

Still confused, he asks more bluntly: "What are *you* [a white American] doing with *them*?"

"I went with them to their hometown. We live in Arkansas and are trying to get back."

"*You* were just on vacation with *them*."

"Correct."

He sends us to be searched. Tired, dirty, and stinking of last night's fiesta, we empty the trunk and dump our stuff onto a couple of tables. The agent searching our belongings is in no hurry. It will be a long process. As we wait, Adolfo complains, "That fucking Chicano [border patrol agent]. He couldn't believe a gringo was traveling with two Mexicans. That's why he sent us over here to be searched [instead of waving us through]. (Laughing) We got stopped because you are a fucking gringo." Laughing, I say, "No, man, we got stopped because you two are Mexicans. Welcome home."

We are, on some level, both correct. Had we been traveling separately, our chances of being interrogated would have been considerably less. By crossing together, we had broken the racially bounded notion of difference and separation that the border relies on. The border agent had, in a sense, put us in our very different places, and Carlos and Adolfo were quickly reminded that "home" was not a place where they belonged.

Transnational community formation

When I first return to Arkansas, my thoughts center on the fate of Santo Domingo. Does the rapid shift from seasonal migration to permanent residency in the U.S. South mean the death of small towns like Santo Domingo (or perhaps their transformation into retirement communities)? Would the first (or second) generation of immigrants sustain small-town Mexico only to see the commitment of subsequent generations fade? On this, I can only speculate. For several generations now, at least a portion of Santo Domingo's population has gone elsewhere to earn a living. The reproduction of the pueblo—its families, buildings, roads, and even its "traditionalness"—depended on this mobility. In the past, it was mostly men who moved (but they returned often and for long periods of time), with women, children, and elderly folks dwelling and working in the community on a permanent basis. Over time, more and more men were forced to

look elsewhere to generate sufficient income, but the pueblo itself remained sufficiently intact to retain the appearance of a relatively bounded and viable entity. Now, virtually everyone is gone for almost the entire year, with a handful of older folks, die-hards, and children remaining in what is a ghost town for much of the year.

Moreover, when the first pioneers such as Antonio made the shift from California to Arkansas, they tended to see it in fairly instrumental terms—as a strategy to make more money. They had every intention of returning to Mexico as soon as they built up something of a nest egg. Santo Domingo was undeniably home, and their eventual return seemed inevitable. Life, however, got in the way. Once they brought their families, established a permanent home in the United States, became consumers, and sent their children to U.S. schools, the possibility—if not always the dream—of returning to Mexico became increasingly unrealistic. Although this older generation continues to invest in Santo Domingo's houses, roads, and buildings, the younger generation, whose kids are growing up in the United States, are beginning to question the wisdom of investing in a place where they spend so little time. This tension in terms of how Santo Domingo is understood and valued varies from family to family, and men more than women seem unwilling to sever the tie with their pueblo, but the physical location of "home" is no longer taken for granted.²⁸

At the same time, one should not be too quick to write off small-town Mexico. Reports of its death have been greatly exaggerated in the past. The pueblo as a physical space where one lives, invests, and returns may be losing its hold, but this does not necessarily mean that it has lost its potency in terms of identity (although this, too, varies depending on gender, generation, etc.). This is partly because being from Santo Domingo no longer requires being from Santo Domingo. Exactly who belongs to the community—how Santo Domingo is understood as a place and identity—has become more flexible. The connection between a community and a locality has been long broken by the experience and understanding of migration. Children who were born in the United States and groan about returning to Mexico still claim to be (and are accepted as) members of the community—even though the town of Santo Domingo itself remains a largely fictive place for more and more immigrants. Both community and "its" places are creatively imagined because the experience of migration is itself so complex.

The resilience of Santo Domingo as a source of identity is attributable to multiple factors, including the nostalgia many immigrants continue to hold for small-town Mexico as well as the reality that equal membership in "American" communities is simply not an option for Latin Americans. Many immigrants are becoming as integrated into Arkansas communities as Arkansans will allow them, but it is hard for immigrants to fully identify with communities that are so ambivalent about their presence. In this sense, the

continuing attraction of Santo Domingo derives in part from the powerful role identity as a Santo Domingan plays in daily life in the United States. Being from Santo Domingo (or *X pueblo*) may not matter so much in Mexico for immigrants who no longer live there, but it remains very important for surviving life in Arkansas. This was brought home to me the first time I saw my fellow travelers in the United States after we had returned from Santo Domingo. I was not surprised that the trip had brought us closer together. We had worked in a processing plant and hung out in Arkansas, but we never had the kind of “quality time” that 48 hours in a car and over two weeks of vacation entail. But the trip was more than a bonding experience. It expanded my own networks in unexpected ways. Everywhere I went in Arkansas with Carlos, Eduardo, Lucila, or Adolfo (all of whom I had known prior to the trip), I ran into people I had met in Santo Domingo. It was now clear that I was something of an honorary member of their community in a way that I had not been prior to the trip. Working in the plant, living in Arkansas, and speaking Spanish all contributed to my acceptance, but going to Santo Domingo was what really mattered. This was partly because Santo Domingo was not Arkansas, and, hence, a place where they could “be themselves,” but partly because the trip itself is absolutely central to the formation of social relationships and networks.

