THE GOD WITHOUT BORDERS AND THE MEXICAN DREAM: RELIGION, SPACE, AND MIGRATION IN EL ALBERTO, HIDALGO

By

LEAH M. SARAT

A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2010
To the residents of El Alberto and to my family
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Primeramente, agradezco a la gente del la comunidad del Alberto, tanto a los que mencionados en el trabajo y a las personas que me alentaron y ofrecieron hospedaje y amistad durante mi estancia en el pueblo. Ofrezco el presente trabajo con la esperanza de que nos ayudará a encontrar soluciones binacionales a la migración, y de que algún día el “sueño Mexicano” sea realidad. Si hay alguna falta este, les pido su comprensión y sugerencias para que lo siga mejorando.

I thank my parents, Melissa and Frank Sarat, for their editing assistance and much more. I am grateful to my mother for passing on her creativity and deep appreciation for the stories of others, and to my father for teaching me to question the lenses through which we look at the world. I thank my sister Evangeline for setting a brave example of putting one’s dreams into practice. Finally, I thank my extended family, especially my niece, for their ongoing love and support.

A heartfelt thanks to Manuel Vásquez and Robin Wright in the Department of Religion at the University of Florida for their mentorship and invaluable contributions to the manuscript, as well as Philip Williams and Pablo Vila for their careful reading and final comments. Many thanks to Anne Newman and Ronald Ozbun for their practical support. I also thank my other instructors at the University of Florida, especially Anna Peterson and David Hackett.

I offer my appreciation to the many graduate students at the University of Florida and Wilfried Laurier University with whom I have been privileged to share the journey. In particular, I thank Robin Globus and Rose Caraway for their friendship and for the insights on religion that our countless informal conversations have helped to uncover.
thank Guadalupe Rivera Garay and Gilberto Rescher for their collaborative spirit and insights on migration in the Valle del Mezquital. I also thank Salvador García Angulo and Oralia Cárdenas Zacarías as well as the the staff at Hmunts’á Hem’í in Ixmiquilpan for offering research support. Finally, to all of the good folks at Annunciation House in El Paso and the Gainesville Catholic Worker in Florida, I owe a heartfelt thanks for the reminder that the best knowledge is that which is applied toward bringing about justice and fostering spaces of loving community in this world.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .......................................................................................................................... 4

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................................................ 9

CHAPTER

1 INTRODUCTION .............................................................................................................................. 11
  Background: Religion and the Undocumented Journey ................................................................. 13
  Overview and Context of the Community ...................................................................................... 18
  Research Questions ......................................................................................................................... 25
  Methodology .................................................................................................................................. 27
  Chapter Summary ............................................................................................................................. 31

2 MIGRA, MOSCAS, AND MIGRANTES: PERFORMING BORDER MILITARIZATION IN THE CAMINATA NOCTURNA .............................................................................................................. 34
  El Alberto ........................................................................................................................................ 34
  The Caminata ................................................................................................................................. 38
  United States-Mexico Border Militarization .................................................................................. 41
  Performative Dimensions of U.S.-Mexico Border Enforcement .................................................... 49
  Performing the Border in the Caminata ........................................................................................... 52

3 LIFE IS SURVIVAL .......................................................................................................................... 61
  The Origins of Migration in El Alberto ............................................................................................ 62
  Early Internal and U.S. Migration ..................................................................................................... 65
  The Origins of the Caminata Nocturna ........................................................................................... 72
  “I Lift up my Eyes to the North” ....................................................................................................... 78
  A Habitus of Migration ...................................................................................................................... 82
  Work, Survival, Living Well ............................................................................................................. 87

4 “THIS RELIGION OPENED PEOPLE’S EYES:” PROTESTANT NARRATIVES OF CONVERSION AND DEVELOPMENT .................................................................................................................. 95
  Pentecostal Narratives of the Past ..................................................................................................... 97
  The Arrival of Pentecostalism in El Alberto ..................................................................................... 104
  Religious Conflict and Social Change .............................................................................................. 110
  Conversion, Development, and Indigenous Religiosity .................................................................... 116

5 DON BETO: WORK, SACRIFICE, AND THE TIES THAT BIND ..................................................... 124
  Don Beto ........................................................................................................................................ 124
# Table of Contents

**Un Pueblo Unido** ......................................................................................................................... 128  
The Comunidad in Mexican History ............................................................................................. 132  
Government and Citizenship in El Alberto .................................................................................... 136  
Collective Labor in El Alberto ........................................................................................................ 143  
Migration, Work, and the Year of Service ....................................................................................... 147  
Negotiating Transnational Belonging ............................................................................................ 153

6 **“PARA DIOS, NO HAY FRONTERAS:” PENTECOSTALISM AND THE MIGRATION JOURNEY** .......................................................................................................................... 158  
Migration as a “Theologizing Experience” .................................................................................... 159  
Pentecostalism and the Undocumented Journey ............................................................................. 162  
Narrating the Border: Francisco’s Story ............................................................................................ 170  
Performing the Border: A Ritual Fast ............................................................................................... 176  
Pentecostalism and the Caminata Nocturna ..................................................................................... 180

7 **“TO CRUSH THE DEVIL’S HEAD, YOU NEED THE POWER OF GOD:” GLOBALIZATION, SPIRITUAL WARFARE, AND HÑÄÑU COSMOS** .................................................................................... 183  
Local Evil, Global Expression ......................................................................................................... 184  
Conversion Revisited ...................................................................................................................... 186  
The Hñähñu Cosmos ...................................................................................................................... 188  
Hñähñu Witchcraft, Sorcery, and Healing ....................................................................................... 192  
Mapping the Global Sacred Landscape ........................................................................................... 197  
Navigating Satan’s Web ................................................................................................................... 204

8 **INDIAN TERRITORY** ................................................................................................................... 209  
Crossing through Indian Territory ................................................................................................. 209  
Past Indians, Border Indians ........................................................................................................... 211  
“Playing Indian” in Mexico and Beyond ....................................................................................... 213  
Don Beto, Don Caco, and Doña Petra ............................................................................................... 220  
Crossed by the Border: Indians, Aliens, and the State .................................................................. 227  
Border Territory, Border Space ....................................................................................................... 233

9 **CONCLUSION** ............................................................................................................................ 237  
Border Embodied, Border Imagined ............................................................................................... 237  
Religion, Ritual, and the Caminata Nocturna ................................................................................... 241  
The Migration Journey .................................................................................................................... 243  
Indigenous Experience and the Migration Journey ......................................................................... 247  
Transnationalism and Globalization ............................................................................................... 249  
The God without Borders and the Mexican Dream ....................................................................... 254  
Limitations and Directions for Future Research ............................................................................ 258
APPENDIX

A  INTERVIEW LIST .............................................................................................................. 264
B  GLOSSARY OF SPANISH AND HÑÄÑU TERMS................................................................. 266
LIST OF REFERENCES ........................................................................................................ 268
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH..................................................................................................... 278
Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

THE GOD WITHOUT BORDERS AND THE MEXICAN DREAM: RELIGION, SPACE, AND MIGRATION IN EL ALBERTO, HIDALGO

By

Leah M. Sarat

August 2010

Chair: Manuel A. Vásquez
Major: Religion

The risk of United States-Mexico border crossing has escalated in recent years, challenging migrants and their families to confront core questions about life, death, and the limits of human agency. This dissertation examines collective responses to the undocumented journey within El Alberto, a hñähñu-speaking community in Mexico’s Valle del Mezquital region. Drawing upon their religious practices as well as an innovative border crossing tourism project known as the Caminata Nocturna, residents of this town of about 2,000 have transformed the danger of the undocumented journey into a catalyst for reflection on what it means to work, survive, and live well across borders.

The Caminata Nocturna, or Night Hike, is the shared product of a diverse and changing religious landscape in El Alberto. Over half of the town’s residents are Pentecostal. For Pentecostals, the border is a space of divine encounter where hardship of crossing sometimes serves as a catalyst for conversion. Submitting themselves to the authority of a God for whom there are no borders, Pentecostals embrace migration as their right and travel with a sense of divine protection. While
Pentecostalism is a powerful force through which migrants from El Alberto formulate their understandings of the possible, the Caminata project promotes an alternate value system grounded in indigenous ideals about autonomy, origins, and connection to the land. Through the project, residents of the El Alberto as a whole seek to raise migration awareness and generate sustainable local employment. Combining symbols of migrant death and sacrifice with features of the local landscape, residents of El Alberto call tourists to join them in bringing about a future free of dependence on labor migration. While there is a tension between the Caminata’s “Mexican Dream” and the Pentecostal “God without borders,” they represent complementary efforts generate options and carve out spaces of belonging in the midst of an unpredictable global economy.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

On a spring night in 2008, hundreds of people in central Mexico pressed into the base of a canyon ablaze with torches. So palpable was the shared shock and grief, people later said, that neither pastor nor priest was needed. The place was El Alberto, a hñähñu community in Mexico’s Valle del Mezquital, in the state of Hidalgo. The event was a memorial service for one of their own who had died shortly after an attempted undocumented border passage in Arizona.

A year earlier, I had sat in the same canyon as several dozen Mexico City tourists engaged in spontaneous reflection with residents of El Alberto about U.S. border militarization. It was well past two in the morning. We huddled over steaming mugs of coffee, drenched, muddy, and exhausted after having walked for five hours through rough terrain and a vigorous thunderstorm. We had just participated in the Caminata Nocturna, or “Nike Hike,” a U.S.-Mexico border crossing simulation that transforms the space of this small town into a reinvented border zone nearly every Saturday night of the year.

Since 2004, more than six thousand Mexico City tourists have dirtied their clothes, bruised their ankles, and at times been moved to tears as they step into the shoes of migrants in the Caminata. The event culminates in a dramatic display of torches representing those who have died en route to the U.S., the same spectacle witnessed during the spontaneous, interfaith funeral in 2008. Through the Caminata and the larger ecotourism venture of which it is a part, residents of El Alberto seek to generate employment for their own youth while inspiring Mexicans as a whole to join them in developing sustainable alternatives to migration.
The Caminata is not the only means through which the members El Alberto are responding to the wave of emigration which, by the early 2000’s, had transformed their community into a self-described ghost town. On Saturday nights, when the Caminata’s sirens and simulated gunshots sound through the riverbanks and cornfields of El Alberto, they mingle with songs, handclapping and prayers spilling forth from the windows of the town’s two Pentecostal churches. Many of those prayers are for relatives and loved ones in the United States. Pentecostalism has a well-established transnational presence in the Valle del Mezquital that dates to the early 1930’s. Widespread conversion in El Alberto preceded wide-scale U.S. migration by a few decades. Recently the region has witnessed even further Pentecostal conversion, as people draw upon religion to maintain contact with migrant relatives, confront the dangers of crossing a militarized border, and resist the stigma of illegality in the United States.

Today, about half of El Alberto’s residents are Pentecostal. The majority of the rest identify as Catholic, with a smaller number of Spiritualists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Latter-day Saints, and others who do not identify with a single religion. Various forms of indigenous religiosity persist alongside and within the multiple expressions of Christianity in the town. The Caminata Nocturna is a shared project, grounded in the system of collective labor required of all adult male members of El Alberto. Through the Caminata, residents of the town as a whole grapple with questions about work, consumption, citizenship, and identity that they face daily as members of a migrant community. In light of recent border militarization, the Caminata also serves as a vehicle through which they confront larger questions about death at the border.
This dissertation is an attempt to understand the Caminata Nocturna within the context of El Alberto’s changing religious landscape. In particular, I compare the vision of migration embodied in the Caminata project with the vision of migration that emerges within Pentecostal narratives and practices. The Caminata’s call for a Mexico free of dependence on labor migration is, in some ways, complementary to Pentecostal voices about migration. Yet there is also a tension within the two responses to border crossing and migration. It is a tension between rootedness and mobility, between embracing the right to travel in search of work, and embracing the right to remain grounded in one’s place of origin. By exploring this tension, I hope to shed light on the subtly and complexity of Mexican voices that are often overlooked in public debates about immigration in the United States. I also hope to contribute to scholarly understandings of religion as a lived phenomenon that emerges out of and in turn shapes embodied experience.

**Background: Religion and the Undocumented Journey**

My interest in migration emerged during 2001-2003, when I served as a live-in volunteer at a migrant women’s shelter in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. When I first traveled to the border in November of 2001, the effects of post-9/11 immigration enforcement were clearly visible in the local landscape. Lines at the El Paso ports of entry had tripled. Helicopters had become a common presence in the region’s skyline. In 2003, INS was placed under the authority of the Department of Homeland Security. The transfer was accompanied by a shift in ideology that increasingly associated undocumented immigrants with terrorists. I witnessed the effects of the transfer first-hand when a 19-year old guest at our organization’s sister shelter in El Paso was shot and killed by Border Patrol agents. As another volunteer and I drove Juan’s parents
from the Juárez airport to the border, his father asked us, “Why did they kill my son?” We had no response.

Juan Patricio’s death was but one of the effects of border militarization that I witnessed in the border region. In El Paso, a 16-year old shelter guest lost her legs while attempting to hop a train to evade immigration checkpoints. In Juárez, I met women who had travelled not only from southern Mexico but also from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Some were brought to our door by Mexican immigration officials after failed border crossing attempts. One had been raped by her coyote, or paid border crossing guide. On several occasions, I mistakenly thought that the new arrivals were mentally ill, so shaken, hungry, and exhausted they were when they arrived at our door.

While the situation for migrant women in Juárez was dire, I also witnessed multiple strategies through which women found or generated the resilience necessary to go on. In particular, I bore repeated witness to the efficacy of religious narratives in helping women to process the migration journey. At times, women told of their travels throughout Mexico and across the border with the same intensity with which they would recount the birth of a child or the death of a loved one. I began to suspect that the migration journey was for these women comparable to a life crisis (van Gennep 1960; Turner 1967). As described in ritual theory, a life crisis is a basic transition in the life cycle, such as birth, death, and coming of age, which stirs such fundamental questions about physical experience and identity into view that people inscribe collective meaning into it through rites of passage. As I listened to scores of women tell their stories and attempt to chart out their next move, religion was often what made the difference
between hope and despair, between action and paralysis. In addition to narrative, I also witnessed the efficacy of performance as the shelter guests danced, joked, and processed their memories together in other nonverbal ways.

The women I met in Juárez used creative action to transform their individual migration experiences into something that they all shared. The process I observed at the shelter, however, was relatively ad hoc and spontaneous. If religious narrative and performance were so effective in helping these women to chart out plans of action in the midst of severely limited options, I began to wonder how communities throughout Mexico and Central America might be using religion to respond to migration on a collective level.

Social network theory tells us that migrants are not individual, rationally calculating actors. Rather, the decision to migrate and the success of the journey largely depend upon a person’s embeddedness in social relationships. Religion brings yet another dimension to the table. Religions are, in themselves, a form of social network. They provide a powerful infrastructure through which people forge and maintain transnational ties (Hagan 2002 and 2008; Levitt 2004). Yet religions are also something more. They also provide lenses through which people map out their place in the cosmos and articulate the horizons of the possible. Religions connect the most intimate embodied experiences with collective representations of ultimate reality. They define what it means to suffer and what it means to live well (Tweed 2006). While social network theory may explain why certain people find it feasible to migrate in certain situations, it does not sufficiently explain how people grapple with the possibility of death while
crossing the border, or how they locate the migration journey within a larger map of space and time that extends beyond the present world.

Due to the increased danger of crossing the border in recent years, we can no longer afford to ignore the role of religion in the migration process. Undocumented U.S.-Mexico border crossing is not simply an economic and political phenomenon. Crossing the border is a religious phenomenon. It confronts even those migrants who are not overtly religious with questions about life, death, and the limits of human agency. It challenges those who travel, those who stay behind, and those who live in receiving countries to examine the ultimate authority, if any, upon which earthly governments rest. Moving beyond questions of belief, the physical difficulty of the migration journey poses distinct challenges to the habitus of people within migrant-sending societies, that is, to people’s embodied tastes, notions of comfort, and sense of the possible (Bourdieu 1977).

After leaving the border, I began to scan the literature to find cases of religious responses to the migration journey throughout Mexico and Central America. One of my early influences was Hondagneu-Sotelo et al.’s (2004) examination of the annual Posada Sin Fronteras. In the Posada, migrants, activists, faith workers and others join on both sides of the Tijuana-San Diego border to celebrate mass, protest U.S. immigration policy, and mourn those who have perished while crossing. In a more recent work, Hagan (2008) demonstrates how Catholics and Protestants from across Mexico and Central America draw upon religion during every stage of the migration journey. Hagan offers new insight on the material dimensions of religion in the border zone. Building upon Durand and Massey’s (1995) study of retablos, devotional
paintings left by migrants at Catholics shrines, Hagan documents how migrants not only leave material offerings at established places of worship but also build makeshift shrines in the desert from found materials. Hagan also documents the role of faith workers in responding to the needs of migrants en route. In a related effort, Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007) and others explore how faith and social justice workers have developed an extensive infrastructure of support for migrants in the United States. Some have even taken steps toward developing a “theology of migration” that takes migrant experience as the starting point for religious reflection (Campese 2007).

In formulating this project, I sought to explore how migrants themselves were using religion to make sense of undocumented travel, both through material practices and through theological reflection. In order to fully understand the collective dimension of religion in the migration process, I turned to case studies of individual transnational communities (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2002; Warner and Wittner 1998). While those studies offer necessary insight on the role religion plays in helping people both adapt to U.S. life and forge transnational ties, few pay close attention to the role of religion in the migration journey itself. A notable exception is Hagan’s (2002) study of Mayan Pentecostals in Guatemala, which became a key inspiration for my research. So great are the risks and uncertainties involved in crossing two international borders, Hagan finds, that potential migrants turn to religion before, during, and after the undocumented journey. They draw upon prayer and prophecy while making the initial decision to travel to the U.S. They gain collective support and empowerment through group practices such as fasting and the blessing of shoes and clothing. Relatives and fellow worshippers on both sides of the border pray for migrants in their absence and welcome
them upon safe arrival. Religion is itself transformed throughout the migration process, as the difficulty of the journey provides an impetus for ritual innovation and an occasion for drawing group values into focus.

**Overview and Context of the Community**

With Hagan’s case study in mind, I sought to find a population whose members were using collective action to make sense of the undocumented journey and transnational life. I came across a news article about the Caminata Nocturna in 2007 (Miller Llana 2007) and travelled to El Alberto that summer. The Caminata offered an excellent case study in which to explore questions of space, embodiment, and performance. Moreover, El Alberto’s dynamic religious field would prove fruitful for comparative study.

El Alberto is located several hours north of Mexico City in the municipality of Ixmiquilpan, a city of about 100,000 people. According to local authorities, El Alberto has a population of about 2,000, half of whom live in the United States.¹ The Mexican census states that 84% of the people in the town spoke an indigenous language in 2005. Most of those were bilingual Spanish speakers (INEGI 2005). Although the census does not specify which indigenous language is spoken, we can assume that in the majority of cases the language spoken was hñähñu.

El Alberto covers an area of 37 square kilometers, or about 9,000 acres (Perez Aguilar 2008). As members of a comunidad or legally recognized indigenous community, residents of El Alberto practice collective land ownership. While individuals and households own private parcels of land, town members cannot sell their private

---

¹ Due to migration, the town’s exact population is difficult to ascertain. The 2005 Mexican census lists 540 inhabitants (INEGI 2005) while the 2008 Situational Health Diagnostic report produced by the town clinic lists 970 (Perez Aguilar 2008). As these sources only include people who are currently living in El Alberto, they do not account for those who consider themselves members of the community yet dwell across the border.
parcels to outsiders. In addition to private lands, El Alberto also contains several thousand acres of collectively managed land which forms the basis of the ecotourism venture known as Parque EcoAlberto. The park makes use of a unique canyon formed by the River Tula as well as two natural hot springs. Because of the town’s ready transportation access and availability of basic education, El Alberto is no longer classified by the Mexican government as a marginalized zone (Perez Aguilar).

El Alberto is part of the Valle del Mezquital, a 7,206 square kilometer region within the Central Mexican Highlands falling mostly within the state of Hidalgo (Fournier García and Mondragón 2003: 47). Traditionally, the zone has been characterized both by the poverty of its arid soil and the social isolation of its indigenous population (Peña de Paz 2009; López Pérez 2009). Since the introduction of irrigation in the mid-1970s, much of the valley’s terrain has been transformed into arable land. Yet the Valle is still an indigenous stronghold, home to the hñähñu and other speakers of indigenous languages. As of year 2000, a total of 217,322 people in the region lived in households headed by hñähñu speakers (Moreno et al. 2006).

Along with the Sierra Otomí, who occupy the mountainous region at the boundary between the states of Puebla, Hidalgo, and Veracruz, the hñähñu of the Valle del Mezquital form part of the larger ethno-linguistic group known until recently as Otomí.3 As of 2005 there were 239,850 Otomí speakers age five and older in Mexico, making

---

2 The benefits of irrigation have not come without a cost. Today the Valle is irrigated by treated wastewater from Mexico City, which has introduced contaminants to the region’s soil and rivers.

3 Since the early 1980’s the term “hñähñu” has become the preferred term of self-reference, as Otomí is a disparaging term given to the hñähñu by outsiders (Vega, Alcantara and Rios 2005: 182). The word “hñähñu” roughly translates as “people who speak through their noses,” referring to the nasal quality of the language (183).
the language the seventh most widely spoken of the country’s approximately 60 indigenous tongues (INEGI 2006).

The Otomí rose to power after the fall of the Toltec capital of Tula in the twelfth century CE. Their kingdom was based in Xaltocan, near present-day Mexico City (Dow 17). When Xaltocan fell at the end of the thirteenth century, the Otomí dispersed, giving rise to the regional distinctions that exist today. By some accounts, the hñähñu were already present in the Valle del Mezquital as early as 250 CE (Crummett and Schmidt 2004: 441). Other estimates date their arrival to approximately 650 CE (Fournier García and Mondragón). Early sources describe the hñähñu of the Valle del Mezquital as hunter-gatherers who lived in small, isolated groupings because the natural resources of the region were not amenable to concentrated settlement (Fournier García and Mondragón 50). By the time of the Conquest they had come under Aztec control and their lands had been divided into tributary provinces. While the hñähñu initially sided with the Crown against their Aztec overlords, they soon came under Spanish dominion (51).

As they sought to maintain autonomy in the face of Aztec and later Spanish domination, the hñähñu retreated to the most marginal lands in the Valle. At the same time, they developed a strong tradition of resistance. Today the hñähñu of the Mezquital continue to hold a reputation as survivors fiercely committed to local autonomy. The residents of El Alberto are no exception. Originally known as “Santa Cruz El Alberto,” until the mid-twentieth century the town was largely isolated from the surrounding region. It was only accessible by foot and its residents were almost entirely monolingual. El Alberto underwent a series of changes beginning in the 1950s due in
part to the formation of the Patrimonio Indígena del Valle del Mezquital (PIVM), a
government agency which sought to alleviate the region’s poverty through Western-
style education and development (Crummett and Schmidt 441). By 1970, the
organization made significant headway in bringing schools, electricity, roads, and water
into rural communities in the Valle, including El Alberto (441).

Development in the Valle del Mezquital was closely intertwined with religious
change. As communities responded to the organizational demands of development,
young, bilingual individuals took on greater leadership roles, thus challenging the
authority of Catholic civil-religious hierarchies. At the same time, evangelical
Protestantism\(^4\) began to gain a hold. The origins of the Iglesia Cristiana Independiente
Pentecostés (ICIP), the movement from which El Alberto’s two Pentecostal churches
derive, lie with migrants who had witnessed the early stirrings of Pentecostalism in
Topeka, Kansas and returned to plant churches in Hidalgo in the 1930s. ICIP churches
spread from the Valle del Mezquital to other parts of Mexico and, later, to the U.S.
Today, ICIP has about eight thousand churches worldwide. The organization made
inroads in El Alberto in the early 1960s and the town’s first Pentecostal church was
founded a decade later. The church later divided due to a leadership conflict. El
Alberto’s two Pentecostal churches, Betel and Sinai, reflect organizational divisions in
ICIP as a whole. The organization Betel contains over 150 churches in the Valle del
Mezquital as well as churches in 16 U.S. states and parts of Central America.

\(^4\) Residents of El Alberto often use the terms *evangelico* (evangelical) and *cristiano* (Christian)
interchangeably to refer to Pentecostals and other evangelical Protestants. In this work I use the terms
“Pentecostal” and “evangelical” interchangeably to reflect local terminology.
A frequent refrain among Catholics and Pentecostals alike in El Alberto is that the town has passed through an era of religious conflict and now enjoys a large degree of harmony. Despite religious differences, residents of El Alberto are united by their participation in the town’s system of collective labor. That system is grounded in ties of kinship and ethnicity that are in some ways stronger than religious difference. El Alberto’s interreligious harmony is not shared by all indigenous communities in the Valle del Mezquital. Some such communities remain largely Catholic, some are almost entirely evangelical, and others are bitterly divided. Nevertheless, all have been affected on some level by the presence of evangelical Protestantism.

Religious change in El Alberto is part of a larger wave of Protestant conversion that is transforming the religious landscape of Latin America. Over 15% of Latin America’s population is evangelical Protestant (Steigenga and Cleary 2007), and the numbers are growing. The percentages within Mexico are somewhat lower, due in part to the country’s traditional anti-clerical stance. Nevertheless, Mexico experienced a concentrated period of Protestant growth between 1970 and 1990. During that time the Protestant population of Hidalgo rose from 1.9% to 4.6%, at a rate slightly higher than the national average (Dow 2005: 830). By year 2000, 6.5% of Hidalgo’s population was Protestant, slightly behind the national average of 7.3% (830). The majority of those Protestants were evangelical. Conversion to Protestantism has been higher in areas of Mexico with large indigenous populations, in part because Protestantism offers new forms of identity and new sources of authority in the face of traditional social hierarchies.
Although residents of El Alberto began converting to Pentecostalism in large numbers in the 1960s and 1970s, they did not begin to migrate to the U.S. until the 1980s. By the mid-1990s, U.S. migration was well established. While the earliest migrants from El Alberto found work in Texas, they later gravitated toward Phoenix, Las Vegas, and Salt Lake City. El Alberto’s migration patterns reflect a growing trend of indigenous migration to the U.S. as well as changing migration patterns among Mexicans as a whole.

As El Alberto’s residents travelled to the U.S. in the 1980s and 1990s, they took part in a “new geography of Mexican immigration” (Duran, Massey, and Capoferro 2005) that arose in the aftermath of the 1987 Immigration Regulation and Control Act. Until the mid-1980s, most Mexican migrants to the United States travelled to states such as California, Texas, and Arizona. By the mid-1990’s the growing militarization of the border combined with increasingly hostile conditions for immigrants in California had driven immigrants to seek opportunities in other parts of the country (2). In just a few years, Mexico-U.S. was transformed from a regional phenomenon to a “nationwide movement” (18). Not only did Mexicans settle in new states like Nevada, Florida, and North Carolina, but they also gravitated new urban centers, including two of El Alberto’s prime destinations, Las Vegas and Phoenix (15).

As Mexico-U.S. migration became more geographically diverse in the 1980s and 1990s, it also became more ethnically diverse. Beginning with economic crisis of 1982, the Mexican government began to neglect its longstanding support of small-scale agriculture (Fox 1994: 247). National policymakers began to look upon the rural poor as a surplus population that would best serve the national economy by leaving the
countryside and participating in urban, industrial labor (247). As of 1994, policy-makers predicted that the opening of free trade combined with cuts to agricultural subsidies would reduce Mexico’s rural population by about half in a few decades (244). While the prediction did not entirely come true, NAFTA did help to drive large numbers of people from indigenous communities, including El Alberto, toward the United States.

Until the 1980s, Mexican indigenous migration had been largely confined to the country’s large agribusiness regions and urban centers (Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2004: 10). With the notable exception of Mixtecs from the state of Oaxaca, few indigenous migrants had travelled to the U.S. By the early 1990s, however, things began to change. By year 2000, the state of Hidalgo had the second highest U.S. migration growth rate in Mexico (Crummett and Schmidt 2004: 437). Hñähñu migrants from Hidalgo have settled in non-traditional areas such as Nevada, Florida, North Carolina, and Georgia (437). Migrants from Ixmiquilpan, the city within whose municipality El Alberto belongs, have settled overwhelmingly in the tourist town of Clearwater, Florida.

As “half-citizens” in Mexico, indigenous migrants face unique challenges but also draw upon unique organizational resources (Fox and Rivera-Salgado 12). In some cases mobility and dislocation serve to strengthen ethnic identity as migrants come to see themselves as belonging social units that extend beyond their town of origin. Indigenous migrants in the U.S. have developed a plethora of transnational political and civic self-help organizations, some of them pan-ethnic and pan-regional in nature (19). In comparison to other hñähñu migrants from the municipality of Ixmiquilpan, very few migrants from El Alberto have settled in Florida, and few have been active in pan-ethnic
organizations such as the Consejo Supremo Hñähñu, which has a strong presence in Clearwater.

**Research Questions**

Unaware of the Pentecostal presence in El Alberto, I initially intended to conduct a short-term investigation of the Caminata project. I sought to understand how the Caminata’s imagined border space drew upon yet transformed the actual space of the border. I sought to understand which aspects of their own migration experiences residents of El Alberto chose to reproduce for tourists, and why. I sought to understand how tourists, in turn, made sense of the Caminata’s recreated border space.

In the initial stage of my project, I drew upon the literature of U.S.-Mexico border militarization (Andreas 2000; Andreas and Biersteker 2003; Dunn 1996). I also drew upon ritual and performance theory (Schechner 2002; Grimes 1995; Driver 1998) to understand the Caminata as an event which, though it is framed as entertainment, crosses into the realm of efficacious performance for actors and tourists alike. Insights from the anthropology of tourism and pilgrimage (Badone and Roseman 2004; Turner and Turner 1978; Coleman and Eade 2004; Swatos 2006) also influenced the formative stages of this project.

During my first visit to El Alberto, I soon realized that the Caminata was part of a complex religious field that called for more extensive investigation. As the initial project expanded into a dissertation, I broadened my scope in three main directions. When I began, my gaze had been limited to the border itself. I wanted to understand the challenges U.S. border enforcement posed for migrants, and how they were responding to those challenges on a collective level. What I found, however, was that the Caminata project was far more than a response to the undocumented journey. The Caminata
provided a space for dealing with larger questions about what it means to live, work, and maintain relationships with others in a transnational context. I found that I could not understand the Caminata without exploring how people in El Alberto are critically reflecting upon the larger system of transnational migration in which they are embedded.

During the first visit to the field I also became aware of the large Pentecostal presence in El Alberto. I found in the Pentecostal churches a body of narratives and practices that exert a strong influence over a substantial percentage of El Alberto’s residents, and whose representations of the migration journey run parallel to the Caminata’s efforts. In my conversations with Pentecostal migrants, I found that the difficulty of border crossing sparks theological reflection and, in some cases, conversion. Worship services brim with references to relatives and loved ones in the United States. The pastor of the Iglesia Betel, the Pentecostal church with which I had most contact, is himself a transnational figure who travels regularly to congregations in Phoenix and Las Vegas. I decided to expand the scope of my research to explore the relationship between the Caminata project and Pentecostal responses to border crossing and transnationalism.

Finally, after my first visit to the field I realized that I could not wholly understand either the Caminata project or Pentecostalism in El Alberto without understanding the role indigenous religiosity plays in both. So strong is the evangelical Protestant presence in El Alberto that, at first, expressions of indigenous religiosity were not entirely apparent. While the Caminata makes reference to the local sacred landscape, to the four elements of earth, water, air, and fire, and to forces such as *nahuales*, or
human-animal doubles, I took these references to be merely anecdotal, packaged for consumption by urban tourists. On a more subtle level, however, I found that indigenous notions of group harmony and relationships infuse the entire project. The Caminata is grounded in a tradition of collective labor that, in the eyes of many of the town’s residents, underlies and outlasts religious difference. Those who don Border Patrol costumes as part of the Caminata do so in partial fulfillment of a year of unpaid service to the community. Participation requires individuals to make a significant sacrifice of time, money and energy toward the group as a whole. I expanded my focus to explore the collective system of labor in which the Caminata is grounded. I also found that indigenous religiosity, far from being replaced by Pentecostalism, plays out both within and alongside it, particularly in notions of witchcraft, sorcery, and spiritual healing. I found that Pentecostals draw upon both local and global scripts as they chart out their place in Mexico, at the border, and beyond.

As the scope of my research expanded, I refashioned my research questions into the following: How do the residents of El Alberto respond to the experience of crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, both through the Caminata Nocturna project and through Pentecostalism? What are the narrative and performative strategies through which they transform individual migration experiences into a collective body of meaning? Finally, how do these collective responses to the border comment upon, challenge, or otherwise influence the larger patterns of transnational immigration in which members of this town are engaged?

