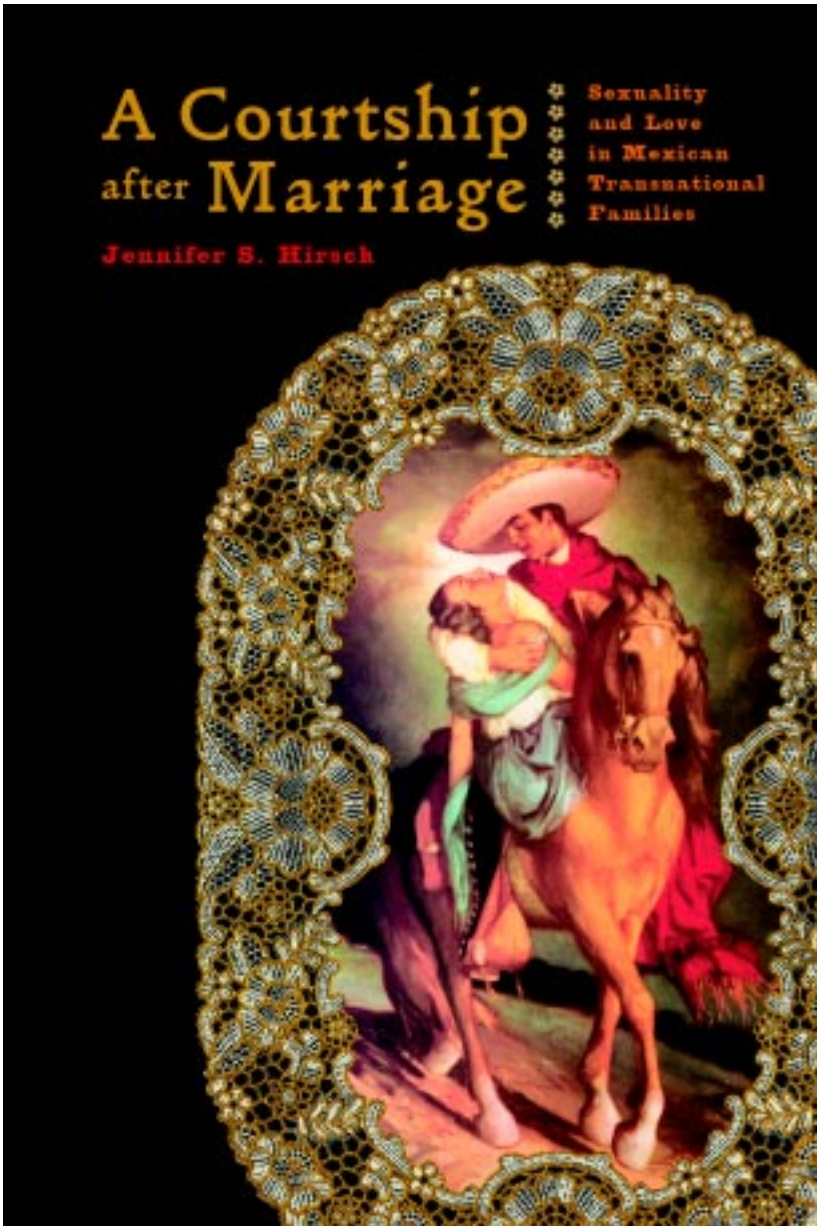


Excerpted from



©2003 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. May not be copied or reused without express written permission of the publisher.

[click here to  
BUY THIS BOOK](#)

## “Here with Us”

### *Introduction to a Transnational Community*

When I arrived in April 1996, both Degollado and El Fuerte looked to me like little worlds unto themselves—sleepy places that could not be more different from the strip malls, trailer parks, and six-lane highways of suburban Atlanta. Over time I learned that the Mexican and U.S. field sites are intensely intertwined, and in fact some of those features that struck me as most strongly “Mexican” looking, such as the colonial-style sandstone details on the homes of some of the town’s wealthier residents, date back not to Mexico’s colonial past but rather to the more recent prosperity of migrant families. Migrant-sending communities in Mexico have been so profoundly transformed by migration that it is not possible to think about rural life in western Mexico without acknowledging the multiple interconnections with urban life in the United States. This chapter describes how individuals bridge the space that divides the two places to create a shared social life and gives some examples of how regional identity continues to be an organizing principle for Mexican women and men in Atlanta. I write in the present tense to give a sense of immediacy, but—as should become clear through the description itself—what follows is not a timeless portrait of life in Mexico but rather a snapshot taken at a particular historical moment.

I had been hearing about the fiestas since I first met women from this community in December 1995; people had been telling me all along how important it was that I be there to experience them, that the fiesta season is *cuando se pone más bonito el pueblo* (the time when the town

is at its nicest). My description makes clear that what I mean by a transnational community (a phrase that has been used in various ways) is one that spans physically distinct locations but that is closely linked through the movement of people and information, and one in which there is a broader sense of membership in a community that transcends physical borders.

#### CONSTRUCTING A TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNITY: EXPERIENCES OF CONNECTION

When, toward the end of my stay in Degollado, several people asked me how long I had been doing research in their community, I would begin to calculate the number of months I had been in Mexico: “April through July makes three,” I would say, “and then mid-October through February is another four.” Inevitably, they corrected me, dating the start of my work with the community to December 1995, when I first began interviewing women from El Fuerte and Degollado in Atlanta. Being “here with us” meant to them being part of the larger community of Mexicans from Degollado or El Fuerte. The annual fiestas in Degollado provide a fine example of the intensity of these cross-border ties and of the implications of these ties for daily life in rural Mexico. These fiestas, which locals experience as the paradigmatic celebration of their Mexican identity, owe much in texture and timing to the changing patterns of temporary and permanent migration between Mexican sending communities and the United States.

