

[In Detroit] I cooked soup and salad and roasted meat for them and by the time they came home from work everything was ready because I had made it in advance. I used to get up very early and pack lunches for everyone. Can you imagine, I had up to seventeen people in my house! My sons would bring their friends from San Ignacio [Jalisco, Mexico], and they all slept crowded together in the basement until I had to say, “I can’t have so many people in the house anymore.”¹

—Doña Tita (seventy-three) interviewed in San Ignacio, December 2001.

ENGENDERING TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL NETWORKS: Mexicanas and Community Formation in San Ignacio–Detroit

Luz María Gordillo

This study analyzes the development of Detroit’s San Ignacian community during the 1960s, a bustling immigrant community continually replenished by new arrivals from Mexico. As more women from San Ignacio in Jalisco came to Detroit following the bracero generation, they played crucial roles in creating and sustaining the networks that supported the immigrant community’s social and cultural life. Women performed productive labor (in the paid workforce) as well as reproductive labor, caring for extended families and for new immigrants arriving from Mexico. These roles for women led to conflicts and ambiguities, especially in the realm of marriage and family life.

This case study examines the social networks that support and sustain immigration from San Ignacio Cerro Gordo in Jalisco, Mexico, to Detroit, Michigan, in the last three decades of the twentieth century and into the new millennium. Gender relations define how Mexicanas experience immigration and these, in turn, further our understanding of the construction of transnational social networks.

On a very chilly morning, Doña Tita and four of her children arrived from San Ignacio, Jalisco, to their new home in Detroit, Michigan. Doña Tita, the first female San Ignacian believed to have settled permanently in Detroit in 1970, fearfully traveled by bus from San Ignacio Cerro Gordo to Laredo, Texas, then in a small van from Laredo to Chicago, and then Detroit. This was the first time that she left her locality in Mexico. This geographic relocation brought fear of the unknown to Doña Tita, who had been caring for her family in San Ignacio since her husband's departure to California as a bracero in the early 1960s. Doña Tita had eleven children by the time Delfino Hernández signed up for the Bracero Program; they eventually had two more children, totaling thirteen.

Though Delfino Hernández began his migratory flow in California, he later migrated to Detroit, where Doña Tita joined him in the early 1970s. Before crossing national/political borders in 1970, however, Doña Tita experienced an internal migration that allowed her to cross gendered intra-borders by becoming head of the household and taking on traditionally male gendered roles, such as attending to the family's economic and social well being. Doña Tita's internal shifts facilitated transnational migration to Detroit, while at the same time provided her with the tools to weave the social networks that would sustain the transnational communities she forged. In the process, her migratory experience shaped and reshaped gendered transnational relations embedded in immigration processes.

Transnational Approaches

My work builds on Chicana/Latina feminist scholarship that explores the gendered ambiguities of these social networks. For example, Denise A. Segura and Patricia Zavella employ an approach from the fields of Chicana/o studies,

arguing that, “[Immigrant] women are constructing their identities in spaces located in the interstices between the dominant national and cultural systems of the United States and Mexico as they live, work, and play in communities on both sides of the border” (3). Inherent contradictions embedded in the immigrant experience also contribute to the construction of a transnational subjectivity; however, while many San Ignacian women disliked Detroit’s isolating weather and impersonal cityscape, they enjoyed the company of their family and the cultural familiarity created by the influx of additional San Ignacian co-nationals. Vicki L. Ruiz’ gendered theoretical approach (1998) and, more recently, Gabriela Arredondo, in her study on Mexicans in Chicago during the interwar years (2008), not only frames gender as central but also begins to look at the complexities of gender relations within Mexican immigrants’ social networks. My study expands on gendered literature of working-class Mexicans in the Midwest and interrogates the way transnational studies have approached research about working-class Mexicanas in the United States.

To understand how San Ignacian women made meaning of their lives, I began by listening to narratives of their experiences over the past three decades; these narratives then became the foundation for an analysis of gendered processes that both affect and are affected by immigration. Women have different ways of expressing their (dis)content and carving out their own socioeconomic and political discursive space(s): “that interstitial space where differential politics and social dilemmas are negotiated” (Pérez 6). Moreover, as Emma Pérez notes, “The historian’s political project, then, is to write a history that decolonizes otherness” (6). In that vein, this study highlights Mexican immigrant women’s narratives, thus challenging conceptualizations of Otherness, making the process of historical decolonization—female oral histories—the main project for feminist approaches to immigration studies. San Ignacian women’s narratives offer an examination of the ways in which gender-specific relationships unfold in transnational spaces.

As a point of departure, my aim is not to gauge how “liberated” Mexicanas have become through immigration, but to understand how women both in San Ignacio and in Detroit met challenges and at times contested spaces despite omnipresent patriarchal systems. Their narratives are essential to understanding how these subjects slowly work their way into the constructions of these very complex sets of transnational social relations. Therefore, I examine San Ignacians’ social networks to appreciate how women weave the social fabric that sustains the migratory flow to and from San Ignacio and Detroit as they participate in the migrant stream. Moreover, I argue that San Ignacian women have played the most important role in this transnational movement. This means that gender roles and relations, in particular the gendered division of labor within transnational circuits, have been central to the development of these networks. This work also assumes that the intersection of class, gender, and nationality is embedded in the construction and maintenance of transnational social networks, which in itself is gender specific.

Scholars such as Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo—in her work on domestic workers in Los Angeles (2001)—have often debated whether the experience of migration for Mexican women changes traditional sexist gender roles and especially whether immigrant women’s entry into the paid labor force gives them more decision-making power within the family. This mode of inquiry assumes that Mexican women have not worked for pay prior to their migration north, disregarding that gender relations are constantly changing and readapting to the particular social, economic, and cultural circumstances of people’s lives.