The importance of these networks goes far beyond what they meant for my own project. Informal networks are the nuts and bolts of immigrant working-class life. They not only carry information about jobs, housing, schools, and cases of racial discrimination but also take on a formal life in the United States through self-help organizations, soccer leagues, and churches. In this respect, the continuing importance of the trip home may not be so much about maintaining ties to the physical space of Santo Domingo (although, at some level, this may be necessary); rather, Santo Domingo, and the trip home, more generally, is important because it provides a relatively safe place—physically, imaginatively, and culturally—where immigrants can form alliances, networks, and understandings that sustain and facilitate their (partial) incorporation into the United States (Chavez 1991). In this sense, the importance of the trip itself partially explains why immigrants (may) decide to continue investing in the town long after it has ceased to be a place where they reside with any regularity. The trip is more than a nostalgic return to a “homeland” for a displaced or mobile people; it is a central moment in an uneven process of community formation that is rooted in daily life in the United States.

This process of transnational community formation—and the understanding of community it assumes—is politically suggestive. Traditional understandings of community typically adhere to (and depend on) a neatly delineated physical space that is assumed to be the place community members participate in and inhabit. Implicit in such a conceptualization is the notion that members of a particular space

share certain cultural values or lifeways that are somehow set apart from (and exclude) other places and peoples. By contrast, the spatially loose experience and understanding of community that emerges in the border zone has potential for including a wider range of groups. Instead of assuming a strong coherence between a particular place and a particular set of shared values, the notion of “community” that develops here is grounded in a common experience of displacement and fractured reality. Put another way, what ultimately ties these immigrant workers together may not be that they are from Santo Domingo in the physical sense of having been born there; rather, what ties them together are common experiences and understandings that do not allow immigrants to be either here or there; that deny them the possibility of being there, of remaining in their Mexican pueblos, while at the same time making it very difficult to be here, to work, go to school, to belong in any meaningful sense of the word in U.S. communities where they are marginalized by ethnicity, nationality, and language.²⁹

Notes

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1. Santo Domingo is not the town’s real name. It is located near the city of Acambaro not far from Guanajuato’s border with Michoacan.

2. *Hispano* is the term used by most immigrants living in Arkansas to refer to Latin American immigrants, in general, including the quite sizable Salvadoran population. Younger Mexican immigrants use *hispano* and *Latino* interchangeably and sometimes lump all Latin Americans together with the term *mexicano*.

3. The initial migration of men who are then followed by their families is a well-known pattern documented by many scholars. For an interesting discussion of Mexican migration both across the border and within the United States, see Hondagneu-Sotelo 1992.

4. This may seem like an overly rosy picture of poultry processing. Working in a poultry plant is a tough path toward upward mobility, and the dangerous nature of the work may not make it sustainable over the long run (see Human Rights Watch 2004; Striffler 2005). In addition, a more marginal group of plant workers never achieves stability and cycles in and out of plants. For a sizable group, however, most of whom come from less secure forms of employment, poultry processing can lead to upward mobility. Moreover, north-west Arkansas has allowed many workers to achieve relative stability because of what is now a decades-long economic boom, a relatively decent housing market, and a large enough population that gives the region some of the advantages of “urban” life without the high costs.

5. The traditional receiving areas were California, Texas, Florida, the Southwest, and major urban centers such as New York and Chicago.

6. The exodus of Latinos from California includes both immigrants and people of Hispanic descent born in the United States.

7. Early on, many immigrants became aware of employment opportunities because companies in low-wage sectors of the economy actively recruited them.

8. For a broader discussion on recent immigration into the South, see Mohl 2002, 2003; Murphy et al. 2001; Peacock et al. 2005; and Gill 2006.

9. For the relative importance of poultry on immigration into the South, see Kandel and Parrado 2004.

10. This also reflects a broader trend. Latin American migrants are staying longer in the United States (and the traditional gender imbalance among them is eroding as more and more women enter the flow), in part because tighter border control during the past decade has made it more difficult for them to return to Mexico and Central America (Malkin 2004; Marcelli and Cornelius 2001; Robb 2002). At the same time, this general pattern of temporary-circular migration transitioning into more permanent settlement has a long history that is largely distinct from border policy (see, e.g., Rouse 1992), although it is not necessarily an inevitable trend (Durand et al. 2001). For an excellent discussion of gender and migration studies, see Pessar 1999; on gender and Mexican migration across the border and within the United States, see Curran and Rivero-Fuentes 2003.