**Methodology**

I initially spent five weeks in El Alberto during the summer of 2007. I made a two-week follow-up visit in 2008 and a brief visit in late December of that year. My longest
stay in the town was a period of approximately nine weeks in the summer of 2009. I also had the opportunity to visit a Pentecostal church attended by several dozen of El Alberto’s members in Phoenix in early 2010.

My research methods include extensive participant observation, informal conversations, and qualitative, semi-structured interviews with tourists, residents of El Alberto, and external religious leaders who are or have been involved in the town. During the summer of 2009, I also conducted a brief questionnaire examining tourists’ responses to the Caminata and their attitudes about migration in Mexico. Given time limitations, I chose not to include an in-depth analysis of that questionnaire in the dissertation.

During my first visit to the field I participated in the Caminata five times, both with tourists and from the perspective of the Border Patrol actors. I carried a voice recorder to note the sequence of action. Afterwards, I took extensive notes on the ways in which the guides and actors orchestrated space and time. I also noted tourists’ responses to that Caminata during the enactment. I observed spontaneous conversations about migration among tourists directly after each Caminata and gathered their reflections in more formal interviews the next day. I had the opportunity to observe the Caminata an additional three times in the summer of 2009, and was thus able to observe how the enactment had shifted to incorporate new border dangers, such as the increased presence of drug-related violence.

In addition to observing the Caminata, I conducted participant observation in religious services at Betel and Sinai, as well as the Catholic church of San Alberto. During the course of my research I attended approximately 30 Betel worship events,
including regular evening services, two large retreats attended by U.S. missionaries, several *cultos familiares*, or services held at congregation members’ houses, and three open-air fasts held at private homes. One of those fasts was for a young man who had lost his leg at in the same border accident that resulted in the death mentioned in the opening paragraph. I also had the opportunity to attend the church’s annual festival, which is held in late December and attracts several thousand people from Mexico and the United States. In addition, I attended Sinai’s annual festival, which is held only a few days apart from Betel’s *fiesta*, as well as several regular worship services and youth bible classes at Sinai. I attended two masses and one evening prayer and study session at the Catholic church, as well as a Catholic youth group meeting. I was unable to attend the Catholic patron saint festival, which is held in November.

A common narrative trope among Catholics and Protestants alike is that despite religious difference, El Alberto is a harmonious town. In the identity of the community, religion assumes the quality of a personal choice that strengthens rather than detracts from the town’s system of collective labor and governance. While underlying tensions are by no means absent, I observed multiple expressions of the harmonious ideal. The fast held for the man who had survived the border accident was attended by non-Pentecostal relatives and neighbors. Each church’s yearly *fiesta* is attended by members of the town as a whole. Moreover, El Alberto holds a series of non-religious festivals each year that promote community cohesion. I observed the *clausura*, a 3-day celebration marking the closing of the school year, as well as planning sessions for the anniversary of Caminata Nocturna, a large-scale celebration attracting thousands of attendants and national media attention.
During my time in the field I interviewed more than 60 individuals. With the exception of Poncho, one of the main guides and creative minds behind the Caminata project, all names have been changed in this dissertation to preserve informants’ confidentiality. I conducted 35 semi-structured interviews with residents of El Alberto. Twenty-six of those interviews were recorded and nine were documented through field notes. I also conducted semi-structured, recorded interviews with two priests, a Catholic religious worker who had been active in El Alberto in the past, and one American pastor who visited El Alberto as part of a mission trip in 2009. Finally, I conducted recorded, semi-structured interviews with approximately 32 tourists. Some of the tourists chose to answer the interview questions as a group, thus my results were not as extensive as the numbers suggest.

During the first research visit, I sought three sets of informants: tourists, migrants from El Alberto who were currently serving as actors in the Caminata, and town leaders who had been instrumental in bringing the project about. The average length of the interviews was about 40 minutes, although some lasted up to two hours. During my second and third summers in the field, the focus of my interviews shifted. On one hand, I interviewed people about their use of religion in the migration process. I sought a diverse range of informants, including both male and female migrants of different religious backgrounds. In addition to exploring the role of religion in the migration, I also sought to understand the crucial period of development and religious change in El Alberto that had preceded wide-scale U.S. migration. I sought key informants who, due to their leadership or close association with leading figures in the past, could offer
special insight onto that history. Again, I chose people from diverse religious backgrounds, seeking to contrast Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal perspectives.

**Chapter Summary**

Several key themes interlace throughout the following chapters. One theme centers on a basic tension that I see in El Alberto: a tension between the “Mexican Dream” expressed in the Caminata project, and religious narratives and practices that encourage border crossing and mobility. Another theme centers on questions of embodiment, space, and performance. I seek to understand how the residents of El Alberto use ritual and other performative action to respond to the physical hardship of the migration journey. Since border crossing is almost always tied to an effort to seek employment, a third theme centers on work. I explore how people in El Alberto view the relationship between work, survival, and living well, and the implications of those views for the patterns of transnational migration in which they are engaged. A final theme of the dissertation centers on indigenous identity, both in its overt and more subtle manifestations.

The first chapter offers an in-depth description of the Caminata Nocturna, based on the eight enactments I observed. I explore how the event reflects U.S. border militarization while serving as a transformative performance in its own right. The second chapter looks beyond the scenes of the Caminata to explore the larger motivation behind the project. I outline the rise of U.S. migration in El Alberto, beginning with the earliest internal migration to cities within Mexico. While migration began as part of an effort to seek a better life, it has in many ways backfired. I argue that the Caminata uses rigorous bodily action in attempt to break through the reproductive cycle of migration and consumption that has, in the eyes of some, become detrimental to the
quality of life in El Alberto. The third chapter takes a step into El Alberto’s past to explore the intertwining processes of development and religious conversion that transformed people’s values and horizons of the possible well before U.S.-migration became commonplace. While the chapter draws primarily upon Pentecostal voices, I also pay attention to the role indigenous motivations played in the conversion process.

In chapter four I take up the question of work by exploring the tension between El Alberto’s system of collective labor and the wage labor that many of the town’s members engage in the United States. I argue that the collective labor system serves both to counter the individualism of U.S.-based work and to control the boundaries of transnational town membership. It is largely through the medium of work that residents of El Alberto seek to channel emigrants’ time, energy and resources toward their community of origin. As such, the system of labor plays a key role in the Caminata project.

In the fifth chapter, I turn to the narratives and practices through which Pentecostals in El Alberto are responding to the migration journey. I argue that the vision of the border that emerges within those practices differs considerably from the Caminata’s “Mexican Dream.” While the Caminata calls people to remain rooted in their place of origin, Pentecostals travel under the authority and protection of a God for whom there are no borders. Through prayer, fasting, and other group action, individual ordeals at the border are transformed into collective proof of divine action that strengthens the life of the congregation as a whole. The sixth chapter moves beyond the border crossing journey to explore how Pentecostals make sense of the larger experience of living and working in a rapidly changing global landscape. I argue that worshippers draw upon
both indigenous and global Pentecostal scripts as they seek to chart the contours of
global space and time and orient themselves within it.

In chapter seven, I turn once again to the Caminata Nocturna by exploring a new
feature that emerged in 2009: a self-described “indios” show through which two men
from El Alberto enact aspects of the town’s past while simultaneously representing
Native Americans at the U.S.-Mexico border. Exaggeratedly rough and savage, the
indios highlight El Alberto residents’ ambivalence toward their own indigenous identity,
while at the same time bringing a new level of complexity to the multilayered, conflicted
space of the U.S.-Mexico frontier. In the concluding chapter I offer final reflections on
what the case of El Alberto can contribute to our understanding of the role of religion in
the migration process, as well as to the broader scholarship on religion,
transnationalism, and globalization.
On a humid night in the summer of 2007, I found myself crouched in darkness, packed tight against several dozen men, women, and children in a hollow amid low-lying bushes. I could scarcely move. My elbow was lodged against someone’s chest, my shin against someone’s back. Shifting and rustling despite our best efforts to keep silent, we strained to see the scene unfolding beyond the veil of branches.

“We know you’re hiding!” a harsh male voice demanded, in Spanish with a false American accent. A spotlight illuminated a landscape that suggested that we at once were— and very much were not— at the border between Mexico and the United States. There were cacti and scraps of barbed wire; there were empty water bottles and shoes abandoned in the dust. But there were also tired cows chained in small terraced fields, chewing their cuds in the dark. Pink and green lights from a nearby fiesta played out upon the trunks of ancient cypresses. Although my companions’ faces bore expressions of fear and suspense, their extra flashlights, designer water bottles, and too-clean clothing hinted that were not migrants at all but tourists who had paid 250 pesos apiece to participate in the Caminata Nocturna, or “Night Hike.”

The Caminata Nocturna is a rigorous, four-to-five-hour simulation of the experience of crossing the U.S.-Mexico border as an undocumented immigrant. Far from the deserts of Arizona and the waters of the Rio Grande, the re-enactment takes place within the cornfields, roads and riverbanks of El Alberto, an indigenous community about an hour north of Mexico City. Through the Caminata, the residents of El Alberto—
the majority of them—former migrants—transform their own memories of migration into a collective narrative that is told in and through the bodies of tourists.

When I first learned of the Caminata in an on-line news article in the winter of 2006, I was taken aback, even offended. I pictured a theme park with plastic cactuses and oversized sombreros. What I found was a sincere, grass-roots effort through which a community strained by migration has come together to convey the hardship of border passage to their well-heeled fellow citizens. They have taken the ugliness of the border—the violence and indignity of encounter with Border Patrol agents, the dull ache of thirst, the threat of death—and transformed it into something new. The tourist cabin in which I spent my first night at Parque EcoAlberto was the product of such alchemy. Thick stone walls, a sturdy roof of agave leaves, pillowcases embroidered with vivid birds: the cabin was stunning. Yet that cabin is the product of two unlikely sources. It draws inspiration from the humble, cactus-walled dwellings common to the region in the past. It also draws inspiration from the recent housing boom in the U.S. Southwest. Migrants from El Alberto have refined their construction skills as laborers in Las Vegas, Phoenix, and Salt Lake City. They have learned something of tourism, as well.

For many, Las Vegas tourism brings to mind garish casinos whose windowless interiors know neither night nor day. How different was this cabin. Return migrants have drawn upon their experience in Las Vegas to build something of quality, to sow something permanent with the ideas and capital they have gained abroad. The Caminata Nocturna, one of the largest revenue-generators in Parque EcoAlberto, is part of that effort. It is an effort to build something stable within the flux of global capitalism and transnational labor migration in which residents of this town find themselves.
The first time I donned my sneakers to join in the border simulation, I had come straight from the clausura, a festival marking the closing of the school year. Hundreds of the town’s residents had gathered to watch their children and their neighbors’ children sing the Mexican national anthem and dance in solemn, choreographed rows in tuxedos and satin gowns. Placid-faced women in striped shawls, young women in jeans, and men sitting together by the side clapped moderately at the teachers’ urging. Weeks later, I would stand in pews with many of the same people and clap along with them until my hands burned. “Y me quema y me quema y me quema! and it burns me and it burns me and it burns me!” we’d sing, invoking the fire of the Holy Spirit as the pastor pounded on the electric keyboard.

This weekend I was unaware of the Pentecostal presence in El Alberto, unaware of the force with which so many of the town’s residents send songs and prayers soaring through the night air toward relatives across the border. Tonight I was led past the basketball court and toward a classroom-turned-banquet hall. I sat at a table crowded with local dignitaries and was fed barbecued goat and broth with wedges of lime. Outside, the basketball court-turned-stage made a second metamorphosis into a dance floor. Pounding tunes and announcements spiraled out through amplifiers to ricochet off the surrounding hills.

“This one’s going out to the cute girls sitting at the corner—someone get up and dance with them!”

A few couples braved the floor.
“And here’s a greeting for my compadre Roberto who’s about to go to the Union Americana— buen viaje— and may his plane fall on the way home!” joked the DJ, reading off messages. “And a ‘hello’ to Lupe, in Las Vegas— that’s from her man José!”

Despite the DJ’s efforts to get people dancing, things were slow that night. Several dozen tourists had already assembled at the park office, eager to begin the border crossing simulation. A dozen people extricated themselves from the festivities and I made my way with them to begin the Caminata Nocturna.

Intimately local yet shot through with transnational elements, the clausura festival is a fitting backdrop for the Caminata. For months the event’s planning committee had worked to ensure nothing would be lacking. The day before a dozen men from the town had come together to butcher, skin, and roast half a dozen goats. Women made tortillas by the hundreds. Parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and neighbors joined together to show support for their youth. Yet the DJ’s stream of greetings to and from the United States provided a gripping reminder of those not present, suggesting that the boundaries of El Alberto extend much farther than we could see. The Caminata is a product of the “transnational social field” in which residents of El Alberto are embedded (Glick-Schiller 1999).

The Caminata Nocturna can be understood, on one level, as a response to U.S. border enforcement policy. It gathers individual migrant experiences into a common narrative about the danger of crossing a militarized border. But that is not all it does. The Caminata responds to the tensions and contradictions of the U.S.-Mexico migration system as a whole. More than a mere reflection on border militarization, more than mere entertainment, the Caminata is a transformative performance. It works in and
through the bodies of tourists, blurring the boundary between audience and actors. It channels the danger and intensity of the migration journey toward new ends.

The Caminata is not overtly religious. It is the collective effort of a community containing Pentecostals, Catholics, Spiritualists, and others who identify with no religion. While the guides make references to indigenous spirituality, they do so in a playful manner that some tourists embrace and others take with a grain of salt. At the same time, the performative action of the Caminata crosses into the efficacious realm of ritual. For a community deeply immersed in a migration lifestyle, the project proposes a new means of collective orientation. Like religious practice, it serves as a medium through which people “make homes” and “cross boundaries” in space and time (Tweed 2006). What follows is a composite description of the Caminata based on more than eight enactments during the summers of 2007 and 2009.

The Caminata

Tourists rarely know what awaits them when they pay the 250 peso ticket for the Caminata. Park workers pitch the event simply as a nighttime hike that deals with “a migrant’s experience.” Groups may be as small as 20 or as large as several hundred. While most participants are young—students or professionals in their 20’s and 30’s—there are usually a handful of families and several young children. Most are from Mexico City, and few anticipate crossing the border themselves.

The first Caminata in which I participated began well after sundown in a clearing outside the sixteenth century church of San Alberto. About 40 people dressed in dark clothing and carrying flashlights and headlamps mingled about in excitement. All but I were Mexican citizens. The mood was half-playful, half-solemn. Families waited
together in the dark. Teenagers joked and lit cigarettes. Some formed nervous huddles, giggling in anticipation.

Suddenly, a figure wearing a ski mask, dark sweater and camouflage pants appeared near the wall by the churchyard. The mysterious arrival told us that he was to be our guide and gathered us into a circle. He insisted that we would begin to recreate the bonds of brotherhood that had been lost among Mexicans. He spoke of physical perseverance and benefit of a positive mind-set. He spoke of the difficulty that lay ahead.

The opening speech set people on edge, priming them to expect the unexpected. Our guide was joined by several others whose attire was similarly unsettling. Their faces were concealed by black ski masks. According to one of the guides, himself long familiar with the hardships of undocumented border crossing, such concealment was meant to invoke the lack of control that immigrants experience when they place themselves in the hands of a coyote or pollero. As crossing the border has grown more difficult over the last few decades, people have come increasingly to rely on the services of these paid guides, whose fees reach several thousand dollars. Using a coyote usually involves great risk, for one cannot be sure of the guide’s honesty. This informant explained that real polleros don’t wear masks. “But it’s as if they did. Because. . . you’ve never seen that face, you don’t know what that person’s like. If that person’s good or bad. . . You are going to trust that person without knowing his face.”

Giving themselves over to the care of guides whose faces they could not see, the group set off into the night. Murmurs, whispers, and stifled giggles mingled with the steps of 90-odd feet as tourists travelled around the church, down a steep embankment,
and onto the road. The guides instilled an atmosphere of creative improvisation, throwing in humor and toying with the line between magic and banality. They took us past cornfields that had been tended by their grandparents, past quiet, night-enshrouded cows that mooing Border Patrol actors jokingly wove into the narrative.

Although a playful element would persist throughout the Caminata, at this moment it was overtaken by fright. Scarcely five minutes into the event, as we crossed a bridge over the Rio Tula, sirens and lights sounded in the distance. Laughter and conversation ceased as tourists grabbed their children’s hands, raced across the bridge and fell to their stomachs in the gravel by the roadside. Taken off guard and against my own expectations, I began to cry. There was an immediate, visceral humiliation in being thrust on the ground, in being on the receiving end of a gaze of surveillance, real or enacted. Adrenaline set in.

The reality that we had left behind persisted beneath the atmosphere of chase. Purple, green, and pink disco lights converged with the receding flash of red and blue patrol lights on the treetops. Dance music rumbled on the background. Yet these sights and sounds posed little threat to the imaginative fabric of the Caminata. The “Border Patrol” chase was not an illusion that could be broken but rather genuine physical event that had produced actual effects in our bodies.

Once the Border Patrol vehicles were out of sight we scrambled down a steep embankment to the river. As the guides ushered us from hiding place to hiding place by the riverbank, costumed Border Patrol agents shined spotlights from the road above. They called out through megaphones in English and then Spanish with simulated American-English accents. “Listen,” they yelled, “We know you’re there! ¡No vayan a/
As the agents exited their vehicles and descended toward the riverbank, the guides pushed us into a hollow space beneath a cluster of bushes. I felt myself packed in with other bodies. My leg began to cramp. I could not operate my voice recorder because my elbow was lodged against someone’s back.

At that point—and this scene was repeated, in various forms, during each Caminata I observed—the Border Patrol agents staged a violent confrontation with another group of “migrants,” actually actors from El Alberto hiding the bushes a dozen feet away from the tourists. The Border Patrol agents landed upon these “migrants,” drew them out by force, and began to question them and bark orders in mixed Spanish and English.

From the tourists’ limited vantage point, the impression was of muffled violence and confusion. I glimpsed wrestling figures. I heard rustles, yells, and groans. During another enactment one of the Border Patrol actors, a man who had spent a good deal of time in the U.S., shouted “You stupid Mexicans!” in between punches and groans. Once, a deafening staccato of gunshots—actually firecrackers—produced gasps among the hidden tourists. One of the apprehended migrants may have been “killed,” but it was impossible to see. We could only see his body, a dull mass upon the ground. “It’s not real,” a mother whispered to her child. But by that time, the reality of being pressed against the bodies of others in the darkness rendered disbelief difficult to maintain.

**United States-Mexico Border Militarization**

The struggle described above may well represent a worst-case scenario. Nevertheless, the tension of the encounter and the physically demanding natural landscape in which it is embedded reflect concrete changes in U.S.-Mexico border enforcement over the last few decades. Wide-scale U.S.-migration from El Alberto began in the mid-1980s, and town’s members began to lay the groundwork for the
Caminata in 2003. The time frame is significant. Beginning with the 1986 Immigration Regulation and Control Act, the U.S. implemented a series of restrictive efforts at the border. During the 1993-4 “prevention through deterrence” strategy, INS focused its efforts on large urban areas such as San Diego and El Paso. While migrants had for decades passed with relative ease through these cities, they now met with miles of chain-link fencing and greater numbers of Border Patrol agents. Rather than significantly deter migrants, however, the new enforcement strategy simply rerouted them away from urban areas (Andreas 2000:111).

As Andreas argues, “prevention through deterrence” was politically if not practically effective. Although undocumented immigrants continued to enter the United States in high numbers, they had been removed from the public view. Images of orderliness at the border replaced images of a “border under siege” (108). The reality for migrants, however, was grim. Migrants now risked crossing through remote desert and mountain areas where the likelihood of dehydration and exposure increased dramatically. By year 2000, the Arizona desert had become the most common crossing area, setting it as a key battlefront of the current immigration debate. Migrants now risked extreme temperatures, exhaustion, and dehydration. The rate of fatality during attempted border passage rose by 474% from 1996 to 2000, with 370 deaths in year 2000. The percentage of fatalities caused by environmental factors tripled between 1985 and 2000 (Eschbach et al. 2003:12-13).

As residents of El Alberto continued to cross to the United States in large numbers throughout the 1990’s, they passed through the only spaces left to them, spaces where environmental risks were inevitable and death a distinct possibility. As one Caminata
guide said, reflecting upon his experience, “It’s like I tell you, it’s a lot of suffering. . .

When I went the first time, well, yes it’s really dangerous; I had to endure about a day or two days of hunger there in the desert.” Another spoke of how it had rained for six hours straight as he and his companions crossed the desert. It was cold, he said. They were soaked to the bone and all they could hear for hours on end was the “sssshh, ssssshh, sssshh” of rain falling on the sand. On another occasion it snowed. Having no blankets, the group hugged one another to keep warm.

When I asked a guide which elements from his own experience he incorporates into the Caminata, he replied: “The danger. The danger— we try to do it in such a way that the people react.” When a thunderstorm struck during the first Caminata I participated in, the guides pressed us onward for a good two hours through the underbrush, across a steep-sided irrigation channel, and along the river bank. I was soaked from head to toe and came down with a nasty cold the next day. During another, drier Caminata, as Border Patrol actors made intermittent appearances on the road above, tourists dashed from hiding place to hiding place, nettles, thistles, mud, and snapping branches pressing upon their bodies.

The physical extremity of the Caminata infuses the event with a sense of intensity that borders on reverence. But it is the interaction with hostile, weapon-toting Border Patrol actors that lends the greatest intensity to the event. When El Alberto residents first entered the international migration scene, a trend of border militarization was well underway. Timothy Dunn argues that between 1978 and 1992, the United States gradually began to apply the Cold War doctrine of Low Intensity Conflict to its southern periphery (1996:3). This military strategy was originally developed in effort to control
specific civilian populations through the use of sophisticated technology and close collaboration between police and military institutions (4). Although the doctrine was first applied abroad, throughout the 1980's War on Drugs and the Central American refugee crisis the Reagan administration applied Low Intensity Conflict to the U.S.-Mexico border. The INS acquired night-vision goggles, vibration and sound detecting devices originally used in Vietnam, and helicopters formerly employed in Central American Cold War efforts (69). The boundary between civilian and military law enforcement blurred as Border Patrol agents took on an increasingly militaristic role.

When residents of El Alberto began to migrate to the U.S. in large numbers, they encountered a border zone marked by a heightened presence of Border Patrol agents and sophisticated surveillance technology. The militarized climate intensified after 9/11, when the U.S. government dramatically increased border security funding and placed INS under the Department of Homeland Security (Andreas and Biersteker 2003:7).

Residents of El Alberto are acutely aware of post-9/11 border enforcement changes. In 2007, when I asked one of the Caminata guides if he had noticed any changes in border security in recent years, he replied, “Five years ago there wasn’t much security, like now. Before, people could pass quickly, they didn’t suffer, people didn’t die. And now yes, now every year 100, 200, 300 die, because, well, there’s a lot of security.”

While riding one night in the Ford F-150 that doubles as a Border Patrol vehicle, I asked a Border Patrol actor whether the real officials are as violent as their enacted counterparts. “When they’re not on camera,” he answered. “When there are cameras, they don’t touch you. When there’s no one else around, when they can’t be seen, they treat you badly. They’ll beat you with the butt end of their flashlights.”
Not all of the immigrants whom I interviewed had experienced negative encounters with Border Patrol agents. Some had no contact with them whatsoever. Yet at the heart of each Caminata lies a profanity-laden, gunshot spiked struggle between “migrant” and “Border Patrol” actors. That scene of struggle condenses the abstract, technologically advanced state of the U.S. border militarization into a tangible human interaction. Although not necessarily representative of every crossing experience, it embodies a terrible possibility that lurks at the margins of each attempt. Hidden within the bushes, the tourists witness violence as experienced, in reality or in fearful imagination, by undocumented immigrants on the border. The event does not merely show the tourists something through a careful orchestration of symbols. Tourists observe the struggle after having themselves been persecuted, with adrenaline coursing through their veins. Although the experience may communicate something to them, it also does something to them.

The wrestling match between migrants and Border Patrol actors is the most overt expression of a more subtle undercurrent of dehumanization that persists throughout the entire Caminata. From the first moment that tourists throw themselves on the ground by the bridge, they find themselves on the receiving end of the harsh gaze of government surveillance. From then onward, Border Patrol vehicle lights frame the town of El Alberto, claiming ownership of the open spaces, the roads. While the migra are active, loud, and aggressive, the tourists are quiet. They hunch, cower, and hide in the dark spaces between the roadside and the riverbank. The Border Patrol agents carry technology. They have handcuffs, a megaphone, spotlights, and trucks. The tourists have nothing. Their few possessions often become damaged or lost.
When the Border Patrol agents first speak to the tourists, they do not do so face to face. They do so from above. Their voices and their lights descend from the road to the tourists’ hiding places. They speak to the tourists through megaphones, in voices magnified by technology. Some speak in English; others in broken Spanish with simulated English accents. One young female tourist remembered that simulated language barrier as the most distressing part of the Caminata. When the Border Patrol agents told the migrants to come out of their hiding places, she remembered, “They try to speak Spanish, knowing that they . . . aren’t aware of what they’re saying, right? I wanted to reflect on that. In a real situation it must be very distressing, because it’s someone who doesn’t master your language, doesn’t know what they’re saying, and . . . . Any moment they can shoot you.”

Throughout the Caminata, tourists experience the alienation of cowering in the darkness like hunted animals and being spoken to in a language that is not their own. One tourist felt the dehumanization most vividly when a group of actors posing as a gang ordered the group to the ground and demanded money. Some felt the dehumanization most acutely through the simple experience of getting their clothes dirty. It was after the first steep descent to the riverside, when tourists stepped ankle-deep in mud, that these participants realized that the Caminata was going truly going to inconvenience them. As one participant, an accountant from Mexico City, put it, “When you start to see that you’re getting in the water, jumping over puddles, getting you skin muddy, getting wet . . . it’s ugly.” Another remarked, “You think you’re going to go hiking on flat ground and everything, and the first thing that happens is you step into the mud, and you say damn! You know what, now my clothes are dirty.”
Some tourists are upset by the physical intensity. “It was hard-hitting,” a young woman told me. “I didn’t expect it to be so real.” Those who plan and implement the Caminata, however, insist that in order for the experience to make an impact, it must be difficult, and the difficulty must be unexpected. One tourist who was furious about the Caminata’s physical demands told me that she would be willing to come back. She would even bring her family, because “good experiences are those that mark you, you share them with the people who are around you.”

The simulation immerses tourists in a disorienting nighttime landscape and forces them to give up control over their customary ways of being. As the tourists run, hide, and stumble in the darkness to escape “Border Patrol” agents, the boundaries between themselves and the natural world break down. Nature rasps at the margins of their bodies, penetrating the space between their toenails and their toes. They take home its bruises. It takes their sweat, their footprints and sometimes their cell phones. When I returned to the riverside during daylight hours I saw a trail of lost shoes and water bottles. The ground was thick with footprints. Paths had been worn by the literally thousands of feet that have passed through the undergrowth. The effects of the Caminata were inscribed within space, much as the major crossing zones of the U.S.-Mexico border bear the marks of repeated human passage.

Pursuit by “Border Patrol” agents forced people to interact with one another in new ways, breaking down the boundaries between themselves and others. During my first Caminata the group at times transformed into a herd. Although I knew that the danger was not real, I felt myself pushing, like an animal in flight, toward the center of the group. I also observed that people began reaching out to one another, tightening their
family groups and improvising others. I heard families taking head counts. A young woman asked, “And my mom? Where’s my mom?” One family, seeing me alone, invited me to walk with them. Strangers grabbed hands with strangers to help one another under low-lying branches. The guides discouraged us from using flashlights and we began to listen and feel our way through the night. One moment found us packed together in a tunnel, three dozen bodies wedged between the rounded concrete walls. From our cylindrical chamber we could hear Border Patrol actors yelling from the road above in electronically amplified voices. The vibrations of the truck engines surged through the tunnel walls and through the columns of people packed closely into one tense, shifting body.

Beneath the veil of the game, the Border Patrol knew that we were there. We could hear them talking with our guides on their radios, in hñähñu. But that reality mingled with this one without breaking its surface. Like childhood play, the fiction had become palpable and elastic. One woman told me later that she had thought of her uncle while hiding there. He had hidden in a tunnel once too, at the real border.

The Border Patrol agents gone, we emerged from the tunnel into a desert dreamscape. The night was clear and the blurred forms of cacti hovered, semi-animate, up the dark hillside. The way was rocky and uneven. Forged into one body in the tunnel, we stretched into a caterpillar-like filament, relaying whispered warnings down the line. Careful–cactus spines! There’s water here . . . watch out for that branch!

We encountered the landscape in slow, shuffled sequence, partly through our own senses and partly through one another. After hiking for hours we were blindfolded and carried in the backs of pickup trucks for several miles. Our vision gone, a hush fell over
us. My attention to sound and feeling grew more acute. I heard my companions shift their weight. I heard the noises of the tires with each turn.

The trucks left the paved road and began a rocky descent. The vehicles came to a halt and the guides led us to the ground. I stumbled as someone placed my hand on the shoulder of the person ahead of me. We took small shuffling steps as we were led into what I would later see was a large circle. Light flickered through our blindfolds, and we could smell fire. The long note of a conch sounded above.

We removed our blindfolds to find ourselves at the base of a canyon. The canyon’s steep walls were lit with hundreds of torches. Some say the torches symbolize people who have died while crossing the border. Others say they represent family members who die while the migrant is away. A flag held high against that backdrop of flames, we sang the Mexican national anthem again. The tourists embraced one another as they returned to their campsites or went off to share a hot mug of atole in the park restaurant.

**Performative Dimensions of U.S.-Mexico Border Enforcement**

In the media, the border is often portrayed as a wilderness, a desert shot through with concrete, footprints, and wire. It is a space where nations meet their limits, where the concept of citizenship dissolves. The border is, as Michael Kearney claims, a liminal zone. Like initiands, the migrants who cross it are “reduced to a categorical state of nonhuman— in this case an ‘alien’” (1991:84-5). They surrender themselves to the care of coyotes who will, metaphorically “either deliver them or eat them” (85). The border is a space of death, claiming the lives of hundreds each a year.

Although the roots of and the demand for undocumented immigration lie deep within Mexico and the United States alike, the richest imagery, the imagery most capable of
inciting public reaction, lies within the narrow line of the border itself. Only at the border
do the symbolism of nationhood and human illegality so palpably coalesce. The fetish
of the nation depends on the border for its being, and the fetish of the citizen draws its
lifeblood from border soil. As Peter Andreas argues, the border serves as a “political
stage” that draws attention away from the larger, messier work of managing
undocumented labor (9). As we have seen, by cleaning up key media-visible cities
during the mid-1990’s, the INS replaced images of border chaos with images of order
(108). Border enforcement is not merely instrumental. It also has a performative
dimension.

To borrow a definition from ritual theory, performance is “that kind of doing in which
the observation of the deed is an essential part of its doing” (Driver 1998:81).
Instrumental action becomes performance when an audience is present and when that
audience’s reaction matters. The INS had multiple audiences in the 1990’s. There are
multiple audiences for Immigration and Customs Enforcement today, including
American voters, Mexican officials, and migrants themselves.

One performative task of border enforcement is to project an image of control to the
American public. Another task is to instill fear and intimidation in migrants themselves.
U.S. border enforcement efforts employ symbolic imagery, transforming humans into
aliens and flight vehicles into beasts. One of the latest pieces of border technology is
the Predator-B, an unmanned flight vehicle described by globalsecurity.org as a
“Hunter-Killer” which “flies faster, higher and carries more weapons than the Predator”
(Pike 2005). Migrants have felt the gaze of these vehicles upon their backs. They have
also felt the gaze of helicopters, which are commonly referred to as moscas, or “flies.”
In 2005, the U.S. Border Patrol sponsored a series of advertisements flooding Mexican
televisions and radios with images of death. The campaign drew upon the tradition of
dfolk ballads as well as images of village cemeteries to infuse the public imagination with
a sense of danger (Marosi 2005). Ironically, the U.S.-backed campaign was a response
to increasingly fatal conditions which the U.S. Border Patrol itself had a hand in
creating.

Migrants serve not only as audience members but also as props in the border
enforcement drama. Their bodies are sites through which the concept of “illegal alien”
is constructed and maintained. As Mae Ngai points out, the “alien” is a recent product,
the result of a heightened post-World War I emphasis on international boundaries. In
the aftermath of the war, human rights came to be framed primarily in terms of
citizenship. At the same time, the war produced millions of refugees and other non-
citizens. Though a genuine social and economic presence in society, the alien is “a
person who cannot be and a problem that cannot be solved” (2004:5).