#### FIESTAS IN A TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Since early November this whole western-central region of Mexico has been abuzz with the excitement of the approaching fiestas, and with them the returning *norteños*. Their return portends both a busy season for local merchants and the changing gender ratios that usher in the start of the courting and wedding season. The cars and trucks are one of the first signs, rumbling into town with *placas gringas* (U.S. plates). Most are from Illinois and California, but Oregon, Nevada, Texas, Alabama, Tennessee, the Carolinas, and Georgia are also well represented. Large, full-size vans are the most popular—how else to fit all the presents one must bring home for one’s family? There is also a fair share of extended-cab pickup trucks, some with chrome detailing and extra lamps on top; these trucks could carry a bull, several pigs, or 2 tons of

bricks (or a whole extended family seated on folding chairs to a picnic in *el cerro*, the hills). Some of the younger men, the single ones, drive low-slung red or black Camaros with neon underlighting and shaded windows. (Not everyone drives home from the United States—especially those families with children in school, who are likely to stay just a week or two and who will take a bus or, if they can afford it, a plane. There are direct buses from Atlanta to La Piedad, twenty minutes from Degollado.)

Suddenly, everyone has new clothes. T-shirts and baseball hats from the Bulls or the Rams are coveted gifts, but any sports team, U.S. city, tourist attraction, or even company logo is warmly welcomed and proudly worn. At Mass on Sundays you can look around and see all the shiny new shoes and handbags. The *norteños* themselves, of course, are splendid in their new clothes: the men's attire crisply ironed, the women perfectly made up. Everyone exclaims over how white they have become in the North. Their hair seems glossier, free of the split ends caused by dust and heat and hard water. The ones who had been too skinny have put on weight, and the ones who were already healthy looking have become even more *llenola* (fuller, that is, heavier). Altogether, everyone comes back looking more *compuesto/a* (fixed up).<sup>1</sup>

The taco wagons in the plaza multiply. During the rest of year they are only crowded on Sundays, but now there seems to be a throng around every wagon, every night. The *cenadurias*, tiny kitchens that sell sopes and pozole and fried tacos, spill their patrons out into the street.<sup>2</sup> In the sleepy summer months the only men in the plaza during the day are old men on benches outside the church, whose cowboy hats shade eyes that inspect every passerby, but suddenly—even during the day—the plaza is full of young men. They luxuriate in the weak winter sun, so much warmer than where they have come from, and in the freedom of being able to sit in public and talk with their friends—of being able to sit down at all without looking over their shoulders for *la migrá*.

Commerce hums. The market runs out of meat if one does not go early—who buys meat every day but *los que traen dólares* (those who carry dollars)? The bricklayers on the edge of town work in a frenzy; not only is the rainy season around the corner, but everyone who comes back wants his (or her) house finished, so they can't make bricks fast enough. The construction workers have more work than they can possibly manage, and the building supply stores are full of people busily getting estimates and placing orders. The *mariachis* and *conjuntos* who the rest of the year stand for hours in the plaza, waiting for someone

rich enough or drunk enough to spend 50 pesos for a song, now never sit still. The store just outside the market that sells *birria* (spicy goat stew) opens every day instead of intermittently. The town's three travel agencies do brisk business, arranging family package vacations to the beach; later, in January and February, they will get even busier as people book their return trips.<sup>3</sup> And dollars are everywhere; “A cuanto está el dólar?” (How much is the dollar at?) echoes not just at the bank and the three *casas de cambio* but in stores throughout town, as men and women pull out wads of dearly earned, proudly spent bills. Like their families who cash money orders in increments of \$50 or \$100 the rest of the year, they hope the dollar is up, giving them more pesos—but also like their families they feel a touch of sadness or even a twinge of guilt when it rises, knowing that there are some in the town with no money orders or foreign checks to cash.

Even during the rest of the year, Sundays are different. Families ride in, packed in the back of pickup trucks, from the surrounding ranchos, to do their shopping and attend one of the five Masses offered that day in the main church on the plaza, or one of the several at the two churches in las colonias. Sunday morning the *tianguis* (flea market) sets up on one of the streets bordering the plaza, offering stall after stall of dishes, underwear, herbal remedies, clothes made in Mexico, America, or Southeast Asia, needlework, makeup, shoes and sneakers, and tapes and compact discs. Young girls invent errands, beg to take their grandmothers to Mass, or volunteer to go for the tortillas, desperate for an excuse to visit the plaza and the flea market.

Even on a regular Sunday in the middle of summer, the air is heavy with food smells, and people eat as they shop: sugar-coated peanuts; *churros* (caramel-filled fried donuts); popcorn; small plastic bags spilling over with chopped watermelon, cucumber, cantaloupe, mango, and papaya, with a squeeze of lime and heavy sprinkle of salt and ground chiles; hot dogs wrapped in bacon and fried, served on a bun with ketchup, mustard, and *jalapeños* in vinegar; *tortas planchadas* (grilled cheese and ham sandwiches). For families who can afford it, Sunday morning is not a time to cook; those who would rather eat at home scurry back with bags of steaming *tacos de cabeza* (tacos made from head meat), goat stew (not cheap at 40 pesos the kilo), or *menudo* (tripe and chile soup, excellent for taking the bite out of a hangover).