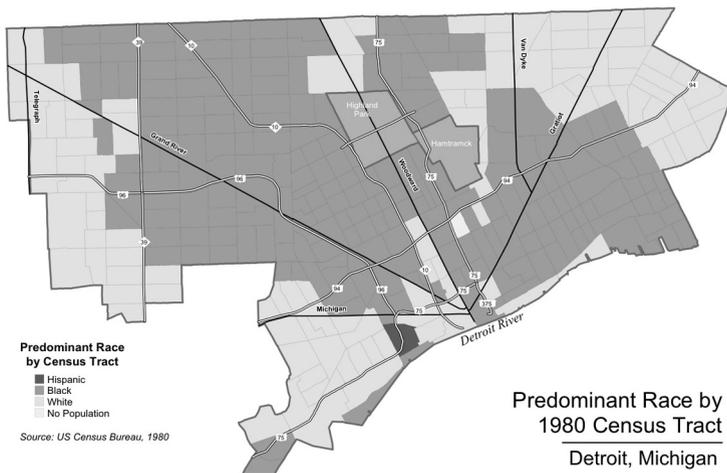
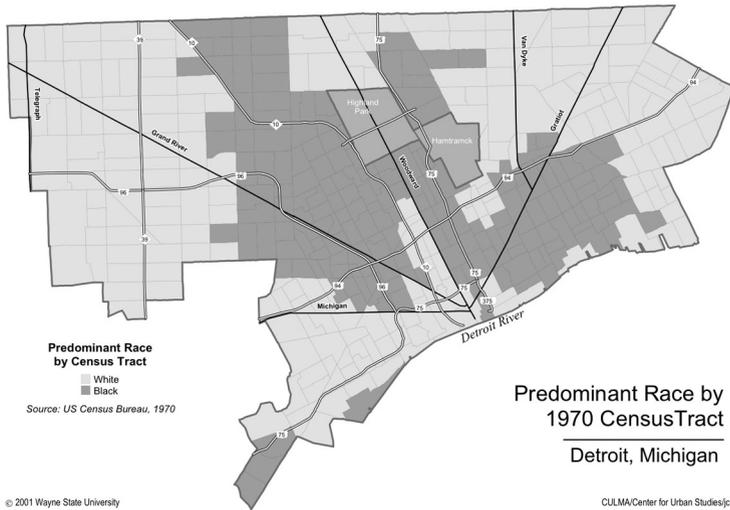
As scholars of gender and women’s studies, we often find ourselves searching for women’s outright resistance to patriarchy, and, in the process, we sometimes miss the nuances concerning the ways in which women negotiate and contest oppressive patriarchal systems. Recognizing the vicissitudes, contradictions,

and dislocations of these very complex transnational processes, this study analyzes the social networks and geographical spaces that San Ignacian women negotiate while building social networks brought about through gendered challenges in connection and construction with the community.

Mexicans in Detroit

In the 1960s Mexican immigrants began to build communities in Detroit, initially drawn by the gendered Bracero Program and later, enticed by the dwindling auto economy, then moving on to construction and service jobs. Although the Mexican immigrant community was relatively small and spread out after the Great Depression,² World War II initiated an aggressive campaign to recruit Mexican male labor through the Bracero Program—a bilateral labor agreement between the United States and Mexico that hired Mexican labor from 1942 to 1964. In the late 1960s, the Mexican immigrant community slowly began to gain momentum; Mexican male workers migrated from Texas to the Midwest, and, most importantly, contributed to the creation of existing Latina/o social networks. It is estimated that approximately 4.6 million working-class Mexican men entered the United States under the auspices of the Bracero Program (Massey 158). At the conclusion of this agreement, many of them processed their documentation in order to remain—temporarily or permanently—in the United States.

By the 1970s, a small number of male immigrants from San Ignacio had settled in Detroit; they were former braceros who had followed Jesús Mercado and his brother Luis, men who are believed to be the pioneers, originally arriving in the early 1960s. The Mexican population in Detroit had a slow increase from 1900 to 1980. However, demographic maps show a sharp increase in this population, from 1970 to 2000.³

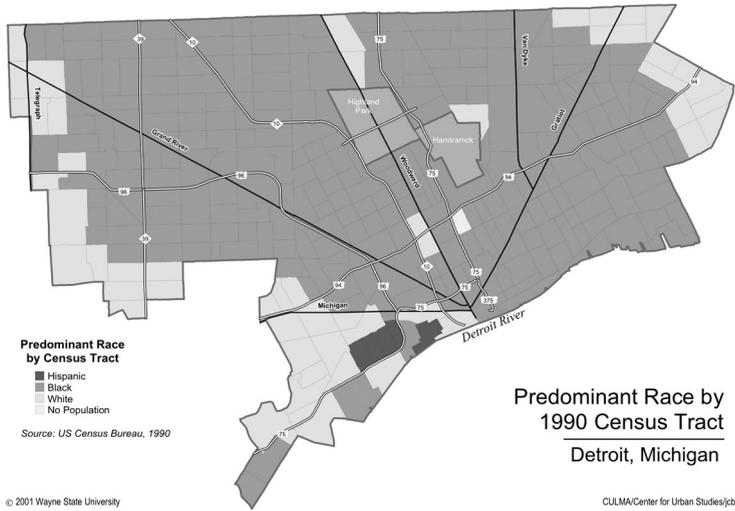


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The end of the twentieth century clearly demonstrated that the city's population of Mexican immigrants had grown exponentially, and many of them were from San Ignacio. By 2000, an estimated 15,000 San Ignacians resided in the Detroit metropolitan area, mainly in southwest Detroit.⁴ As the transnational community expanded with new arrivals, women's social networks—sustained by their productive and reproductive labor—remained the bedrock of the community.

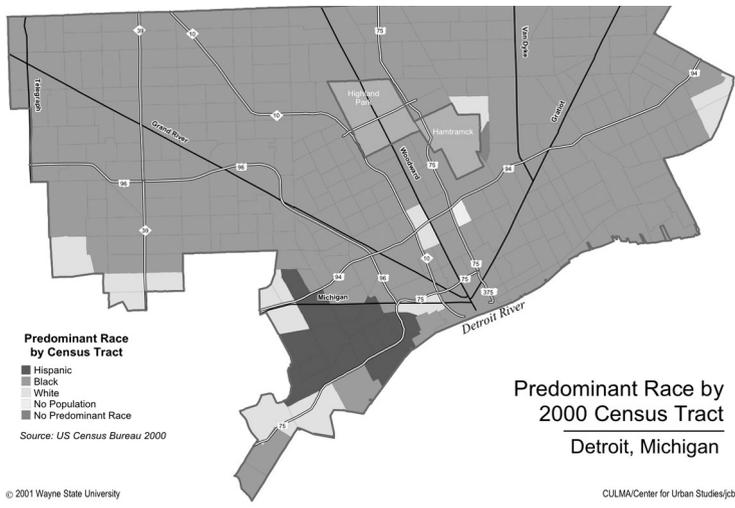
San Ignacio and Detroit

San Ignacio Cerro Gordo⁵ is a small town in the state of Jalisco, in western Mexico. It was part of the delegación of Cerro Gordo (part of the municipio of Arandas) until 2003, when it officially became a separate municipality (put into effect in 2005). The town's population was approximately 17,500 in 2000.⁶ Its economy is based on the cultivation of corn and agave, the plant used to make tequila; other activities include cattle ranching, dairy farming, and brick making. In the last fifteen years San Ignacio has seen the rapid expansion of small businesses, financed partly by immigrants' remittances. Due to the demand for new houses paid for with Detroit dollars, construction companies are booming. Additionally, bars, restaurants, and small retail businesses have sprung up. Both the town and the state have a long tradition of migration to the United States. People have been journeying north from Jalisco since the last decade of the nineteenth century as a result of aggressive recruitment by enganchistas (recruiters) who represented U.S. agricultural capitalists' interests, as well as those of railroad companies. In the first quarter of the twentieth century, some Mexican men and women migrated to various midwestern states, including Michigan, where they worked the beet fields or toiled with railway construction crews.⁷ Mexican immigrants from the states of Michoacán, Guanajuato, and Jalisco were reported to have been among the majority of this early migration flow.⁸



