HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS: PLACE ATTACHMENT, SOCIAL CHANGE, AND YOUNG FEMALE MIGRANTS IN XALAPA, MEXICO

Introduction: This paper explores social capital, citizenship, and place attachment among young female urban migrants from Xalapa, Mexico to the United States through an examination of their financial contributions to the remodeling of the family home. In this paper, social capital is defined as a network of relationships, while citizenship is a form of spatialized belonging at multiple levels of scale. Place attachment is both the integration of people with their social environment and the geographic and social behaviors that create people’s physical worlds. One expression of place attachment is the flow of remittances to the family and the use of those remittances on modifying the family home. In Xalapa, the primary use for young urban migrants’ remittances is the renovation their families’ homes, particularly the addition of a second story. I interpret this investment in the home as a form of conspicuous consumption, an expression and affirmation of Mexican and urban identity; an assertion of rights and a staking of claims within the family; a renewal of family ties; and a recognition of the physical space as the site of past memories and social ties as well as the site of future connections.

Before I go any further, I would like to give you a little background information on where I am in my research, the population I’m working with, and Xalapa itself.

Where I’m at: The data used in this paper was gathered in the summers of 2005 and 2008 during preliminary fieldwork. I will do the bulk of my fieldwork next year.

The Population: The population of this study is defined by age, generation and education. Participants in this study are primarily young (between the ages of 18 and 30) and college educated, and will belong to families with recent rural roots, though they themselves have lived most or all of their lives in Xalapa. In this paper, I examine the
experiences of young migrant women, a subset of this population, using interviews and participant observation from the preliminary fieldwork of 2005 and 2008.

As my preliminary fieldwork in Xalapa indicates, young adult identities partially reflect a shared narrative of membership in an urbanization and ‘modernization’ process that has not met their expectations. In my conversations and interviews with them, young adults acknowledge that they have more educational opportunities than past generations and that their parents found better jobs by moving to the city. However, they see few professional opportunities for themselves in Xalapa. As one young woman observed, “If I cannot work in my profession, why not go to the United States and earn more money not working in my profession.” Narratives of ‘middle class’ affiliation among young Xalapeños reflect this account of sought after and only partly realized upward mobility. Education level, their parents’ position in lower strata white collar and upper strata blue collar occupations, as well as home ownership, home renovation, and other forms of consumption inform young adults’ narratives of membership in the ‘middle class.’

**Xalapa:** Xalapa's population has increased more than six-fold over the second half of the 20th Century, with the greatest growth taking place in the '60s and '70s (INEGI 2002: 21). The rate of growth for the state of Veracruz for the same two-decade period, while still rapid, was roughly half as great (INEGI 2002: 21).

These high rates of growth, both at the city and the state level, can at least in part be attributed to Veracruz’ status as a labor importer for its sugar, coffee, and oil industries from the 1950s to the mid-1980s. The state has since become a labor exporter with rapidly increasing numbers of citizens joining intra- and international migratory flows

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1 “Si no puedo trabajar en lo mío, por qué no irme a Estados Unidos y ganar más no trabajando en lo mío.”
Researchers attribute this change to the Mexico’s application of neoliberal policies such as the privatization of previously state-run industries and the implementation of international free trade agreements (Anguiano Téllez 2005). Due to privatization and free trade compacts such as NAFTA, mid-1980 to mid-1990 was a time of economic contraction in Veracruz, accompanied by rising under- and unemployment and a growing number of small businesses and micro-small businesses (Zamudio Grave 2004:265) suggestive of more precarious and more informal employment (Quinlan 2003; Sassen 1998:138-151). Young people just joining the work force are particularly likely to encounter these forms of employment. One interviewee with a degree in psychology worked only one evening a week for almost a year as a group therapist for a group that she had organized, while another interviewee, an archaeologist, relied on contractual work of four to six months in length. Since 1990, service employment, also characterized by instability and impermanence, has increasingly replaced jobs in agriculture and industry (Zamudio Grave 2004:266). Emigration from Veracruz has increased rapidly since 1990. Contributing 4.88% of the Mexican emigrant population bound for the United States, Veracruz now ranks fifth among Mexican sending states. Moreover, the Xalapa region has the second highest rate of migration within the state (Zamudio Grave 2004:269-271). That Mexican government estimates of well-being in the region remain positive suggests that migration is being used to prop up relatively prosperous standards of living (Zamudio Grave 2004:273). This can be observed in the use of remittances to renovate family homes.
In the case of young female migrants, financially contributing to the renovation of the family home serves to redefine their role within the household, while at the same time reaffirming their belonging and expanding their rights. These shifts do two things: 1) change the nature of young female migrants’ social capital by increasing their access to the other forms of capital (cultural, symbolic, economic) and 2) redefine their citizenship within the family and community.