As midafternoon draws near, those from the ranchos tend to head back, their shopping done and their Mass finished (the Mass at noon is known as the *misa del rancho*). In spite of the exodus toward the ran-

chos, if anything the pace in town starts to pick up as dusk falls. The early evening Mass (at 7:30) is the *misa de adolescentes*, the teenagers’ Mass.<sup>4</sup> As the 7:30 Mass lets out, young single people flood out into the plaza to sit on the benches or to *dar la vuelta* (promenade around the plaza). Women walk counterclockwise, men clockwise. The young women tend to link arms or hold hands; men walk in groups of two or three, but without touching each other. In the past, people say, young men let their intentions be known via an elaborately coded courtship language of real and artificial flowers and confetti-filled eggs, but now (they say because of *la crisis*) exchanges are immaterial, though no less significant: a glance, a smile, perhaps a few words as they pass.

The air fills with nighttime smells: cologne, roasting green garbanzos and ears of corn, *buñuelos* (another fried pastry), tacos, and more bacon-wrapped hot dogs. In between the ringing bells before each Mass, one hears the throb of disco music from that den of iniquity, the disco, which most of the year opens only on Sunday nights but during the twelve days of the annual fiestas of the Virgin of Guadalupe (December 1–12) is open nightly. The crowd in the plaza thickens at 9:30 when the last Mass ends. Now there are no spaces to be found on the benches, and the paving stones are thick with the green shells of roasted garbanzos. At ten o’clock the streets clear of families and the noise dies down. Now is the time for married women, good girls (*las recogidas*), and young children to be safely home. Men, whether married or single, may stay out later. Some bad girls do too, because the disco continues until 1 or 2 in the morning.

So if the streets brim with excitement on Sundays in May or June, when the crops are just coming in; in the Salinas Valley and construction, landscaping, and paving are at their peak in Georgia, imagine Sundays in the winter. The bandshell, silent all year, fills with a group of local musicians courtesy of the mayor’s office (which pleads poverty during the summer months, but coughs up the money in the winter to please the returning migrants). During the summer months, the line going counterclockwise (girls) is several times thicker than the one going in the other direction. The few boys who come to promenade in the summer are noticeably younger than most of the girls—that is, still too young to go north—but in November and December the boys’ line and the benches around the plaza fill with new faces. Most of them of course are actually familiar faces, but with new clothes, pockets bulging with dollars, and chins smooth after a carefully done, though barely needed, shave. In the girls’ line one sees teenagers but also women in

their twenties, thirties, and even forties. Because some men go north and marry Mexicans from other towns, Chicanas, or even gringas, there is a sizable group of adult, unmarried women in town.<sup>5</sup> Still technically *muchachas*, many of them put on heels and stockings and continue to optimistically *dar la vuelta*.

The return of these *norteños* ushers in courting season.<sup>6</sup> Many men come back hoping to find a girlfriend; they are looking for a nice girl, one who expects to be respected. If all goes well, they can spend several months courting, talk on the phone weekly after he goes back north in January or February, and then marry the following year. Young women dress with care for these crucial Sundays. Some wear the latest fashions from the United States (during my fieldwork, clunky black shoes, low-slung baggy pants, and midriff-baring tops), but it is not uncommon to see *muchachas* in off-the-shoulder, ankle-length velvet, taffeta, or sequined dresses. (A bridesmaid dress can live a long life in this part of the world.) The more sophisticated girls from the pueblo mock those in long dresses, choosing instead suits in printed rayon fabrics, copied from designs in K-Mart, Sears, and J. C. Penney catalogs sent from the other side.

November is also wedding season; young men who have worked hard all year come back prepared for a splendid wedding, with *mariachis* and *carnitas* (tender, deep-fried pork meat) and then a honeymoon at the beach.<sup>7</sup> Several times a day on Sundays in November, December, and January, a bride and groom brave a torrent of flying rice to leave the church. Sometimes the couple pauses for photos outside the church, interrupted by clapping and shouts of “*beso, beso*” (kiss) from the gathered crowd (they do not kiss in church in this part of Mexico; it would be disrespectful). Then the newlyweds hop into their heavily decorated wedding car and lead a parade of cars through the town streets, beeping their horns and driving in circles, until they can be sure that enough guests will have arrived at the party so they can make a grand entrance (see Photo 2.1). (Between wedding processions and *norteños* showing off their cars, traffic gets so heavy this time of year in Degollado that the police make several normally two-way streets one way, to lessen the possibility of serious accidents and relieve congestion.) Even couples who themselves do not go north often wait until November or December to marry or baptize, counting on the help of returning relatives as *padrinos* and thus cosponsors of the party—and many families who live in the United States baptize their children in Mexico, strengthening their and their children’s ties to home by choosing *compadres* in their hometown.



Photograph 2.1. “Just Married.” This minivan, sporting Georgia plates and a “Just Married” sign in English, was the car of choice for a couple from El Fuerte who married in La Piedad in January 1997 and left soon afterward for Atlanta. From November through January, a bride walks down the aisle at the main church in Degollado several times a day, and even the other chapels are sometimes fully booked.