Today the U.S. government has periodic needs for undocumented labor, yet
relegates immigrants to alien status in part to maintain control over their flow (Kearney
1991:82). For the system to function, undocumented laborers must be dehumanized
just enough to justify their periodic expulsion from the country. Rendering humans into
aliens requires sustained performative work. A promotional video on the U.S. Customs
and Border Protection website offers a window onto how such work is done (U.S.
Customs and Border Protection, 2008). The brief video grants undocumented persons
a degree of humanity. A migrant on a stretcher is attended by Border Patrol agents. A
father and child press their foreheads together tenderly as they are apprehended.
While the video humanizes migrants to a certain extent, it also makes clear that the regulation and control of their humanity rests with government officials. Scenes of agents saving people’s lives shift to scenes of tackling, chasing, and handcuffing. Sunflowers in the background of a tackling scene reemerge in a section on “agricultural terrorism,” subtly linking migrants with unwanted plants. Adrenaline-pumping music accompanies the rapid succession of images.

Their lives alternately saved and seized by border enforcement agents, their bodies policed upon the border stage, undocumented migrants carry within their flesh the “contradiction of borders and boundaries in the age of global capital” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001: 649). In the theater of border enforcement, the U.S. maintains an illusion of national sovereignty by criminalizing undocumented immigrants at the border line. Today, discourse about national security also links immigrants with terrorism, crime, and the drug trade.

**Performing the Border in the Caminata**

What happens, however, when migrants tell the story? What happens when they take the same set, the same scenery, the same cast of characters, and frame things from their point of view? If the border is a political stage, as Andreas has claimed, residents of El Alberto have crafted a stage of their own, seizing the power of frontier imagery for their own purposes. On one level, the Caminata can be understood as an alternative migration narrative that wrests representational control from governments and news media and places it in the hands of migrants. It gives voice to the voiceless and agency to the disempowered. While U.S. border enforcement policy objectifies migrants, the Caminata bring migrant voices front and center. It humanizes them.
The Caminata has served as a space for collective reflection within the town of El Alberto itself. Through the reenactment, members of the community share the difficulties and traumas that few have voiced beyond their immediate circle of friends and kin. Before the Caminata, a former town leader old me, people rarely discussed the undocumented journey openly. Those who did so usually put a good face on things, not wanting to worry others. During the planning stages of the simulation, however, stories began to emerge. The costumed officials with simulated gunshots, the disorienting landscape, and the attacks by gangs are all drawn from El Alberto residents' flesh-and-blood experiences. Some young men who were reticent during interviews came alive as they donned Border Patrol garb and shouted and struggled with “migrant” actors. Others told me anecdotes from their own migration attempts as memories jostled to the surface during the simulation.

The Caminata gathers together hundreds of stories and presents them in a single, forceful statement. As Peterson (1996) argues, “socio-ontological or religious narratives” can facilitate social change (30). Not only do they provide a basis for collective identity, they also propose “an alternative vision of the future” which “enlarges people’s view of their possibilities” (31). The new sense of the possible offered by religious narratives can inspire people to do things they otherwise would not do. As a collective narrative, the Caminata tells us that border militarization has transformed the U.S.-Mexico divide into a dangerous place. It tells us that losing one’s life during migration is a distinct possibility. It tells us that beyond overt violence, there is another, more subtle form of violence at the border, the dehumanization that one experiences as an undocumented person in the United States. The Caminata brings to light to “el
México que existe pero muchas veces no queremos ver,” (the Mexico that exists but many times we do not want to see), and it does so with prophetic force, seeking to motivate new forms of collective action.

If we simply read the Caminata to discover its meaning, however, we miss much of what it is and does. The Caminata is more than a storyline, more than narrative. Tourists are not simply audience members. They are participants. As Schechner (2002) has argued, no firm line separates theater from ritual. All performances are entertaining to some degree, and all performances act upon and transform those involved. Rather than force performances into the rigid categories of “ritual” and “theater,” it is more helpful to examine the particular balance of efficacy and entertainment within them. When entertainment dominates, performers are separate from the observers. When efficacy dominates, the boundaries between actors and audience break down and participants are “transformed into a community” (72).

The Caminata is marketed as a form of entertainment. Tourists arrive as part of their vacation travels and weekend getaways. They purchase tickets and expect to be engaged. Tourists’ expectations and desires subtly shape the parameters of the Caminata. While Parque EcoAlberto’s website solemnly entreats tourists to support their “hñähñu brothers,” another page flashes the words, “Make fun of the migra! Cross the border of extreme sport!” (www.parqueecoalberto.com.mx). While the Caminata is a form of entertainment, however, it is also highly efficacious. The Caminata shakes tourists out of the role of audience and makes them full participants in an event that borders on pilgrimage.
In an oft-quoted line, Victor and Edith Turner suggest that “a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist” (1978:20). In their travels, tourists seek self-transcendence evocative of the communitas of pilgrimage. Like pilgrims, tourists step out of the structures of daily life. Their perspectives change as they encounter new people, places, and things. More recently, Badone and Roseman have suggested that the boundary between tourists and pilgrims has become increasingly blurred as persons at a loss for meaning in postmodern society seek authenticity and self-transformation in travel (2004:6).

Some Caminata tourists seek transformation. Some hope to educate their children about migration. Others hope to better understand what their own migrant relatives have endured. Others simply seek an adrenaline rush. Regardless of tourists’ motivations, the Caminata works in and through tourists’ bodies to generate a new, experimental social space. More than mere entertainment, the Caminata delves into the realm of ritual.

Residents of El Alberto do not simulate border danger for its own sake. Rather, they strive to recreate the loss of control that migrants frequently experience, and they put that loss of control to new use. The undocumented journey challenges migrants both mentally and physically. At the mercy of coyotes and the natural elements, migrants discover survival resources they never knew they had. As one of the Caminata guides explained, referring to his migration attempts, “I never prepare. I just go. Getting there, I don’t even know who I’m going to deal with. I don’t know if that person is good or bad. I don’t know if that person is going to cross me, or leave me in the desert . . . . You have to trust, whether or not you want to.” Although the migration journey is difficult, it also
generates new possibilities. It fosters new spaces of solidarity. We can see the transformative potential of border crossing at work within Pentecostal migration narratives. According to the pastor of the Iglesia Betel, many migrants have testified that they have asked God for help in the desert. “Because it’s a moment that’s so difficult,” he explains, “there in the desert no one offers you their hand, only God. So only a miracle can happen in your life.”

A separate chapter will explore Pentecostal migration narratives to a greater extent. For the time being, note the theme of surrender. The pastor claims that crossing the border is “a moment so difficult” that “only a miracle can happen.” The guide claims that “you have to trust, whether or not you want to.” Through the Caminata, residents of El Alberto tap into a core loss-of-control experience that is central to the migration journey and harness its creative potential. They immerse tourists in a disorienting landscape and challenge them to interact with one another in new ways. The “migra” who chase them do so not to keep them out of the U.S., but to push them into a new way of being. Rather than predatory coyotes who may either “deliver” or “eat” their charges, (Kearney 1991:85), Caminata guides are compassionate trickster-clowns who use humor to push tourists out of their comfort zone.

At the start of the first Caminata I observed, a young tourist asked a guide named Poncho what would happen if the migra caught us. “Well, the thing I have to tell you is, they are authorized to use rubber bullets,” the guide answered, sparking gasps and nervous giggles. When he led the group in singing the Mexican national anthem, flag held aloft, the guide urged people to sing louder, more forcefully. “We have to be
dynamic,” he shouted. “Ladies, you can tell how a guy is in bed by the way he sings. So sing like you mean it!”

If the Caminata is about the experience of immigrants who suffer, I asked Poncho later, why make light of it? Humor, he answered, is one way to invigorate people, to render them receptive to the unexpected. “Most of the time, people go around with a layer of ice in front of their faces,” he answered. “You have to break that ice.”

On one occasion, after we had travelled by foot for about two and a half hours, the guide gathered the group together. In a rousing speech, he urged us to realize our full physical potential by overcoming hunger and thirst.

“Are you hungry?” he shouted.

“No!” The tourists yelled back.

“Are you thirsty?” he shouted.

“No!” they replied. To which the guide reached into his backpack, opened a can of coke, and drank it loudly in front of them. And burped.

“Pues, you told me you weren’t thirsty, or I would have offered,” he responded.

I discussed the incident with another guide a few days later. In his young thirties, this man was no stranger to the undocumented journey. He explained that although the journey was difficult, life in rural Mexico had prepared him well. “The way life is here,” he explained, “you go up in the hills, you go wherever. You don’t get tired, and if you’re hungry for two, three days, you put up with hunger. Because you’re already used to it.” More than a mere insult, the coke-drinking incident contained a playful message of resilience. Know when to put up with hardship, the prank suggested, and know when to
gulp down a cold can of soda. Endure hunger but don’t idolize it. Stay open to possibility.

A common complaint among tourists is that they are not told what to expect. They are not told to wear good sneakers and bring raincoats. To give tourists such warning, the guide quoted above insisted, would defeat the purpose of the Caminata. “We tell them, it’s a simulation of how an immigrant suffers. You’re going to go as an immigrant; do you think it’s going to be a trip to the beach? . . . No. Because an immigrant suffers. An immigrant gets surprises.”

The Caminata embraces the ludic quality of the unexpected. Sometimes children from El Alberto join the fun. During one Caminata there were at least a dozen children among the tourists. Four kids from El Alberto joined the team of guides. Dressed in white, they were introduced as “gringos” numbers one, two, three, and four. The little guides took their job seriously. They herded the tourist-children along and reprimanded adult participants for turning on their flashlights. They danced ahead of us and climbed trees. They hid in bushes and snorted. They tackled our legs as we walked by. For a moment the border simulation became a goofy, magical game of tag.

While the Caminata confronts themes of border militarization and death, it is shot through which playfulness. The paradox is intentional. Caminata guides use humor to invite tourists to entertain new possibilities. Like ritual, the Caminata is a form of “work done playfully” (Driver 1998:99). As Driver argues, rites are productive on multiple levels. Rites serve not only to “communicate” and “entertain,” but also to expand the sense of the possible beyond the here-and-now, to make palpable the presence of
beings and things unseen (99). The Caminata guides use playfulness not to dilute or lighten the experience but because play itself is efficacious. Play calls culturally accepted models of reality into question (Turner 1983:233-234). It frames things anew.

As we have seen, U.S. border enforcement has performative qualities. Border enforcement renders humans into aliens as it inscribes separation on the land and in the mind. Border-making reverberates throughout Mexican society in the form of ethnic, class and regional divides (Vila 2005). While U.S. border enforcement reifies, separates, and shuts out, the Caminata questions, opens, and destabilizes. While border enforcement draws a line between nations, the Caminata is messy, amorphous. The border space of the Caminata is something to be hurdled and crawled through, a fertile darkness teeming with mud, rivers, patrol sirens, and snorting beasts. Palms grasp palms; blisters and dirt grind into the skin. The boundaries of the body dissolve as humor stirs new possibilities to the fore.

During the Caminata, tourists cross no wall, no fence, no line. At the event’s close tourists realize that they have “made it,” but not to the United States. The true border to be crossed, the guides insist, is not physical. The true border to be crossed is the boundary between the human and the inhuman, between “los seres humanos” and “los seres inhumanos.” Rather than concluding in a simulated Arizona or California, the Caminata ends in the base of a torch-lit canyon. The canyon is a highly revered space for the residents of El Alberto, a place that they hope to preserve for future generations. By bringing the Caminata to a close in this location, residents of El Alberto draw attention to the importance of origins. As one of the guides explained, the Caminata “is
a way of showing that [migrants] suffer, but only for trying to live a dream. . . . What we’re trying to get across is that here in Mexico they can achieve their dream. . . . Turn that physical effort around, but here.”

Through the Caminata Nocturna, residents of El Alberto do not simply protest U.S. border militarization. They call for a transformation in the international migration system as a whole. As a collective narrative, the Caminata brings migrant voices to the fore. It seizes representational control of the border from the news media and from the U.S. government and places it in migrants’ hands. As an efficacious performance, the Caminata unlocks the creative potential of the migration journey and channels it toward new ends. It fuses the danger and the gravity of border crossing with playful improvisation. It generates spontaneous community and fosters a spirit of engagement with the natural world. Border Patrol agents become catalysts of suspense, coyotes become trickster-clowns, and death becomes a symbol of sacrifice as the Caminata calls tourists and migrants alike to seek a “Mexican Dream” free of dependence on foreign labor migration. In order to fully understand the Caminata’s efforts, however, we must understand the larger system of transnational migration that the project seeks to transform. In the following chapter, I explore the rise of U.S. migration in El Alberto.
CHAPTER 3
LIFE IS SURVIVAL

Our parents lived; they lived and worked with what they had. With what they had. And they didn’t die of hunger. . . . Because life is survival, nothing more. You have to work to survive. To eat. If our parents, being poor, if they managed to survive, I think that we can too. In fact the Caminata Nocturna is—that’s the message that it contains. . . . What we’re trying to get across here is that they can achieve their dream in Mexico.

The words above were spoken by a man from El Alberto who has spent years as an undocumented laborer in the United States. In 2007, Ramón worked as a guide and Border Patrol agent in the Caminata. Along with approximately 60 other men, he had given a year of his life to the border reenactment and other projects aimed at stemming the flow of migration. Ramón’s hands are heavily calloused from building houses and roads in Las Vegas and beyond. Even as he spoke, Ramón knew that he would soon risk the undocumented journey again to return to his wife and children in Las Vegas. He spoke for those who had not yet gone, in the hope that some day soon, young people from El Alberto would no longer make the journey north.

This chapter is an attempt to understand Ramón’s vision and the vision of others like him who have helped make the Caminata Nocturna a reality. It is an attempt to understand how and why the Caminata Nocturna came about, and what challenges residents of El Alberto face as they attempt to forge the “Mexican Dream.” In order to fully understand the motivation behind the Caminata, we must understand the origin and development of migration in the town. From the earliest internal travel to Mexico City to the first trans-border journey, migration was a quest for survival, rooted in the desire to provide one’s children with a better life. What began as an effort to survive, has, in the
eyes of many, become a trap. Migration has disrupted the family, producing a generation vulnerable to drugs, alcohol, and gang life. It has led to rootlessness. In the eyes of Ramón and others, migration has also produced a more subtle transformation. It has altered people’s sense of what it means to live well; it has transformed their embodied expectations and desires. Migration has trapped people in a cycle of alienated labor and consumerism that eats away at their longevity and health. The rigorous nature of the Caminata is an effort to reach participants through their flesh and blood, to access a point where their sense of comfort and their preferences arise. It is an attempt to break through the habitus (Bourdieu 1977) that migration to the U.S. has created.

**The Origins of Migration in El Alberto**

The classic Mexican anthropological literature portrayed the Valle del Mezquital as a paradigmatic region of poverty, in which social and environmental desolation were inextricably intertwined. The place was a desert, containing little but cacti and mesquite trees. Its indigenous population had been largely forgotten by the larger society (Peña de Paz 2009; López Pérez 2009). This image of the Valle helped make the region a prime laboratory for Mexican indigenismo, the national government policy that sought to transform indigenous societies through western-style education and development. Today, irrigation has transformed the landscape. Maize grows tall where once there was dust. Pomegranate trees line the roads, laden with fruit. Yet the image of the Valle as a marginalized, impoverished region continues, both in the national government and in the self-identity of people from the region. While anthropologists may have had a
hand in emphasizing the poverty of the Valle del Mezquital, they did not create that image out of nothing. A college student from El Alberto explained that his grandparents do not always like to talk about how things were when they were young. “When the ancianitos talk about the past,” he told me, “mostly they just get really sad.” They become sad, he explained, because things were so difficult back then.

When asked how migration has changed their town, the majority of informants begin by citing positive changes. For women, in particular, those changes have to do with the quality of life people are now able to offer their children. Paola, a Pentecostal, explains that as a result of migration:

the children began to eat much better, they started to dress much better, above all, wearing shoes; and in that sense there’s been a great deal of change. Because before children really did go around barefoot. They didn’t have clothes, they’d wear something but it was the same little piece of clothing, day after day. . . . Right now I’ve seen that there’s been a lot of change . . . . Parents go to the U.S., although they run a great deal of risk, but at least their children don’t go hungry.

Cecilia, a younger woman, gave an even more graphic description of the poverty that drove her husband to seek work abroad. We spoke outside of her house—a small but solid concrete dwelling—as her four children hung near the doorway. Cecilia explained that she and her family used to be very poor. Thanks to the fact that her husband had worked in the U.S., they now had a place to live. She pointed toward the outdoor kitchen, a spindly structure made of wooden poles. Their house used to look like that, she explained. When it rained the water would come pouring in. She and her husband would cover the children up with a piece of plastic to keep them dry. Cecilia held up a scrap of plastic sheeting to demonstrate. Back then, the family’s beds
consisted of a rough type of cactus propped on cement blocks to allow the water to run underneath when it rained. Thanks to migration, Cecilia continued, they now have not only a solid house, but also food and clothing. Before, they survived on quelite, verdolaga, and nopales (lambsquarters, purslane, and prickly pear), and they only wore ropa de manta. The rough, hand-sewn cotton cloth was not enough to keep them warm in the winter.

Javier, a Pentecostal man in his early forties, described similar conditions. Javier recalls accompanying his mother to the market in Ixmiquilpan as a young boy. Javier’s job was to carry back the two bottles of the oil that the family used to light their dwelling. His mother could not carry them, for she was already laden under huge bag of maize and, on top of that, the baby. Javier’s feet would bleed after walking barefoot three or more hours over rough terrain. His family’s house “wasn’t even a house,” he explained. It was just one room, where the entire family slept together. To keep warm at night, the children would cover up with one of their mother’s old skirts, or a cloth sack such as those that bulk sugar comes in. Javier also remembers that water would come in the house when it rained.

Javier, Cecilia and Paola’s stories reveal an array of strategies that households used to cope with poverty, from using scraps of found materials to protect children from the rain and cold, to enlisting the labor of even the youngest to help transport necessary supplies. Labor migration arose as a natural extension of these household efforts to survive. The first migrants sought not luxuries, but basic necessities. They wanted to
buy shoes so that their children’s feet would not bleed. They sought to build solid houses so that the rain would not rush beneath the beds at night.

**Early Internal and U.S. Migration**

Long before the first migrants from El Alberto set foot in the U.S., they began to venture to other cities in search of work. For years, members of the town had struggled to make ends meet by cultivating what they could in the unirrigated soil and selling firewood and basketry in Ixmiquilpan. Then, by about 1955, some managed to find wage labor in other parts of the state. “But not just anywhere,” remembers don Cipriano, a man in his late sixties. Some found work harvesting crops in Progreso, a city about an hour away. “And how much did they pay those who managed to fill up those big containers? Fifty *centavos*. And the kids, like this one here,” Cipriano said, pointing to a ten-year-old boy, “10 or 20 *centavos*.”

Later on, as the Mexican economy grew with the petroleum industry in the 1970s, people began to find work in Mexico City. Internal migration was divided along gender lines. Women tended to work as maids, while men found work in construction. Don Evaristo, a man in his mid-forties, remembers that he first went to work in Mexico City when he was 17. He explains that virtually “the whole town, all of the adults” would go. The men would stay in Mexico City for a week at a time, leaving home each Monday and returning on Saturday night. The pattern of internal migration was well-established by the 1970s and continued through the 1990s. The progression was typical of Mexican indigenous communities, which tend to participate first in seasonal rural to urban migration to accommodate agricultural and festival schedules at home before moving on.
to lengthier stays in the U.S. (Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2005).

Roberto, who was in his late fifties at the time of the interview, describes his own participation in widening spheres of migration. Today Roberto runs a store in El Alberto and is an active member of Sinai. He recalls that he was born among "poor people. My father didn’t speak Spanish, nor my mother . . . they didn’t know anything, they were totally secluded. . . . we were a poor family, very humble." Like Javier, Roberto used to accompany his parents as they made the three-hour trek to Ixmiquilpan to sell baskets. He left home at the age of 14 to work in Mexico City. At first Roberto worked in excavation, with a pick and shovel. Then he worked in construction for two years. “But we earned very little. Very little, and we hardly earned enough for the family, for a week’s worth of food.”

Roberto was not the only one to experience difficulty making ends meet in Mexico City. Víctor, who is in his late thirties, tells of travelling to Mexico City from Guadalajara as a young man. He and his friends found a construction job in Mexico City, but they spent all of their money on a bus ticket and had nothing left for food. They worked for three, four, five days straight without eating. When the companions became too weak to continue, their supervisor noticed that they were hungry and gave them some tortillas and a pancake. “So we made tacos with the pancakes inside,” he remembers. “We pretended we were just having fun, but really we were so hungry that we made pancake tacos.”

While men tended to work away from home on a weekly basis, women remained away for months or years, for they served as live-in maids. As the work provided food
and shelter, it helped ease the burden of families with many children. Some left home at a very young age. Marta first worked in Mexico City at age 12. The work was very difficult because she did not understand Spanish. She did not know how to clean, for she was accustomed to dirt-floor dwellings. “So the lady says to me, ‘did you finish sweeping?’ And I tell her, ‘yes.’ ‘You didn’t sweep it well. Sweep again,’ and ‘sweep again.’” Discouraged, Marta joined her older sister, who was working as a maid in a different house. She became a burden to her sister because she was still very young.

When the earthquake of 1985 struck Mexico City, Marta’s mother bid her return home. “And back here, I put myself to work selling greens . . . . I’d look for quelites, epazote, whatever I could find in the countryside to go and sell.” A woman Marta met in the market offered her a job as her daughter’s maid in Tijuana. Marta’s new boss worked across the border in San Diego. In addition to cleaning, Marta took care of her boss’s children, although they were in fact older than she was. Marta stayed at the house in Tijuana for a year and a half, “without once talking to my parents or going home, without hearing a thing from them,” for there was no telephone in El Alberto. While the long separation from her family was difficult, one good thing came of it: Marta learned to speak Spanish well.

Although they travelled back and forth to Hidalgo frequently, the family in Tijuana forbade Marta to visit her parents. Marta finally summoned the courage to tell her boss that she was leaving. But the woman told her, “‘if you leave, I’m going to call your mother, and I’m going to tell her that you’re missing, and she’s going to worry.’” At first Marta lost heart, but a friend convinced her that she ought to go anyway. Not only did
the señora try to prevent Marta from leaving, she also tricked her out of part of her pay.
The salary itself was low—30 pesos a month—but “they gave me shoes and clothing. . . .
Everything their daughter didn’t want, they gave me.” After a brief stay at home, Marta
returned to Tijuana. She found work with a different family. “This time, they paid me
110 pesos a week. A week!”

Eventually Marta ended up in Guadalajara. To this day, she explains, some young
women from El Alberto work as maids in Guadalajara, “because one doesn’t finish one’s
education, doesn’t know how to do other types of work, the only thing is house work,
cleaning.” But the pay is good. “You don’t pay rent, or electricity, or water . . . and the
girls are now earning 1000 pesos a week,” or roughly $80.

Doña Felipa’s story echoes Marta’s in many ways. Felipa moved to El Alberto from
a neighboring town when she married a widower in the community in 2000. She first
went to work as a maid in Mexico City when she was eight years old. “I didn’t have a
father,” Felipa explains. “That is, I was really little when my dad died. . . . And, so we
went to earn a peso, among us kids. Because my mom was widowed, there was no
money.” Things were very difficult at first. The first family she worked for didn’t give her
enough to eat. “I was always afraid. They’d give me a cup of coffee and a roll for the
whole day, and I’d be so hungry. . . . Until four in the afternoon, or five, they’d give me
more food. And that was it. Until the following day.” Like Marta, Felipa spoke little
Spanish. The owner of the home scolded her continuously because she didn’t know
how to clean. “Because there, in my town, everything was just dirt, no beds, nothing. . . .
And there in Mexico City, many of houses are elegant, lots of furniture, and as I didn’t
know about those things, that cost me. It took me awhile to learn. But yes, I learned.”

The first household paid Felipa about 90 centavos a month. After a few weeks she left to work with her sister, where she stayed for about eight months. “And then I earned, at that time, about 200 pesos a month. And in that time, well that was plenty of money. . . . I remember when they’d send me to the store, they’d give me one peso, and I’d bring back a bag of bread this big,” Felipa demonstrated, holding her arms open wide.

Marta and Felipa each initially sought work in order to meet their most basic needs. As they gained experience and learned Spanish, their options and possibilities expanded. They gained the confidence to leave their places of employment rather than endure bad treatment. They learned to travel farther from home in search of better work. While they initially worked in conditions of hand-to-mouth survival, their salaries gradually increased and they were able to save a few pesos. Internal migration helped expand these women’s horizons of possibility and lay the groundwork for cross-border migration in the years to come.

The first people from El Alberto to venture to the United States had already had been working in other parts of Mexico before learning about opportunities abroad. Evaristo recalls that a group of seven people heard about opportunities in Texas while they were working in Tamaulipas in the early 1980s. “In Texas they say there’s a lot of work,’ people began to say to one another. ‘And they pay a dollar, or two dollars an hour,’ and ‘oh, is that true?’” The group eventually made it to Brownsville, where they worked in an oil refinery. Several years later, Roberto and his companions had a similar experience.
Recall that Roberto had been a construction worker in Mexico City. Sweating through long days with meager wages, he and his companions caught wind of better opportunities in the North. “So we struggled, we were thinking, thinking, pretty much daily what we were thinking and hearing was that those who went [to the U.S.] made money, enough to build a house, and buy a car. But not us, well we just stayed in the same routine.”

After much deliberation, Roberto and three others finally ventured to the border in 1986. There, on a riverbank crowded with people they met a coyote who knew the local Immigration and Naturalization Service agent’s schedule and advised them of the best time to cross. On reaching the other side, the companions kept hidden by walking through a bed of reeds. They travelled on foot for 10 days and eventually arrived in San Angelo, Texas, where they found agricultural work. After several short-term jobs Roberto found work helping a “gringo” farmer manage his cotton fields near San Antonio. He lasted two years there. Roberto speaks well of his boss, for “he gave me my house, gasoline, he gave me my pickup truck, and I went to my work is if it were my home.” The boss thought highly of Roberto, as well. Once Roberto’s boss got sick and spent two months in California for treatment, leaving Roberto in charge of the house. “And when he came back from the doctors . . . he cried. . . . He said, ’I’m not going to find another Mexican like you.’” With the money he earned, Roberto was able to build a house in El Alberto. Later he made several other trips to the United States.

Those who crossed the border during the eighties and early nineties recall that the journey was easy. Evaristo went for the first time in 1988 at the age of 29, through
Nogales. His guide was a young boy who didn’t charge a thing. They simply walked by when the INS agents not looking. As soon as he was across the border Evaristo’s new boss met him at a McDonald’s. Evaristo recalls eating two large orders of french-fries and laughs as he remembers how he fumbled to work the ice dispenser on the soda machine. They arrived in Chandler, Arizona at ten o’clock that night. “It was so easy,” Evaristo recalls. “And now—no, man, the reality is totally different. Now, you really do suffer!” Marta’s first trip to the U.S. was relatively simple, as well. She and her husband passed through the Nogales in the early nineties. It took them scarcely ten minutes to cross. They arrived at a Burger King, where a taxi was waiting for them.

The early U.S. migration narratives from El Alberto reflect twentieth-century migration patterns described by Durand, Massey and Malone (2002). The authors argue that the 1965-1985 period of Mexican immigration is comparable to earlier waves of European immigration to the United States. That is, as Mexico began intensive industrialization, migrants naturally travelled to the country where they shared the most economic and social ties, much as European migrants had done at the turn of the century. Left to itself, migration would follow a natural course, ending once Mexico had achieved a sufficient level of industrialization. Beginning with the 1986 Immigration Restriction and Control Act, however, the U.S. government disrupted the well-established machine of Mexico-U.S. migration.

While the earliest migrants from El Alberto worked in Texas, later migrants travelled to Las Vegas, Phoenix, and Salt Lake City where many of the men found work in construction. Women worked cleaning houses and hotels. Some men worked in these
cities for a year or two at a time while their wives and children remained in Mexico. Others started families in the United States. Today El Alberto’s population is about equally divided between Mexico and the U.S. Although the town’s members have travelled as far north as Washington State and as far east as Florida, the southwestern cities of Las Vegas, Phoenix, and Salt Lake City remain the most concentrated centers of the town’s emigrant population. There, neighbors and relatives stay in contact at churches, through soccer leagues, and by meeting periodically to pool funds for development projects and other needs in El Alberto.

**The Origins of the Caminata Nocturna**

From the mid-1950s onward, residents of El Alberto participated in widening spheres of migration, beginning with internal migration and, eventually, migration to the U.S. At first, migration to the U.S. was a natural extension of early household efforts to survive. The children who once trekked back and forth to Ixmiquilpan selling firewood with their parents managed, a mere generation later, to provide their children with houses, televisions, and cars.

Today, members of the first generation of children born in the United States are beginning to reach adulthood. Patricia, a Phoenix resident and a mother of three, describes how different life is for her children than it was for she and her husband. Patricia first went to the U.S. as an undocumented immigrant in the 1980’s, and was able to secure papers in 1988. She now lives in Phoenix, where her children attend school. When I interviewed Patricia, she was visiting El Alberto with her 15-year-old son. “At first, I didn’t plan to spend much time there, but now my life is more there than
it is here,” she explained. Patricia states that her children are more comfortable speaking English than Spanish and “like it better there [in the U.S.] than they do here.” She and her husband seek to impress upon their children the sacrifices that they made to get them where they are today. “I tell my children ‘right now you’re not suffering, you have everything, you have school, and no, we suffered a lot’ . . . . We’re giving them everything so they won’t have to suffer like we did.”

Whether they live in El Alberto or the United States, the younger generations today eat better, have better clothing, and have greater access to education than did their parents. As of 2008, over 99% of the houses in the community had electricity, and over 66% had running water. All but two of the 289 homes were made of cement, and over 50% of households owned a television (Perez Aguilar, 2008). While the standard of living has improved, problems persist, some of them unanticipated.

One problem is that migration has also placed a heavy strain on family life. The quest to seek a better life for one’s children, some claim, has backfired. As Ramón explains, “it’s a mistake when parents think they have to give their children everything.” Rather than leaving one’s children behind to search for better opportunities, Ramón insists, it is better to stay in one place, work hard, and give one’s children what one can. “Because they too are going to learn that they have to work in order to live, to survive,” Ramón explains. “But we don’t think like that.”

Noe, who served as delegado several years ago, describes the dire consequences of giving one’s children too much. He states the children end up rebellious when their parents provide them with everything. Noe tells of a friend who used to give his son
credit cards. The son would spend thousands of pesos a week with his friends, and finally ended up in jail for stealing. “The parents are at fault,” he explains, “and the kids are in the streets, doing what they will, they don’t learn a thing.” Other young people have become addicted to drugs. Some in the U.S. have joined gangs. Others who remain in Mexico grow up without the presence of their mothers and fathers. Víctor, the man who recalled being so hungry he ate pancake tacos in Mexico City, explains that televisions, a solid house, and nice clothes cannot replace parents who spend their time working far away. “When a child doesn’t have the love of his parents—all the riches in the world don’t mean a thing,” he insists. A generation of children is now turning to alcohol, drugs, vandalism, and other forms of rebellion to fill the emptiness left by absent parents.

While some young people have grown up in Mexico without their parents by their side, others have grown up in the United States without once having set foot in El Alberto. Some people in El Alberto are concerned that these young people will lose touch with their origins. As Víctor explains:

They no longer know the culture of the place they were born. They don’t know their dialect, their mother tongue. They have no idea what a community is. . . . Maybe one day after their parents die, they’re going to show up and we won’t know who they are! . . . . They’ve left behind all of their roots . . . who we are, who we were, how our ancestors lived. Now they’re going to live without roots.

In an effort to generate employment, protect the youth from the many dangers of migration, and preserve the cultural heritage of El Alberto, residents of the town began to lay the groundwork for the Caminata Nocturna in 2004. As Noe explains, “we don’t
want to lose our origin, we don’t want to lose our culture, we don’t want to lose our way of thinking . . . . We want for the people from here, from El Alberto, to have employment.”

Rodolfo was delegado in 2004, when the Caminata was first created. At that time, residents of El Alberto already owned and managed a small water park which drew upon the natural hot springs prevalent in the area. Rodolfo recalls that the town authorities began to think about bringing tourists into the canyon area after a road was built near it. They began by opening a pathway to the bottom of the canyon. Their first idea was to offer boat rides. Rodolfo recalled seeing a television commercial for boat rides in the Grand Canyon, so they superimposed the globally renowned site onto the local landscape by naming the area the Gran Cañón. The town authorities first welcomed tourists to the area during Holy Week, but the river current proved too strong for the rowboat they had purchased. In a last-minute improvisation, one of the town officials built up a section of the river so that tourists could be taken across it in a pickup truck. The experiment was a success. From then on, the community as a whole began to build up the canyon area. They bought a motorboat, set up a rappel station and made a zipline. The next project was the Caminata.

In Rodolfo’s view, the purpose of the Caminata was “to explain to the people how you suffer. Well, one goes in search of a better life. But perhaps there are people—they don’t achieve that better life. Because it ends there in the middle of their path. In the desert, or in the mountains.” He recalls that those who initially planned the Caminata decided to light torches in the canyon in memory of those “who didn’t make it,
or those who turn back, or those who return back, but already—already dead.”
Rodolfo’s own nephew was the young man who died during a migration attempt in 2008. Rodolfo recalls that the community lit torches for him when his body was received in the canyon at five in the morning. When the community staged the first Caminata in 2004, no one from El Alberto had yet perished at the border.