**Predominant Race by
1990 Census Tract
Detroit, Michigan**

CULMA/Center for Urban Studies/jcb



**Predominant Race by
2000 Census Tract
Detroit, Michigan**

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In stark contrast to San Ignacio's rural landscape, Detroit's urban setting shaped San Ignacians' transnational experiences. Detroit's highways, the main arteries of the city's grid, cut across poor neighborhoods in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the name of urban development. One of these fragmented neighborhoods was the *barrio* in southwest Detroit known as Mexican Town. The booming economy of postwar Detroit attracted many immigrants from Mexico and migrants from Texas. This economic mirage lasted only a few years before the city's economy plummeted due to deindustrialization, heightened by white flight to the suburbs. By the 1950s, Detroit looked like a skeleton: "Whole sections of the city [were] eerily apocalyptic" (Sugrue 3). Adding to this image of a racist city were institutionalized practices—directed mainly toward African Americans, whose population had dramatically escalated (see maps above)—such as redlining or lending. Such discriminatory acts against neighborhoods viewed as high-risk became common practice. This racial oppression culminated in the Detroit Race Riots of 1967.

San Ignacians, settling in Detroit in the late 1960s and early 1970s, experienced the bizarre and serious implications of the historical racial tensions perpetrated against African Americans and other minority groups.⁹ Racist real estate and banking institutions pushed minorities to what they considered "appropriate" urban spaces for these already marginalized groups. These housing practices allowed San Ignacian immigrants to purchase homes at very reasonable prices. However, this practice came with consequences. Segregated neighborhoods lacked consistent public services like garbage collection and/or urban repairs such as street paving, giving these marginalized spaces a deteriorated look of abandonment and neglect. Despite these major setbacks, which also included a lack of health and educational services, the Mexican transnational community of San Ignacio grew; first, facilitated by Latinas' social networks, and followed by the first *bracero*

San Ignacians and other Latinas/os.¹⁰ The community would later be reshaped by the arrival of San Ignacian women in southwest Detroit.

The end of the twentieth century clearly demonstrated that the city's population of Mexican immigrants had grown exponentially—and many of them were from San Ignacio. By 2000, an estimated 15,000 San Ignacians lived in the Detroit metropolitan area, mainly in southwest Detroit. As the transnational community grew with new arrivals, women's social networks, sustained by their productive and reproductive labor, remained the bedrock of the community.

San Ignacian Women Arrive in Detroit

Doña Tita is recognized by her co-nationals as the first woman from San Ignacio to settle permanently in Detroit. Unlike some San Ignacian men who were reluctant to have their families migrate, Doña Tita's husband, Delfino Hernández, applied for her residency and that of all of their children, shortly after he came to Detroit in 1969. Although Mexican immigrants had migrated to Detroit for decades, it was still viewed as a dangerous and challenging urban space. Doña Tita remembered her first impressions of Detroit when she arrived in 1970: "I didn't like it too much, nor did I like the small house. But I was happy because I had all my family and my husband there."¹¹ For Doña Tita, family unification took precedence over her geographic dislocation.

Once in Detroit, San Ignacians replicated their socio-religious adherence to community building by turning to the Catholic churches located near their neighborhood. She explains,

When I arrived, I started to go to Santa Ana church because they [her husband and his brothers] were already going there. The church

is more welcoming [than Holy Redeemer]. It's a place where people meet: there's a coffee shop with someone making coffee and pastry, some donating money for the church, and people sit around in little groups and talk with their family or friends. There were people from everywhere, not from San Ignacio at first, but from Santiaguito [a town close to San Ignacio]. There were Puerto Ricans and Cubans. I made a lot of friends, partly because I had several older sons, and they're not bad looking at all—I'm boasting [she laughs]. So I made a lot of friends because some people wanted my sons for their daughters, so they became my friends.¹²

Doña Tita's fond recollections of the church reveal its significance for the construction of this transnational community via Latinas/os cultural contributions like food, religious loyalty, and economic support that aided the first small group of San Ignacians to settle in the 1970s.

Doña Chavelita (interviewed while visiting San Ignacio) praised the warmth of the growing San Ignacian community: "I like being there [in Detroit] because there are so many people from here [San Ignacio]. We enjoy seeing each other when we meet in the stores, at church, everywhere, and we help each other a lot."¹³

These recollections vividly illustrate how transnational community grew over the years and how San Ignacians began to "San Ignacize" Detroit by transplanting familiar regional and local cultural rituals such as socializing at church. Their comments also underscore the importance of women's social networks for the survival and growth of this transnational community. While navigating racialized institutions in Detroit, Mexican immigrants have turned inward to the strength of their own community and have transformed Detroit into a second home.

The Mexicanas' oral histories make it clear that the development of these networks, through women's labor, is a complex and contradictory story. On the one hand, they emphasize their satisfaction in sharing lives with their families and friends arriving from San Ignacio, to whom they feel a strong sense of obligation. On the other, the gendered division of labor means that the burden of helping new arrivals falls heavily on women, who feel the strain of welcoming and helping them to adjust to a new home. In particular, the crowding of relatives and acquaintances into small dwellings can lead to tensions and conflicts. While women recall fun celebrations such as birthday parties, they also note that accommodating so many people in their households compromised space and privacy.

Women were more likely to engage directly with U.S. social structures, often crossing gendered and racial borders across language and cultural barriers. In her analysis of Mexican women in the United States, Adelaida R. Del Castillo also found that, "In the United States, Mexican immigrant women make possible access to institutions and agencies that serve the family such as schools, clinics and religious groups" (98).¹⁴ While Mexican men worked long hours at their jobs, many women managed to take new arrivals around what became known as Mexican Town in southwest Detroit—they took them to schools and health clinics in order to obtain needed services as they juggled their own domestic chores and wage labor. Other San Ignacian women reported taking English language classes after the factory where they worked closed, having fun sharing the experience with other women.