People try to make it home by November 23, when there is live music and dancing in the plaza from dawn till dusk during the fiesta of Saint Cecilia, patron saint of musicians. Shortly thereafter begins the twelve days of the fiestas for the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico’s beloved patron saint, culminating on December 12, the day she is said to have appeared in a vision to Juan Diego. The plaza fills with booths of games, a mechanical bull, and carnival rides offering the chance for young couples to get stuck on top of the Ferris wheel, forced to clutch each other in fright. The acrid sulfur smell and sharp crack of firecrackers accompany the bells that announce the early morning (6 A.M.) and afternoon (7 P.M.) processions through the town before the special daily Masses of the fiestas. Some go to the early Mass to show their love for the Virgin; others go because it provides a good excuse to linger in the plaza afterward, drinking coffee, eating hot donuts, and checking out the boys.





Photograph 2.2. La Peregrinación del los Hijos Ausentes/  
The Procession of the Absent Sons. Men, women, and  
children stroll happily down the main street in Degollado,  
dressed in their best clothes, to line up for the religious  
procession sponsored by returned migrants.

Each of the twice-daily religious processions is organized by a different group: the sick; the stone cutters; inhabitants of the four “quarters” of town; those who have moved to Guadalajara; elementary and secondary schoolchildren and their teachers; and of course *los hijos ausentes* (the absent sons [and daughters]), those who have moved to the United States and are back to visit. The pilgrimage financed by *los hijos ausentes* is paid for by canvassing groups of migrants living in different cities in the United States during the year and is expected to be the most splendid: more firecrackers in the morning than on other days and actual fireworks at night; huge multicolored arches of helium balloons spreading over the main street; several groups of hired “Indian” dancers; and a number of marching bands and groups of mariachis.<sup>8</sup>

The biggest attraction of the *peregrinación de los hijos ausentes* (the religious procession sponsored by the town’s absent sons) is, of course, the migrants themselves (see Photos 2.2 and 2.3). The men are



Photograph 2.3. La Peregrinación del los Hijos Ausentes/The Procession of the Absent Sons. On their procession down Degollado’s main street, returned migrants carry a banner of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a Mexican flag, and an American flag. The parade also featured a banner that read “Los hijos ausentes agradecemos a Nuestra Madre de Guadalupe y a Degollado que nos reciben con los brazos abiertos” (The absent sons [and daughters] thank our mother of Guadalupe and Degollado, who welcomes us with open arms) and a truck with suitcases, representing the generosity and safe return of the town’s *hijos ausentes*.

in suits and ties or in crisply ironed jeans with shiny boots, cowboy hats, and new belt buckles of brass, silver, or handwoven *piteado*.<sup>9</sup> Women shine in new dresses or tailored suits, some with matching hats, and children are on parade as well: little boys in suits and little girls in velvet dresses with tights and patent leather shoes. All the migrants carry candles, as one does in a pilgrimage, but they are the 30- or 40-peso kind, rather than the 20-peso version that their nonmigrant kin would buy. Many also carry video cameras; they will sell tapes of the parade to those back in the United States who were unable to make it this year. During the pilgrimage of los hijos ausentes, the return migrants march, grouped by U.S. state, under three flags: the banner of the Virgin, the Mexican flag, and the U.S. flag. The first float in this quintessentially “Mexican” parade is a pickup truck, its back piled high with suitcases representing the triumphant, gift-laden return of the migrant. The religious procession sponsored by los hijos ausentes highlights the way in which their whole trip home to Degol-

lado is a kind of pilgrimage, a way of giving thanks for having survived and even prospered in el norte.

These fiestas, with the smells, tastes, and sounds of a communal street life, represent to migrants all the pleasures of life in Mexico, contrasted with the sacrifices of life in the North—but without the infusion of energy and money that the migrants bring, the fiestas would not be what they are. In years past the carnival rides left town on the 12th, the day the fiestas ended. Now they stay on—in 1996 nearly through the end of December—to take advantage of those migrants, home for school vacation with their young children, whose appetite for an authentically Mexican good time was not sated during the fiestas. The migrants’ longing to replicate the smells, tastes, and sounds of their imagined pasts collides with their desire to help their town (and show how successful they have become) by renovating the church or the plaza or installing potable water and with the logistical constraints of their back-and-forth lives.<sup>10</sup> Migrants contribute to the creation of fiestas that are showier than in the past—more food, more fireworks, more souvenir stands and games—and that last the duration of school vacations in Chicago or Atlanta.<sup>11</sup>

Questions about Mexican authenticity hang in the air during this time. For example, on November 1, Evita called me from my breakfast to look outside our front door onto the main street at the passing parade. I was delighted to see a horde of kindergartners in black pants and shirts with paper bones pinned on, their faces painted as the traditional day of the dead skulls, carrying a large banner that read: “Mexicano, di no a Halloween—Festeja el día de los muertos” (Mexicans, say no to Halloween—Celebrate the Day of the Dead) (see Photo 2.4). During Christmas both in the rancho and in town people debated the most properly Mexican way to celebrate the holiday. The Three Kings (*los Reyes Magos*) had always brought Mexican children whose families could afford it a new dress, shoes, or a toy on Three Kings Day (January 6); children dreamed of breaking a *piñata* on Christmas Eve, then sitting down to a steaming bowl of pozole. Lately, however, a Santa Claus they see on TV and depicted on gifts from the United States has begun to appear in children’s daydreams; Santa’s visit on TV is followed by turkey and stuffing, rather than pozole and tamales. I asked one four-year-old boy who lives in El Fuerte with his mother and grandmother (his father is in Harvey, Illinois) what the Three Kings might bring him this year, and he told me with a serious face that it was Santa Claus who was going to bring him presents. When I stuck my foot in my mouth by saying rather insensitively, “No, Santa Claus lives in



Photograph 2.4. Protest against Halloween. Children marching in a 1996 parade to celebrate the Mexican holiday *día de los muertos* (The Day of the Dead) carry a sign that reads “Mexicans, say no to Halloween, Celebrate the Day of the Dead.”