The border reenactment took about four months of planning and discussion. The first trial run was with a group of students from the University of Ixmiquilpan. Rodolfo explains that representatives from El Alberto went from classroom to classroom promoting the event. A date was set, tickets printed, and dozens of students and professors were invited. The Caminata has changed much over the years. During that first Caminata the group walked until three or four in the morning. At the close of the Caminata, after being blindfolded, the tourists walked the whole length of the road from the highway to the bottom of the canyon. “It was a greater sacrifice,” Rodolfo remembers. The rewards were greater, too. After the first Caminata, the students were met with a free campsite, firewood, and a sumptuous barbecue in the style typical of the Valle del Mezquital: meat slowly roasted over hot, buried stones.

Over the years the content of the Caminata shifts as new migrants return home, new people assume leadership, and different people contribute ideas. New anecdotes are introduced to entertain the tourists. The route varies. Sometimes guides make the Caminata more difficult to accommodate particularly adventurous tourists. Other times they make it easier to accommodate large groups of children. The event has attracted reporters from as far away as England, Germany, and Japan. The ecotourism park has
been featured on 60 Minutes and MTV. El Alberto has been the subject of internationally produced documentaries. Several years ago, former President Fox himself made an appearance at the anniversary of the Gran Cañón.

The national and international attention has resulted in significant financial benefits for the town. Xóchitl Gálvez Ruiz, former director of Mexico’s National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples (CDI) and current gubernatorial candidate for the state of Hidalgo, has taken a special interest in El Alberto. She helped town officials secure government funds to construct the ecotourism cabins and highway, and continues to offer support. The town has hired a full-time ecotourism specialist from a neighboring city and has a hñähñu background. Other external actors, including a couple from a nearby town who are dedicated to El Alberto’s ecotourism project, have made invaluable contributions.

Despite the influence of external actors, virtually every decision regarding the development of the ecotourism park must pass through the town’s General Assembly, a governing body consisting of representatives from each household in the community (Rivera Garay 2009). Rodolfo explains that the initial planning stages of the Caminata took a long time because so many people contributed. “I tell you, it was somewhat difficult,” he remembers, “because many said ‘let’s do it like this . . . but another says ‘let’s go to this place’ . . . so we’d start to discuss, then we’d put it to a vote.”

Today, town officials state that the Caminata is beginning to pay off. Results are measured not in pesos earned, but in the effects of the project among the mentality and aspirations of the young people in the town. Noe explains that in the past, every single
teenager to graduate from *secundaria*, the approximate equivalent to American middle school, would leave for the United States. Boys and girls alike would leave, some as young as 14. When I spoke to him in 2007, however, Noe stated that that year four or five *secundaria* graduates had remained in Mexico. In total, about 15 young people from the town were studying in universities, and they too were now concerned about the future welfare of the community. Those students, however, are still the minority.

“I Lift up my Eyes to the North”

Although the abject poverty that drove earlier migration has lessened, the urge to migrate persists among the youth of El Alberto. Those graduating from *secundaria* still experience strong pressure to travel north. A Mexican government sign posted in the window of the school in 2009 offers a vivid illustration of the expectations facing young people today. The sign states, “If you’re thinking of going to the United States, don’t forget the following documents,” including a vaccination card and Mexican ID. Frustrated parents state that their students would rather seek quick money in the north than pursue scholarships and continue their studies at home. Others state that even when students are able to secure scholarships for advanced study, their post-graduation employment options remain limited. Ramón states that young people today do not migrate out of necessity, but simply to expand their options. As he understands it, “in their place of origin they’re obviously not going to die of hunger.” They go, rather, out of curiosity. Yet migration today is a potentially deadly endeavor.

In order to understand the continued lure of the United States for El Alberto’s youth despite dangerous border conditions, we must understand the full extent to which the
culture of migration has transformed the town. Young people’s desires and expectations reflect fields of possibility that have been shaped by over a generation of migration. Migration has transformed what members of different generations will or will not eat and what they will or will not wear. It has even changed what they consider to be food or clothing in the first place. Not only has it influenced the *habitus* of the place—that is, people’s culturally inculcated tastes, preferences, and sense of the possible—it has also transformed the physical makeup of their bodies (Bourdieu 2006). It has transformed people’s height and bone structure and the amount of pain that women feel in childbirth. It has subtly shifted what Bourdieu would call the *doxa* of the community, the body of assumptions and practices that are so deeply engrained that they lie beyond the realm of right and wrong. This is the challenge facing the Caminata: in order to change migration patterns, it must access the nexus where changing expectations and desires become matters of flesh and blood.

In a rapid-fire breakdown of earnings and expenses, a young man named Heriberto explained the tremendous temptation of U.S. dollars. Heriberto has never been to the United States, but says that he would like to obtain a master’s degree in order to work there as a teacher. The basic daily wage in Mexico, he explained, is about 150 pesos. About three years ago Heriberto worked as a quality inspector in a clothing factory. His job was to ensure that the products’ seams were in good order. He began work at eight in the morning and left at six in the evening, from Monday to Friday. Heriberto made 900 pesos, or $71 a week, which works out to about $14 for a 10-hour day. He recounts:
I spent 300 pesos a week on gas, so that leaves me with 600 pesos. And sometimes I would give my mom money, 100 or 200 pesos, so that leaves me with 400 pesos. And to go have fun on the weekend, at the dances, another 200 pesos. So that leaves me with 200 pesos for the week. And if I want to buy a pair of jeans, well, I have to work a whole week just to save enough to buy a pair of jeans. Or a shirt. So you see? You can't save anything. And to build a house, or buy a car? Forget about it.

Heriberto explains that many people go to the U.S. because there they can earn in two hours what they would earn in a whole day in Mexico. The trouble is that they underestimate how long it will take them to save money. Often people plan to return after one year once they have earned enough to build a house in Mexico. The year comes and goes, and they find that they have not met their goal. As they continue working, their needs and desires grow. Even after they return to Mexico, they are soon itching to return to the United States.

In the dynamic that Jean and John Comaroff refer to as “millennial capitalism,” the contemporary global economy presents itself as if it had a near-magical, salvific quality (2000). So far removed are sites of production from sites of consumption that one does not always see the grueling labor from which massive profits arise. Commodity fetishism is intensified by the culture industry and mass media. Money seems to appear out of thin air. As the possibility of instant wealth hovers tantalizingly close, magical, get-rich-quick schemes abound in churches and in the informal market alike. While some people benefit from global capitalism, the majority of the world’s population is blatantly excluded, even as their desire escalates for products that lay just out of reach. Millennial capitalism, the Comaroffs argue, “appears both to include and to marginalize in unanticipated ways; to produce desire and expectation on a global scale” (289).
There is indeed something magical in the attraction of *el norte* among young people from El Alberto today. In a common legend within the Valle del Mezquital, mountains occasionally open up to let forth animals and *nahuales*, or human-animal doubles. In hñähñu cosmology, mountains are the source of rain and other benevolent forces, and sometimes contain circulating currents of air or bodies of water that connect to the ocean (Garrett Ríos 2006:65). In the legend, animals and *nahuales* from inside the mountains travel to human settlements in order to lure young people back inside. Time passes differently inside than it does in the outside world. While a young person may feel that he or she has spent but several hours within the mountain, a year may have passed within the life of the town (Sanchez Vásquez 2003:239-40).

A place that contains hidden, potentially benevolent forces, to which the youth are lured; a place in which time passes differently than it does at home; a place that can only be accessed at certain times, by special guides: it requires little stretch of the imagination to note the parallel between the enchanted mountains of the legend and the enchantment of the United States today. Like the mountain of the legend, the North is a marvelous place that offers opportunities but also dangers. When young people emerge from the U.S., as from the fabled mountain, they find that their sense of time is out of sync with that of those they left behind. In a play on Psalm 121, a visiting pastor at a Pentecostal church in Phoenix captured the magical appeal of American dollars while speaking to a congregation which included a dozen or more immigrants from El Alberto. “Many people in Mexico say, ‘I lift up my eyes to *el norte*, from whence cometh
my help,’” he cried. “From the North comes my support! From the North comes my check! But then, when we’ve made it to the North, to where will we turn our eyes?"

**A Habitus of Migration**

Quoting Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Bourdieu writes that “we are no sooner acquainted with the impossibility of satisfying any desire than the desire itself vanishes” (2006:77). That is, we tend to desire only those things that we feel we have some chance at attaining. One’s sense of the possible is embodied in what Bourdieu calls the *habitus*, a set of dispositions that emerges out of a one’s embeddedness in a particular field of power and that in turn serves to structure the social environment. The *habitus*, as Bourdieu puts it, is “history turned into nature” (78).

In El Alberto today, young people’s attitudes toward migration have been shaped since birth through the course of myriad interactions with parents, aunts, uncles, siblings and friends. One’s sense of the possible, Bourdieu maintains, is far from a system of rational calculations. Rather, it is heavily influenced by early events, particularly within the realm of the family (78). Those who aspire to cross the border for the first time today follow in the path of relatives who first travelled north in days when INS agents turned a blind eye and employers waited with open arms. While migration may not, by rational calculations, be a safe option, it is still generally regarded as a possibility. The case of El Alberto supports Kandel and Massey’s (2002) findings on the “culture of migration” in Mexico. In a culture of migration, the authors explain, working in the United States becomes so commonplace that young people inherit the expectation that
they will one day migrate themselves. Kandel and Massey find that children born into families whose members have worked in the U.S. are indeed more likely to aspire to do so than those from families whose members who have not migrated.

Young people within El Alberto have inherited the notion that undocumented migration is a possible life path. While migration is in part a conscious choice, it is also something of a collective, embodied preference, forged of semi-conscious memories, expectations, and desires. It is this felt sense that the Caminata project seeks to work within and transform. In order to be effective, however, the Caminata must confront not only the desire to migrate, but also young people’s underlying assumptions about what it means to live a good life. To return to Bourdieu, generational conflicts occur when the habitus shifts to such a degree that people of different ages possess conflicting notions “of the impossible, the possible, and the probable” (78). As a result, members of a one age group come to “experience as natural or reasonable practices or aspirations which another group finds unthinkable” (78). As successive generations of people from El Alberto have sought a better life for their children through migration, their standard of living has transformed astronomically. Ways of life that once seemed impossible or unthinkable have become probable, just as ways of life that were once commonplace are rapidly fading from the realm of possibility.

A conversation with two women in the summer of 2009 provides a vivid illustration of how rapidly the standard of living in El Alberto has shifted. Recall Javier, the man who told of having accompanied his mother barefoot to Ixmiquilpan. On this day, I sat at the kitchen table in Javier’s house. Gloria, his 34 year old wife, sat to my right, and Alicia,
his 61-year old mother, sat to my left. Speaking in hñähñu, Alicia had begun to tell me about her childbirth experiences. Gloria translated to Spanish, weaving in stories from the births of her own children. Alicia had had eight children, three of whom died. The babies came out easily, she said; little pain. “Otho ra deje, otho ra sangre!” she exclaimed, mixing Spanish and hñähñu– no water, no blood. The births were “dry, dry.” Meanwhile, Gloria mentioned that her own first two births were at home, and everything got wet and bloody. “No, not for me!” continued her mother-in-law, in hñähñu. She gave birth to one baby alone, in the patio of the house. It came straight out, right into the dirt. Alicia laughed, remembering how a man was passing by and saw her. I asked whether it had hurt. “No, not much,” she replied. The labor “no tardó!” – “It didn’t take long!” she answered, slipping into Spanish. Other older women in El Alberto share similar stories. Some say that there was an herb that women used to take to help bring about the birth quickly from the time contractions started.

Javier and Gloria have four daughters whose ages ranged from 6 to 21 at the time we spoke. Gloria gave birth to their first two daughters at home. She had a third, a boy, who didn’t live. He was in the hospital for five months, “but something was wrong with him, he wouldn’t grow.” The younger two girls were born in hospitals in Mexico, by caesarian section. Gloria states that in contrast to her mother-in-law’s experience, her births were far from easy, far from painless. Although she herself has never been to the U.S., her birth stories indicate how rapidly a person’s notion of what a body can and ought to endure has shifted in the course of a generation. Today, traditional midwives are largely a thing of the past, and women tell me that giving birth in the hospital is the
norm. A mere 26 years lie between Javier’s mother and his wife, yet his mother’s body was accustomed to demands that women today, with access to hospitals and clinics, would scarcely dream of.

Changes have occurred not only across the generations, but also between older and younger siblings within a single family. Gloria says that her younger two daughters, age 6 and 12, will not eat quelite, nopales, and chile, but the two older daughters will. The younger girls prefer packaged food, such as yogurt, bread, sausage, and cheese. Javier recalls that he never had such things growing up. Asking for them was simply not an option, for there was not enough money. As I sat with a group of older men under a mesquite tree one day, they pointed to the mesquite pods that had fallen from the tree. One man told me that when he was young, one never would have seen such a thing: the children used to snap them up as soon as they fell to chew on them. The pods have a sweet, tangy flavor.

Recall Ramón’s claim that today people do not migrate out of necessity but rather to seek a higher standard of living. While migration began in response to genuine needs, it also gave rise to new desires, which in turn transformed what people have deemed necessary in order to live. We can catch the subtle redefinition of needs in the way people speak about food and clothing. Recall Cecilia, who used to cover her children up with strips of plastic when it rained. Cecilia states that migration has made it possible to buy food and clothing. Note that her category of “food” does not include the quelite and nopales that are native to this region, and her category of “clothing” does not include ropa de manta, the rough cotton clothing that people once sewed and
embroidered by hand. *Ropa de manta* and desert plants were simply second-place substitutes for the “real” food and clothing that one can obtain with money. I have heard others categorize food and clothing in a similar way. Agustín, a Catholic man in his fifties, explained that migration had been helpful because “people no longer suffer a lot like before.” In the past, “we didn’t even have anything to eat. We’d eat *salsa*, *quelite*, *nopales*, and now sometimes one can buy a piece of meat, more or less . . . . Yes, the life of the community has changed.”

People state that migration has made it possible for them to eat real food, unlike the weeds and cacti that they once had to subsist on. Change in diet involves more than preference. It has also transformed the structures of people’s bodies. On one occasion, I was having lunch with two older men in the community at a small restaurant. A girl of about 14 approached one of the cooks to grind a bucket of maize. The girl was tall and big-boned. When she left, one of the men observed that he could tell from her stature and her “elegant” clothing that she had been raised in the United States. Children who are raised in the United States, he explained, grow large because of the quality of the food there. “Here, we just eat tortillas. Here, you can eat all you want, and you don’t grow.”

Conklin and Morgan (1996) note that “North Americans recognize the social on the body . . . but they find it hard to see the social in the body, in the construction of the material, corporeal thing itself” (659). El Alberto residents’ reflections on the bodily effects of living on either side of the border suggest that they do indeed see the social within the body. Bodies grow differently depending on what side of the border they are
raised. Social and economic differences are lodged in the bones. Distinctions of taste, of what one will or will not eat, and of what one considers food in the first place, serve to subtly reinforce emerging class divides (Bourdieu 1984).

There is ambivalence, however, in people’s attitudes toward the foods of the past. The very people who lament their former need to eat quelites and nopales often admit in the next breath that the frugal diet was quite healthy. Cecilia herself went on to say that people who subsisted on quelites and nopales used to live until they were well over 100. In fact, she could think of two people who had lived until they were 120. Although it is unlikely that they alone provide sufficient nourishment, quelites and nopales are indeed quite nutritious, containing high levels of Vitamin A, Vitamin C, and iron. Now, with improved access to meat, processed foods, and soft drinks, diabetes and heart disease are on the rise. Moreover, the physical benefits of migration have not fallen evenly across the generations. With labor migration, the youth flourish: the teenaged girl raised in the United States stands tall above her El Alberto-born cousins. But the same cross-border life that has strengthened her frame has taken a toll on her parents’ generation, who spend their days not at school but toiling in construction, landscaping, and housecleaning. While the effects of migration upon the body have not all been positive, the negative effects are often clouded over by the consumer lifestyle that shapes the choice to migrate.

**Work, Survival, Living Well**

The lifestyle of migration has produced a shift in people’s sense of the possible, but not all of those transformations have been positive. For some, such as Ramón, the
difficulty of recent undocumented migration has been a catalyst for reevaluating what it means to live well. Ramón embraces the lifestyle of the past as an antidote to the quasi-magical lure of U.S. dollars. He explains that as a young man he initially did not want to travel to the U.S., but his brother continually urged him to join him there. Ramón finally complied, mostly out of curiosity. “But I tell you when I went there; in fact I wasn’t happy with it,” he explains, “because I earned less.” While he had earned “an average of $700 a week” in Mexico, in the U.S., “I earned an average of $200. The change was drastic for me, because what I earned there was very little.” And the work, he laughs, was harder. “I was working with a pick and shovel. And then I didn’t know how to speak English, and I couldn’t communicate.”

Ramón explains that although his earnings at first were lower in the U.S. than they had been in Mexico, “it wasn’t an offense for me. It was a way to learn for me, to learn to be in a place.” Not everyone has a similar mindset, however. “It’s just that many people hear that people work over there, you could say because money doubles itself, so they automatically think that they can obtain it very easily, but no, they also have to start from the bottom up.”

Ramón states that it is possible and indeed preferable to seek one’s livelihood in Mexico. He states that Mexico has the resources necessary to live independently. The only trouble is that “many times, human beings want to have what others have. Because of greed, you could say.” The importance of the Caminata project, he insists, is to help people realize that they no longer have to travel to the United States. Otherwise, “that’s always going to be their thinking, to have a better standard of living.
And like I tell you, they’re not going to have it if they don’t work. They have to work to have it. The same over there, as here.”

While some people in El Alberto claim that migration helped lift them out of ignorance, isolation, and impoverishment, Ramón insists that people have willingly subjected themselves to a different, more subtle type of impoverishment by engaging in migration. The trouble with working in the United States, he explains, is not simply that saving money takes longer than expected. The trouble is that one becomes locked into a cycle of work and consumption that gradually eats away at one’s vitality. As Ramón puts it:

A Mexican who emigrates from here to there, at the age of 50, physically he already looks really worn out. He looks worn out because he spends his whole life at work. Working, working . . . in the morning at work until the afternoon, and yes, he has everything that he wanted to have, a nice sofa, a nice house, a nice bed, some nice shoes, but he doesn’t notice that physically he wears himself out.

Ramón describes a moment of realization, in which the immigrant comes face to face with how he has spent his life. Although the case he describes is hypothetical, it is not hard to guess that the immigrant he describes is himself, or perhaps a future version of himself:

And if he stops to think, well, is the dream that he had really worth the effort, it’s there that he finally realizes. Notice, he goes along walking like this . . . . And he turns and he looks at himself, let’s say in a mirror, and says, ‘well, yes I had things, but physically I’m already worn out.’ And it’s like he doesn’t feel satisfaction, because maybe it’s just material, but instead what gives a human being pleasure is that they live to be 100 years old.

Living well, Ramón reflects, does not necessarily mean having nice things. What matters most is longevity and good health. If people lived unselfishly, if they sought
only what they needed, all would benefit: “We would be prolonging our life, as human beings, on the earth.”

Ramón’s reflections vividly illustrate the multiple levels of alienation experienced by wage-laborers in a capitalist system. In the double bind of commodity fetishism and alienation, a product grows in value only to the extent that the worker’s humanity is stripped away. As the worker expends his time and energy in creating things, Marx claims, “the poorer he himself—his inner world—becomes, the less belongs to him as his own” (1978:72). The thing produced, which ought to be an object of pride, an outward manifestation of time and energy well spent, confronts the worker from the outside as an autonomous and alien power.

Ramón states that although an immigrant buys “everything he wanted to have,” including good shoes and nice furniture, little does he realize that his body is slowly deteriorating. He expends great effort building houses so that one day he will have enough money to buy a house of his own. Yet the value his own labor instills in the product saps him of his own life force and leaves its mark upon his physique. As Marx puts it, “the better formed his product, the more deformed becomes the worker” (73).

Workers in capitalist systems are alienated not only from the products of their labor, but also from nature, or as Marx describes it, the “sensuous external world” (72). Nature is the stuff upon which labor acts and out of which things are made. It is also the source of life itself. The more people approach nature instrumentally, looking toward it as a mere source of raw materials that can be used to produce commodities, the more they lose sight of the fact that it is, in itself, the source of their most basic survival. We
arrive here at the opening quotation of this chapter. Ramón draws attention to the basic fact that “you have to work to survive, to eat.” He reminds us that “life is survival, nothing more.” He highlights the fundamental connection between work and survival that is too often lost from view within a wage labor system.

Ramón’s attention to survival runs deeper still, to the point where nature and the body are one. Drawing inspiration from those who came before him, he recalls:

People who lived very humbly, let’s say 60, 70 years ago, our grandparents, ate simple food, basic food. But they reached 70, 80, 90 years old. And they kept themselves healthy. There are about three people here who are about 100 years old. And for a human being to live 100 years . . . for me, that’s the most beautiful thing that the human being can achieve. To live a certain time.

Living unselfishly benefits both oneself and others. When one uses less of the earth’s resources, more remains for others. And by eating simple, natural food one is more likely to achieve that most “beautiful thing,” longevity.

Referencing the North American Free Trade Agreement, Ramón draws a distinct connection between unsustainable agricultural practices and the unsustainability of a migration system that draws people away from their place of origin. In Mexico, Ramón explains, “you still eat naturally. There are many natural things.” In the U.S., however, “the things they produce, they no longer give them the [proper] time. . . . It’s done by means of chemicals, fertilizers, to produce like this [snaps fingers]. So obviously it’s an abnormal process, abnormal. That’s not good.” Virtually in the same breath, Ramón states that international migration is, in the same manner, “a mistake.” It is a mistake because migrants are living “in the wrong place.” They leave their place of origin “in order to live better, let’s say, to have a nice sofa, a nice bed, a nice house. And yes,
they get it. But what is it that they’re eating? Is it good or bad?” he laughs. They eat processed foods, resulting in poor health. Some fall prey to cancer at age 40.

As Ramón’s words indicate, it has become increasingly difficult as a result of NAFTA to rely on small-scale agricultural practices. The choice to migrate, like the choice to use chemical fertilizers, is heavily structured by the state and capitalism. Ramón is not the only one to draw a connection between agricultural practices and human health. On one occasion, I spoke to a man in his eighties as he coaxed his herd of sheep and goats back into their pen. He said that life was easier in the past. “No, the plants we planted, we didn’t have to put medicine on them,” he explained. “Like tomatoes. They just grew. And now, everything we plant, it needs medicina. And the same with people: we hardly ever got sick! Now, you have to go to the doctor, you have to pay. No, it’s a bit difficult now.”

Marx reminds us that “man lives on nature—means that nature is his body, with which he must remain in continuous intercourse if he is not to die” (75). The connections these speakers draw between agriculture and human health are not simply metaphoric. Rather, they recognize that eating, working, and travelling are part of a single organic process. Just as chemical fertilizers produce rapid growth that ultimately robs the soil of its vitality, migrant labor produces short-term gain that takes a toll on people’s long-term health. Both cases are driven by a single principle: an accelerated expectation of productivity.

Recall the image of the magical mountain, within which time passes at a different pace than in the outside world. The lifestyle of migration is so deeply established that in
order to transform it, it will be necessary to curb people’s expectations for immediate results, and to cultivate patience. The Caminata project, Ramón explains, will take time:

Nothing is easy. Nothing can be obtained easily. . . . Obviously the results of [the Caminata] will not be instantaneous. Achieving a good standard of living will take a process. It will mean that those who are here now will have to work so that others will come after and will have that privilege, of having a better standard of living.

The goal of a Mexico free of labor migration is, at this point, only “a dream.” Yet Ramón insists that “when someone has a dream, and wants to realize it, it can be done.”

In the previous chapter we saw that the Caminata is, on one level, a response to the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border. While U.S. border enforcement officials inscribe a fixed notion of territory into the border soil, dividing human beings into classes of citizen and alien, the Caminata breaks apart fixed categorizations. It unsettles tourists, working through their bodies to create new spaces of solidarity. On another level, the Caminata is a medium for questioning the standard of comfort that those embedded in a lifestyle of migration have come to expect, and the measures they will take to achieve it. The enactment dramatizes the physical costs of the migration journey. It uses shock and embodied difficulty in attempt to break the reproductive cycle of U.S. migration. Its message is directed, in part, to the very actors who stage it. The town of El Alberto requires its young male residents to work in the Caminata as part of the year of unpaid service through which one gains full “citizenship” in the community. During the year of service, a given participant may participate in well over 50 border crossing reenactments. As the Caminatas are generally held on Saturday nights, participants must give up other forms of diversion and socialization. The town thus
inserts the Caminata at a crucial stage of young people’s lives, when many of them are contemplating making the journey to the United States.\(^5\)

The Caminata Nocturna is not the only system of collective, embodied practice that shapes people’s tastes, desires, and sense of the possible in El Alberto. Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, as the first internal migrants ventured beyond El Alberto and the town underwent a period of socioeconomic development, a wave of Pentecostal conversion transformed the religious and cultural life of the town. In the following chapter I explore how the changing religious landscape of El Alberto intersected with the rise of migration and development in the town. Pentecostal narratives and practices influence people’s ideas of the possible and their sense of what it means to live a good life. They do so in ways that at times lie in tension with the Caminata project.

\(^5\) The year of service remains a heavily gendered institution. Service requirements do not apply to women, with the exception of those who substitute for their husbands. However, some young women from El Alberto volunteer as guides and actors in the Caminata on an informal basis.
CHAPTER 4
“THIS RELIGION OPENED PEOPLE’S EYES:” PROTESTANT NARRATIVES OF
CONVERSION AND DEVELOPMENT

It is said that until about 1950 El Alberto was a savage town where nobody
entered for fear of being killed. In about 1960 a person by the name of
Jose Luis went to work as a *bracero* and brought back the evangelical
religion, and from that date forward the town allowed people to enter, and
their evolution began.

Thus begins a community study produced by the staff at El Alberto’s clinic in 2008
(Perez Aguilar 2008:1). While the image of progression from savagery to civilization
may appear extreme, the words in fact echo a narrative of progress I have heard, time
and again, in interviews and informal conversations with the town’s Pentecostal
residents. The late 1950’s through the late 1970’s were a crucial years of change for El
Alberto. Mexico as a whole underwent an economic boom as a result of the petroleum
industry, and the town’s first migrants travelled to Mexico City and beyond in search of
work. As more people in El Alberto learned Spanish, they engaged in greater and
greater interaction with government authorities, bringing schools, electricity, roads, and
drinking water into the community. As the reforms of Vatican II took effect, an
undercover process of religious change that had begun in the 1950’s swept the town in
a wave of evangelical Protestant conversion, and the traditional civil-religious hierarchy
was restructured into the secularized committee system that exists today.

Many evangelicals interpret religious conversion as the single most important
change that El Alberto town witnessed during the crucial decades of the town’s
development. None of the community’s present prosperity would have been possible, I
was repeatedly told, had it not been for religious change. Evangelicalism made people
stop drinking. It made them stop fighting. It made them think of “tomorrow,” channeling their time and resources into projects for the common good. Money from migration, many say, would have meant nothing had evangelicalism not given the people the sense to invest it well.

While individual conversion narratives are common business, Pentecostals in El Alberto tell conversion narratives about the town as a whole. They state that once mired in alcoholism, witchcraft, and poverty, the town now shines with sobriety, harmony and material abundance. Once scarcely populated, the community has grown well into the thousands with grandchildren on both sides of the border. Once a mere collection of cactus-walled huts, the town now hosts scores of concrete houses and a thriving ecotourism business. I have been told on more than one occasion that El Alberto’s material prosperity is a sign that the town has been “blessed by God.”

Evangelical narratives of the El Alberto’s conversion are powerful, for they root economic change and prosperity in divine will. They interpret the development process as a good path, a path that should continue. While the goal of this dissertation is to understand the role of religion in the migration process, the goal of this chapter is to explore how the rise of Pentecostalism in El Alberto was tied to a process of development that began well before the town’s first migrants set foot in the U.S. By exploring how Pentecostals themselves tell the story of their town’s development, we can learn something about how they imagine their own possibilities today. I draw here upon five formal conversion narratives in addition to dozens of informal conversations with Pentecostals over the course of three summers. In particular, I examine the story
of El Alberto's first Pentecostal pastor, a key player within the processes of religious change and socioeconomic development that took place in El Alberto in the 1960s and 1970s. Finally, I draw upon a historical study produced by the Iglesia Cristiana Independiente Pentecostés, the religious movement to which El Alberto’s two evangelical churches trace their origins.

**Pentecostal Narratives of the Past**

El Alberto’s oldest residents remember a past of poverty and isolation. Over 50 years ago, the town had no running water, no electricity, no roads, and no schools. What little food there was had to be gathered from the desert or coaxed forth from dry soil. Scarcely anyone spoke Spanish, and the town’s residents rarely ventured into Ixmiquilpan unless it was to sell the firewood they gathered or the baskets they wove from cactus fibers. Due to the language barrier, they were wary of outsiders who ventured into the town.

While Catholics and Protestants alike recall poverty and isolation in the past, Protestants are unique in that they interpret the past through a distinctly moral lens. As they tell it, El Alberto was once fraught with conflict. Alcoholism and witchcraft ran rampant, and Catholic *fiestas* led to murderous, drunken brawls. Indeed, the rejection of alcohol is a key identity marker for Pentecostals. Before the arrival of a water treatment system, the default beverage in El Alberto as in other communities of the Valle was *pulque*, a milky, mildly alcoholic drink made from maguey, or agave nectar. Everyone down to the youngest child drank *pulque* daily. In small quantities the drink has little effect, but some people, I have been told, would drink up to 20 liters a day.
For a desert population whose only water was obtained with great physical exertion, the maguey cactus with its sweet “honey water” and strong, fibrous leaves was literally a life-source. In hñähñu cosmology, the agave cactus is a central religious symbol, and pulque consumption is an integral part of religious ceremonies. Pentecostals reject the consumption of pulque as they reject alcohol consumption in general. Indeed, they often describe Catholic ritual as nearly synonymous with drinking. Some remember honoring the saints as little more than an excuse to “throw back a few cups.” One Pentecostal man in his late fifties remembers going to mass as a young adult with a group of friends who would drink all night long. Out of curiosity, the group began to attend the evangelical church. At first they would arrive drunk, but when the evangelical message resonated with this informant he continued on in earnest. The trouble with drinking, state, is that it leads to conflict. As a Pentecostal man in his seventies put it, “The thing about Catholic fiestas is that people would start drinking, and then they’d fight. Good friends, brother and brother, would start fighting.”

Open fighting was not the only form of conflict that evangelicals recall. If the people did not kill one another with knives and guns, they killed each other through witchcraft and sorcery. Don Tomás, a Pentecostal man who owns a landscaping company in Phoenix, remembers a childhood fraught with poverty and fear. He remembers sleeping on the leveled-off top of a large cactus covered in planks to escape the reach of roaming animals at night. As for religion, he remembers, “My dad was Catholic, but I didn’t know that Catholic church, no, no, no. . . . This town was drunk. Everyone, everyone used to kill one another. Lots of sorcery here.” Tomás remembers stumbling
upon acts of sorcery as a child. “When I used to pastor goats, and I’d be there in the path, . . . and then, 'Get out of the way, kid,' they’d say, . . . and they’d have something here, carrying it, I don’t know what they’d have, but they’d leave it up on the hilltop so that it would kill other people, they’d say.”

The current pastor of the Iglesia Betel confirmed that the town once contained many witches. They were responsible, he told me, for the deaths of many infants and children. As Nutini and Roberts (1993) have argued, “bloodsucking witches” are in fact one of the most common supernatural beings in Mesoamerican cosmology. Usually but not always women, they have the power to transform themselves into animals. In this form, they sneak into their victims’ sleeping chambers and steal the blood that they furiously crave. Today in El Alberto, fewer children die than in the past. While improved nutrition and medical care have much to do with this, some Pentecostals suggest that the deaths have declined because witchcraft in general has declined with the arrival of evangelicalism. While I will explore contemporary understandings of witchcraft more thoroughly in another chapter, for now it is worth noting that some Pentecostals interpret the low population of the past through a distinctly moral lens. Child mortality, as they see it, was an extension of the conflict and moral strife that characterized the town as a whole. As El Alberto’s first evangelical pastor explains, “How can I put it, the town was totally disorganized. Pure fighting. Here in El Dexthi [a neighborhood of El Alberto] there were just six people. Here in El Centro, there were seven houses. And in El Toxi, four little houses, that’s all. In El Camino, there were just four houses, too.”