11. Some of this earlier work on immigration into the United States was very good, even if it assumed relatively bounded communities in both Mexico and the United States. Some authors challenged the idea that immigrants were rapidly, and fully, assimilated, suggesting, instead, the process was more gradual and eventually produced ethnic subcultures. See Madsen 1964, Lomnitz 1977, and Achor 1978 for some good, early examples.

12. I made the trip to Santo Domingo three times. This account is based on the final trip. I also worked with many Santo Domingans in a poultry plant and spent considerable time with them in Arkansas over a four-year period. For a broader discussion of immigrant work and life in poultry-producing regions, see Striffler 2005.

13. For a good, broad analysis of the overall transition from migrant to settler and the process of incorporation into U.S. society, see Chavez 1991.

14. As I discuss, understandings vary somewhat depending on gender and generation. Class divisions among Santo Domingans, however, and even among the Latin American community in north-west Arkansas, more generally, are relatively limited (although growing) for several reasons. First, most immigrants come from relatively similar economic circumstances in Mexico and have only recently arrived in Arkansas (see Wilson 2004 on the importance of this factor). Second, the vast majority of those who first came to Arkansas settled into the poultry industry, although this pattern has been changing recently as immigrants establish their own businesses and find employment in other sectors (particularly construction). Finally, as other scholars have noted (Baker-Cristales 2004; Kearney and Beserra 2004), ethnicity and nationality are such strong markers for immigrants that they often seem to trump class within immigrant communities. See Rouse 1992 on the broader impact of migration on class consciousness.

15. The immigrants I describe in this article have (at least in the short term) resolved the question of "illegality"; that is, they have acquired papers that allow them to cross the border legally. This simple fact, as well as their success in acquiring relatively stable employment, puts them in a more secure position than many of their undocumented compatriots. For an excellent discussion of "illegality," see De Genova 2002.

16. Interview, December 12, 2002. When quoting from formal interviews, I note the date of the interview. Undated quotes are from field notes.

17. Interview, November 19, 2002.

18. Interview, November 19, 2002.

19. As will become apparent from the discussion, the display of consumer items, including cars, as well as spending money and hosting expensive fiestas, is a big part of the return to Mexico. No one wants to return empty handed. On the importance of consumerism among Latin American immigrants to the United States, see Baker-Cristales 2004.

20. We are pulled over for making an illegal U-turn within 15 minutes of arriving in Nuevo Laredo. Fortunately, my companions know how to take care of it quickly (i.e., we pass the officer \$15).

21. There are, of course, women in Santo Domingo, but the town is relatively small and is not seen as a place to make new acquaintances. Also, there is an expectation that although the boys and men might not always behave well outside of the town, they should treat girls and women from their pueblo with respect. Thus, young men feel a bit restricted in their own town.

22. The underside of all of this is a kind of sex tourism in which Mexican men return home with dollars in their pockets in search of relatively cheap and accessible sexual services.

23. This is particularly true once children or grandchildren enter the U.S. school system, learn English, and tend not to entertain the thought of returning to Mexico.

24. Interview, January 2, 2003.

25. Interview, December 28, 2002.

26. Interview, December 26, 2002.

27. Interview, January 5, 2003.

28. As I suggested above, men seem to be more nostalgic about small-town Mexico in part because the migration north is often experienced in emasculating terms and because they see their relative control over women decline. In contrast, women are quicker to remember the hardships of small-town life in Mexico in part because they are able to enter the (low) paid labor force in the United States on nearly equal footing with men (and thus gain some degree of autonomy).

29. In this article, I cannot possibly explore the broader process of immigrant incorporation into the U.S. South. For a more general discussion, see Murphy et al. 2001, Mohl 2002, Striffler 2005, Fink 2003, and Peacock et al. 2005. It is important to note, as many scholars have, that the process of settlement itself is filled with tensions and conflict, both within families, as women try to assert their independence and men their control (Malkin 2004; Simon and Brettell 1986), and within immigrant communities, as ethnic and class divisions (continue to) develop. Mexican immigrants, for example, tend to be more willing to embrace (somewhat uncomfortably) the category of "Latino" than do Central Americans, who rightly point out that within the United States the term *Latino* often becomes nearly synonymous with *Mexican* (Baker-Cristales 2004:27). For two interesting cases on the development of political consciousness among immigrants, see Fink 2003 and Nagengast and Kearney 1990.

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