*gringolandia* (where the gringos live) near your father, and here in Mexico it is the Three Kings who bring little boys and girls presents,” he got very worried and started to cry. His grandmother stepped in to save the day, telling him not to worry, that Santa Claus and the Three Kings would together make sure that he was not forgotten.

#### U.S.-MEXICO MIGRATION AND CHANGES IN THE SENDING COMMUNITIES

The fiesta season is framed with flags and pictures of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a celebration of all that which is *lo mexicano* (most Mexican), but this very sense of Mexican-ness makes sense only in implicit contrast to *lo gringo*—and the annual creation of the fiesta relies on resources to which residents of this town only have access because of their sojourns in the United States. In addition to the fiestas, transformations in architecture and residence patterns, the local economies, and markers of social status in El Fuerte and Degollado over the past generation are at least partially a result of the communities’ growing links to migrant networks.

As the saying *la que se casa quiere casa* (she who marries wants a house) suggests, one consequence of the increasing integration of local Mexican economies into migrant circuits is that newly married couples are



Drawing 2.1. Finishing the House. This drawing, by a young woman in Degollado, shows what she says is her most important hope for the future: “In my future, I would like for my house to be finished. Now my husband is in the United States to finish the house, if God helps us.”

much more likely to start off with their own houses (built before or soon after marriage with money earned working in the United States) (see Drawing 2.1 and Photo 2.5). As Inhorn concluded based on her fieldwork with infertile couples in urban Egypt, neolocal residence forces a couple to rely much more heavily on each other both socially and emotionally.<sup>12</sup> Five out of the seven life history informants who live in Mexico and own their own homes purchased or built them with money saved through their husbands’ trips north.<sup>13</sup>



Photograph 2.5. Construction Site in Degollado. Piles of rebar, stacks of bricks, cement pipes, and heaps of gravel—as well as a two-story house such as the one rising in the background—show how migration is transforming the appearance of small towns throughout Mexico.

The look of houses in this region has also changed. Twenty years ago, the typical house was a one-story brick or adobe house. The front wall was flush with the street, and the doors and windows were covered with decorative (but strong) wrought-iron bars. Inside, the room or rooms faced an inner courtyard full of flowering plants, where wash hung to dry, beans cooked over a wooden fire, and birds were kept. The roof was made of clay tiles, or large sheets of tin or fiberglass. The bathroom, if there was one, was shared by the whole family. Most of the rooms were multipurpose; during the day, people would sit, eat, and cook in rooms in which they would sleep at night. Siblings frequently shared a bed, but boys and girls slept in different rooms if possible, or at least in separate beds. One frequently walked through one room to get to another; no precious space was wasted on hallways.

As González and Pader have noted based on fieldwork in other Mexican towns with large migrant populations and as is illustrated by Photo 2.6, the influence of North American suburban architecture has become unmistakable.<sup>14</sup> The front wall has receded from the sidewalk, making the garden a floral showplace rather than a communal living area. Newer houses have living rooms, and the rich have both a living room and a family room, giving them the luxury of a room of wasted space



Photograph 2.6. New House. Newer homes reflect new needs, such as a garage for cars purchased through hard labor in the United States. The home pictured here integrates some traditional Mexican design elements (stucco, sandstone trim on the windows and along the roof, a tile roof, and the wrought-iron-and-glass decorative lamps), but also provides room for a two-car garage. The two-story design separates living areas into public and private in a way that is quite distinct from older homes.

and untouched furniture just like their North American neighbors. Bedrooms are set off from the rest of the house, often opening onto a shared hallway, and some houses now have multiple bathrooms. More houses are two-story, with the bedrooms upstairs and the common areas downstairs, and some also include room for off-street parking; a few even have pull-down garage doors. These new-style homes show not just that a family has money but that they have modern tastes. A person living in one of these new houses learns privacy through the closed doors, hallways, and multiple bathrooms; they learn to have more individual possessions that they can store in their closets (another innovation). Some of these new houses stand empty, yet they still perform an important

function, marking a migrant’s continued identity as a native daughter or son of their hometown. Many migrants live in cramped, rented quarters in the United States while sending as much as they can scrape together (often every other paycheck) to Mexico to build a splendid house in which they will never live, and only rarely visit.

During a quick walk through El Fuerte or the colonias of Degollado, it is easy to pick out those families in which either the husband or the whole family spends most of the year working for dollars: a pickup in front of the house or a large parabolic antenna are sure signs of *norteños*. As suggested by the transformation in domestic architecture, through decades of migration people have become accustomed to a whole range of status symbols that are attainable either with great difficulty or not at all to those who do not migrate. As far back as the 1920s, the store-bought clothes and radios accessible only to migrants were prized possessions, and now many other items distinguish those who have family in *el norte* from those who do not: cars, microwaves, video cameras, VCRs, and satellite dishes.<sup>15</sup> Extravagant weddings, baptisms, and *quinceañeras* (fifteenth-birthday celebrations) are another example of this migration-dependent system of marking social status; in order to finance the requisite mariachis, party favors, sartorial splendor, and food it is often necessary to involve multiple sets of *padrinos* who, as ritual godparents, cosponsor part of the party.<sup>16</sup> Video-tapes have become an important component of the transnational sharing of these ritual moments; no celebration is complete without a video camera recording events for relatives in the United States who are not able to be present, and these tapes are eagerly awaited and viewed over and over by those on the other side.