The association between child mortality and the moral failings of the past can shed
light on the larger understanding of socioeconomic development within Pentecostal narratives. Evangelicals today often say that El Alberto has been “blessed by God,” that its prosperity is a direct result of moral changes in converts’ lives. As the comments about infant mortality suggest, the quest for prosperity may be rooted in something more basic than the accumulation of possessions. For a population that has long struggled to make a marginal living in a desert environment, often enduring hunger for days on end, the quest for advancement is an extension of basic survival goals such as clothing one’s children, providing enough food for all, and giving birth to babies who live.

Pentecostals incorporate indigenous witchcraft beliefs into their narratives about the past. Pentecostal narratives also incorporate indigenous concepts by contrasting the “dirtiness” of the past with the “cleanliness” of the present. I have heard Protestants, Catholics, and those who practice no form of Christianity utilize metaphors of cleanliness when speaking about morality and social relations. A non-church-goer who is well respected for his service to the town told me that it is better to be “clean” in all of one’s affairs—that is, to maintain respectful social relations—than to be clean within church walls alone. The man went on to speak of the importance of respecting animals and the natural world.

Pentecostals reinterpret indigenous concepts of “clean” and “unclean” through morally absolutist lenses. As Douglas (1966) demonstrates, concepts of purity and cleanliness serve to reinforce symbolic boundaries within a culture. That which is unclean is that which is disorderly or out of place. In individual conversion narratives, notions of “clean” and “unclean” serve to separate the speakers’ sinful past from his or
her present state of salvation. Likewise, narratives of the town’s conversion emphasize
the “dirtiness” of the collective past such that the collective present shines all the more.
Don Tomás remembers that the town’s Catholic church was once literally contaminated
with ritual trappings. As he puts it, “This church that you see is clean; it wasn’t like that
before. It was full of candles. It was dirty, dirty inside there. The chapels were full of—
something reeking there, everything reeking.” With the arrival of evangelicalism, “That
evil that had existed here was finally finished, everything here became clean.” The
church was purged of its excessive ritual accoutrements. Today, despite religious
differences, “We take care of it, very well, all of us go to clean there.”

Although Protestants are not the only people in El Alberto to criticize features of their
town’s past, their narratives are unique in that they bind the problems of the past into a
single moral system. One additional element of those narratives, however, remains to
be mentioned. It is an element that emerges in the conversion story of Don Cipriano,
the town’s first evangelical pastor and one of the earliest converts. What emerges in
Cipriano’s story is a distinct sense that El Alberto was once bound in unjust submission
to external, non-indigenous authorities, and that the Catholic fiesta system played a key
role that submission.

Cipriano’s tale begins with his memories as a young child in the late 1940s. At that
time, El Alberto’s four neighborhoods were more highly differentiated than they are
today. Each had a mayordomo who was responsible for making a certain contribution
to the town’s fiestas. One supplied the music; another, the mass; and another, the
carved wax decorations. The fourth would provide the “castle,” an elaborate tower
frame wired with colorful explosives. Castles or “castillos” are in common use today, and are a high point of the entertainment during Catholic festivals. Fireworks shoot from the top and sides or spin out in wheels, sending thunderous booms across the night to neighboring towns.

“But the saddest thing about it,” Cipriano remembers, “is that there was pure injustice. If someone—for example I’m a mayordomo. For lack of money, if I don’t fulfill what the town calls me to do . . . the authorities would have to come and tie me up!” If the person in charge of the castillo failed to generate the necessary funds, he would be tied to a tree all night in punishment. And if the person in charge of the music failed to provide it, he would be tied near the castle. When the fireworks began to explode, the unfortunate individual’s family members would lay a wet cloth on him to protect his skin from the sparks.

While Catholic fiestas are often explained as means of generating communitas, in Cipriano’s memory, a central symbol of the fiesta—the colorful and celebratory castle—becomes a torture device. When speaking of the fiesta Cipriano emphasizes not conviviality but coercion, not voluntary sacrifice but rather enforced compliance to repressive ritual obligations. Interestingly enough, he remembers the external, secular government as the driving force behind the punishment. In those days, the municipal government based in Ixmiquilpan was not concerned with indigenous people’s needs. “Just traditional fiestas, just traditional fiestas,” Cipriano recalls, “and so this community— we didn’t even have a road. Or light. Or water. Or— or a school!”
When public education finally arrived in El Alberto, the teachers had few qualms about using physical punishment. If one didn’t write what the teacher told one to write on the board, Cipriano continues, “the teacher would take out a knife, saying ‘bring a stick from outside.’” And they’d hit you, “and órale! Until there was nothing left of the stick.” Another punishment was to kneel on the ground until recess with a stone in each hand. “If you let a hand down, they’d knock you over.”

As Cipriano remembers, the realm of the market was no gentler than the realm of education. Before the arrival of irrigation, it was nearly impossible to grow enough food to support a family. People worked by collecting and selling firewood, or by making baskets and extracting maguey fiber for rope and coarsely woven cloth. They would leave before dawn to carry a load of goods three or so hours over rough terrain to Ixmiquilpan to sell, and would return late at night with corn and other supplies. Municipal authorities demanded a tax on every load. Those who did not pay risked having their wares confiscated, and those who complained were thrown in jail. “And it was hardest for the family,” Cipriano remembers. “Waiting and waiting, when will the man or woman come back home; well, how are they going to come home if they’re imprisoned? So the people [at home] were dying of hunger.”

Cipriano remembers Catholicism as an integral part of the structural injustices of the past. As alcohol kept people’s minds fogged, the fiesta system kept their energies bound in needless activity, preventing them for pressing for material change. Indeed, anti-Catholic discourse among evangelicals at times assumes a distinctly post-colonial form. As Tomás put it, “This religion, this Catholic religion, the Spaniards brought it as a
way to deceive a lot of people. I could tell you a little bit about that.” The Virgin of Guadalupe, he said, was a scheme to keep indigenous people bound under Spanish authority. The arrival of Protestantism, however, “opened people’s eyes,” in a similar dynamic to that described by practitioners of progressive Catholicism (Burdick 1996).

The Arrival of Pentecostalism in El Alberto

Isolated, impoverished, and conflict-ridden, bound into submission and ignorance by alcohol and an onerous *fiesta* system: this was the situation in which, as evangelicals tell it, the flames of the Pentecostal “fire from heaven” found ample fodder beginning in the early 1960s. Before examining the earliest conversions in El Alberto, however, I would like to take a step back to explore the rise of the Iglesia Cristiana Independiente Pentecostés (ICIP), the movement to which El Alberto’s two evangelical churches trace their roots. The origins of ICIP can be traced to Mexican migrants who encountered Protestantism while working in the U.S. in the early 1900s. They brought the new religion home, where it rapidly indigenized to become a Mexico-based organization that is today planting churches in the United States, Central America, and other parts of Mexico (Espinosa 1999). The story, as recounted by a former ICIP leader, (Ramírez 1972) is worth summarizing here, for it sheds light on the early relationship between labor migration, capitalist growth, and religious change in Mexico as a whole.

The story begins in the state of Jalisco in 1919 when a man named Andres Ornelas picked up an evangelical pamphlet while working in Arizona. Months later, after returning home and in a period of great emotional stress, Andres read the pamphlet and was deeply transformed. He sent away for more materials. Andres had a profound
desire to read the Bible, and started a school in his *rancho* to teach others to read and write. At one point he returned to Arizona to raise funds for the school. Meanwhile, Andres' brother Silvestre had fallen ill with silicosis from working in the mines. Knowing that Silvestre, influenced by “Bolshevik” doctrine, was plotting to kill the rich company owners in order to leave an inheritance for his children when he died, Andres wrote to him:

Silvestre! You and I have aspired to combat the empire of the rich who gathered their fortunes with the sweat of the workers, and without doubt some of our children will continue dragging the chain of the hateful slavery. You have exhausted your energies in the rough work of the mines to increase the company’s treasure, and I too go following your example, and within a short time I will be sick like you are now. You, with the scant savings of your work, bought a pistol of the best German brand, and with it you’ve taken 300 bullets with the goal of using it against the rich . . . now my brother, I invite you to accompany me in the new business that God has entrusted to me, and I desire with all my soul that you and I should unite our forces and resources to bring down another empire more harmful than that of the capitalists. This empire is the power of Rome that has invaded the whole world with its horrendous idolatry (26, my translation).

Silvestre soon converted, and the new faith healed the illness in his lungs. The two brothers eventually sought work in the mining city of Pachuca, Hidalgo. There they began to attend a Methodist church and, at a prayer meeting in a private home, came into contact with a man named Raymundo Nieto. Nieto had worked in Kansas during the early stirrings of Pentecostalism in Topeka. He taught the brothers about divine healing, speaking in tongues, and baptism of the Holy Spirit. Invigorated by these gifts of the Spirit, the three men founded the first church of what would become the Iglesia Cristiana Independiente Pentecostés (28).
The movement evolved, at one point fusing with the Iglesia Evangelica Independiente founded by Swiss missionary Axel Anderson in Mexico City. For the most part, however, the Pentecostal movement that reached Ixmiquilpan and then El Alberto was the fruit of the efforts of the Ornelas brothers and the charismatic Raymundo Nieto. The movement was transnational from the start. It was born of the sweat of migrants whose labor enriched the mining companies in Mexico and the U.S. southwest and whose travels brought them in contact with the flames of Pentecostalism that were leaping across the continent in the early years of the twentieth century. As we see in Andres’ letter to his brother, evangelical Protestantism found enthusiastic reception among laborers disillusioned by capitalist exploitation. The brothers were well aware of the injustices of the economy. As Andres grimly accepts, “without a doubt, some of our children will continue dragging the chain of the hateful slavery.” But rather than fight the powers of exploitation, they turned their aggression toward what they saw as a more formidable enemy: the Catholic Church, and set about winning their corner of Mexico for Protestantism.

Pentecostalism first arrived in Ixmiquilpan in the 1930’s. It was brought by one Prudencio Esquivel, who had, like the others, worked as a migrant in the North. Esquivel began holding services in private homes. In dialogue with Nieto and the Ornelas brothers, Esquivel went on to pastor Ixmiquilpan’s first Pentecostal church. Soon converts began to arrive from surrounding villages, often travelling in secrecy because of the widespread hostility they faced in their home communities. Some left
their communities altogether to live in Ixmiquilpan. A new Protestant neighborhood, the “Colonia Cristiana del Calvario,” came into being at the edge of the city (127).

As Garrett-Rios (2006) has noted, a theme of progress infuses insider accounts of El Calvario’s history. In Ramírez’s words, “the transformation that Christ was working in the believers was immediately visible, for in place of the maguey leaf huts they had had, they were building houses with cement blocks and concrete roofs” (127, my translation). Organized, productive labor and modern-style houses were seen as signs of divine agency, foreshadowing similar attitudes in El Alberto today. But Protestantism did no simply usher in a new individualistic lifestyle in the neighborhood. Rather, the people fused Protestantism with indigenous values and practices into a new experiment in communal living. For example, they held faenas, or traditional indigenous work parties, to build houses for each new family arrival.

Evangelicalism had already been established in Ixmiquilpan for several decades before the religion would make its first entrance in El Alberto. First the religion was brought to the neighborhood of El Dexthi by the bracero mentioned in the opening quotation of this chapter. A church was built and El Dexthi became a Protestant stronghold. The neighborhood later separated from El Alberto. Although I was unable to discover the reason for the separation, religious conflict likely played a role. Reports vary as to when exactly Protestantism arrived in El Alberto proper. The process was a gradual one that began undercover, escalated through the 1960s, and then came into the open with the establishment of the town’s first Protestant church in the 1970s.

El Alberto’s earliest Protestant converts were exposed to the religion not from
foreign missionaries, but rather from relatives, neighbors, and acquaintances in El Dexthi or Ixmiquilpan. In the dynamic described by Smilde (2007), conversion followed lines of kinship and other close association. That is, individuals converted as they became exposed to the new religion through those with whom they had the most frequent content. Usually, the chain of conversion can be traced back to someone who had at some time worked in the United States. Don Tomás, for example, tells us that his uncle converted after getting to know an evangelical man in Ixmiquilpan 1970s. As Tomás remembers, “He was living there, in the U.S. I don’t know what part, but the important thing is that he went to the U.S., he brought back the word of God.”

The earliest conversion story I gathered is that of Cipriano, the same speaker who shared his childhood memories of that Catholic fiesta system in the late 1940s. The tale begins when he was a young father in the early 1960s. At this time, no one from El Alberto had yet ventured to the U.S. in search of work, and labor migration to Mexico City was not yet well established. I relate Cipriano’s story in detail, for it vividly illustrates how illness and healing served as a focal point for larger social and religious transformations in El Alberto.

One day Cipriano’s year-and-a-half-old daughter fell ill. “And in that time,” he remembers, “there weren’t so many doctors as there are now. There were just doctors who used traditional medicine. Or natural medicine, from plants. And then, the sad thing is that there were lots of sorcerers. So the girl fell ill, and I went here, there, everywhere, looking for medicine. And I never found any. The moment arrived when the girl died for three days. Just her little heart– it kind of jumped. But her eyes were
completely closed. And then one day I said to my late wife, ‘what are we going to do with the girl? She’s already dead.’”

“I didn’t know what to do,” Cipriano continues, “where I could go for this girl, it made me sad to think that she would die, because her heart still jumped, jumped.” One day, however, Cipriano’s brother-in-law passed by on his way to El Dexthi.

“And if I bring the girl there with the evangelicals, do you believe that she will be healed?” Cipriano asked. The brother-in-law did not answer, for he knew that Cipriano had a tough character and was afraid to anger him. The brother-in-law took Cipriano directly to El Dexthi. Knowing Cipriano’s strong-willed reputation, the hermanos offered him pulque as a trick, hoping to convince him to attend their service later that evening. “But they didn’t know that I was there for that very reason!” he recalls. The hour of the service arrived, and Cipriano accepted their invitation. Although the hermanos sang, prayed, preached, and even applauded for him, Cipriano did not tell them why he had come. Afterwards, however, he told his sister of the child’s predicament.

“And why didn’t you say anything in the service?!” Cipriano’s sister exclaimed. She promptly sent out word, and soon “everyone arrived. Even those who hadn’t been at the service came. To see me. They started to pray.” During the first prayer, the girl remained deathly still. During the second prayer, however, “the girl opened her eyes. And she was looking at all those who were praying.” After about four prayers, the hermanos left, promising to return first thing the next day.

“And at about four in the morning,” Cipriano remembers, “the girl started to cry. She cried. But now she was speaking. I said, ‘what’s the matter, daughter?’ ‘I’m hungry,’
she says. And then my sister, hearing her crying, got up. . . . Well, my sister quickly warmed up some tortillas and some broth, and the girl ate perfectly well. And from then on I began to see the wonders that the Lord worked."

**Religious Conflict and Social Change**

Cipriano’s conversion sparked conflict which came to head in a confrontation with the village priest that marked a pivotal moment in El Alberto’s religious history. Unlike previous Pentecostals who had attempted to keep their worship secret, Cipriano broke the news by inviting the *hermanos* and the pastor from El Dextrhi to his house for a prayer service. His relatives were the first to find out. If Cipriano wanted to become evangelical, they told him, he may as well leave. A group of people went to the priest to complain.

“So they called me to a meeting,” Cipriano remembers. “Everyone was there, from the youngest to the oldest. Each with a stick in hand. Wanting to kill me. But I said I wanted to speak with the priest.” The priest, who was from Mexico City, asked Cipriano why he had converted. Cipriano turned the tables on the priest by asking him how long he had been a priest.

“Twelve years,” the father answered.

“And in those 12 years, how many liars, how many drunks, how many malcontents, and how many people have you changed?” Cipriano asked. “Not a single one,” the priest replied. “You, for example, you used to come here all the time— you’d just come here and drink and you never wanted to enter the church. Just as you did, many people are doing. They don’t want to come inside.”"
Cipriano proceeded to tell the priest about the changes God was working in his life. The priest congratulated Cipriano and claimed that he himself would convert if what Cipriano said was true. But the town was incensed by the priest’s laxity. They ran him off, saying, “We don’t want to see him here, because he’s going to contaminate our church!” The priest told the people that he was leaving them the money, clothes and books that he had been keeping in the church. “If you need it, it’s yours,” he said. And he took off.

In Cipriano’s version the town ran the priest off because he was too soft on Protestants. Don Adolfo, another Pentecostal who would have been a young child at the time, remembers things differently. In his version, the confrontation happened in the 1970s, and the priest at the time was German. The town ran the priest off because he in fact condemned Protestantism, and the people refused to allow an external authority to dictate their religious choices. In this version, the priest vengefully seized the Catholic church’s images as he fled. Multiple sources confirm that the church’s most ancient and valuable images have been lost.

Regardless of which version of the confrontation is most accurate, both highlight El Alberto residents’ fierce commitment to taking matters of governance into their own hands. As Protestants and Catholics alike tell it, the period of religious conflict was a bitter test from which the town emerged stronger and more unified. The town’s civil-religious hierarchy was restructured into a committee-based government in which Catholics and Protestants served side by side on common projects. It was decided that
the new town government would set aside an equal amount of funds for each church’s yearly festival.

As Cipriano tells it, religious harmony was not so quick in the making. At first, the people blamed him for the priest’s departure and plotted to have him killed. Cipriano’s assassin found him one day when he was walking in a remote canyon. The man had come to kill him, he said, to prevent him from “infecting everyone else” with evangelicalism.

“I had a pistol,” Cipriano remembers, “and I had a bible that someone had given me. I took out the bible in my hand, and I took out the pistol. And then ‘which do you prefer?’” Cipriano’s attacker begged him to spare him his life. Cipriano sent four warning shots in the air. The killer left, trembling. “And from then on, I defeated the enemy,” Cipriano concludes. Time passed, Cipriano’s cousin became delegado, and his position gradually improved within the town.

As Pentecostals tell it, the benefits of Protestant thrift and organization became increasingly apparent as religious conflict was overcome and evangelicals gained a foothold in local politics. We can see the narrative of progress within Cipriano’s tale of his first years as a pastor. Cipriano was required to attend pastors’ meetings outside of the town. Through these meetings he forged connections between his home congregation and a growing Protestant network that offered an alternative to the system of authority embedded in the old political-religious system. “There were about 25 churches,” he remembers, “that were really far away. And I had to go on foot. But one day I began to pray with my wife, I tell her ‘you know what, help me pray. Hopefully one
day I'll get money to buy at least a bicycle.” Eventually a fellow hermano in Progreso gave Cipriano a bike, saying, “If it's for God, hermano . . . there's no problem. Choose the bike you want, and take it.”

Cipriano continued on with the bicycle for some time. He would leave home at 5 in the morning and make it to the meetings by 10. Each meeting would be followed by a worship service ending as late as 11 at night. Following the service, Cipriano would begin the long ride home, often arriving after four in the morning. Later he managed to buy a horse, and eventually, a car.

Cipriano’s story is one of slowly getting ahead through perseverance, personal connections, and carefully focused prayer. His religious efforts extended into his civic and political activities. As he puts it, “when the people saw that I was concerned with the things of the town, and not just the things of God . . . they started to respect me.” He claims that becoming Protestant helped him to establish strategic alliances with outsiders and thus help El Alberto move forward as a whole. First, Cipriano befriended the municipal president. Later, he worked with a friend who was involved with the Patrimonio Indígena del Valle del Mezquital (PIVM) and had connections with the governor of the state. The friend trusted Cipriano, he said, because he was Protestant and didn't drink. He took Cipriano to Mexico City to meet with government officials and solicit funds for projects. “So we start to work, I started to organize the people, I say ‘you know what, stop drinking, we're going to work.’ And from then on we began, little by little.”
While Cipriano remembers El Alberto’s development process through the lens of his own religious odyssey, Pastor Isaías, the current pastor of Iglesia Sinai, tells a slightly different variation. At first, he notes, Protestant converts were brutally threatened by Catholics in the town. The evangelicals appealed to the municipality for help, and the municipality stood behind them. When the Catholics did not succeed in kicking out the evangelicals, they decided, out of spite, to appoint a Protestant as delegado each year. The move was originally intended as a leveling mechanism, for the leadership position demands a year of unpaid work. Once in charge, however, the Protestants turned punishment into opportunity, soliciting drinking water, electricity, roads, and other development projects.

Protestants did not do away with the old governing system altogether. Rather, they transformed it from within and redefined its priorities. The old ethic of self-sacrifice to the group remained strong. What changed was what they would and would not apply their time, money, and energy to. As Pastor Isaías tells it, Protestants did not oppose making contributions to the common good. What they opposed was the superfluous expense of Catholic fiestas. They chose to channel collective resources into practical projects that would move the town forward.

Like other evangelicals I interviewed, Isaías affirms that the changes that we see today in El Alberto would not have been possible without the arrival of Protestantism. Even U.S. migration would have done little to improve the town’s material circumstances had Protestant thrift and sobriety not guided people to invest their wages well. As Tomás affirms, “The changes are because of religion. The word of God that
came here—it changed us.” Protestantism, he claims, “opened people’s eyes. Those who thought of today, now think of tomorrow. So then that sense of organization began, of working together.”

Protestants in El Alberto draw a strong causal link between evangelical conversion and socioeconomic development. In their eyes, Protestantism has been a central force helping the town to move out of isolation and poverty and into a new state of prosperity and connection with the outside world. Once immersed in conflict and witchcraft, the town is now characterized by harmony. Once bound in submission to outside authorities through unjust taxes and an oppressive Catholic ritual system, the town has thrown off external control and repositioned itself within political networks that extend well beyond the local level.

The Protestant narrative of progress is powerful and pervasive in El Alberto. But it is not the only narrative. Catholics and persons who profess no religious belief tell a different story of those crucial decades of religious change and socioeconomic development. The name of one figure emerged repeatedly in my interviews with non-Protestants. That figure was Eulogio Barrera, a man who, in the early 1970’s, served as El Alberto’s small properties representative. Barrera introduced a land reform that changed the system of labor within the community and encouraged people to work together as never before. These informants attribute the town’s prosperity, in large part, to Barrera’s leadership. Ironically, Barrera was Catholic, and alcoholism brought him to an early death.
Conversion, Development, and Indigenous Religiosity

I explore non-Pentecostal accounts of the emergence of the collective labor system in more detail in the following chapter. What I wish to do here is to analyze the relationship between Pentecostalism and social change in El Alberto in light of theories on conversion in Latin America in general, as well as theories that focus on conversion among indigenous communities in Mexico. Protestant growth in Latin America is frequently attributed to the disruption in the social fabric brought about by economic change and, in particular, capitalist development. In his foundational study, Willems (1967) explained conversion as a response to the state of anomie generated by industrialization, urbanization, and migration (256). In a similar vein, Lalive D'Epinay (1968) argued that Pentecostalism in Chile reproduces the sense of security and close community of the hacienda system within urban environments. Rather than represent a break with popular religion, Lalive D'Epinay argues, Pentecostalism reforms popular religious cultures and adapts them to a new context. David Martin (1990) argues that Protestant growth flourishes as Catholicism loses its monopolistic hold on society, generating new “free social space” (28), and Dow and Sandstrom (2001) claim that Protestant growth in Mesoamerica is “systematically linked” to global capitalist penetration in the region (xi). Dow suggests that evangelical Protestantism is particularly appealing to indigenous communities, for it helps clear the way for market expansion by challenging the authority of traditional civil-religious hierarchies.

Whether scholars see Protestant growth a reaction to or a driving variable of social change, most tend to agree that Protestant conversion is tied at some level to people's
growing participation in a capitalist economy. Protestant growth in El Alberto has indeed gone hand in hand with profound changes in the town’s level of interaction with the surrounding economic system. As the case of Andres and Silvestre Ornelas suggests, conversion in El Alberto was part of a larger process of religious change that swept the nation as migrants travelled to work in an expanding market economy. It would not be difficult to make a Marxist analysis of the Ornelas brothers’ conversion. Their lungs literally blackened by the soot of the mines, the brothers begin to cry out in protest but in the final moment channel their woes into a new religion that allows them to cry out in unknown languages and call upon the power of a Spirit that heals. But it would be insufficient to see Pentecostalism as an opiate or a blindfold that obscures the causes of their impoverishment from view. Well aware of their oppression in the mines, Andres and Silvestre embrace evangelical Protestantism because it gives them something new and takes their lives in new directions. It is the energetic, proactive nature of conversion that we must keep in mind while attempting to analyze religious change in El Alberto.

Willems has argued that Protestant conversion and socioeconomic change do not involve a simple, one-way causality. Although Protestantism helps people adapt to “a series of highly disruptive changes” that they cannot control any other means, religion is not only a reflection of but also a driving force in social change (256). Willems states that Protestantism is initially a by-product of structural changes in society. As the religion grows stronger, however, it causes additional social change. Those changes in turn reinforce Protestant growth (13). The multi-directional causation Willems describes
is similar to the “elective affinity” that Max Weber (1958) noted between the Protestant ethic and the rise of capitalism.

We can see the dynamic of mutual reinforcement between religious change and social transformation within El Alberto. Although evangelical Protestantism was originally introduced into the region through return migrants, conversion preceded widespread migration by some time. The initial converts were not, from what I was able to gather in interviews, struggling to regain a firm footing in the midst of a state of anomie. Rather, what the earliest converts describe is a sense of struggling within a deeply entrenched social system that was too limiting, too coercive, too trapped in the rituals and power structures of the past to allow them to move ahead. They turned to Pentecostalism precisely as the state-sponsored policy of indigenismo was introducing new development projects and new figures of authority into the rural communities of the region (Chance 1990).

Martin (1990) might argue that Pentecostalism worked itself into the spaces of a faltering Catholic civil-religious hierarchy to expand “free social space” and generate “new concepts of self and new models of initiative and voluntary organization” (284). Protestants in El Alberto have indeed rejected the centralized control of municipal and Catholic authorities. However, evangelical Protestantism did not rush in to a vacuum left in the wake of a crumbling religious system. Rather, change was worked out through struggle and conflict. In order to better understand what made Protestantism so worth the effort for people in El Alberto, I turn to the observations of Dow and
Sandstrom, who examined conversion within indigenous societies in Mexico and Central America.

Dow and Sandstrom argue that Protestantism in Latin America serves to “overthrow orthodoxy rooted in the colonial past,” offering people new identities in the midst of a changing economy (xi). Dow suggests that Protestantism has been especially popular among indigenous populations. He refers, in particular, to the Mesoamerican cargo system, in which people gain prestige in exchange for carrying out expensive obligations such as festival sponsorship. Remove the moral and religious meaning behind those obligations, and new opportunities for individual advancement emerge. Dow argues that “a civil-religious hierarchy is anathema to capitalist entrepreneurship,” for it prevents people from accumulating and investing wealth (17). By providing an alternate source of moral authority, Protestantism promotes economic change (18).

Religious conflict in El Alberto did indeed prompt a whole-scale restructuring of the town’s governing system. But the tension between Catholic and Protestant attitudes toward progress should not be overdrawn. Protestantism did not necessarily usher in a capitalist mentality of individual accumulation at the expense of an older, communal social system. Rather, the town’s residents have incorporated new values and new visions into their long-standing indigenous ethic of self-sacrifice and collective labor. In order to fully understand this shift, it may help to take a closer look at the role of illness and spiritual healing within the early conversion stories.

For the most part, early conversion stories follow a common pattern. Someone falls ill, often from witchcraft. The family tries all available remedies to save the individual,
including herbal remedies, shamans, and Western medicine. As a last resort, the desperate family seeks the help from the hermanos whom, they have heard, know a new and powerful way to heal. The ill person and his or her family members convert when the Pentecostal prayers prove effective. As conversions spark resentment and social conflict, this conflict contributes to additional cases of illness, and the chain of conversion continues. Don Tomás, for example, remembers that as the number of Protestants grew in the seventies, “the others wanted to kill us; the people here didn’t like evangelicalism. . . . because they said we were demons, because we were speaking the word of God.” Tomás’s father wanted to kill his newly converted Protestant cousin. But then Tomás’s father himself fell ill, and the family brought him to the evangelicals. “And my dad was healed. He was healed, and there he is to this day. He’s 80, 87 years old, and you’d never know it.”

The earliest conversions arose out of indigenous Mesoamerican understandings of illness and healing, in which conflict and disharmony in the larger social world find expression within the physical body. As Sandstrom has shown, Mesoamerican societies place a high value on maintaining respect for all things. Lack of respect leads to disharmony. Religious rites aim to restore harmony between humans and the natural world. Rites ensure that people will continue to receive the “normal flow” of spiritual and material benefits from the cosmos (267). In hñähñu cosmology, as within Mesoamerican cosmology in general, the body is permeable to external forces. While some illnesses have natural causes and can be cured with herbs and Western
medicine, others are of supernatural origin. Shamanic healing works by identifying the source of the illness and restoring harmony.

While many of the early converts sought Pentecostal faith healing after falling victim to witchcraft, others wrestled with disharmony in different ways. We can see the core value of harmony close beneath the surface of Consuelo’s conversion story. Consuelo, who was in her late eighties at the time of the interview, converted when her evangelical relatives’ fervent prayers helped ease the symptoms of an illness that had left her nearly crippled. She had a dream shortly after her conversion. At that time Consuelo’s son was Protestant, but her husband was not. She related the dream to me in hñähñu, and her son translated it as follows:

She had a dream here, here where [a neighbor’s] land is. . . . She was up there standing like this, and my father was pulling her down, and I was pulling her hand . . . like I wouldn’t let her fall downward. Like when one doesn’t believe in God entirely. One agrees, the other doesn’t agree. That’s when one is balancing. Balancing. And then once everyone believes in God across equally, the sick are healed quickly. It’s like having a single plan, one single hope. When the whole household loves God.

Harmony emerges almost as an active force within this narrative, a force that has the power to heal. When all believe in God the same way, Consuelo’s son translates, “the sick are healed quickly.” We see the power of unity yet again in Cipriano’s story of his daughter’s healing. He tells us that “everyone arrived. Even those who hadn’t been at the service came. To see me.” Nothing could heal the girl but the power of the hermanos’ united efforts to invite the power of the Holy Spirit into their midst.

The early Pentecostal faith healings built upon a specific Mesoamerican tradition in which conflict in the larger social and spiritual environment plays out in people’s flesh
and blood. The earliest converts responded to the same visceral necessity of restoring harmony that had long prompted their parents and grandparents to engage in shamanic healing and rites of reciprocity with human and other-than-human persons. However, they responded to that need in a new way: by rejecting intermediaries and using group prayer to call upon the immediate, efficacious intervention of an all-powerful God. Harmony still mattered, but it is sought through the “single path” and “single plan” of Protestant salvation.

Just as individual conversion transforms one’s way of being in the world, the town’s “conversion” has, in evangelical eyes, transformed the town’s way of being in the world. From the darkness, inner conflict, and drunkenness of the past, evangelicals claim, the town has emerged enlightened, cooperative, and free of the coercive obligations of the Catholic fiesta system. Pentecostalism, as we will see, helps instill individual migrants with a sense of protection and possibility as they venture across the border to the United States. Yet the religious landscape in which they are embedded is characterized by far more than an individualistic ethos of self-advancement. The old relationships of reciprocity with non-human actors are indeed retreating from view as strategic alliances with external economic and political actors take hold. Yet people still cultivate indigenous ideals of harmony and respect. What has emerged is a group vision in which the town as a whole is the unit of competition within the capitalist economy. The old energies of self-sacrifice for religious fiestas are now applied toward the sustainable development and ecotourism projects of which the Caminata Nocturna is a part.
The “Protestant ethic,” if such a thing exists, has been applied in El Alberto toward the shared goal of making this place, this set of human relationships, thrive and continue within a changing economy. As Wright (2009) describes in the case of sustainable development efforts among Baniwa evangelicals in the Northwest Amazon, the universal discourse of Protestant salvation has been harnessed in ways that contribute to the preservation of local, indigenous traditions (233). Such processes, however, rarely occur without conflict. In the case of the Baniwa, Western ideals of economic success have clashed with indigenous notions of reciprocity and human-nature relationships, resulting in witchcraft accusations against project leaders. In the case of El Alberto, new notions of witchcraft and sorcery have emerged in response to perceived threats within the global economy. I will explore alternate Pentecostal visions of the dangerous underside of migration and development later on. First, let us take a closer look at the system of collective labor out of which the Caminata project has emerged.
Don Beto

During the start of each Caminata, the guides tell the tourists the story of don Beto, legendary founder of El Alberto. Years ago, the tale goes, the town of El Alberto was little more than a few huts in the sticks. There were no roads, no running water—“ni padres ni madres.” Folks went barefoot. They scarcely saw anyone from the outside. Yet there lived in the hills a man named don Beto who would offer water, food, and a place to rest to those passing through. While the tale of don Beto is shrouded in the same poverty and isolation that we find in the Pentecostal narratives of conversion and development, the story depicts not conflict but rather a seed of harmony within that early poverty. Don Beto is an ideal first citizen whose selfless love undergirds El Alberto’s collective labor system and inspires the hospitality shown to tourists today.