The Growth of Mexican Town

In the 1970s, more San Ignacian women were reunited with their husbands and families; women migrating alone also joined the migratory flow. It was the women who made possible the growth of Mexican Town by housing

thousands of newcomers from San Ignacio as they arrived. Shortly after Doña Tita moved to Detroit, she and her husband welcomed some of their thirteen grown children and their families. From there, Doña Tita and other immigrant women branched out to support the arrival of more distant kin and townspeople. She recalled cooking for large numbers of San Ignacians, sometimes up to seventeen at a time, many who were not related to her but were friends of either her husband or her sons and daughters.

Despite the hard work of housing and feeding so many, Doña Tita recalled the camaraderie and sense of obligation associated with helping her co-nationals:

We had fun because we would have parties and sing. We celebrated everyone's birthdays in my house because it was big and I was not very strict [about cleanliness]. Also, I would think to myself, if I do not welcome my own people and make them comfortable then they will not feel at home here.¹⁵

Doña Tita recognized that her reproductive labor was indispensable for the survival of her community in Detroit, and it reflected the maternal obligation she felt toward her family and their guests. This sense of obligation toward *mi gente* (my people) was the foundation for the social networks that allowed the movement of thousands of San Ignacians to Detroit over three decades. Her resiliency and demands that she would not have so many people in the house motivated her husband to buy another home where she would have much more space to accommodate others. This female need to execute reproductive labor under better conditions, compounded by male access to better jobs, aided in the expansion of the *barrio* as more and more San Ignacians purchased new homes in Mexican Town. New moral and emotional bonds formed among San Ignacians in Detroit, as the immigrants stretched the meaning of familial

obligation to include people from their hometown in addition to blood relatives. Doña Tita positioned herself as a kind of surrogate mother to all the muchachos (young men), thus redefining the parameters of kinship systems in response to the unique imperatives of the immigrant experience. In practice, this meant having people arrive at her doorstep without much notice, allowing numerous guests to stay for an undetermined number of months, carrying the financial burden of supporting all the parties involved, and, most importantly, doing the intensive domestic labor necessary to maintain a household of seventeen. Many San Ignacian women in Detroit shouldered similar burdens of reproductive labor while also joining the labor market with paid jobs outside the home.¹⁶

Thanks to female support, the flow of San Ignacians to Detroit grew rapidly from the 1970s through the 1990s. Because of de facto housing segregation in Detroit and Latina/o families' desire to live close to each other, San Ignacians along with other Latinas/os began to rebuild what is now called Mexican Town, which was severely affected by the Great Depression and by the 1970s deindustrialization of Detroit. Still, a reporter for the *Detroit News* found that 60,000 people lived in the area of Mexican Town after rebuilding efforts and those numbers escalated in 1990 (Aguilar 2005). The area was surrounded by small businesses that mirrored the growth of the Latina/o population and in particular the San Ignacian community. The names of local businesses, many owned by Mexican entrepreneurs, attest to their regional identification: Jalisco's Auto Sales, Aranda's Low Rider, and Los Altos Restaurant (Los Altos de Jalisco is the geographic area where San Ignacio is located).

By the 1970s, deindustrialization was already underway in Detroit. The dismantling of the auto industry and the closures of steel factories and meatpacking plants led to thousands of job losses, devastating the city.

Much of the literature on deindustrialization, however, overlooks the brighter picture in certain areas of the city such as southwest Detroit, where “marginal” groups such as Mexican immigrants were creating a new, albeit informal and less grandiose, economy.¹⁷ Also, San Ignacians in Mexican Town bolstered their community of origin with their remittances to Mexico, as they did their part to sustain the flagging economy of Detroit.

San Ignacian Women’s Reproductive Labor

Feminist understandings about labor in capitalist societies recognize that female reproductive labor not only has capitalist value but it is central to social production (Boydston 1990). In a transnational context, however, reproductive labor is not only central but also constitutive of the dynamics of community-formation. In this way, reproductive labor integrates the productivity of domestic labor as essential in the survival and maintenance of transnational networks. Moreover, the gender tensions arising out of these specific labor circumstances influenced and affected the growth and settlement of the community.¹⁸

Women who have had relatives and friends stay in their homes bore the brunt of these tensions by performing both reproductive and productive labor. These situations led to gendered family dislocations that were difficult and unstable for many San Ignacians. Young women I interviewed were not having as many children as their elders, and this was not necessarily due to what Father Ignacio Ramos Puga (San Ignacio’s local priest until 2005) called “betrayal of traditional religion” or the use of contraceptives to enjoy sex for pleasure rather than for reproduction.¹⁹ Greater acceptance of contraceptives, economic constraints, and the acculturation to contemporary U.S. and Mexican ideologies about family size, all contributed to the downsizing of large families. I suggest that most women in Detroit became surrogate mothers, sisters, and daughters to

large numbers of San Ignacians, whether they were blood relatives, *compadres* or *comadres* and their children, or friends; hence this new transnational commitment influenced the number of birth-children that Mexican immigrant women had.

Mexicanas' contribution to the creation of their transnational community was dependent on both their reproductive and productive labor. Historically, scholars of women's studies have struggled to foreground the importance of women's reproductive labor within patriarchal and economic systems. Feminist approaches to the topic of migration have tended to emphasize women's challenges to traditional gender roles when they join the paid labor force. But the experiences of San Ignacian women are evidence that this process is more complicated than it may seem. Women who feel empowered by their participation in the paid workforce may still adhere to gendered divisions of labor at home. And while they may feel burdened by domestic tasks, some expressed that their authority over the domestic sphere gave them power to make decisions concerning all the residents of the household. In gendered immigration studies, it is imperative to recognize the organic connection between female reproductive labor and the subsistence of transnational communities. It is through the gendered division of labor that we can begin to understand how gender relations are interlinked and embedded within the immigrant experience and the maintenance of transnational social networks.

Most San Ignacian men I interviewed did not regard reproductive labor as work or acknowledge its value. Don Antonio brought his family to Detroit in 1972. He and his wife, Imelda, had nine children. When asked whether his wife worked, he replied: "No. She just took care of the house. I supported her." Later, he clarified that his wife worked with a neighbor who prepared meals for retired older people and also got a job in a factory.²⁰

Don Gabriel and his son Sergio offered a similar argument. Don Gabriel and his wife, Lupe, had ten children. She had to care for them before and after she migrated to Detroit. When asked whether his wife had worked in Detroit, Don Gabriel adamantly asserted: “No, [over there] she never worked, not one minute!” When queried a second time, Sergio responded:

Oh, yes, she did do housework; she was a very active woman. But the houses there aren't as large, and she didn't have to mop every day because the house in Detroit had carpeting. So I think her workload was lighter.