Migrants continue to invest in maintaining a social identity in the sending community—as exemplified by the focus on building houses in one’s hometown in Mexico. Migration is a strategy for local (that is, Mexican) social mobility for those who go north. This is true most obviously in terms of the possessions they accumulate to fill houses they barely visit, but even the very fact of having stepped on gringo soil can cast a halo of importance on people.<sup>17</sup>

The local economy has also been transformed, both by the influx of migrant dollars and by growing insertion into regional, national, and international markets.<sup>18</sup> The demand for housing has created local industries of brick making and construction work, and people credit post-NAFTA international competition in porciculture, combined with skyrocketing interest rates, for having driven many local pork producers either into debt or out of business. An *ejido* is a system of communal landownership de-



veloped after the Mexican Revolution's failed attempts at more widespread land reform.<sup>19</sup> Under former President Zedillo (1994–2000), all the ejidos were dissolved and land was parceled out to individual ownership. Since the ejido has been dissolved in Degollado (none of the land near El Fuerte was ever part of an ejido), land speculation (driven by migrants eager to invest their dollars locally) has begun; prices for land with irrigation have reportedly climbed to 20,000 pesos a hectare. Migration is not the only force that has changed rural ways; equally important have been increased regional integration due to the highway, the telephone, and the television, and, as I discuss in Chapter 5, the precipitous decline throughout the past several decades in the percentage of families engaged in agricultural work as their main source of support.

#### BUILDING THE TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNITY: STAYING IN TOUCH

Even when migrants do not physically return, they maintain an intense level of communication with family and friends in the sending community. People move back and forth in regular, seasonal patterns, facilitated by the relative speed of air travel (see Photo 2.7) and even direct bus service, but even during the summer when most *norteños* are hard at work in the United States, the flow of information is nothing short of astonishing. María, who lives in Atlanta, joked to me that the speed with which information travels surpasses the accuracy: she had barely missed her first period in her last pregnancy, she told me, when her mother called her (collect) from home to say how happy she was to hear that her daughter was pregnant with twins!

In El Fuerte, individual phone service only became available in the summer of 1996; before that people had to line up to make and receive phone calls at the general store, which had a thriving business charging for phone calls. Even under those less-than-private circumstances, many spoke to husbands or children in the United States on a weekly basis. For most of the families I knew in the rancho, the cost (several hundred dollars) of a private phone was subsidized by relatives in the United States who wanted the convenience of being able to call at any hour of the day. In Degollado, the first individual phones were installed more than a decade ago, but many families do not have a private line. Several shops near the plaza have phone booths, and those who do have phones (especially in *la colonia*, where they are sparser) frequently receive calls for their neighbors. Fax service is also available, though generally less



Photograph 2.7. Travel Agency. This travel agency, one of several in Degollado, quoted prices in the winter of 1997 for travel between Guadalajara and some of the destinations to which people travel frequently. Residents of this region have been traveling for decades to places such as Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Oakland; Atlanta and Nashville are more recent incorporations into migrant itineraries.

desirable for anything other than sending copies of documents (when people get married in the church in the United States, for example, they need to send parish records indicating that they were baptized and that they are not married in Mexico) because a fax is much less private.

Some also write letters, but it can take three to four weeks for a letter to travel from a U.S. city to El Fuerte or Degollado (see Photo 2.8). Consequently, those who write on either side tend to send their letters with someone who can deliver them personally. There is almost always someone heading either north or south, and it is not uncommon for people not to know a child or a spouse’s mailing address; it is possible to stay in close touch without ever mailing a letter. Videotapes also play an important



Photograph 2.8. Mexico Express. Mexico Express is one of a number of businesses that have sprung up to take advantage of people's intense desire to maintain relationships across great distances. Letters mailed between the United States and Mexico can take up to three or even four weeks to arrive, but Mexico Express (which has outlets in Degollado and other migrant-sending communities in Mexico) gets letters and small packages to their destination in about a week by sending them directly to southern California in a bus and then mailing them to destinations throughout the United States with an American stamp.

role; people watch these tapes over and over again, and minute details do not escape notice: Susana, whose boyfriend is in Atlanta, told me that one of their biggest fights started because he noticed her dancing with another young man in a videotape of a wedding in El Fuerte that he saw in Atlanta.

For migrants to the United States, their identity as residents of El Fuerte or Degollado is a source of solace, reminding them that in Mexico they are valued members of a community in spite of the fact that they work in low-paying, low-status jobs in Atlanta. Men and women also use their connections to others from the same community to build their lives in America. The primary way that people hear about work opportunities is through relatives and friends from home. Migrants who arrive in Atlanta may start work within a day or two because a cousin or a sibling will have scouted out possibilities in advance. Recent migrants count on relatives and friends for information about apartments, medical services, and school enrollment for their children, and most socialize primarily with fellow townspeople.