“Many will ask themselves, ‘who is don Beto?’” asked the guide Poncho at the start of a Caminata. “Don Beto is the classic character who gave us our cultural and historical identity. . . . He tells us, ‘you have to be honest. You have to be sincere, you have to be of your word, and you have to be de bigote,’” that is, “of one’s mustache.” In the past, Poncho explained, “a funny way to make a promise was to pull out a mustache hair. When you pull out a mustache hair, what happens? It hurts! So it’s like giving your word. . . . It’s an agreement, you have to fulfill it.” Like don Beto, the guide explained, Mexicans must be “de bigote.” He suggested that residents of El Alberto must struggle to overcome the stories that have been told about them as savage, ignorant “Indians” by drawing their heritage of self-sacrifice and reciprocity to the fore.
Similarly, citizens of Mexico as a whole must overcome the country’s reputation of crime and corruption by fostering sincerity and brotherhood.

At first I was skeptical of don Beto. Surely the mustache-toting founder figure was little more than an anecdote invented for tourists. In initial interviews I was told that character is indeed rooted in local tradition. Raymundo, a Catholic man in his fifties, claimed that don Beto and the patron saint of the community are one and the same. Tourists listen to the story of don Beto while El Alberto Magno, his green-robed namesake, sits silently nearby within the Catholic church.

Cortés Rivera and Martínez Torres (2007) report that, according to legend, El Alberto received its name from an enigmatic man named Alberto who offered help to travelers. He was so benevolent that he would even appear to people in need and offer them assistance after his death (46). Adolfo, an evangelical of about the same age, expanded upon this explanation. More than a patron saint, Adolfo explained, don Beto was a real person. When I asked him whether Catholics and Protestants alike share this view, he answered that they do, for “it has nothing to do with religion. It’s our past.” Adolfo explains that the town was founded not by don Beto alone but also by his wife doña Chona and his sister-in-law doña Petra. These individuals lived “long ago. In the beginning. Before the church was here—thousands of years ago."

In the Caminata, the guides shroud the origins of don Beto in mystery. Poncho tells tourists:

Don Beto is a real character . . . but [with] a disconcerting story. Death took him by surprise, but he came back from the other side to leave us something very important. Perhaps many won’t be able to understand it, for it’s a marvelous thing we have, the ability to create tradition.
By alluding to the marvelous “ability to create tradition,” Poncho suggests that don Beto exists in the realm of efficacious fiction. My suspicions were confirmed one night as I helped a woman make desserts for a visit from the Secretary of Tourism. While the meal would consist of traditional fare, she wanted the dessert to be creative, fusing local products with global cuisine. We devised cheesecake with prickly pear topping and chocolate cake with pomegranate icing.

“We’ll tell them it’s an original recipe from don Beto’s wife,” I joked as I spread the fuchsia icing on the cake.

“Oh, now you’re catching on,” she laughed. “That it’s all made up.”

Don Beto is no ancient founder figure. He was concocted six years ago at the start of the Caminata. In part, the joke was on me. The more I sought to learn about don Beto in interviews, the more informants used my questions as an opportunity to elaborate upon their newly formed legend. When Adolfo, Poncho, and others speak of don Beto, however, their animate, joyful creativity suggests that the story is no lie. There is something deeper to don Beto than a mere tourist show. For Adolfo, that “something deeper” is his desire to teach the town’s youth the value of hard work. Adolfo has a strong personal motivation for the Caminata project: his son has battled drug and alcohol addiction in the United States. Don Beto embodies a genuine tradition of values that Adolfo and others embrace as a solution to the social dislocation facing young people today.

Like a patron saint, don Beto is a symbol through which the town’s collective identity is given tangible expression. Unlike a patron saint, he has no explicit religious
significance and is thus shared by the Catholics and Protestants alike who, tongue only partially in cheek, seek to engage tourists in their “Mexican Dream.” Although he is invented, the qualities of honesty, sincerity, and self-sacrifice that don Beto embodies are real. He represents a culture of work that runs deep in El Alberto and is stronger, some say, than religious difference.

This chapter is about work and community. More specifically, it is about the system of collective labor that don Beto represents. I explore how that system emerged and how it contributes to the ongoing construction of El Alberto as a community in the midst of labor migration today. For residents of El Alberto, as for other indigenous communities in the Valle de Mezquital, the town of origin is a key locus of identity. By participating in various forms of shared labor, people establish ties of reciprocity and promote an ideal of harmony as they are molded as “citizens” and earn the benefits of community membership.

While some scholars have proposed that we look beyond models of community to best understand the experience of transnational migrants (Rouse 2002; Glick-Schiller 1999), I argue that the community is a powerful point of mediation affecting indigenous migrant experience. The communal labor system in El Alberto profoundly shapes and restricts the possibilities available to migrants, for it requires that those living and working in the United States leave behind their employment and often their families for one or several years at a time to fulfill service posts at home. Some migrants embrace the communal ethic embodied in the figure of don Beto and the Caminata project. They look to collective labor as a redemptive antidote to the individualism, materialism, and
unsustainability of the work that they have experienced first-hand in the United States. Others regard the labor system as unduly coercive and restrictive. They argue that the system places unnecessary strain on themselves and their families as they face a grim labor market and uncertain legal future in the United States.

“Un Pueblo Unido”

As Olivar Vega et al. maintain, the community is the “primary marker of identification” among the hñähñnu of the Valle de Mezquital. It is the site where ties of reciprocity are forged and the center through which people define themselves against others (2005:189). Galinier notes that in years past the hñähñnu village was, in popular conversation, “the 'center of the world'” (1987:42). In my observations the comunidad takes precedence over ethnic identity. For some, it also takes precedence over religious identity.

Residents of El Alberto frequently stress that they are “un pueblo unido,” a united town. Without being prompted in interviews, people state that the town as a whole values harmony, peace, and cooperation. Although residents of El Alberto are not immune to internal conflict, the face that they present to the outside world is strikingly unified. They state that it is the practice of labor, in particular, that binds them together.

While Pentecostals tend to cite religious change as the crucial variable that made today’s state of harmony possible, Catholics and other non-Pentecostals tell the story differently. Rather than draw a strong moral distinction between public life in the past and present, they recognize that an ethic of collective participation has long existed.
They emphasize the agency of a few key actors who channeled and redirected that ethic by reorganizing the way land and labor were managed.

While El Alberto’s first Pentecostal pastor remembers an onerous and coercive Catholic *fiesta* system, Agustín, a Catholic man in his fifties, remembers the festivals as part of a rich cultural heritage that is being lost. In the past, Agustín explains, “people put on four or five *fiestas* a year . . . and it was nice. They’d bring a band . . . or trios! And yes, there was a lot of atmosphere, people celebrated a lot of things . . . they do now too, but it’s not like before.” Today, as a result of religious change, “the culture doesn’t work like it worked before.” People are still bound together, however, through work: “When there’s work in the community, we work together, across the board.”

Lucita, A Catholic pastoral worker, offers a crucial Catholic perspective on religious conflict in El Alberto’s past. Lucita is not a resident of El Alberto. Based in Ixmiquilpan, she was part of a pastoral team active in the town in the 1980s. Lucia told me the story of religious change in El Alberto as related to her by various Catholics over the years. As she understands it, when Catholics in El Alberto reacted negatively to the presence of the first Pentecostals, the evangelicals responded with aggression of their own. They attacked Catholics by harming their religious images and interfering with their rites. During the festival of the Santa Cruz evangelicals followed behind the Catholics and taunted them as they carried the large wooden crosses through the town.

As a result of religious conflict, the Catholics fell ill. They were spiritually sick, Lucita explains. Although Lucita does not mention sorcery, note the parallel to the illness that prompted the earliest Pentecostal conversions in El Alberto. As we saw in the previous
chapter, some Catholics who at first condemned evangelicals later fell ill and turned to Pentecostal faith healing as a last resort. As Lucita tells the story, evangelical conversion was not the only solution to spiritual malaise. The concerned priest sent for missionaries and doctors to strengthen the people and teach them practical skills. With a strong dose of encouragement from the outside world, the Catholics decided to put religious conflict behind them. As within the Pentecostal narratives of the past, Lucita holds that El Alberto passed through a period of religious conflict so bitter that it manifested in physical illness. As in Pentecostal narratives, Lucita recalls that the town emerged from that period of conflict stronger, more harmonious, and committed to moving forward. The town's members called a General Assembly, transformed the town government system, and compiled a document, still in use today, stating the rules of the community.

Agustín traces the current labor structure of El Alberto to 1970. Before then, “[people] worked, but they didn’t work in such a unified way as they do now.” This was due, in part, to poverty. “[One] wouldn’t have money for even for one’s own expenses, but there we’d be.” Although an ethic of collective participation was in place, the strain of poverty kept people from fully exploiting that system’s potential. Things began to change, Agustín notes, as migration brought more resources to the community. While migration often produces inequality and tension, Agustín recalls that it introduced the minimum level of material well-being necessary for collective labor to be effective. The most crucial change in the community, however, came through the organizing efforts of Eulogio Barrera. In the past, people in El Alberto participated in collective labor, but
only in their respective neighborhoods. Agustín remembers that Barrera “had a lot of
courage, a great deal of strength for the community.” During his three-year position, he
“lifted up the community! Yes, it cost him work to do it. But yes, he managed to unite
the people.” Although he passed away, Barrera is survived by his brother Leonardo, who is “working hard right now too with the problems that exist.”

Don Leonardo identifies as neither Catholic nor Protestant. Well respected in El
Alberto for his service to the community, Leonardo attributes his own efforts in part to
“my father’s heritage—my father was very active in the community.” As one of the
earliest people in El Alberto to learn Spanish, Leonardo’s father was a crucial player
who helped others by serving as a translator in external legal matters and business
dealings. Later, Leonardo’s brother Eulogio took up the torch. As Leonardo puts it,
“from 1970 and before, there was no authority to unite people . . . there was no
electricity, no roads, no school, nothing! . . . So he organized the people, and started to
visit government offices to ask for services, and through all of that, united people . . .
evangelicals, Catholics, everyone.”

Leonardo confirms that don Beto is a legend of recent origins. Yet the essence of
his character, the spirit of self-sacrifice that he represents, is real. Leonardo explains
that working together is “something that we’ve been left with as an inheritance, to
participate—that heart, that mentality, of not abandoning the town. [Working together] is
a culture that we already have, that we can’t leave behind.” His words are echoed by
Protestants and Catholics alike. Agustín, a Catholic, states that “what we want here is
peace! Tranquility. Respect is what matters more than anything else.” The pastor of
the Iglesia Betel states that “we love each other. And we’re fighting for that love. . . . So that that harmony isn’t lost . . . . It’s an inheritance that keeps getting passed on, from generation to generation.”

People from all religious backgrounds stress the importance of harmony and respect. Their words suggest that the ethic of collective participation runs deeper than religion, for it is grounded in ties of kinship. Paraphrasing the words of a prominent Catholic leader in the town, Agustín says, “there’s no distinction between us. We’re all human. We’re all flesh and blood. And we’ve been born in one single crib. Why? Because we’re in the same community.” Agustín states that people should not fight, because “all of us have one single father, one single mother in the world. One single God, one single Virgin, apparently—that’s how I understand it.” Although Agustín disagrees with evangelicals regarding the centrality of the Virgin, he speaks of them by placing their own kinship term for themselves in the affectionate diminutive form. In Catholic festivals today, he explains, “even the hermanitos (little brothers) visit us, and we visit them. We live and share with one another. . . . There’s no distinction.”

The *Comunidad* in Mexican History

An ideal of respect and harmony is central to El Alberto residents’ collective identity. The bonds of community, however, run deeper than the realm of ideas. The community exists not only in the realm of collective sentiment but also on the level of geographical, economic, and political reality. The community is a system of power that regulates people’s relationships with one another and influences their access to land and other resources.
El Alberto is, legally, a comunidad. The comunidad has roots in pre-colonial Mexico and has been shaped by centuries of interaction between Mexican and Spanish colonial officials and indigenous actors. The indigenous residents of New Spain already had a system of collective land management in place at the time of the Conquest, and Spaniards implemented their own European systems of corporate land management (Alcorn and Toledo 1995:127). Throughout the colonial period, the texture of indigenous communities was shaped by colonial leaders whose chief interest lay in extracting labor and maintaining social control. At some points in history, land has been stripped from indigenous populations. At other points, native peoples have been forcibly regrouped into artificial communities in the name of socialization and religious conversion.

In pre-Columbian Mexico, communal property existed in the form of the calpulli, a unit of several dozen to several hundred households (Olivar et al 2005:186). When millions of indigenous people in New Spain died from Old World diseases, colonialists “peacefully” acquired vast reaches of the most fertile land, which they transformed into commercial estates (Carroll 1991:11). At first landowners enslaved the native population to work in sugar plantations. The effect upon them was so deleterious, however, that the Crown abolished the enslavement of Native Americans in 1542 and turned instead to the Atlantic slave trade (Palmer 1976: 65).

Although Spain outlawed indigenous enslavement, colonial powers continued to exploit indigenous workers through a series of semi-forced labor systems. In the encomienda system, colonists required indigenous subjects to provide tribute labor in exchange for Christianization. During the later repartimiento system, Native laborers
were required to provide tribute labor to the Spanish government, and the labor was then distributed among the colonists (66). When the *encomienda* and *repartimiento* systems were abolished in 1635, voluntary wage labor became the only legal means through which colonial powers could employ Native workers. As indigenous people were not generally inclined to seek work outside of their subsistence agricultural systems, the colonial leaders used tax policies to create an artificial need for wages (Carroll 1991:17).

For much of Mexican history, the population was segregated into “*repúblicas de indios*,” or “Indian republics,” and “*repúblicas de españoles*,” or “Spanish republics” (Olivar Vega et al. 2005:186). Considered to be a separate race from European “people of reason,” indigenous people lived in separate settlements with their own systems of government. In the early seventeenth century, colonial authorities gathered indigenous people into new congregational groups with the explicit goal of providing religious instruction. As these reorganizations were often carried out with little respect for indigenous social groupings, many fled to remote areas where the colonial authorities would not be able to find them (186).

With the Constitution of 1824, the legal distinction between “*indios*” and “people of reason” was finally removed (Olivar Vega et al.,187). While the move may appear to have been a step toward justice and egalitarian relations, it also paved the way for changes that robbed indigenous people of collective land management rights. When the Lerdo Law of 1856 made indigenous people small property owners, large landowners became able to purchase parcels of land from individuals and thus enlarge
their holdings (188). During the Porfirian period of 1876-1910, the Mexican government complicated matters even further for communal properties by claiming as state property all lands that bore no official title (Alcorn and Toledo, 127). As a result, massive numbers of the rural population were transformed into debt peons with no option but to work on haciendas (127). The Mexican Revolution emerged out of the bitter conflict between landowners and indigenous communities that ensued. As Olivar et al. note, different understandings of land lay at the heart of the conflict. While large landowners saw in the land a source of raw material for production, for the indigenous population the value of the land was inseparably bound to social relationships and shared history (Olivar Vega et al. et al 188, my translation).

Through the 1917 Constitution, the Mexican government redistributed land to peasants and established two types of collective land: the ejido and the comunidad (Alcorn and Toledo). As of the mid-1990’s, over half of the land in Mexico belonged to one of these two systems (128). While an ejido is a property that was intentionally established by the government, a comunidad is a “pre-existing corporate entity” in which rights are granted to those who “can demonstrate prior, longstanding, community-based use of the land and waters” (Alcorn and Toledo, 127). Indigenous communities such as El Alberto are generally comunidades. In comunidades, members of each household have access to shared natural resources such as arable land, forests, or coastline. However, members of the community cannot sell or rent land to non-members (126-7).

Today’s comunidades are the product of long and bitter struggle. The right to hold land collectively is a right for which people have shed blood. Throughout history, as
colonial and later capitalist powers strove to sever the ties between people and the land, indigenous Mexicans continually fought back, refusing to be reduced to wage laborers. Today the strong value that members of communities such as El Alberto place on origins and connection to the land derives in part from that history. When a person such as Agustín claims that “respect is what matters more than anything else,” and that “a peaceful town has more to gain than a town with problems,” his words indicate that harmony must be cultivated not for mere sentimental reasons, but because the past has shown that strength, power, and protection from the predatory actions of large landholders lies in cooperation. Today, as NAFTA-related reforms make it easier for communal property holders to sell off parcels of land, some communities are losing their autonomy to outside investors. Such is the case in some of El Alberto’s closely neighboring communities. The residents of El Alberto, however, maintain strict control over the physical and human boundaries of their town, as the formal community rules and regulations make clear. Their affirmation of locality is part of a strategic effort to maintain autonomy in midst of powerful deterritorializing forces.

Government and Citizenship in El Alberto

Compiled in 1982, the Internal Rules of the Community establishes the requirements for “citizenship,” or membership, in El Alberto. The document also specifies the guidelines for town leadership. Written in Spanish and drawing upon Article 34 of the Mexican Constitution, the document defines a citizen as a person who is “allowed to participate in all Social, Cultural, and economic aspects within the life of the community” (my translation). Although the document makes no gender
specification, the unspoken rule is that citizens are male. Town membership is passed through the father’s line. If a woman marries outside of the community, her children are no longer considered residents of El Alberto. The Internal Rules document specifies that a citizen is a male 18 years of age or older who is not a student. In some circumstances minors who are no longer students are subject to the obligations of a citizenship as well. While students are exempt from the citizens’ obligations, as “future citizens of the town, they should demonstrate their willingness to participate to the best of their abilities.” The Internal Rules also state that individuals “who are living in this community, but who are not originally from this town,” will be asked to identify themselves to the authorities and to provide evidence of a clean legal record.

The boundaries of town citizenship is a subject of sensitive debate today, as some of the first children who were born in the United States or brought there as young children are beginning to reach adulthood. In order to secure membership in El Alberto, young men must travel to the town at some point shortly after they turn 18 and complete a year of unpaid service in the community. Doing so involves great risk for those who are undocumented or whose immigration status is in process. Some must choose between securing citizenship in their town of origin and waiting for possible U.S. citizenship should comprehensive immigration reform become available in the United States.

After the initial year of service, citizens of El Alberto are required to fulfill a service post at approximately eight year intervals. Those fulfilling their service are referred to as los comité. Although the term comité translates as “committee,” it is used in this
case as a title; hence a given person might serve as comité of the drinking water system, or comité of public goods. The general authority is the delegado, who is chosen by a general assembly and serves for a period of one year. In addition, there are two subdelegados, also referred to as secretaries, and a treasurer. Young men start with simple service posts. As the years go by and they earn the respect of their peers they may advance to a more prestigious position, including that of delegado.

Today, approximately 60-70 persons fulfill their service requirements in the community at any given time. Some positions begin in August and some in January. These dates have become important times of coming and going in El Alberto, as migrants generally return to Mexico just before for their year of service and leave shortly after its completion. Although some women may hold positions of service in the schools and health clinic, in general they are not part of the main system of service posts. The paucity of female leadership is due to custom rather than formal legislation. That is, although the internal rules of the community do not explicitly state that citizens are male, in practice participation in the yearly cycle of service posts tends to be confined to men and to single women who are heads of households. Such is not the case in all communities, some of which have even had female delegados as migration opens up new spaces for women’s participation (Rivera Garay 2006).

Like the comunidad system of collective land management, the comité system of leadership in El Alberto is a historical product, shaped by centuries of interaction

---

6 While women have yet to attain an equal position with men in the collective government of El Alberto, they have been engaged in parallel efforts of collective participation and development, the most successful example being a craft cooperative that sells sponges and other products made of hand-woven cactus fiber to international markets (c.f. Schmidt 2006).
between indigenous systems of organization and government policy. During the colonial period, Spanish authorities imposed their own forms of local government onto indigenous towns, and the indigenous population responded by adapting the hierarchies to their own needs (Chance 1990). Initially the government system consisted of civil hierarchies, but these were transformed into civil-religious hierarchies during the nineteenth century as the responsibility for festival sponsorship shifted from *cofradías*, or religious brotherhoods, to individual households. In the civil-religious hierarchy system, adult males alternate between civil and religious leadership positions. Communities turned their focus increasingly inward as the focus of religious festivals became more geared toward balancing internal status relations.

El Alberto’s own civil-religious hierarchy began to falter by the 1970s and was officially transformed into the present committee-based in the early 1980s, when the Internal Rules were compiled. The transformation was due to the arrival of evangelical Protestantism and in part due to a series of efforts by the state and national governments to integrate the community into the surrounding society. At the same time that the town’s religious landscape was shifting, state-sponsored development projects produced new organizational needs. Chance argues that the civil-religious hierarchy system began to unravel in Mexico as a whole beginning in the 1920s, when the government sought to integrate indigenous communities into the national public by setting up a federal school system and incorporating local indigenous leaders into the local political structure. The impact of this transformation arrived decades later to some communities.
We can see the transformation at work in the life story of Cipriano, El Alberto's first Protestant pastor, whose religious life was intertwined with his growing involvement with external agencies such as the Patrimonio Indígena del Valle del Mezquital. We can also see the transformation at work in the life of Agustín's father, who used his Spanish language abilities to bring needed services into El Alberto. Leadership increasingly fell not upon elders who had moved through the status hierarchy, but rather upon younger, more educated men who could better navigate the municipal and state systems.

In El Alberto, as we have seen, the political and religious spheres today are officially separate. Catholics and Protestants alike participate in the committee system of government, and religious participation is voluntary. Although the opinions of elderly men carry heavy weight in group meetings, official leadership posts are given to those who possess sufficient education and Spanish language skills to interact with the local, state, and national governments. A given man may exercise a great deal of authority in the town while he is serving as delegado, but once the term has ended his public authority is significantly reduced. When I asked to interview a former delegado about his early efforts with the Caminata, for example, he strongly recommended that I speak first with those who were currently in charge. “I'm just a neighbor,” he explained, “soy vecino, nada más.”

In addition to the rotating system of authorities, El Alberto is also run by General Assembly meetings. General Assemblies are large, Town Hall style meetings to which every household is required to send a representative. The assemblies are held about once a week, and sometimes more frequently if a topic arises that must be dealt with
quickly. The time and topic of each meeting is announced by messengers who spread the word from door to door drive or by driving throughout the town with a megaphone. Meetings begin at roughly nine in the morning and last several hours or more, sometimes extending well into the evening. Decisions are generally arrived at by consensus. Although the original idea behind the Caminata Nocturna was inspired by a few key actors, the border reenactment as it exists today was filtered through a long process of collective decision-making in General Assembly meetings.

Attendance and participation at General Assemblies require considerable sacrifice, especially for those who work during the day. Hundreds of people gather on plastic chairs inside a large concrete building on the grounds of the primary school. The delegado and the secretary preside in the front. The discussion, which is conducted almost entirely in hñähñnu, travels about the entire room. Sometimes the debate can be quite heated. All who wish to are given time to voice their opinions, although I have heard long-winded participants be ushered out of the spotlight with a chorus of “enough, enough, let’s move on!”

In a discourse analysis of General Assemblies in the Valle de Mezquital, Sierra Camacho (1987) has found that decision-making occurs through a horizontal process, in contrast to the vertical forms of power exercised at the municipal and state levels (105). While the juez, or in the case of El Alberto, the delegado, holds the ultimate authority, that legitimation of that authority ultimately rests with the community. Assemblies involve active participation but are also governed by implicit rules of conduct. To preserve group consensus, the delegado must take care to appear
impartial. Speakers must conform to the customary styles of argumentation. As Sierra Camacho explains, “it’s not enough to say things, one must also know how to say them so that they will be accepted and believed” (106, my translation). Female participation is the exception to the norm. During the meetings I have attended, no more a tenth of those present were women. Rivera Garay (2006) has observed that in some communities of the Valle de Mezquital, women’s participation is subtly discouraged by the body language and informal comments of male participants, although the situation is changing as women substitute for husbands absent due to migration.

Although General Assemblies encourage active, grass-roots participation, they also have a coercive dimension. The Internal Rules document makes clear that attendance at General Assemblies is required. Those who arrive over an hour late are not counted as present. After three unjustified absences one is fined “for disobeying.” The amount of the fine is decided upon within the General Assembly. Not only do town citizens face fines for absence from or excessive tardiness to assembly meetings, they also face punishment if they fail to pay cooperaciones, financial contributions covering the cost of communal projects. Those who do not pay must appear before the town authorities and, if necessary, the Municipal President.

As the content of the Internal Rules suggests, collective harmony in El Alberto is not always self-arising. It is also produced and enforced through concrete rules and regulations. The Internal Rules state that the town “will not allow division or groups of people who attempt to violate the obligations that this document stipulates.” Recall that these words were written not long after bitter conflict between Catholics and Protestants
had coursed through the community. The document implies that religious difference will be tolerated in the town as long as it does not interfere with the rules and obligations of citizenship. Political parties are another source of potential division. During my fieldwork in the summer of 2007, I was told that during election years, all of El Alberto’s residents agree to vote upon a single party so that their vote will have a stronger chance of bringing needed services into the town. Such was not the case in 2009, however, as demonstrated by publicly posted election results. Another source of potential division, as Leonardo explained to me, are educated professionals. In other communities, residents who have obtained professional degrees have sided with political groups and caused schisms. “And that’s where the fights began. Well here, we don’t accept that.” Although the town encourages young people to seek professional degrees, the important thing is that they maintain a collective vision. “If they have a good vision, for the town to progress, we’re with them,” Leonardo explains. “And if, because of the training they have, they attack the idea we have here, well we don’t allow that.”

**Collective Labor in El Alberto**

As citizens, adult male members of El Alberto gain a say in the collective management of land. They also obtain access to communally managed water, electricity and other utilities, gain the right to vote in community affairs, and retain the right to be buried in the town cemetery. One way that they obtain these benefits is through active participation in the town government. Another way they do so is through work. El Alberto has various forms of collective labor. One form is the year of service required of all adult males. Another form of collective labor is the *faena*. Held once a
week or more, *faenas* are shared work projects to which each household is required to send a representative. A third form of work that is integral to community belonging is subsistence agriculture.

Because work involves self-sacrifice for the good of the whole, it assumes an almost sacred significance in the public life of El Alberto. Adolfo, who served as *delegado* in the mid-1990’s, gave me three photographs that illustrate the deeper significance of work. Adolfo had been telling me about how the community had come together to construct the main road that crosses through the town today. He spoke of the difficulties people had overcome to obtain permits and rent the necessary equipment. The photos are a vision of solidarity: men, women, and children alike wield picks and shovels, clearing the brush to make way for the bulldozer that prepared the way for the road. Adolfo explained that the road exists today only because of sweat and toil of each of those people. They were paid not in money but in the knowledge that they were creating something that would benefit generations to come. As Noe, another former *delegado* explained, “We’ve worked like one man—like one single woman, like one single man. Here we work, men, women and children. . . . If since 1985 this community hadn’t worked, hadn’t put in its time, El Alberto would not be like it is today.”

Noe explained that the collective projects are not carried out merely for those present, but also so that those yet to come will “see that we’ve worked, and we’ve built a lovely community.” Concern for future generations motivates collective labor, and the fruits of that labor are enduring testimony of the value and efficacy of cooperation.
Work in El Alberto has a moral, aesthetic quality that challenges conventional North American understandings of productivity. Anthropological insights on the “aesthetics of conviviality” in Native Amazonia can help us to better understand that quality (Overing and Passes 2000). Rather than emphasize roles and social status, Overing and Passes note, Amazonian peoples speak about “how to live well, happily, in community with others” (2). Harmony is not a given; it is something to be actively fostered through day-to-day interactions. Moreover, sociability is expressed in aesthetic terms. Amazonian peoples speak about “how to go about creating ‘good/beautiful’ people who can lead a tranquil, social life together” (2). Passes finds that the Pa’iikwené, for example, do not separate work from social life in the same way that persons in modern industrial societies do. Although the Pa’iikwené describe work as difficult, they do not place a strict moral value on silence, and they do not perceive joking and talking as time-wasting. In combination with conversation, work produces convivial relationships (109). Minna Opas claims that work is so foundational to the generation of sociable living among the Yine that Yine Christians express concern that they will be unhappy in a Heaven free of worldly toil (2008:290-1). Opas also argues that among the Yine, morality is both instilled and manifested through concrete bodily practices such as working and eating. One becomes a proper human, in part, through how one works and what one puts into one’s body (65).

Although the Mesoamerican cargo system emphasizes roles and social status to an extent not present within Amazonian society, Overing and Passes’ attention to the “anthropology of the everyday,” as well as Opas’ observations on embodied morality,
can help us to better understand the moral qualities of work within El Alberto (7). As within native Amazonia, work in El Alberto is far more than a utilitarian activity carried out in exchange for wage labor. The daily interactions involved in work help to generate the fabric of society itself. Through work, people forge bonds of reciprocity, cultivate harmonious relationships, and mold young people into fully functioning adults.

The socially and morally generative nature of work is evident within faenas, the weekly work parties in El Alberto mentioned previously. As I only observed the faenas from a distance, I was unable to observe the quality of social interaction during them. However, people suggested to me that faenas strengthen social solidarity because they demand that one sacrifice one’s time, energy, and comfort for the good of the group. As one male in his early thirties put it, “Here sometimes there are faenas . . . we have to do faena and sometimes we have to work all afternoon and all night. We have to do it. And, ‘no, I’m hungry,’ well, all of us are hungry, what are we going to do? And we have to do it.” Although households that fail to send a representative to a faena are fined, the system does not operate through direct coercion alone. Many participate because they value the effort and hope to improve the community for generations to come. The road in the photographs that Adolfo showed me, was the product of faenas. Participation in faenas is also a way to earn the respect and esteem of the community. Finally, faenas serve a socializing function: children are encouraged to participate in order to learn the value of service. Not only do faenas produce roads and bridges, they also produce bonds of respect and interdependence and mold children into morally functioning adults.
The moral, relational value of work is also evident within the year-long period of service required of all adult males. The principle underlying the cargo system is much the same as that underlying the faenas: one earns respect through self-sacrifice to the community. Both during interviews and within informal, spontaneous conversations, those currently completing their terms of service are quick to emphasize the unpaid nature of the position and the level of self-sacrifice required. While fulfilling a cargo, one is constantly at the beck and call of the community. On one occasion, I observed a comité member operating construction equipment in a road building project early in the morning. Later that day found him busy running messages for the delegado, and that night he served as a guide in the Caminata until three in the morning. All told, he had completed a 20-hour work day. Others confirmed that such a schedule was not uncommon. The constant demands of the year of service result in significant sleep deprivation. In 2008, two town authorities were so sleep deprived after serving back-to-back shifts that they got into a car crash. One of them broke his neck. Those participating in the year of service speak of the work with a mixture of pride and resentment characteristic of young recruits in boot camp.

Migration, Work, and the Year of Service

The year of service, like the faena, serves a crucial socializing function. As we have seen, young men who reach the age of 18 and are no longer students must complete their first year of service before they are considered full citizens of El Alberto. The service requirement exerts a pivotal influence upon them in the midst of wide-scale migration to the United States. While some young people complete the year before
migrating to the U.S., others do so after having lived across the border for several years. In the culture of migration, one’s first undocumented migration journey often assumes the quality of a rite of passage (van Gennep 1960). We saw in Chapter Two that the Caminata project serves as a countermeasure to that rite of passage. The project strives to break through the *habitus* of the consumer lifestyle that drives and is in turn perpetuated by migration. Here, I argue that the larger system of collective labor in which the Caminata is embedded serves a similar function. The collective labor requirement works to inculcate a communal ethos that counters the individualism and alienation of wage labor in the U.S.

One man, a former town leader who is also a U.S. resident and the father of three, compared the communal, reciprocal nature of work in El Alberto to the money-driven climate of urban life in the United States. In the city, he explained:

> You even have to buy tomatoes, onions, everything. And without money— but here . . . I’ll go with one of my relatives or a neighbor, I help them pick tomatoes today, and tomorrow I go with another neighbor, I’ll pick *chiles*, and next week I go with another and I’ll harvest maize, and they give me maize, they give me beans, they give me tomatoes, *chile*—and look, . . . I have salsa, I eat tortillas made 100% by hand. What more could I ask?

Many though not all of the households in El Alberto own small, varied plots of land known as *milpa*, a Mesoamerican term for the form of swidden agriculture that is widely practiced in the region (Alcorn and Toledo, 132). The *milpa* is a central institution through which ties of reciprocity are forged and maintained and through which patterns of inheritance are channeled (132). Neighbors and relatives frequently exchange labor and share equipment. Sometimes neighbors help the families of absent migrants work their *milpas* in return for percentage of the harvest. As the quotation above indicates,
agricultural work in El Alberto consists of relational exchanges between neighbors and kin. Food is more than a commodity to be bought and sold; it is the product of social interactions. During summer fieldwork I have left interviews carrying gifts of more pomegranates, avocados, apricots, and prickly pears than I can hold, plucked fresh from my informants’ plots of land.