Casually, Sergio added that at one point more than eighteen people lived in their house, including his wife and the wives and husbands of his ten siblings.²¹ Downplaying domestic chores within transnational fields points to the unequal patriarchal gendered division of labor as well as the transnational domestication of domestic labor by Mexican immigrant women. For male San Ignacians I interviewed, domestic labor in the United States seemed easier, given the modern domestic appliances like vacuum cleaners, but it was also normalized as an extension of personal obligations.

Doña Chavelita persuaded her husband to buy a house, when she complained about the crowded conditions they were living in and the extra work she had to do.

All his [her husband's] brothers came, and he arranged for several of his sons to come, too. We all lived tightly crowded together. Anyone who arrived could stay with us until he found work, and my husband

didn't charge them. They all helped with the house, my children all living in the same place. It was bad, and I was not used to it. Finally we bought a house.²²

Under the stress of overcrowding, some women were able to negotiate with their husbands for better living and domestic labor conditions. These negotiations sometimes led to the purchase of homes and thus more permanent settlement in Detroit, helping to solidify the transnational community.

San Ignacian Women and Wage Labor

Women's entry into paid work in the United States opened up additional spaces for Mexicanas to expand the development of transnational communities. Most of the women I interviewed have worked for pay and are currently performing paid employment in Detroit. Due to their immigration status, many held low-paying jobs, such as working in auto parts industries and other service and food sectors. The shop floor became one more contested arena where women revisited their cultural constructions of gender and further expanded their social networks, often recruiting other women to join them at their place of employment.

Doña Tita's daughter-in-law, Alina, arrived in Detroit in 1972, about a year after she was married to Javier Hernández, Doña Tita's oldest son, in San Ignacio. While most of the men in the Hernández family worked in steel factories, the women found jobs in auto parts factories. Alina worked in a factory sewing covers for cars. Paid employment gave her an opportunity to meet other women while her reproductive labor at home allowed more San Ignacians to move to Detroit. She remembered how kinship networks on the shop floor facilitated transitions into a new job market and created a place for Mexicanas to socialize.

I didn't like the job at the beginning; it was very difficult. So, when I got pregnant with Fabiola [her first daughter], I quit. But after I had Araceli [her second daughter], I started to work there again. We sewed car covers with industrial sewing machines. I started working there because my comadre [Doña Lola, her aunt] recommended me. Right after I started, my friend Aurora, may she rest in peace, joined the factory and she worked there for about twenty-seven years. So, at first, we were a small group from San Ignacio, only Lola and Aurora, but Elia joined after I did and then more people arrived. We would get together after work and visit each other all the time because we were the only ones [from San Ignacio]. I would run to my Aunt Lola's house in the evenings so that I wouldn't be alone.²³

Socializing with other Latinas added to Alina's sense of confidence. While performing her wage labor as well as extending the social networks, she provided labor opportunities for other newcomers.

After Alina's arrival in the city, Doña Tita went back to San Ignacio to bring her youngest children to Detroit. Doña Tita remained in San Ignacio for a year before returning to the United States. During that year, Alina cooked and cared for fourteen family members and friends and also worked in the auto plant. Her marriage to Javier, the first of Doña Tita's children to marry, imposed upon Alina the responsibility of caring for younger family members and San Ignacian guests. She recalled learning to cook in Detroit, thanks to her comadre Lola from San Ignacio. Although the workload was heavy, she expressed that, "I felt good here with all of them because I was not alone. Thirty-one years ago there was almost no one here from San Ignacio, not like now."²⁴ With nostalgia, Alina recalled the times when she appreciated having so many members of the family there, while she downplayed the story of having to perform intensive domestic work in

order to sustain the household. Alina linked the unequal gendered obligation she felt to perform domestic chores with her feelings of loneliness and need to have her family around. Despite her sense of camaraderie with her comadre, Alina was supporting fourteen members of her family until they became independent and left her home.

The complexity of gender relations in immigrant households makes it difficult to determine whether the effect of women's entry into the paid labor force liberates them in terms of challenging traditional gender roles. The case of Gela illustrates the plurality of experiences among Mexicanas and their ambivalence regarding their position as wage earners. Gela commented:

We could definitely support ourselves on what he [her husband] makes. So whatever I earn, I can use for things that are not... [necessities], like for new clothes or going out, or to save. I can do what I want with whatever I make.²⁵

She described her contribution to the household's finances as supplemental income, even though she had been working consistently since she arrived in Detroit nine years earlier, doing factory work and waitressing in several restaurants. Although she underestimated the importance of her wages, it was clear that her financial contribution did cover some essentials, like clothing for the family. Her comment portraying her income as minor and supplemental suggests a desire to defend her husband's sense of manhood as the breadwinner, showing how women must constantly navigate patriarchal assumptions pertaining to women's paid work and its importance in the household economy.

Some women, who had previously taken care of agricultural duties in San Ignacio, used their transnational experience and entry into the labor force in

Detroit to reprimand their partners for not being able to support them and their families, as traditional gender roles prescribe in their community of origin. Tina commented:

If men take care of their obligations better [for example, make enough money to support the family], then I don't think women should work; they should care for their families. But if the men do not, then it is better there [in Detroit], because here [in San Ignacio] there aren't many jobs for women.²⁶

Tina was in San Ignacio for the January festivities when I conducted the interview, but she and her family live in Detroit. Her comment appeared to reflect what Emma Pérez calls the “third-space,” that oppositional discourse where San Ignacian women claim their transnational experience to negotiate and maintain some kind of power over the family dynamics (1999).

Yet despite their assertion of resistance due to their transnational experiences, the comments of San Ignacian women—contesting men's economic adequacy and their own competency—include an ironic acceptance of traditional gender roles, in which they assume that women do not work outside the home (even when they do while also performing domestic labor). They reveal the contradictions inherent in social norms and their lived transnational realities. But when I asked Tina if she enjoyed working, she replied: “Yes, at first it was hard but now I like it, it's fine. You don't have to worry about anything.”²⁷ Tina was laid off from the company she worked for in Detroit. The company offered two years of English lessons as part of a severance package, and she expressed enthusiasm about the prospect of looking for another job as soon as the lessons were finished. Tina's resentment toward her husband for not fulfilling his obligations as breadwinner stemmed from her guilty feelings about not spending much time

with her children rather than from any dislike of paid work. Indeed, she recalled having fun with her friends at work. "I have many women friends. The factory has been closed almost a year, but we still keep in touch and we see each other when we go to English lessons."²⁸ Her ambivalence about her participation in productive labor reflects the multiplicity of experiences available to transnational Mexicanas as they weigh adherence to socially-assigned gender roles against their feelings of empowerment and, in some cases, enjoyment as members of the transnational/global workforce.