As is typical of Mexican migrants, the men from El Fuerte have a soccer team in Atlanta composed primarily of fellow townspeople. Degollado has fielded soccer teams in Chicago and southern California, but the men are either too dispersed or else the migrant stream is not sufficiently established for a soccer team to have been organized (though some men play on other towns' teams). When the Mexican migrants join soccer teams in Atlanta or other U.S. cities, they are re-creating the weekly rhythm of their social lives in Mexico: in both Degollado and El Fuerte, soccer is as much of a Sunday ritual for many men as Mass is for their wives. The women from Degollado who live in a suburb north of Atlanta meet regularly on Wednesdays at a local church for a rosary in Spanish. Both single-sex social events like baby showers and mixed ones such as baptisms, weddings, and birthday parties are primarily attended by others from the same hometown, and in moments of crisis the local network springs into action, banding together.

#### IMAGINING THE FAMILY: LIVING-ROOM DECOR

A description of the photos and objects with which men and women on both sides of the border decorate their living spaces gives a bit of depth to one's understanding of how these families imagine themselves.<sup>20</sup> Living rooms in Mexico and the United States are decorated with one or two large, many-shelved pieces of furniture, a cross between bookshelves and stereo cabinets. These shelves are frequently the only piece of furniture in a room other than a bed, a couch, or a chair. Made of wood or formica, they display electronic equipment, crocheted doilies, party favors from weddings and baptisms, formal, posed family photos from a portrait studio, religious icons, and small, sentimental gifts that men may give to

their wives or children to their mothers—a sort of altar to the family. These altars on both sides of the border have the same categories of items, yet there are subtle but important differences between them.

Prominently displayed on the shelves will be some combination of electronic equipment: a stereo, a television, a VCR, or a portable boom box (preferably one that plays CDs instead of tapes). Among Mexicans in the United States, the stereos and televisions tend to be of recent vintage and in good working order.<sup>21</sup> In Mexico the shelves will frequently contain electronic equipment that does not work (for example, three TVs, only one of which works or only one of which is in color and connected to the antenna). Nonfunctioning items are not discarded both because there is always the hope they can be fixed, and because, even if they do not actually work, they still do the symbolic work of representing connections with successful family members in *el norte*.

The second item gracing these pieces of furniture are crocheted doilies. As with the electronic equipment, the doilies have related but distinct meanings in Atlanta and in the sending communities. In both locations, they are a focal point for demonstrating feminine homemaking and attention to detail, visible proof of the emotional bonds between women. Heavily starched and ironed doilies also decorate wardrobes, couches, chairs, tables, and china cabinets (only the larger homes, of course, have china cabinets). In some homes, they seem to cover any available horizontal or vertical surface; they are tucked into wardrobe doors and drawers, and slipped beneath picture frames and ceramic figurines. Women and girls crochet doilies for each other as gifts or, less frequently, for themselves, weaving together families and homes with these elaborate needlework creations.<sup>22</sup> Part of a feminine currency of exchange, a set of doilies makes a well-received Mother's Day or Christmas gift.<sup>23</sup> I received several sets as Christmas gifts while in Degollado, and many women gave them to me as going-away gifts before I left. Concha, assuming that the doily style of decorating was universal, asked me if I had an eight-doily bookshelf in my living room or if we had the larger, twelve-doily style.

In Mexico most women crochet their own as gifts, or if they can afford to or do not know how (most women seemed to know how to crochet, though not all enjoyed it) they will pay someone else to make a set for them as a gift. Josefina, for example, made sets of doilies for other women. Women also give gifts of cross-stitch, either in the form of large (24" × 24") napkins used to wrap stacks of hot tortillas, pillowcases (which are not as private a gift as one might think, since most bedrooms

double as sitting rooms during the day) or, most splendidly, large tablecloths.<sup>24</sup>

In Atlanta, in contrast, many Mexican women buy sets of doilies for their homes, usually from other women who have purchased them in Mexico specifically to bring to the United States and sell. Pilar, who lives outside Degollado in a small farming community, crochets doilies to sell to a woman for about 8 pesos (1 dollar each); the doilies might sell for several dollars at the Mexican flea market in the United States. Some continue to do needlework as they did in Mexico, but many say that between working outside their homes and the endless diversions offered by life in the United States there is no longer time to sit and crochet. Women continue to exchange sets of doilies as gifts, but less commonly than in Mexico. Doilies continue to have their place in the living room as a sign of a feminine, well-ordered home and of the threads of connection that build community, but they also become a symbol of consumption and of the changing value of women’s time.

The party favors known as *recuerdos* (literally, memories) or as *arroces* (rices) are a less-gendered signifier of cross-border social ties. Arroces are small ceramic or plastic figures from wedding, baptisms, and quinceañeras, in the shape of a swan, a shoe, a bell, a couple, a heart, or perhaps a wedding ring. Decorated with glitter or bits of tulle, the ones from weddings may actually contain a small (symbolic) amount of rice, although rice-filled bags of tulle are given to the guests at a wedding so that the arroz can be saved as a souvenir. On them one reads the name of the couple, infant, or honored señorita (for example, “wedding of Juan and Guadalupe” or “baptism of Pedro Figueroa”), the date, and the name of the padrinos who contributed that particular recuerdo to the party. Many people in Degollado and El Fuerte plan a wedding or baptism around the December or January arrival of relatives from el norte, upon whom they know they can count for a level of generosity hard to match among those who earn in pesos. It is nearly impossible to refuse a request to be someone’s padrino or *madrina* (godmother) without giving offense, so those who journey back count these sponsorships as one of the costs, and the pleasures, of showing how well they have done “on the other side.” When it was time to head north again, Guadalupe’s sister joked that she could not afford any more *compadrazgos*.