The man quoted above contrasted the labor system in El Alberto to the inflexibility of the work structure in the United States. During the early planning stages of the Caminata, as people shared about their experiences in the United States, they said, “no, it’s true, there in the U.S., the bosses, if you arrive at six in the morning, . . . and you don’t get there [on time], then they don’t give you any more work, they send you back.” One man who had worked for about a year in the United States as an undocumented immigrant drew attention to the inflexibility of living in such an environment:

It’s not the same being in your land as being en el otro lado. Like I was telling you . . . let’s say you don’t work for a week, you already owe rent, bills, all of that. . . . And here every person has their own house. They don’t pay rent. They just pay electricity and water, but if you don’t have money . . . they wait for you, they don’t say anything. And there, well, when are they going to wait for you? [laughs] They cut you off soon enough.

This informant is the same man whose comments on the difficulty of the faenas I mentioned earlier. In the faena, he explained, “sometimes we have to work all afternoon and all night. We have to do it.” The benefits of life in the comunidad, however, make the self-sacrifice of collective labor worthwhile. Wage labor in the United States demands a different sort of sacrifice, for it is a sacrifice in which the principle of reciprocity is not operative. Rather than toiling and sweating for the good of the community, one sweats and toils for material things, often with little to show for it in
the end. Ramón, whose reflections on migration and living well I quoted at length in the second chapter, explained it this way:

Many people who have left their place of origin . . . feel as though they never had the liberty to live in a place where their people understand them, their people accept them, but rather always living under a scornful gaze. . . . Although you’ve worked, although you’ve participated, but even so the people don’t look favorably upon you. . . . And obviously [the migrants] do have, materially, the community that they sought, but within them they don’t have a great satisfaction, to say ‘no, damn it, I did it, I succeeded, I feel proud.’

The speaker describes a state of working without belonging, of contributing to the U.S. economy without the satisfaction of knowing that one’s labor has helped to forge community in the true sense of the word. While he refers in part to the stigma of illegality that undocumented laborers experience at a bodily level in the United States, he also suggests that there is more to work than financial advancement. He suggests that what is lacking in the United States is the positive quality of being understood, accepted, and looked “favorably upon” by one’s people. Undocumented labor offers little opportunity to achieve harmonious, lasting relations of reciprocity.

While those quoted in the previous section recognize collective labor in one’s place of origin as an ideal, the pressure to migrate remains strong in El Alberto. In the Valle de Mezquital as a whole, land conflicts have increased with population growth (Olivar Vega et al., 188). Subsidies to small-scale agriculture have declined with the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement, and inexpensive U.S. food products flooding the Mexican market make it hard for small-scale farmers to compete (Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2004:11). Marta, an evangelical woman in her mid-thirties, explains that it is possible to make enough money to live on by working locally in agriculture. If both parents work, she explains, “[the family] can earn enough. Not to buy things they
don’t need, but enough. You can do it.” The problem, however, is that not all families can work in this way, for there is not enough arable land to go around.

Migrant labor is the main source of household income in El Alberto, but land retains strong social and symbolic significance. As Franco Pellotier observes, a commonly held ideal in the Valle de Mezquital is that the comunidad be both one’s place of work and one’s place of residence. This ideal, however, is difficult to carry out in practice, as generations rooted in the subsistence farming economy coexist with younger generations who seek income elsewhere (1992:212). El Alberto’s ecotourism park is an effort to generate new opportunities for the type of collective labor through which bonds of harmony and reciprocity can be forged.

We now arrive at a new dimension of the Caminata Nocturna project. We have seen that a central motivation of the project is to generate employment. The hope is that, eventually, the park will be able to bring in enough revenue to keep young people in the community. Yet raising money is only part of the effort. The point of the Caminata is also to offer a meaningful, structured activity that can shape young people as town citizens.

Whether or not tourists realize it, the space that they cross through during the Caminata brims with tangible signs of collective labor. The reenactment engages the entire space of the El Alberto, covering intimate, hidden pathways and decades-old irrigation channels. The event also utilizes the paved road, bridge, and the tunnels that the community has built during faenas and with pooled funds from U.S. migrants. The human-made landscape is an organic extension of the entire ecotourism venture of which the Caminata is a part. The “Border Patrol vehicles,” white Ford F-150's
equipped with police lights, double as utilitarian vehicles during the day, as members of the comité haul supplies and drive along the main road of El Alberto to announce General Assembly meetings.

Previously, I have argued that the Caminata occupies the middle ground between entertainment and ritual, for it coaxes tourists out of their customary ways of being and pushes them to interact with one another in new ways. For young men from El Alberto fulfilling their first year of service in the community, the activity occupies another middle ground. Mundane and tedious at times, the border reenactment is a space to establish social bonds. Those fulfilling their year of service must repeat the same Caminata routine week after week, giving up every Saturday night for a year. During several Caminatas, I accompanied the Border Patrol actors on their shift. Bursts of activity were followed by long periods of sitting. The young men sitting in the back seat of the patrol vehicle appeared bored. They text-messaged their girlfriends and yawned from time to time. The Caminata was, for them, an inconvenience. It required that they sit cramped in the front or back of a truck with uncles and older neighbors while their friends attended dances in nearby towns. While the Caminata provides tourists with a singular, “imagistic” experience (Whitehouse 2004), for those undergoing a year of service the Caminata is repetitive and mundane. Yet there are also moments of camaraderie and spontaneous humor. During one point in a shift I observed, the group shared tamales and sodas. Later in the night the crew broke into peals of laughter when my knee hit the siren button by accident and a man sleeping during a patrol shift nearby startled and

---

7 Whitehouse contrasts “imagistic” and “doctrinal” modes of religiosity. While the doctrinal mode is characterized by low-intensity, repetitive action, the imagistic mode is characterized by singular, high-intensity experiences that leave a strong, specific mark upon the worshipper’s memory.
drove off. Over the course of a year, such minor, seemingly insignificant occurrences accumulate into a body of experiences shared with fellow town citizens.

**Negotiating Transnational Belonging**

Although Parque EcoAlberto has not yet earned sufficient money to employ many people full-time, the Caminata project is already successful in the eyes of many. It is successful because it provides a framework through which people can work side by side with their neighbors and kin, and through which young people learn and embody the values of community service. Not all of El Alberto’s residents perceive collective labor in the same manner, however. Although one gains benefits from working in the community, the community also has a coercive underside. Labor and land management are the site of a clash between individual wills and the will of the group as a whole.

Recall the voice of don Cipriano, the Pentecostal who described the coercive dimensions of the Catholic *cargo* system. Cipriano claimed that people were once fined, thrown in jail, even tortured for disobeying. That voice of resentment has not disappeared. The very land that the ecotourism park occupies is the product of conflict. When the community voted to develop the Gran Cañón into a park, those whose *milpas* lay in the way had no choice but to relinquish their land. While people describe the year of service as “voluntary,” the consequences of not participating, or of participating poorly, can be severe. To this day, young men who shirk their duties or get in fights are locked within a small, community-managed jail for short periods of time.

A man in his thirties whom I will call Jorge offered a perspective on El Alberto that cut biting through the common narrative trope of harmony and reciprocity. “Everyone says this is a peaceful town, where people work together,” Jorge told me during a
Caminata shift. “But I just think, ‘if they only knew.’” From his perspective, El Alberto is wrought with jealousy and conflict. Jorge was carrying out his year of service at the time of the interview. He lives most of the time in Las Vegas. Jorge identifies as evangelical, although he does not regularly attend church. For him, the year of service involves “lots of worry,” for it demands that he give up a year of work in the United States, leaving his wife and children behind. “I’m making good money in the U.S.,” he explains. “Why should I leave?” That year, Jorge had offered to pay the community $5,000 instead of fulfilling the year of service, but his request was denied.

In 2009, the community formally decided not to allow people working in the United States to send a substitute for their cargos. People in El Alberto are “very jealous,” Jorge explained. “They want to keep us back here so we don’t get ahead.” His perspective provides a new take on the seemingly selfless spirit of don Beto. “While we’re working, they treat us like slaves,” he put it bluntly. After this Caminata, for example, “we’ll finish at one or two in the morning, then they want us back tomorrow at seven in the morning! Or we’ll be fined 500 pesos.”

This year, Jorge noted, several dozen of those called did not show up to fulfill their cargo. “And like I say, the people here are jealous: if those migrants don’t come back, people will say ‘well then we don’t want them here in our community any longer.’ But it’s hard for them!” Jorge explained that he knows men from El Alberto who are living on welfare with their wives and children. “On welfare! And how are they going to work a year for free, if they’re already struggling?” An immigrant from El Alberto whom I spoke to in Phoenix explained his own difficulty with the service requirement. If he were to return to Mexico, he would lose his job. With two children to raise in the current labor
market, that was not a risk he could afford. As we have seen, the service requirement also poses a dilemma to teenagers who were brought to the U.S. as young children. Jorge explained that many of them are waiting in the hope that President Obama will grant amnesty. “And for them—well that would be a dream come true for them. So they’re worrying that if they came back for their cargo, they might miss their chance.”

If not for the year of service, Jorge explained, he would not return to El Alberto. The risk of losing work in the U.S. and having to cross the border again is too great. If he had papers, however, he states that he would travel back and forth more frequently, as would the young people who face an uncertain future in the U.S. In his view, more inclusive immigration policy would foster more, not less, community cohesion.

Jorge does not simply critique the year of service because it causes him a personal inconvenience. Rather, he views the entire system as inefficient. He argues that the rotating system of voluntary labor “keeps the park from getting anywhere.” Rather than require migrants from the United States to leave their work and return to El Alberto every few years, those migrants should provide money to finance more substantial employment for young people in the park. If young people had the opportunity to get paid well, they would be happy to stay. “And if it was their job, well then they’d want to do it better, better, so that they could climb, from one thing to the next,” he explains. Jorge drew a parallel from his own experience. He had begun by doing menial labor in the United States but had worked his way toward better-paying positions, for he always had an “ambition to achieve.”

As a final example, Jorge noted that young men who own their own pickup trucks must use them in the Caminata. Large, shiny, U.S.-bought pickups with license plates
from Arizona, Nevada, Utah, and beyond are a common feature in the landscape of El Alberto. For young men especially they are a status symbol, a sign that they have made something of themselves in the United States. Yet once a week or more, the young men are required to put their trucks to the service of the Caminata, using their own funds to pay for the gas as they haul tourists from point to point in the park.

Residents of El Alberto belong to complex, multilayered, and constantly changing networks in Mexico and the United States. Some who live in the U.S. have papers, other do not. Some participate in global religious organizations. Many send their children to public schools in the U.S.; others send their children to schools in Mexico. Some run their own business and employ immigrants from other Mexican states. Not all of the town’s members have the same options or access to resources. Their identities and possibilities are shaped through involvement with multiple, interlocking institutions and social spheres.

Roger Rouse (2002) has argued that the term “transnational community” does not fully encompass the complexity of the social, economic, and political affiliations that international migrants such as residents of El Alberto have today. The term “community,” Rouse argues, carries heavy assumptions about the solidarity of face-to-face communities, and perpetuates a romantic notion of holistic, place-bound identity that is often associated with the nation-state. In fact, towns of origin are but one node within the complex, changing networks in which migrants live, work, and interact. In a similar manner, Glick-Schiller (1999) argues that the term “transnational community” diverts attention away from questions of power and social differentiation among
migrants. Glick-Schiller prefers to speak of “transnational social fields” to draw attention to the fields of power in which migrants are embedded.

While residents of El Alberto participate in multiple networks that extend beyond their town of origin, the notion of community is nevertheless worth retaining as a category of analysis. While the community may well be a social construction, it exercises a very real influence over the lives of migrants. The community of El Alberto is, on one level, an ideal of self-sacrifice, respect, and harmony as embodied in the figure of don Beto. Yet it is also a system of relationships that exercises concrete legal, financial, and material control upon the town’s members. The system of collective labor is a medium through which the boundaries of group membership are forged and contested. We can see in the example of the pickup trucks that the system of service obligations functions as a powerful leveling mechanism that is uniquely fitted to the migration situation. In the former fiesta system, individuals were required to expend great sums of money for festival sponsorship. Today, the town demands of migrants not financial contributions, but time, labor, and, most importantly, their physical presence.

Through the larger collective labor system of which the Caminata is embedded, residents of El Alberto are both working out the boundaries of community and balancing two very different understandings of work. In the chapter that follows, I turn to the narratives and practices through which Pentecostals in El Alberto are responding to the migration journey. As we shall see, the vision of the border that emerges within those practices is quite different from the vision of migration that is promoted within the Caminata project.
CHAPTER 6
“PARA DIOS, NO HAY FRONTERAS:” PENTECOSTALISM AND THE MIGRATION JOURNEY

In the first chapter, we saw that U.S. border enforcement is not only instrumental, but also performative. While U.S. border enforcement efforts render migrants into aliens and inscribe a line of separation into the border soil, the Caminata seizes representational control of the border from the governments and the news media and brings migrant voices to the fore. The Caminata seeks to lead tourists across a boundary not between nations but between humanity and inhumanity. It blends images of death with the energy of humor to conjure new possibilities. With each enactment the Caminata generates a living, breathing “Mexican Dream,” seeking to shake the country out of the juggernaut of the international migration system.

The Caminata’s efforts are directed not only toward tourists but also toward residents of El Alberto, particularly the youth. Some of the Caminata’s guides are teenagers considering crossing the border themselves for the first time. As they participate in the reenactment week after week for a year or longer, they are enculturated into the collective labor system of the town and they begin to embody the message of the “Mexican Dream.” The Caminata provides a powerful set of images, narratives, and embodied experiences through which people in El Alberto, Catholic and Protestant alike, form their ideas about the border and about migration. In this chapter I explore another powerful set of images, narratives and practices through which people in El Alberto shape their ideas about the border: Pentecostalism.

Over half of El Alberto’s residents identify as Pentecostal, and over a hundred attend each of the Pentecostal churches’ thrice-weekly services. Like those who stage the Caminata, Pentecostals find within the migration journey inspiration that they channel
toward new ends. They too wrest representational control from the governments and news media. They too frame the migration journey in such a way as to draw new possibilities to the fore. The possibilities they envision, however, differ considerably from the Caminata’s “Mexican Dream.”

I have two intertwined goals within this chapter. The first is to explore how individual migration experiences shape and are shaped by Pentecostal narratives and practices. The second is to explore the vision of the border, and the vision of the relationship between human and divine power, that emerge within those practices. I begin by exploring the conversion story of a man from El Alberto who nearly lost his life at the border.

**Migration as a “Theologizing Experience”**

Francisco survived the 2008 border accident that cost another man from El Alberto his life. He was in his young thirties at the time of the accident. His wife was pregnant with their third child. He was returning to his home of ten years in Las Vegas after a visit to El Alberto. The van that he and his companions were riding in was hit several miles north of the Arizona border in what was apparently a chase by border enforcement officials. Francisco was in a coma for five days. When he awoke, he found himself paralyzed from the waist down. Francisco was surprised that he had survived, for although the van was hit close to where he was sitting in the front, those in the back were killed. Among those who died were another man from El Alberto and two men from a neighboring town.

While he was in the coma, Francisco told us, he entered a different place. It was a wonderful place, where everything was clean, where nothing was lacking. There was a banquet with many people present. It was peaceful. Their clothes weren’t like the
clothes people wear here. They dressed in – “you know what God wears?” he asked me. “Like, dressed in white?” I answered. “Yes, something like that.”

At some point, God came behind Francisco and gently touched him at the back of his head. God showed him two places. One was the clean and wonderful banquet. The other was a place where everything was dirty. God told Francisco that he’d been given the chance to choose the good path. “There are only two paths,” Francisco stressed, in a phrase that I had heard echoed repeatedly among Pentecostals throughout the town. God told Francisco that he had work for him yet in the world. He was going to send Francisco back to life, to serve him. When Francisco awoke he felt a heat moving up from his feet and out through his head and shoulders. “It was the Holy Spirit,” his aunt explained.

Francisco told us that God had put him through a trial. Now, he insisted, he had a message to spread. He wanted to share the message of salvation in evangelical churches throughout Mexico and, if possible, the United States.

As Timothy Smith has argued, migration to the United States has long been a “theologizing experience” (1978:1175). Migration challenges people to reevaluate the boundaries of group identity, as the emotional trials of “uprooting and repeated resettlement” spark theological reflection (1161). In a more recent study of Mexican and Central American migrants to the United States, Jaqueline Hagan (2008) has found that reliance on religion figures prominently in all stages of the migration journey, and has increased as border crossing conditions become more dangerous. Hagan explains that social capital gained from membership in networks is no longer sufficient in helping migrants overcome the unprecedented risks they face today. As a result, migrants
increasingly turn to religious beliefs, practices and institutions for psychological and practical support (158).

In El Alberto, migration has indeed been a “theologizing experience,” generating religious reflection and ritual innovation. Yet my perspective differs from Hagan’s in several ways. Rather than draw a distinction between religions and social networks, we must recognize that religions are themselves a type of network. Religions are at once powerful lenses through which people make sense of the world, and systems of relationships that shape people’s possibilities. We must explore in greater depth the interplay between individual experiences at the border and the collective religious practices that make those experiences possible. Also, while Hagan examines how religions help people to endure the difficulties of migration, I wish to move beyond questions of coping to explore the extent to which Pentecostal narratives and practices respond to structures of power and propose new possibilities for human life.

Francisco’s narrative touches upon questions of citizenship, nationality, and government authority. It also grapples with questions of life, death, and the limits of human agency (Geertz 1973). By taking a close look at the narrative, we can learn something about how Francisco and other migrants imagine their possibilities as actors in local and international contexts. Before analyzing the content of Francisco’s narrative, however, I would like to take a look at the larger context of religion and migration out of which it emerged. Although Francisco’s was an extreme case, the pastor of the Iglesia Betel had explained to me the previous summer that conversion during migration is not an uncommon phenomenon. He notes:

There are many people there in the U.S. who didn’t go to church here. But when they’ve arrived there, they’ve felt that need. . . . Many people have
testified . . . when they go walking in the desert, and so many things happen to them, that’s when they start to ask God for help. . . . Because it’s such a difficult moment, that there in the desert no one reaches out their hand, only God. So only a miracle can happen.

Pentecostal informants state that religion has not always figured so prominently in the migration journey. Today, however, migrants run great risks. Not only do they face possible death, they also risk falling prey to dishonest coyotes, border gangs, and vigilante groups. As Víctor, an active member of the Iglesia Betel, explained:

The first time I went, truth is I didn’t have any preparation. . . But the last few times I’ve gone yes, I’ve asked for a prayer in the church. To cross. We ask God to take us safely because we know the danger we’re running. . . . I’ve also heard that the Minutemen were really strong on that side. They even threatened people with firearms. . . But what can you do! One has to survive.

As the danger of crossing the border has grown in recent decades, the journey brings people face to face not only with the boundary between nations, but also with the boundary between life and death. Some, like Francisco, come close to death themselves. Others suffer extreme hunger, thirst, or exhaustion. The possibility of death is ever present in the minds and hearts of family members who remain behind.

Given the sheer depth of the existential questions that the migration journey stirs to the fore, the act of border crossing can be compared to a life crisis (van Gennep, 1960). Like fundamental transitions in the human life span—birth, puberty, and death—border crossing is a personal crisis that acts upon and transforms the body, posing challenges of meaning to the larger society.

**Pentecostalism and the Undocumented Journey**

Just as religious groups inscribe shared meaning into life crises through rites of passage, Pentecostals in El Alberto draw upon prayer and ritual practice to frame the migration journey throughout each of its stages. When speaking to prospective
migrants, Marcelo, the pastor of the Iglesia Betel explains, he offers three pieces of advice. The first piece of advice “is that they never forget God. Wherever they go, God should be in first place. Because God is the one who gives life . . . and God is the one who takes life away.” The second piece of advice is to remember the relatives who remain behind. Finally, pastor Marcelo urges potential migrants never to forget their community, because “for us the town is our home. . . . That’s what has helped us and keeps helping us to maintain unity.” Although migrants travel to the U.S. with the hope of advancing economically, Pastor Marcelo insists, it is important “they don’t forget their people. That they don’t forget God. And . . . that they don’t leave the family.”

The pastor of Sinai, El Alberto’s other Pentecostal church, offers similar advice. He states that whether people migrate is their own decision. As a pastor, his role is to remind them “not to forget God.” He advises potential migrants “to work, but by the sweat of their brow—they should save their money, and do something with it.” If the migrant leaves a spouse behind, he urges them to remember that marriage is a pact made before God.

As we can see from both pastors’ emphasis on family and community, the migrants’ loved ones need advice and support as much or more than the migrant herself. The pastor of Sinai notes that although some young migrants come to him for advice, more often it is their parents who seek spiritual support. Betel’s pastor explains that “before any relative goes [to the U.S.] we as a church, we put the person in God’s hands. Because we know and we’ve seen God’s marvels, so that motivates us to pray for them.”
Pentecostals insist that prayer is efficacious, that God literally extends his hand into the world to shield his charges from harm. During a service at Betel's affiliated congregation in Phoenix, a man lead a fervent prayer for two migrants who were about to cross the border. He implored God to make the men invisible to the immigration agents. “Lord, blind the eyes of the migra, so that our companions can pass safely!” he cried out. “Make them invisible, Lord; we know you have the power to make them invisible!” The pastor of Betel in El Alberto explained that the congregation continues to pray for migrants until word is received of their safe arrival. “Then we pray but now in gratitude to God. Because he took them safely.” Successful border crossing attempts, in turn, become evidence that God has clearly guided people’s lives. As Betel's pastor explains, “we’ve seen. . . that God is real. That God does hear prayers.”

Prayers do not end once a migrant has successfully arrived. In El Alberto, a time is reserved near the start of each church service to pray for relatives and loved ones in the United States. As Betel’s pastor explains, “although they’re there, we who remain here, we set aside a time to ask God for their health, for good work, for a good salary. That God will bless them there.” I have observed countless prayers of this type in Iglesia Betel. Those who wish to pray for someone in the United States are urged to come forward. As many as half of the congregation members leave their seats and gather near the altar. Some stand, some kneel. Although one person leads the prayer on the microphone, that person’s voice is soon enveloped by scores of individual prayers. Some call out in Spanish, others in hñähñu. The prayer lasts five minutes or longer. As individual prayers intertwine, anguish leaves the confines of the individual chest and is seen and heard by all. Some break into tears. During casa cultos, when services are
held outdoors at congregation members’ homes, the effect is especially pronounced.

With no roof overhead but the stars, prayers seem literally to spiral upward through the night air toward relatives across the border.

On many occasions, I have strained to catch individual words within the sea of voices. “Give him work, Lord! . . . Give her wisdom. . . . Protect her, Lord . . . . Find him a good job, Lord, you’re the one who opens doors!” Some call for protection, others for work. There is a logical continuum within those prayers. As we will see in a later chapter, some Pentecostals in El Alberto draw a connection between migration, prosperity, and divine will. They state that El Alberto’s present material well-being is a sign that the town has been blessed by God. Faith has multiplied the material resources gained from migration and channeled them toward good use. More recently, an immigrant from El Alberto who I met at a church in Phoenix told me to put God first. When we put God first, she explained, God blesses us spiritually, and also materially. Her words reflect a Pentecostal non-dualism, a notion that spiritual and material benefits, like spiritual and material dangers, are inextricably intertwined.

Migrants call upon divine aid not only at the border, but also while seeking work in the United States. As the pastor of Betel puts it, “when [migrants] are there . . . they start to look for a place where they can ask God for work. And they’ve gotten answers.” He insists that although crossing the border and finding work often involve great hardship, the spiritual rewards are great:

Perhaps we don’t have words to explain what God has done in our favor. Because although the border has been so difficult to cross, but . . . we’ve seen that many people have succeeded. Because it’s something lovely to believe in God. Many people when they have money, they think that money can make them great but that’s not so. Here we value the power of God.
Stripped of material resources, travelling with little more than the clothes on their backs, migrants are pushed to a state of heightened dependence on God. That experience, the pastor explains, has breathed new life into the congregation as a whole. He explains:

Many, after coming back, start to share what God did there, when they were in the United States. So [the rest of us] who stay . . . that’s what pushes us, too, to depend more on God. . . . If God took you there, it’s because God wanted you to be there. So, to depend on God is the most beautiful thing. Wherever one may go.

The migration journey does not always strengthen migrants’ faith. For some, especially teenagers and young adults, travelling to the U.S. exposes them to new freedom and with it, new opportunities for temptation. As Víctor explains, “young people who leave here, who are evangelical, who don’t drink, don’t smoke, don’t do drugs here, but when they’re involved in life [in the U.S.], their friends start to invite them.” Freed from the structure of the community and the evangelical church, young people begin to drink, have illicit sexual relationships, and become involved in gang violence. For some, however, the vices that they fall into in the U.S. eventually push them to seek salvation with greater intensity.

While migrants cross a literal desert in their journeys to the United States, errant youth wander about in a figurative desert of sin and spiritual isolation. Biblical desert metaphors have a special resonance among congregations so deeply affected by the migration journey. A pastor visiting Betel’s affiliated church in Phoenix asked the congregation, “How many of you have crossed through the desert while coming to here? Perhaps you don’t want to be reminded. . . . But what does it mean to be in a desert? To be in a desert means to be in an empty place, a hot place, there’s nothing there.” Just as dangerous and isolating as the physical desert is the spiritual desert that
people step into when they distance themselves from God. Pastor Marcelo made a similar connection. In a sermon in the summer of 2009, he drew a visceral parallel between the thirst migrants experience in the desert and soul’s thirst for the Holy Spirit:

I talked to a man who endured 3 days of hunger, and thirst, thirst, thirst, while crossing the desert to the U.S. And they found, by a miracle of God, a spring, a little spring of water, where the animals all went down to drink, and they lay down like animals and drank there from that water. Any you know, Christians often cross through the desert, but a spiritual desert, and what happens to body without water? It can’t live! And what happens to a person without the Holy Spirit?

Just as the body dies without water, the pastor implied, the soul soon perishes without the nourishment of the Holy Spirit. Pushed to the limits of physical endurance, migrants in the desert experience total dependence on God. Fasting works through similar logic. The pastor asked how many people in attendance had ever endured hunger. He was answered by a scattering of “amens.” He then asked each person how long and in what context they had done so. One man responded that he had fasted for two days and a night on a hilltop. Others had gone hungry during migration. Still others had experienced both types of hunger: the intentionally induced hunger of a fast, and the necessarily endured hunger of border crossing.

Among Pentecostals in El Alberto fasting is a practical effort aimed at producing transformations. Much as crossing the border is a physical sacrifice undertaken to improve job prospects, fasting is a physical sacrifice intended to improve spiritual clarity and increase the likelihood that one’s prayers will be heard. Members of the Iglesia Betel hold bimonthly fasts at private homes. The fasts last for five hours or more and are attended by about 40 to 100 people. Worshippers from the Iglesia Sinai sometimes hold fasts on hilltops, the same hills where their parents and grandparents once brought offerings to call the rain. Sometimes the fasts center on migration.
The Pentecostal churches frame all stages of migration. Prayer sends migrants off, prayer follows them along their way, and prayer extends throughout the long period of living and working in the United States. Desert metaphors abound in day-to-day worship, as the physical difficulty of crossing the border resonates with ritual act of fasting. Not only are migrants sent on their way and prayed for during their absence, they are also ritually reincorporated into the church on returning to Mexico. In July of 2009, a family that had been in the United States for nine years was welcomed back into the Iglesia Betel. Also in attendance was a woman from El Alberto who had been away for 11 years and had returned to visit with her new husband. The pastor called each person by name, including the children. The children who were born in the U.S. stood up and waved for all to see. “When they left there were only two in the family, and now there are five!” the pastor exclaimed. He called the newly returned individuals to the altar. One by one, members of the entire congregation passed to the front. Some shook hands with the return migrants, others embraced them. Each was reincorporated into the group through the simple yet intimate act of touch. The same action is undertaken for other significant life transitions, including baptisms and birthdays. I was given a similar sendoff when I departed for the U.S. after three months in El Alberto.

Interpreted within a collective context, the migration journey is indeed a “theologizing experience” for El Alberto’s Pentecostals, affecting not only migrants themselves but also their neighbors, loved ones, and fellow congregation members. Much as the Caminata gathers individual experiences of the border into a shared narrative that draws new possibilities into light, Pentecostal narratives transform individual migration
trials into a single, forceful testimony of salvation. While the migration journey pushes some toward a deepened state of dependence on God, others state that their faith gives them a sense of protection and assurance before they even embark. Such is the case for Marta. A 34-year old women and an active member of the Iglesia Betel, Marta has crossed the border on multiple occasions. Several times, she crossed with young children. Once, she was six months pregnant. Marta, like Víctor, states that the migration journey is indeed more difficult today than in the past. Yet she knows that she travels with divine protection. Marta states:

   Every time I go to the United States, I turn myself over to God, I say, "I'm going to make it, because I'm not alone." There are borders for human beings, but for me, a daughter of God, there should be no borders. I go with that security, with that certainty that I'm going to cross. Thanks to God, those times we've gone, we've made it . . . and I believe that if I go again, that I'm going to succeed.

Like the worshipper in Phoenix who implored God to "blind the eyes" of the migra and render those who cross the border invisible, Marta suggests that God offers not only other-worldly salvation, but also this-worldly protection to his followers. She insists that such protection extends to other believers. "Many say that the border is very difficult, but I've seen many people from the community of El Alberto, they've been able to cross, again and again. And why? I say because they're guided." In some cases, Marta continued, people do not succeed. Their mistake, she explains, is that they put faith in the coyote rather than in God.

   There are people who go with coyotes, they say "this coyote is very safe." And then they end up saying, "this coyote has never failed, but failed this time." Why? Because they're putting their faith in human beings. . . . I say [go] with the help of a coyote, because he knows the routes. But I also say that God protects us in every moment along the way.
Migration can be worrisome for documented migrants, as well. The process of seeking a visa can take years, and even those who have papers may be held up at the border. One member of Iglesia Betel, a U.S. resident, told of an occasion when immigration officials pulled some of his companions aside to ask for their papers. Yet they let him pass with no questions. He was already peaceful, he explains, because he knew that God was with him.

In the summer of 2007, the pastor of the Iglesia Betel told me that everyone from El Alberto who had attempted to cross the border had arrived safely. “To this day, thanks to God . . . There hasn’t been a single accident,” he explained. The following summer, this was no longer the case. The first person from El Alberto had met his death at the border that April, and Francisco survived to tell the story. The accident was sharp blow to the residents of the town. Although residents of El Alberto had been depicting border danger in the Caminata for nearly four years, this was the first time that one of their own had fallen. I was unable to attend the interfaith funeral held in the Gran Cañón, but I observed the process of narrative and worship through which Francisco and others made sense of his near-death experience.

**Narrating the Border: Francisco’s Story**

Undocumented border crossing is a life crisis that challenges individuals and communities alike to wrestle with deep-reaching questions about identity and about human beings’ place in the world. Through group prayer, fasting, and rites of reincorporation, Pentecostals in El Alberto inscribe shared meaning into all stages of migration. Border crossing provides an opportunity for the group as a whole to bear witness to the efficacy of prayer and the reality of God’s intervention in the world. In
Francisco’s case the opportunity for group reflection was particularly pronounced, for he literally crossed the boundary of life and death.

The seeds of Francisco’s narrative had been sown well before the accident. In his former life, neighbors told me, Francisco was a marginal Christian. Although his religious convictions were weak, he occasionally attended Pentecostal churches. As Smilde (2007) has suggested, a person’s proximity to other evangelicals strongly affects his or her likelihood of conversion. Through contact with evangelical relatives and neighbors, people are exposed to landscapes of possibility that crystallize in the moment of conversion into a coherent whole. In Francisco’s case, the migration journey was the catalyst that brought disparate pieces of experience together into a vivid, palpable vision of the afterlife. As Francisco told and retold his story in changing contexts, and as relatives and neighbors came together to fast, pray, and worship over his paralyzed body, his near-death experience and miraculous survival drew upon and reinforced a shared system of beliefs and embodied sensibilities.

Francisco returned to life with a profound conviction that the afterlife was real. He also returned with a profound conviction that one’s actions in this life will be punished or rewarded in the next. He stresses that God takes an active role in human life, and he highlights the central importance of choosing the “good path” that leads to salvation. Francisco’s story supports Vila’s (2005) observations among Pentecostals in the U.S.-Mexico border region. Vila has found that Pentecostal narratives place far more emphasis on the spiritual border between sin and salvation than on the political boundary between nations.
Although Francisco described the afterlife in meticulous detail, his story was not a fixed product but rather an ongoing process, worked out in the company of others. Francisco told me about his coma while lying in bed at home. His aunt, mother, and nieces sat nearby. The stark presence of this formerly robust man’s paralytic body imbued that conversation with a sense of immediacy, offering living proof that the accident had occurred. His fingers laced slowly together as he spoke. The stump of his leg lay barely concealed under a thin blanket, and a bag of IV solution hung upon the wall.