Gendered Contradictions for San Ignacians

As women take on different surrogate roles, they must contend with conflicting moral imperatives about how much they should tolerate when taking care of extended family members and other long-term houseguests. Moreover, San Ignacian women had to pay the physical and emotional costs involved in the development of transnational social networks. While doing my research in San Ignacio and Detroit I spent time with Gaby (twenty-two), Gabriel (twenty-eight), and their son Luis (six). Luis was born with a muscular disease that impeded his ability to walk. Gaby was advised by a friend to seek accountability from Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, where her son was born, and to file a lawsuit. Gaby did not speak English and the lawyer someone recommended did not speak Spanish, so they used a friend as an interpreter. While I was helping her fill out the thick questionnaire the lawyer had sent her in order to begin the lawsuit, Gaby received a phone call from her oldest brother. In an instant I saw her attitude and tone of voice change. She began to complain about her younger brother Camilo, who had recently arrived in Detroit from San Ignacio and was living with her family. She said that Camilo was not paying for his long-distance phone calls to Mexico or contributing for the food he ate. He scattered his clothes everywhere and she had to pick them up and put them away.

In appealing to Beto, her oldest brother, Gaby made use of family hierarchies based on patriarchal social structures in order to discipline her younger brother. While she honored one tradition, acting as “mother” to Camilo by picking up after him and paying his expenses, she also asserted a spousal status by appealing to the family patriarch to reinforce family roles. When I asked Gaby why she did not just tell Camilo to straighten up, she replied, “No, I can’t, he’s my brother.”²⁹ Here was a woman who was undertaking a lawsuit against a hospital, a daunting task (especially in light of her limited English skills), yet she was not able to tell her own brother to act responsibly.

The sense of obligation toward extended family and friends and the burdens on women that this entails frequently provoked gender conflicts within families. Vivi, Gaby’s sister, was married and had two little girls. While I was interviewing Vivi in her living room in Detroit, another woman came down the stairs with two little girls. It turned out that Vivi’s sister-in-law, and her two daughters had arrived two months earlier from San Ignacio and were living in the house. Vivi was on the verge of desperation. Her sister-in-law did not clean the top floor, which was completely taken over by the woman’s family, or help with the cooking or dishes. Her husband was only working three times a week, which meant that it would most likely take them a long time to move out and make it on their own.

After a few months and a lot of conflict within the household, Vivi was able to negotiate with her husband, Genaro, a timeframe for his brother to move out. This was possible because she continued to stand her ground but also because Genaro had more siblings in Detroit with whom his brother’s family could stay. Nevertheless, for four months Vivi and Genaro argued continuously, causing turmoil within the household. Amidst this very contested and unfair situation, Vivi commented:

Many people helped us. It's very important when you come here that you have someone to extend a hand to you. I know a lot of people who didn't have anywhere to stay when they came, who didn't know anybody, who didn't even have a place to sleep or anything to eat until they found a job. Thank God I was lucky because I had my sister here. It's so nice and it encourages you to come when you have a place to stay, because life here is not easy, and if you're not working it's even harder, but it's easier when you have family here, thank God. [Once you get settled] you want to help other people because you know what they're going through. We've all gone through the same thing, all of us.³⁰

Vivi's comment pointed to the contradictions and ambivalences that the construction of transnational social networks has created in women's lives. Even though she was having problems with her husband because of his relatives' extended stay, Vivi also felt obligated to do for her in-laws what Gaby had done for her. Gender relations are shaped and reshaped by the immigrant experience, and this makes it hard to determine when and how Mexicanas challenge traditional gender relations. I offer that they do, albeit in increments, as they construct their lives in their transnational community. Women see themselves as the creators of their community even though they must continuously stake their claim to contested spaces in which the division of power is unequal and unfair.

Young San Ignacians and New Attitudes

Compared to Mexicanas who moved north with the bracero generation in the 1970s, younger women who have settled in Detroit more recently have had certain advantages. Because there were so few San Ignacians in Detroit in the early years of migration, women faced a difficult moral choice between housing

their newly arrived relatives and friends or letting them fend for themselves while they got on their feet. Today the large transnational community in Detroit offers arriving San Ignacians more options in terms of places to stay, somewhat lessening the burden on the families already there. As the transnational community has grown, it has opened up spaces for younger Mexicanas to negotiate and challenge patriarchal dominance by appealing to members of their families and to other San Ignacians already residing in Detroit. Gender relations and patriarchal systems are not monolithic or stable, and women are constantly changing the ways in which they negotiate and challenge these systems. Younger Mexicanas are also influenced by cultural expressions of feminism and individualism and are more open-minded about relationships than their elders. This has allowed young women like Vivi to express discontent and to act on it, by relying first on their female system of support, but also by negotiating issues that affect the family's wellbeing with their partners. Mexican immigrant women built communities of resiliency, drawing strength from their comadres, their families, and their faith.

These narratives provide a glimpse of the hardships and struggles that Mexicanas have experienced as they work to support the social networks that sustain immigration. Painful tensions and conflicts within families have required immigrants to renegotiate gender roles and kinship relations. Even so, the main burden still falls on Mexicanas, who frequently work full-time outside the home and who are also the primary caretakers of their immediate families and houseguests. The trajectories of women from San Ignacio prove that gender dynamics expand and create new and complex social spaces where the dominant patriarchal values are permanently renegotiated and readjusted by women's agency.

Conclusion

The former braceros who relocated to Detroit in the 1960s would have had little impact on the city had it not been for the women who ventured north and became involved in community formation. As the study has shown, women create and sustain transnational social networks; they develop strategies to navigate contested patriarchal spaces in order to maintain a sense of identity and dignity for themselves and their families. They experience ambivalence, contradictions, and conflicts as they gradually conquer public and private spaces. The creation of transnational communities reshapes gender roles and family structures and calls into question the whole notion of geopolitical borders, acknowledging their transparency and fluidity. As they meld two different, albeit connected experiences in San Ignacio and Detroit, immigrant families develop new narratives of gendered transnational social relations.