Citizenship, at a local, national, and international level, shapes identity. With no one to work the family land as family members relocate to cities, and as remaining relatives age or die, young Xalapeños lose citizenship in their families’ rural home towns at the same time they assert new claims to urban spaces. While ties to ancestral villages weaken, young migrants send money to finance the renovation of their families’ urban dwellings, thus simultaneously reaffirming membership in the family, the city, and the nation-state.

Mexican cities such as Xalapa are nexuses in intrantional and international migrations across several generations. Thus, as both previous generations’ internal rural-urban migrations and this current generation’s transnational migrations create shifts in kinship and family organization, gender roles, and class identity, the home serves as a space to transform and reaffirm these relationships.

**Home Is Where the Heart Is: A Case Study:** When I was in Xalapa during the summer of 2005 I was able to interview Rosa and her mother Marta on several occasions, both separately and together. At the time of our interviews, Rosa was 27 and had been back in Xalapa for slightly more than a year. Her immediate family consisted of her brother Julián and her mother, Marta. She had little contact with her estranged father or his side
of the family. Rosa and Marta’s sometimes intersecting and sometimes diverging accounts of Rosa’s migration and its effects on their relationships and the family as a whole highlight the negotiation of familial belonging and rights through migration and financial contribution to the renovation of the home.

Rosa migrated to the United States with her aunt. Originally, her aunt invited Rosa’s younger brother, Julián, but, as he had not yet finished high school their mother decided that he could not go. Rosa suggested that she might go in his stead and, after thinking about it for several days, decided that she would. Rosa does not recall her mother ever opposing the decision; in fact, she says, Marta “said nothing at all.”

 Perhaps, Rosa suggests, this was because her mother saw her as “very decided.”

Similarly, Marta remembers her sister invited Marta’s son, Julián, to come with her to the United States. Julián wanted to, but Marta rejected the idea; arguing that he should finish high school first. She recalls mounting no opposition to Rosa’s decision to go. As she observes, “I saw Rosa as more steady [than Julián]. I have put more trust in her because of her steadiness.”

Marta recalls the time just before Rosa’s departure as particularly difficult financially. While she has worked full-time as a secretary for over twenty years, she observes that, in Mexico, “salaries are so tight that they can’t be stretched.” While money is always a concern for the family, Marta noted that the situation was “a bit pressured.” In contrast, financial difficulty was not a key factor in Rosa’s narration of
her reasons for migration. She cites instead dissatisfaction with her employment as well as her studies to become a primary school teacher as two of her primary motivations.

At first when she was in the United States, Rosa did not call her family much. With time she remembers wanting to hear more from them, and calling them more frequently. Marta experienced the separation more acutely, remarking “at first I didn’t miss her, but after eight days I began to feel the distance, the shock.” Marta also recalls the phone calls, but her narrative of these communications focused on the house and the renovations. She remembers Rosa calling to ask, “What are you working on in the house?” or to tell her “I’m sending you money.” She recalls her own contributions to the conversations as upbeat updates on the construction process, evocative of both familiarity and change; “I’m sitting in front of the rosebush. . . I’ve bought the water tank and the cement blocks. . . They’ve finished the room, the bathroom, the porch. . . The stones still haven’t been installed up above.”

Both Rosa and her mother frequently refer to their house as “our house” (nuestra casa); a particularly striking phrase in Spanish, where the article is frequently used with the noun, “the house” (la casa), or the article is dropped entirely (casa) to communicate a meaning akin to “home” in English. This shows a feeling of shared investment and endeavor in the home, as well as revealing a sense of ownership on Rosa’s part, which seems to be recognized and affirmed by her mother. This has been difficult for Julián, who has felt overshadowed by his older sister, especially since her return (he in fact moved out shortly after her return). In contrast, this redistribution of power within the

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7 “Al principio no le echaba de menos, pero a los ocho días empecé a sentir la distancia, la sacudida.”
8 “Qué has hecho con la casa?” “Te voy a mandar dinero”
9 “Estoy sentada en frente del rosal . . . Ya compré el tinaco y los bloques de cimiento . . . Ya han terminado la pieza, el baño, el porchecito . . . En la parte de arriba todavía falta la losa.”
family has been relatively easy for Marta to accommodate, as she feels that “the land and
the house are like a patrimony” that she will leave for her children.10

10 “El terreno y la casa son como patrimonio.”