Mexicans who marry in the United States also have recuerdos; Isabela in Degollado made the arroces for her sister Blanca’s wedding in Atlanta so late that she had to send them via DHL Second Day Air so

they would arrive in time for the wedding. Whether displayed in Mexico or the United States, the recuerdos are both personal, glittery reminders of having been invited to, and attended, a party, and more generally a reminder to all that a new tie of *compadrazgo* has been created. But in Mexico they can also serve to note the munificence and prosperity of those who have been in *el norte*, while in Atlanta they are also physical evidence of how one continues to be thickly knit into a social network in the South.

On these living-room shelves one also sees photos of family. These are not the snapshots so common in American homes, though; film is expensive and a camera is a luxury—instead, one sees professional photos of large groups of relatives, taken for the most part at weddings. Also common are large-format, full-length wedding portraits; it is a point of pride for a woman to have gotten married in white rather than eloping, and so women eagerly display their wedding photos as a tangible reminder of their triumph. In Mexico, I also saw many old, hand-colored studio portraits of people’s parents and grandparents. These older photos are quite rare in Mexican houses in Atlanta; most of these studio portraits are the only photos people have of their now-deceased parents or grandparents and thus not something they are likely to give a child or spouse departing for what is hoped to be a temporary absence in *el norte*. Newer-looking portraits of nuclear families, arrayed against the mottled blue background used by American photo studios, are displayed on both sides of the border: the father, mother, and two or three children seem a typically North American grouping, and they are smiling, in sharp contrast to the serious demeanor of the older wedding pictures. Although I suspect the difference in emotional tone of the photos is due at least in part to fluoridated water and greater access to dentistry among Mexicans in the United States (part of what people do when they smile is show off shiny, straight white teeth), the intended message also seems distinct. The older photos suggest that the act of having one’s picture taken is momentous and that one should face the camera directly in one’s Sunday best—these are depictions of respectability, rather than charm. The newer photos, in contrast, show families grouped to convey warmth and happiness; the father’s hand is on the mother’s, and they stand close, touching each other and their children. They are still in their best dress, the women carefully made-up and every hair on the men’s heads in place, so part of the message is prosperity and success, but the difference in emotional tone is striking, the focus on capturing happiness for all to see.

Decorative, sentimental gifts exchanged among family members, such as arrangements of plastic flowers or small ceramic figurines bearing messages such as “World’s Best Mom” or “Te quiero, madre” (I love you, mother), also reflect this emphasis on emotion as constitutive of family ties. Men are less frequently on the receiving end of these gifts, and they never exchange them among themselves (for example, sons to fathers). Most typically, a son or a daughter gives them to a mother for her birthday or Mother’s Day, but occasionally a husband who is particularly *detallista* (thoughtful) will give one to his wife for Valentine’s Day; these spousal exchanges draw meaning from the trend toward companionate marriage.

The other images displayed on the shelves or the walls around them in homes on both sides of the border are religious ones: the dark-eyed, dark-skinned Virgin of Guadalupe is most common, but also popular is the Virgin of San Juan de Los Lagos, from the nearby town in Jalisco of the same name.<sup>25</sup> Crucifixes are also sometimes displayed on these shelves, but the most common place for a crucifix in a home is the bedroom. It is the rare home in the Bajío region of Mexico that does not have a crucifix hanging over the bed’s headboard, and people frequently hang their rosary beads on the bedpost. Without putting too fine a point on it, the doleful countenance and bloody stigmata of *Nuestro Señor* (Our Father) serve as a constant reminder of the values that should be lived out in the marital bed. Although I did not enter the bedrooms of all the women I interviewed in the United States, at least several of the ones I saw lacked the crucifix. When I asked Blanca, recently married, why there was no crucifix above her bed in their little townhouse in a suburb north of Atlanta, she laughed enigmatically. Most Mexican women do not turn away from the church when they migrate, and for some women both their social relationship to the institutional church and their personal relationship with La Virgen de Guadalupe continued to be an important source of strength and support—but the missing crucifixes in some bedrooms in Atlanta hint at a private sphere beyond the reach of the confessional.<sup>26</sup>

People in the sending and receiving communities share a vision of the ideal family. These families value technological connection to modern sources of entertainment and the material success that these items represent. They also prize social connections, both the feminine ties embodied in multiple sets of doilies and the less-gendered ones symbolized by large collections of party favors. The sentimental gifts suggest an-



other kind of tie, a tie based not on blood like the photos or exchange like the doilies and party favors but rather on emotion, and the family photos imply both the shared importance of blood ties and a subtle shift in how people understand what it is, exactly, that ties them together.

I saw many of those I met in Atlanta later in Mexico, and people I met in Mexico popped up constantly in Atlanta. The intensity of this movement complicates making comparisons between those who go and those who stay—those who go frequently return, and many of those who stay seem perpetually poised on the brink of leaving. Furthermore, people do not just move between places—some of them continue to own property and maintain an identity as residents of communities on both sides of the border, communities that depend on each other in integral ways. Both economically and culturally, Degollado and El Fuerte would not be what they are without the support of migrants. The migrant communities, it barely needs to be said, base their group identity on shared background, on the fact that they know each other’s families *al otro lado* (on the other side). But in spite of these transnational social ties, there persist important differences between the two locations—differences that led men and women in Degollado, El Fuerte, and Atlanta to tell me that “in the United States, women give the orders.” Before exploring those differences, however, it is important to look a little more carefully at how the influence of migration has combined with other social changes to reshape gender relations in the sending communities.