Feminist approaches to Mexican and Latin American immigrant communities in the United States have emphasized the gains secured by immigrant women during the process of joining the labor force in terms of gender awareness and separation from patriarchal structures in the traditional society. These analyses, however, have not often recognized the fluidity of traditional patriarchal structures and institutions. Identifying and analyzing the impacts of reproductive labor on the immigrant experience adds a deeper understanding of transnational communities. Moreover, the immigrant experience for Mexican women has been both liberating and repressive.

Building on Pérez' call to decolonize the other as a project for historians, I engage the incorporation of a theoretical approach that also de-normalizes patriarchy in transnational spaces when analyzing the immigrant experience. Women's oral histories serve as an oppositional discourse that essentially challenges and de-normalizes patriarchy. In the process of community formation,

San Ignacians have turned inward to the strength of their own cultural capital while transforming Detroit's Mexican Town into a home away from home in the last three decades of the twentieth century and into the new millennium.

Notes

¹ "Yo les hacía sopa, ensalada y carne al horno y ya cuando venían de trabajar ya estaba todo porque lo hacía antes. Me levantaba temprano y les hacía lunches. ¡Fíjese!, nomás y llegaron a estar diecisiete personas en mi casa! Porque los muchachos llevaban más amigos de San Ignacio. Dormían en el basement apilados hasta que les dije ya no puedo tenerlos." Doña Tita, December 2001.

² Demographic changes altered the ethnic landscape of Detroit throughout the twentieth century. But Mexican immigrants arriving in the 1920s and 1930s suffered severe dislocations that affected transnational community formation in different ways. The Great Depression in the early 1930s hit the Mexican community living in Detroit like a tsunami, diminishing its vitality until the early 1970s. Programs in the 1930s were implemented in the United States to repatriate Mexicans who were believed to be the cause of many social ills. A large sector of U.S. society blamed Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans for depleting the meager welfare resources available to civil society during the Great Depression. Many Anglo Americans felt that they were the only ones entitled to public assistance. The repatriation programs were launched during the Great Depression throughout the United States but concentrated in places where Mexican population numbers were higher, like California and certain areas of the Midwest, such as Detroit. Mexican consulates and welfare officials collaborated to convince Mexicans and Mexican Americans to return "home." Approximately 500,000 Mexicans were repatriated from 1929 to 1939. These programs were unorganized and inhumane; according to Norman Daymond Humphrey of Detroit, "Even families of naturalized citizens were urged to repatriate, and the rights of American-born children to citizenship in their native lands were explicitly denied or not taken into account" (Acuña 222). For more on the relationships between Anglo American institutions and Mexican consulates during the Great Depression, see also Francisco E. Balderrama, *In Defense of La Raza*.

³ See Nodín Valdés, Dionicio. 2000. *Barrios Norteños: St. Paul and Midwestern Mexican Communities in the Twentieth Century*. Austin: University of Texas Press. P. 157.

⁴ Aguilar, Louis. "Mexicans Bolster a Corner of Detroit." *Detroit News*. 6 March 2005. The 2000 U.S. Census reported 47,167 "people of Spanish Language" in Detroit, 33,143 of whom were Mexicans. If the estimate of 15,000 San Ignacians is accurate, then about 45 percent of Mexicans in the city would be from that town. All these numbers, however, are probably too low, given that thousands of Mexicans are rendered socially invisible by their undocumented status. Members of the community sometimes cite much higher numbers. A *New York Times* article from 2000 quotes María Elena Rodríguez, president of the Mexican Town Community Development Corporation and a longtime resident of Detroit, saying that, "More than 40,000 of the people that live in southwest Detroit are either from Jalisco [state] or have relatives there." Nichole M. Christian.

“Detroit Journal: Mexican Immigrants Lead a Revival.” *New York Times*. 21 May 2000. In 2006 the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey reported 39,885 Mexicans in Detroit. It is likely that a substantial proportion of them are from San Ignacio, but exact numbers are not available.

⁵ San Ignacio Cerro Gordo is the original town’s name, however it is usually referred to as San Ignacio. I will from here on use San Ignacio and San Ignacio Cerro Gordo interchangeably.

⁶ The Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI) in their Catálogo de Localidades, of May 2010 (along with CONEVAL, con base en INEGI, II Conteo de Población y Vivienda 2005 with the ENIGH 2005) estimated that the total population of the new municipio in 2010 was 20,323. See the following statistics: <http://cat.microrregiones.gob.mx/catloc/default.aspx?tipo=clave&campo=loc&valor=14125&varent=14&varmun=125> (accessed 8 July 2010).

⁷ The first three decades of the 20th century brought about the Great Migration, 1900–1930, when approximately 46,000 Mexican people immigrated into the United States. Researchers of international migration have now recognized several structural processes that cause people to migrate from their place of origin to a different nation. Some of which include: disparate wages, poverty, political upheavals—like the Mexican Revolution in 1910—urban and rural development, and global bridges—such as aggressive recruitment of Mexican male labor like the Bracero Program compounded by United States’ economic imperialism in Mexico.

⁸ Writing in 1930, Manuel Gamio (*Mexican Immigration to the United States*) noted significant numbers of Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and New York as well as larger populations in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California. He focused his research in Mexico on the states of Michoacán, Guanajuato, and Jalisco. Also see Paul S. Taylor, *A Spanish-Mexican Peasant Community*. For more on early Mexican migration to the Midwest, see García, *Mexicans in the Midwest, 1900-1932*; Vargas, *Proletarians of the North*; and Dionicio Nodín Valdés, *Barrios Norteños*.

⁹ While Mexican immigrants reported animosity between African Americans and Anglo Americans, they did not mention any confrontations in Mexican Town between African Americans and Latinas/os. However, some women referred to African Americans as “los negritos” a pejorative term used against African Americans by Latinas/os.

¹⁰ Doña Tita reported having friends from Santiaguito, a small town in Jalisco, and Chihuahua, a northern state bordering the United States. Other subjects reported having contact with many Cubans. Don José’s first contact in Detroit was a couple from Cuba.

¹¹ “No crea que me gusto mucho, y la casita no me gusto tampoco. Pero yo estaba contenta porque yo tenía toda mi familia y mi esposo allá.” Doña Tita (seventy-three), interview in San Ignacio, December 2001.

¹² “Cuando llegue empecé a ir a templo de Santa Ana porque ellos [su esposo Delfino y sus hermanos] ya habían empezado a ir al Santa Ana. El templo es más acogedor [que el Holy Redeemer]. Uno se reúne, hay un lugar donde hacen café, da dinero y hay una persona que hace café y pan dulce y entonces la gente se va al café y al pan y entonces cada quién se hace bolitas a

platicar con sus familiares o con sus amigos. Ahí había de todo--no había gente de San Ignacio cuando yo llegue, pero había gente de Santiaguito [un pueblo cerca de San Ignacio]. Había gente puertorriqueña, había de Cuba. Yo me hice amistades de todo, como yo tenía muchos hijos ya grandes y luego no están tan feos, muy vanidosa yo. [Se ríe.] Entonces yo me hice de muchas amistades porque las personas aquellas les gustaban mis hijos para sus hijas entonces a mi me hacían amistades." Doña Tita, December 2001.

¹³ "Me gusta estar allá [Detroit] y que las personas de allá que son de aquí, nos vemos también con mucho gusto. Cuando nos encontramos en las tiendas, en la misa, en donde quiera nos prestamos algún servicio, alguna cosa." Doña Chavelita (sixty-nine), interview in San Ignacio, November 2002.

¹⁴ See also Vicki L. Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows*: "Confronting 'America' often meant confronting the labor contractor, the boss, the landlord, or *la migra*. It could also involve negotiating the settlement house, the grammar school, and the health clinic." (32)

¹⁵ "Ahí se hacían muchos relajos, cantaban y hacíamos fiestas. Cumpleaños hacíamos de todo en mi casa porque era grande y yo no era delicada.... Porque decía yo si no recibo a mi gente para andar ay que no me pisen aquí que no me pisen allá, pues las personas no se sienten a gusto, como si estuvieran en su casa." Doña Tita, December 2001.

¹⁶ San Ignacian women reported working in nursing homes, screw and auto parts factories, green houses, restaurants, and as domestic labor.

¹⁷ Dionicio Nodín Valdés points out that Mexicans in Detroit were only 13 percent of Mexicans in Michigan in 1990 according to the census and by the late 1990s Mexicans were still only 3 percent of Detroit's population (Valdés 223). Urban studies of Detroit, such as those by Thomas J. Sugrue in *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, focus on African Americans and say little about the less numerous groups such as Mexicans. Nonetheless, even this relatively small population of Mexican immigrants had an impact on the economic life of the city that should be taken into account.

¹⁸ Though there are disparities about rural vs. urban reproductive and productive labor—tending to farm animals vs. doing laundry for pay—I refer to urban productive labor in Detroit as wage labor outside the home.

¹⁹ Even though Mexicanas do experience the use of contraceptives through more information and availability both in Detroit and in Mexico, many continue to rely on withdrawal (*mi viejo me cuida* [my old man takes care of me]). Mexicanas' fertility rates have dropped, however, both in the United States and in Mexico, showing that Mexican immigrants want to have smaller families.

²⁰ "No, ella se dedicaba a la casa, yo la mantenía." Don Antonio (seventy-eight), interview in San Ignacio, November 2002.

²¹ "¡No, ella nunca trabajó, ni un minuto!" Don Gabriel (seventy), interview in San Ignacio, December 2001. "A trabajar en la casa pues ella era una mujer muy activa o sea yo creo que lo mismo, bueno diferente porque las casas allá no son tan grandes y no trapeaba todos los días porque teníamos alfombra. Yo creo que era más liviano." Sergio Hernández (forty-six), interview in San Ignacio, December 2001.

²² “Se vinieron todos sus hermanos [de su esposo]. Ya habían arreglado también a algunos de sus hijos. Pero vivían todos en una casa, vivíamos todos bien apilados y mi viejo [su esposo], todo el que llegaba iba a dar ahí hasta que encontraba trabajo y no le cobraba comida, no les cobraba nada.... Todos me ayudaban a hacer el quehacer yo con mis chiquillos ahí revueltos con todos, se me hacía rete feo a mí pues yo no estaba impuesta a eso. Al poco tiempo compramos una casa.” Doña Chavelita, November 2002.

²³ “No me gusto el trabajo primero, era bien trabajoso y cuando salí embarazada de Fabiola me salí. Pero después volví a entrar cuando tuve a mi hija Araceli. Cocía lonas con máquinas industriales. Empecé a trabajar ahí porque mi comadre fue la que me metió. Entonces entre yo y luego después entró Aurora, que en paz descanse, ella duró muchos años, como veintisiete años. Después luego empezó a llegar más gente. Primero éramos muy poquitas, nada más Lola y Aurora; Elia llegó después que yo. Nos juntábamos, nos visitábamos mucho porque éramos las únicas. Yo corría para allá con Lola, que viene siendo mi tía, en las tardes para no estar sola.” Alina (fifty), interview in Detroit, June 2004.

²⁴ “Yo me sentía bien aquí con todos porque no estaba sola, hace treinta y uno años no había gente de San Ignacio como ahora.” Alina, June 2004.

²⁵ “Nos podríamos mantener con lo que él gana. Con lo que yo gano lo uso como para cosas que no son [necesidades]...para vestirnos, para salir, para guardar. Lo que yo gano es para lo que yo quiera.” Gela (twenty-five), interview in Detroit, June 2004.

²⁶ “Si el hombre atiende a sus obligaciones mejor, que las mujeres ni trabajen, que atiendan a su familia. Pero si no cumplen, sí, están mejor allá porque aquí no hay mucho trabajo para las mujeres.” Tina (forty-seven), interview in San Ignacio, January 2003.

²⁷ “Sí, primero fue difícil pero ahora me gusta, a gusto. No tienes nada de que preocuparte.” Tina, January 2003.

²⁸ “Tengo muchas amigas. Apenas tiene una año que cerró [la fábrica] todavía nos hablamos y ahora estamos yendo a las clases de inglés.” Tina, January 2003.

²⁹ “No puedo, es mi hermano.” Gaby (twenty-two), interview in San Ignacio, December 2007.

³⁰ “Hemos muchas personas que nos dan la mano, eso es lo importante, que llegues y haya una persona que te de la mano. Yo conozco a muchas personas que no tienen a donde llegar, que no conocen a nadie, que no tienen un lugar ni siguiera para dormir que hasta que tengas trabajo no tienes que comer. Yo gracias a Dios a mí me toco la suerte que yo tenía aquí a mi hermana. Pues es bien bonito, así te da más ánimo poderte venir cuando tienes así un lugar en donde llegar que tu sabes que no es tan fácil aquí la vida. Si no trabajas pues esta más duro, pero así está bien que tengas familia y gracias a Dios como te digo que uno pueda ayudar a otra gente porque tu ya sabes porque tu viniste lo que tu pasaste, todos venimos a lo mismo, todos.” Vivi (twenty-eight), interview in Detroit, June 2004.

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