Before beginning, Francisco noted that the story he was about to tell was merely a rough version. He wanted to refine his narrative and incorporate relevant Bible verses before speaking in church. At times as he spoke, he invited me to respond. At other times his aunt joined in the conversation, and her contributions subtly guided the narrative in new directions. It was through an interview with Francisco’s aunt, whom I will call Paola, that I had first heard of the accident. Paola is an active member of Iglesia Betel and is well-respected community leader. She has never been to the U.S., but her husband has spent many years working there. Paola states that her faith gave her invaluable support throughout the years as she struggled to raise her daughters alone and maintain contact with her husband across the border. She mentioned Francisco’s near-death experience in order to reinforce a larger point about the afterlife.

“While some people work just to live well, here,” she explained, “thinking that when they die, there’s nothing left, they are mistaken.” There is an afterlife, Paola insisted, and we will be rewarded or punished there. Paola’s nephew, she explained, had
recently seen the afterlife firsthand. She proceeded to relate to me the story of the accident.

Paola’s version of the story brings evil into the mix. She portrays the border as a battleground between God and Satan. Paola had pointed out that although the accident was a horrible ordeal, it had brought Francisco into contact with God. Who had caused the accident, I asked, God or the Devil? “Look,” she answered. “Between them both. Between both, because the Enemy can do his thing, right? But God saved him in the middle of it.” Although Satan had provoked the crash, “apparently when the accident was happening and he was able to see the Lord . . . the Lord was there, He helped him. . . . God said ‘this one is going to serve me, so I’m going to save him.’”

Paola’s narrative addresses the issue of theodicy. It explains why the van was hit and why Francisco survived while others died. Paola’s story also reinforces a broader logic in which divine and demonic forces engage in perpetual struggle over human activity. She spoke of demon possession. “Many people,” Paola claimed, “when they want to do something, it’s not their idea alone, it’s not their thinking; there’s someone very powerful among them that makes them do things.” Because of the constant machinations of the Devil, she suggested, people must seek out divine protection. It is important to pray for loved ones in the United States, she insisted, “because there too, although they’re inside [the U.S.] there’s much danger, there are many accidents there, in the road, on the plane. . . . When the Enemy wants people, well, this plane falls and many people say ‘no, well what happened . . . everything was ok, but why did it fall?’”

It is crucial to turn to God, Paola suggested, not only to ensure ultimate salvation but also to ensure ongoing protection in this world. Drawing the focus of our conversation
back to the border, I expressed frustration at U.S. efforts to keep people out of the country by erecting walls. I asked her whether such actions were in accordance with divine will. “No,” she answered, “...This is the will of the Devil. Of the Enemy. Why? Because the Enemy wants to alienate people.” Later, Paola offered an alternate interpretation. Whether the gringos decide to place more barriers at the southern periphery, or whether they decide to open the borders, their actions will be an expression of God’s will.

While Paola’s narrative gives a clear sense that God and the Devil actively intervene in human affairs, in her broader reflection on border enforcement the relationship between divine, demonic and human agency is less clear. The lack of clarity can perhaps be attributed to the process of narration itself. I had the sense that Paola was actively formulating her understanding of the topic throughout the course of our conversation. The lack of clarity could also be attributed to a certain practical, open-ended approach toward life’s problems. Her words suggest that although both divine and demonic forces are certainly at work at the border, it is not humans’ role to take a God’s-eye-view of the situation. God alone is judge. Although people cannot see all, they can act. They can navigate the sea of benevolent and hostile forces in Mexico and the United States by choosing the “good path,” by calling God to protect themselves and others.

Francisco, like his aunt, emphasizes divine agency at the border. So central to his story is the theme of salvation that the hostile encounter with Border Patrol agents pales in comparison. When I asked Francisco his feelings regarding the immigration agents involved in the accident, he quietly responded that he did not blame anyone, for God
was in control. When, at his father’s urging, I offered to put Francisco in touch with human rights groups at the border, he declined. There would be justice, he said, but justice would come from God alone. As he reflected more, however, he told me that as he lay recovering he had begun to sense that someday soon there would be no borders. God was going to do away with such things, for the end times were coming soon.

Francisco declines the opportunity to press for justice in this world and to denounce the Border Patrol agents who chased him. At the same time, by following the authority of a God who is powerful enough to wipe away borders and end human history, he refuses to allow those Border Patrol agents to have the last word. Other Pentecostals offered a more straightforward critique of the U.S. government. Referencing the Tower of Babel, Marta stated that the U.S.-Mexico border is a product of human pride. As she put it, “I believe that God didn’t make any borders. In the beginning, there was only one race, right? But when man wanted to be clever, and wanted to be larger than God . . . what did they make, a tower, right?” God, she explains, responded by creating different languages. “That’s why there are—Americans, Mexicans. God made it like that, but I think for God, there should be no borders.” Although ethnic and linguistic divides are the result of divine punishment, Marta suggests that God’s will is that humans be united in love.

Both Marta and the pastor of the Iglesia Betel recognize the validity of Romans 13, which states that God puts human governments in place. Yet both suggested in interviews that those who formulate U.S. immigration policy have strayed from God’s will. The pastor explained:

As a pastor, I respect the laws. Because the Bible teaches us that we have to submit ourselves to the authorities. But also, I believe we know that
among the leaders, they always create laws. And, some of the laws are good for us, and others affect us badly. So, on that end of things, I see that those [immigration] laws have affected many people, many families.

In a similar manner, Marta stated, “The authorities are certainly chosen by God. But God sent the prophets to give us commandments, and God’s commandments . . . from Genesis to Revelation, tell us that we must love our neighbor.” Marta pointed out that Mexico, too, is guilty of closing its doors to Central Americans. “Just as the United States does to us, Mexico is doing to others.”

Much as Francisco looks toward a near future when God will do away with all borders, the pastor indicated that the continuing stream of immigrants northward is divinely sanctioned. “Although they’ve tried to put up borders, and make walls, and everything else, but the U.S. government itself has seen that it hasn’t been able to stop the people. . . . Here, the leaders of this earth put their laws in place. And they put up their borders. But for God, there are no borders.” The pastor explained that “we’re just praying to God, that God will do something . . . . Because maybe with our own words we can’t change the thinking and the decisions of the leaders. So all we can do is ask God.”

**Performing the Border: A Ritual Fast**

As the ultimate authority rests with God, the pastor indicated, an answer to the suffering that migrants experience at the border will come not through protest, but through prayer. In the summer of 2008, I witnessed a vivid example of such prayer in action. Days after I first heard his testimony, the Betel congregation held a fast at Francisco’s house. By weaving sacred story into the course of immediate, objective events, the fast shaped not only participants’ models of reality but also their flesh-and-blood attitudes, their active orientations toward the immediate problems at hand. I turn to Munn’s (1973) theory of ritual to better understand how this was done.
Munn argues that ritual symbols are effective because they are able to condense multiple meanings and circulate those meanings in an efficient form (592). Moreover, symbols are iconic: they connect abstract meanings to the direct, tangible stuff of daily life. Yet even this expanded understanding of symbols, Munn argues, does not fully account for their creative potential. Through a process of “symbolic instrumentation,” rites transform the abstract, unarticulated possibilities in a situation into a tangible form that can be observed and shared (592). Because they take place in an external, shared context, symbolic acts ‘come to ‘work back’ upon the individual imagination with the authority of external reality” (593). Through symbolic instrumentation, action is taken. Something gets done. Because the images and memories of the event act upon participants from without, they transform the understanding of reality that participants carry with them.

By blending sacred narrative with the immediate, physical reality of Francisco’s accident and recovery, the ritual activities of the fast worked to transform participants’ relationships with one another and to alter their sense of the possible. Preparations for the ayuno began early in the morning, as relatives and church members gathered outside of Francisco’s house. Dozens of chickens had been killed, and giant buckets full of maize had been ground for tortillas. Women cleaned and boiled the chickens over open fires and made tortillas by the dozen for the shared meal that would follow. Rows of plastic lawn chairs had been placed in the dusty yard, and the pastor set up his omnipresent electric keyboard to lead the attendees in song.

By the time the service began, roughly 100 people had gathered, most of whom had been fasting since the previous night. Most were Pentecostal, but some Catholic
neighbors and relatives arrived as well. Francisco sat in a wheelchair with his wife and two small children at the front of the group. The presence of his injured body, juxtaposed against the active bodies of his two young sons and the noticeably pregnant belly of his wife, served as a visceral reminder of the ordeal that Francisco had survived at the border, and also of the promise and vulnerability of new life. Over the course of four hours the attendees sang with Francisco, prayed over him, and embraced him, making his near-death experience and miraculous recovery something they all shared.

From the beginning of the service, the pastor made clear that the purpose of the fast was to bring about an efficacious communion with God in attempt to restore Francisco to health. About ten minutes into the service, after a period of song, the pastor read the story of Moses’ encounter with God on Mount Sinai:

Moses was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant: the Ten Commandments. 29 When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD (Exodus 34: 28-29, NIV).

In the brief sermon that followed, the pastor drew parallels between Moses’ ascent at Sinai and the actions undertaken by the congregation that day. Like Moses, the congregation was engaged in fasting and prayer. As in Moses’ case, this effort would bring about communion with God. The pastor stressed the difficulty of fasting but also its transformative power. “Fasting isn’t an easy thing; fasting weakens the body,” he insisted. “But how important fasting is. . . . Through fasting we can receive many miracles from God.” He brought repeated attention to the length of Moses’ time on Sinai. Although this congregation would fast for one day rather than forty, although “we’re not on a mountain, we’re at a house,” the pastor insisted, “we’ve come with one
single purpose: to pray for the health and the life of our brother Francisco. And do you believe that God can answer us? . . . . God can do it.”

By claiming “we’re not on a mountain, we’re at a house,” the pastor brought images of biblical space into close association with the space at hand. As participants listened to the story of Moses’ ordeal, they did so as their own stomachs were beginning to growl, as they smelled the chickens boiling nearby. This was no dry, disembodied reading of a text, but rather an attempt to fuse a sacred story with the immediate reality. Most importantly, the presence of Francisco’s paralytic body at the front of the group kept his recent ordeal in constant view.

Although the pastor did not make the connection explicit during the ayuno, I find it highly unlikely that Francisco himself, as well as the others who had heard his testimony, would not notice a connection between Moses’ story and Francisco’s recent encounter with the afterlife. Much as Moses had undergone a great ordeal that, in the end, brought him into contact with God, Francisco had endured the trauma of near death and, in so doing, come in contact with the divine. Through his ordeal, Moses had received the Ten Commandments: “and those Commandments weren’t just for him, but also for the people of Israel,” the pastor insisted. “And they were not only for the people of Israel, but rather they are the word of God for us as well.” Similarly, Francisco’s near-death encounter had not only brought about his own salvation, but would also touch the lives of others for years to come.

The image of Moses’ radiant face was a central point of focus in the sermon. Moses had descended from Mount Sinai with a face so radiant that his companions were afraid to behold him without a veil. Francisco had returned as living proof that direct contact
with God was possible. Yet he had returned to life broken, his body paralyzed and his face somber. The ayuno was an attempt to set things right. Moses’ face shined, the pastor stressed, because he had been with God: “Moses had spoken with God for not just one day. He had been there for forty days and forty nights, and as a result it says his face changed! He was a different Moses!” Now, as a result of this fast, the pastor insisted, “brother Francisco . . . your face [too] will change. It will be different.”

The fast that day contextualized Francisco’s ordeal within a larger system of meaning, but that was not all it accomplished. By replicating, in part, the conditions that had brought divine revelation on Mount Sinai, the ayuno participants sought to access the healing power of God. Rather than make a straightforward, calculated attempt to cure Francisco, the event drew certain possibilities to light. By weaving a specific sacred narrative into this fast, on this day, outside this house with its dusty yard filled with plastic chairs, the fast gave tangible form to the ideas and images embodied in the revelation at Sinai. Many of the fast’s participants had crossed the border themselves or would do so in the future. They are likely to carry with them on future migration journeys the embodied sense of the possible generated during this and other Pentecostal worship events.

**Pentecostalism and the Caminata Nocturna**

Earlier, I argued that the migration journey can be understood as a life crisis. By crossing the border, migrants transition from the status of “citizen” to the status of “alien.” They also encounter a host of forces over which they have little control. They navigate a harsh, unpredictable desert environment. They place themselves in the hands of guides they cannot fully trust, and they encounter Border Patrol agents
wielding sophisticated surveillance technology. The possibility of death while crossing is ever present.

Much as the Caminata uses collective, embodied action to transform the difficulties of the border crossing journey into a focus for reflection, Pentecostals use collective, embodied action to transform the journey into a source of renewed faith and group cohesion. Much as the Caminata recreates the physical intensity of the migration journey to generate new possibilities for Mexico, Pentecostals draw upon prayer and fasting to generate new possibilities in the lives of migrants and their families. Yet the vision of the border and of human power that emerges in each context is quite different.

The Caminata Nocturna emphasizes human agency. Combining images of migrant death and sacrifice with symbols of Mexican national identity, the Caminata calls participants to transform the international migration system by generating jobs at home. The border reenactment looks to the border as a source of creative raw material for generating the “Mexican Dream” of a future free of dependence on labor migration.

Rather than emphasize the human power to bring about change, Pentecostals stress divine agency. Rather than find within the border crossing journey a catalyst for generating the “Mexican Dream,” they find a catalyst for salvation. In Pentecostal migration narratives, the border emerges as a hostile zone in which forces of good and evil struggle over the fate of the individual soul. The best that migrants can do in this threatening environment is to call upon divine aid by choosing the path of salvation.

While Pentecostals’ emphasis on divine agency may appear disempowering or otherworldly, it also allows them to carve out a morally acceptable space for continued acts of undocumented migration. As Pentecostals submit themselves to the authority of
a God for whom there are no borders, the authority of human governments fades from view. They embrace the undocumented journey as their right and they travel with a sense of divine protection. In the next chapter, I explore how the logic of divine protection and empowerment that Pentecostal express at the border extends to the larger experience of living and working within a global landscape.
CHAPTER 7  
“TO CRUSH THE DEVIL’S HEAD, YOU NEED THE POWER OF GOD:” GLOBALIZATION, SPIRITUAL WARFARE, AND HÑÄÑU COSMOS

We have seen that in Pentecostal narratives of El Alberto’s past, the town was once mired in alcoholism, poverty, and internal conflict. Witches transformed themselves into animals to suck children’s blood, and people contracted the services of sorcerers to inflict curses on others. In the early years of conversion, some people turned to Pentecostalism as a last-resort cure for illness. Others converted proactively, having heard that the new religion offered immunity against spiritual attack. Many state that witchcraft and sorcery declined as people turned to evangelical Christianity in growing numbers and as the town underwent a process of socioeconomic development. Sanchez Vásquez (2003) has even found that some residents of a nearby town in the Valle del Mezquital attribute the decline of witchcraft to the introduction of electric lighting. Not only are there less shadows for witches to lurk in, but “every one of the [utility] poles is a cross, and also when they try to fly they get tangled in the wires” (226, my translation).

Although Pentecostal narratives draw a close association between socioeconomic development and religious change, Pentecostals also recognize that not all aspects of development have been good, and the devil lurks close around the corner. The very electric wires that trap witches in their paths also bring the potentially corrupting influence of global culture into the bosom of family life. Evil enters homes through the tattooed bodies of return migrants and poisons children’s minds through television and radio waves. This chapter explores a dark side of development and globalization as expressed in sermons and conversations about witchcraft and sorcery in the Iglesia Betel.
Evil is alive and well today, Pastor Marcelo assured me last July as we stopped for gas at a PEMEX station on the way to a worship conference. As he drove the minivan, cell phone in hand, he and the other passengers had been telling me about the past. They mentioned how frequently children used to die of malnutrition and witchcraft. As the pastor’s monolingual grandmother listened silently in the back of the van, the others told me that she had once worked as a healer who sucked children’s eyes to rid them of curses. Although witchcraft may have declined, my fellow passengers told me, it has not disappeared. The pastor said that there is a young man in the nearby city of Ixmiquilpan who turns into a wolf each full moon. He had been studying magic and made a pact with the devil to gain power. The young man did not fulfill his end of the bargain and was transformed into a wolf. The family keeps him enclosed, and many people go to see him. I asked whether any hermanos have gone to visit him, to pray for him. The pastor said he did not know.

The wolf boy is not an isolated case. People also tell of a witch who turned herself into a turkey, the pastor continued. As the turkey went walking along the side of a road, a man found her and put her in the back of his truck. When he arrived at his destination and opened the back of the vehicle, he found no turkey at all but rather an old woman. “But she was kind of still half-turkey, with turkey-like skin,” the pastor explained. The others in the van gave murmurs of agreement.

My travelling companions told me this sort of thing is nothing new. People have long transformed themselves into animals. Not everyone has the power to do so: Christians, for example, do not turn into animals. Only those who make a pact with the devil have the power of transformation. But such practices occur on a global scale.
While the particular form of evil varies from place to place, people throughout the world make pacts with the devil to obtain power.

“For example,” the pastor explained, “I have a friend who is a missionary in Africa. In Equatorial Guinea. And he said that people turn into animals there, and they fly.” The people there keep cows, he continued, but they do not eat them. Neither do they drink the cows’ milk. Instead, they worship the cows as gods. Since the people do not consume the cows’ flesh, the pastor explained, they kill and eat their own children.

Although my travelling companions were devout Protestants, their stories brim with indigenous Mesoamerican elements. The notion of human-animal transformation derives from the Mesoamerican concept of tonalism, and the notion that supernatural power can be obtained through pacts with the devil resonates with hñähñu popular religion. Yet my companions also express a global awareness, a sense that the witchcraft and sorcery occur abroad as well as at home. My first goal in this chapter is to explore how hñähñu cosmological understandings play out within Pentecostal ideas of witchcraft, sorcery, and evil. My second task is to analyze those sorcery beliefs within a global context.

I argue that Pentecostal witchcraft and sorcery beliefs in El Alberto represent an adaptation of hñähñu cosmological understandings to the challenges of living, working, and travelling within a global sacred cosmos. While the sacred landscape of the past teemed with myriad human and other-than-human beings, today it is also infused with images and symbols from global media and global entertainment culture. Pentecostal sorcery beliefs, often centered on the bodies of youth, are part of an effort to chart a
safe path through the chaotic “landscapes of possibility” that people face daily as members of a migrant community (Appadurai 2002).

**Conversion Revisited**

As seen in Chapter 3, the earliest evangelical conversions in El Alberto often centered on issues of illness and healing. Desperate patients and their families turned to Pentecostal prayer as a last resort. Often the illness in question was attributed to supernatural causes. I turn to two additional conversion stories to better understand the role sorcery beliefs played in this process. As we shall see, the earliest converts turned to Pentecostalism in part because the religion resonated with their own embodied sensibilities about sorcery and shamanic healing.

I begin with a story related to me by Marta, the active member of Iglesia Betel whose words on border crossing we heard in the previous chapter. Marta, who was 34 at the time of the interview, told me that witchcraft had catalyzed her father’s conversion. Her father was once a tough man. He used to treated his wife badly and fight with neighbors. But one day he fell ill. He “got a bad illness, bad, it wouldn’t get better.” The illness, Marta explained, was caused by sorcery.

“It wasn’t something a doctor could treat. Someone had done him evil.” Thin and virtually lifeless, Marta’s father could scarcely muster the energy to move from the sun to the shade. He was wasting away. He sought help among the evangelicals in Ixmiquilpan, to whom his wife had already fled.

“And then they told him ‘you know what? You’ve got to get on your path. You’ve got to recognize that you’ve failed, and that God will heal you.’” The evangelicals insisted that God could heal Marta’s father. The only condition was that he must have sufficient faith. “Don’t be playing around with God,” they told him, “... God is not a game. Just
as he can heal you, he can also not listen to your prayer.” After giving himself entirely to God, Marta’s father was healed.

Witchcraft also played a role in Roberto’s conversion. An active member of the Iglesia Sinai, Roberto was 59 at the time of the interview. In his case, he did not wait until he fell ill. Like Marta’s father, Roberto had a bellicose character in his youth. He had been training to become a lucha libre character fighter. He was short, he said, but he was tough. At one point he was attacked by 15 gang members in Mexico City. He fought them off singlehandedly. In those early years, Roberto said, he had no respect for community.

“Oh, I was rebellious,” he remembers. “So here in the town, I had my enemies. Here they were going to— they were going to bewitch me. They were going to curse me. So, I had heard that those who become evangelicals, even if 100 enemies bewitch them, it won’t hurt them. So that motivated me, I became evangelical . . . . I was afraid that the people were going to kill me. . . . I’d be better off converting.” Now, Roberto insists, God is his protector. “God defends me. That was already His purpose . . . that I was going to serve Him. . . . To this day He defends me! Whatever person, or whatever enemy, even if they don’t appear, I offer them friendship. I love them.”

In both Marta and Roberto’s stories, we gain a sense that God is not the only actor on the scene. The stories depict a world that is infused with hostile and threatening forces. Rather than reject witchcraft and sorcery beliefs, Roberto and Marta’s father sought within evangelicalism a new, powerful way to counteract spiritual attack. They sought not only salvation in the next world but also this-worldly protection.
A dynamic of danger, protection, and empowerment lies at the heart of Roberto and Marta's tales. A similar dynamic emerged in the conversation with the pastor mentioned previously. I had asked whether witchcraft can affect people who do not believe in it. At first the pastor answered no. “If you believe in God, then you’ve got the blood of Christ surrounding you, protecting you,” he explained, “and nothing can do you harm.”

I rephrased the question. If a person does not believe in witchcraft, but does not believe in God either, can witchcraft affect them? “Of course,” the pastor responded. “Because evil exists. Satan exists, and he’s very, very powerful. But God exists too, and He is more powerful. We, alone, are only this powerful,” he said, measuring a few inches with his fingers. “But if we call upon the power of God,” he insisted, “which is so enormous, so much larger than us, we are protected.”

The pastor insisted that good and evil exist in dynamic tension. He insisted on the unshakeable reality of God and Satan alike. Far from mere superstition, he made clear, witchcraft and sorcery are real.

**The Hñähñu Cosmos**

Although Pentecostal discourse emphasizes a radical break with the past, the religion is in many ways continuous with hñähñu cosmological understandings. The hñähñu cosmos brims with agency and danger as myriad beings act upon people for benevolent or harmful purposes. Sorcerers and shamans alike enlist the aid of animal doubles to curse and to cure. As in other parts of the Americas, the interlocking struggle of killing and curing is understood as a necessary dynamic that makes social life possible (Whitehead and Wright 2004). By taking a closer look at the role of sorcery, witchcraft, and shamanic healing in hñähñu tradition we may better understand how the shamanic system continues to shape the Pentecostal worldview.
Before evangelical Christianity entered the scene, religion among the hñähñu of the Valle de Mezquital was shaped by a blend of traditional popular Catholicism and Mesoamerican practices. Until better transportation became available in the mid-twentieth century, clerical presence was scarce. Typically, residents of small villages in the Valle de Mezquital had contact with a priest once every few months at most. While priests officiated at functions such as weddings and baptisms, the people were largely left to themselves in their day-to-day religious practices.

Although there is regional variation, the traditional Otomí religious practices known as costumbre have several common characteristics. They include frequent offerings of flowers, candles, incense, and food to earth or water-based fertility deities. The dates of the Catholic fiestas are closely tied to the pre-Hispanic agricultural cycle. There is a ritual emphasis on the four directions, and fires or torches are used for night-time ceremonies. Festivals include ritual dances and meals shared among the entire community (Lastra, 326). As discussed in Chapter 3, hñähñu religion is grounded on principles of balance and reciprocity. Religious rites aim toward maintaining harmony with the wide variety of non-human beings who occupy the cosmos. The hñähñu pantheon is large, with significant regional variation. In their study of the practice of ritual paper cutting in the Sierra region, Alan and Pam Sandstrom (1986) gathered images of as many as 97 distinct non-human beings. These beings include gods, Catholic saints, and benevolent and malevolent spirits occupying the many realms of the cosmos.

The hñähñu cosmos consists of seven layers. In the three-layered heavenly realm dwells the primordial couple, known in hñähñu as zidada and zinana (Lastra 2006:328).
Zidada, the Holy Father, is associated with the air and the sun, and also with the Christian God. Zinana, the Holy Mother, is tied to the moon and the Virgin of Guadalupe. The heavens are also home to Maka Xita Sibi, or Grandfather Fire, and the zidāhmũ, a hñähñu term which encompasses both Catholic saints and indigenous intercessory figures known as the “ancient ones” (Sandstrom and Sandstrom, 141).

Below the heavens lies the earth, home of animals, plants, and humans. In the earthly realm also dwell the seed spirits whom shamans call upon during agricultural fertility rites, and mountains which serve as intercessors (Sandstrom and Sandstrom, 130). Mountains are particularly important among the hñähñu of the Valle de Mezquital, for in this arid region they are traditionally believed to be a source of water (Lastra, 326). At the beginning of the rainy season in early May, people carry crosses and offerings to the tops of mountains to petition for rain in the festival of the Santa Cruz (Sanchez Vásquez). The Santa Cruz was the patron saint of El Alberto in the past, and features of the festival are reflected in both the Caminata Nocturna and in Pentecostal worship practices.

In the earth dwell not only the plants, animals and mountains but also a variety of stones known as wemas and cangandhos. Wemas are the bones of giant ancestor beings that have the power to cure people and to send illness (Sanchez Vásquez, 181). Cangandhos are carved stone statues that people occasionally find while working in their fields. Presumably created by the Otomí years ago, these figures are believed to be very ancient gods (191). As they can be both benevolent but harmful, people must placate them with offerings of food and pulque. The earthly realm is also home to a
variety of water beings, including the “Lady of the Water,” who is sometimes referred to as the Siren of the Lake (Sanchez Vásquez).

Like the heavens, the underworld contains multiple layers. Within these layers dwell the dead, the *malos aires*, and *judíos*. The dead play an active role in human social life, serving as intermediaries who can send disease but can also heal (Lastra, 329). They must be properly honored with offerings. Judíos, or “jews,” are a class of malevolent beings. Although their name can be traced to the Spanish Inquisition, today they have little to no conscious correlation with the ethnic group (Sandstrom 1981:16-19). *Malos aires* or “evil winds” were originally associated with the spirits of those who died unnatural deaths. They blended with the Spanish notion of body humors during the colonial period, and today they are believed to bring harm to those they encounter (Dow 1986). In the Valle de Mezquital, evil winds are joined by *tierras malas*, also known as “dust devils,” which can provoke *susto*, or fright (Sanchez Vásquez, 165).

From this brief overview we can see that the traditional hñähñu cosmos brimmed with diverse beings, and the social and natural worlds were inseparably intertwined. To live harmoniously within so vibrantly populated a world is not an easy endeavor. Despite wide-scale conversion to evangelical Christianity, the hñähñu cosmos described above has not disappeared. Although evangelicals no longer believe in all of the beings described above—the pastor once joked while driving past the town cemetery that “*los muertos*” here do not bother the living—not all such beings are lost from view. Several examples come to mind. Pastor Marcelo told me that sirens occasionally appear near the river, though the saved cannot see them. As I struggled to speak hñähñu one night with an elderly evangelical woman, she referred to the moon as
zinana, or “Holy Mother.” While I was helping a member of the Iglesia Betel in the fields one day, she stopped to embrace a bush of ruda, or rue, explaining that the plant can help protect one from malos aires. Sanchez Vásquez writes that some evangelicals fear the power of cangandhos, those ancient stone figures that farmers occasionally unearth in their fields, and Garret-Rios (2006) has found that in cases of crop failure or other severe misfortune even staunchly evangelical communities in the Valle de Mezquital have returned to long-abandoned rites of reciprocity in effort to restore harmony with the natural world.

Rather than anecdotal survivals, the beliefs described above are evidence that an underlying ethic of relationality continues to shape the worldview of evangelicals in the Valle de Mezquital. For evangelicals as for practitioners of hñähñu shamanic religion, the world is seeped in agency. In both systems religion is an interactive enterprise aimed at balancing relationships with the human and other-than-human world. It is this relational drama that forms the backdrop for today’s Pentecostal witchcraft and sorcery beliefs. In order to fully understand such beliefs, however, we must take a closer look at the nature of hñähñu personhood.

Hñähñu Witchcraft, Sorcery, and Healing

As we have seen, within hñähñu religion humans are not the only persons on the scene. Humans, animals, and plants possess part of a common life force known as zaki. In humans, zaki is located in the center of the body. More specifically, it emerges from the stomach, or mbui (Galinier 199). The stomach is the source not only of the life force, but is also the seat of emotion and the source of the breath soul (200). While all humans share a portion of the universal life force, each human is also linked through their breath soul to one or more animals. We arrive here at the Mesoamerican notion of
tonalism (Sandstrom and Sandstrom, 139). In hñähñu understanding, as within much of traditional Mesoamerican thought, each person is born and dies at the same time as a particular animal. Terms for this animal companion vary throughout Mesoamerica.

Among the hñähñu of the Valle del Mezquital, the animal companions of shamans and sorcerers alike are known as nahuales (Dow, 62). Issues of naming aside, each individual shares a common fate with his or her animal double. Most humans are not able to identify the animal, and can bring death to themselves by accidentally killing it (Galinier, 209). It is not uncommon to have more than one animal double, and very powerful shamans have many (Galinier, 210).

As we can see through the concepts of zaki and tonalism, human beings are tied to the natural world not only through rites of reciprocity. They are also fused with the natural world in a much more direct way: through their very life force and breath soul. Rather than autonomous individuals as in the Western understanding, hñähñu persons extend beyond the boundaries of the body. Some humans can transform into animals. While Pentecostals claim that only “evil people” are capable of human-animal transformation, such transformations serve both light and dark purposes within shamanic religion. The hñähñu term for shaman is “badi,” which implies “a person who ‘knows’” (Dow, 49). This name refers to their ability to see to the source of problems. Although they possess the power to heal, shamans also have special knowledge of the origin of evil and thus also posses the power to kill. For this reason, no firm line separates shamans from sorcerers. Both have similar training, but they apply their powers toward different ends (Dow, 50).
Mesoamerican shamans carry out a variety of functions including divination, priestly functions, and healing (Galinier, 68). Healing may include *limpias*, sucking, and ritual paper cutting. During *limpias* a ritual bundle is swept across the patients' body to remove the illness (Dow, 95). Sucking involves chewing tobacco and sucking the body's surface to remove harmful objects, often with the use of crystals for divination (108). As we have seen, several elderly women in El Alberto once healed others in this way.

While *limpias* and sucking work directly on the body, some forms of healing also act upon the patient's life force. Shamans enlist the aid of their *nahuales*—often strong animals such as eagles and jaguars—to strengthen the *zaki* of those who have been weakened by sorcery (Dow, 62). A common method involves ritual paper cutting. By cutting elaborate figures representing the *zaki* of various human and other-than-human beings, shamans and sorcerers alike seek to obtain power over those beings and alter the course of their actions (32). Shamans are not bound by spatial distance (73). Nor are they deterred by international borders: some conduct rites to influence the *zaki* of migrants in the United States. Although paper cutting is more prevalent among the Sierra Otomí than in the Valle de Mezquital, the logic of causality involved is similar. By manipulating symbols in which the patient is emotionally invested, shamans produce genuine changes in the person's physical and psychological state (Dow, 135-150).

As Nutini and Roberts (1993) have argued, witches are another common category of ritual specialist within Mesoamerica. Usually female, witches have the power to transform themselves into animals. As turkeys, dogs, fleas, and ants, they sneak into sleeping victims' chambers and suck their blood. A sharp object, preferably a piece of
metal, placed under the bed or behind the door also offers some protection against witches. Witches may also transform into balls of fire that shoot out sparks as they bound across great distances (Sanchez Vásquez 2003). In order to gain the power to fly, witches take off their legs, which they then place in the form of a cross upon the hearth. To capture a witch, one must steal her legs after she has removed them (223). As Galinier points out, the lower half of the body is associated with the Devil among the hñähñu. Legs also symbolize connection to one’s animal double (81).

As we can see, the turkey-woman and the bloodsucking witches my informants describe clearly have Mesoamerican roots. Their relationship to the devil however, is different. Pentecostals have told me that witches gain power by making a pact with the devil. Within hñähñu popular religion, people can indeed make pacts with the devil to gain power (Galinier 120). Mesoamerican witches, however, do not necessarily make such pacts. In some classifications, they are born with their condition and cannot control their furious craving for blood (Nutini and Roberts 128-9).

As Whitehead and Wright have argued, the distinction between witches and sorcerers may not be so easily drawn in all parts of the Americas. They propose the term “dark shamanism” to encompass the predatory dimension of various ritual specialists within Amazonian societies. Although they center on a different region, Whitehead and Wright’s observations may help us to better understand sorcery beliefs in hñähñu shamanism and within contemporary Pentecostalism. They argue that shamanic curing cannot be understood apart from shamanic killing. Light and dark shamans are locked in a perpetual struggle that keeps the cosmos in motion. Rather than condemning dark shamans’ actions as sins, people recognize them as an
“inevitable, continuing, and even a necessary part” of existence (7). In fact, the presence of dark shamans helps make the social world possible, for such figures provide a manageable focus for the otherwise overwhelming predatory potential of the cosmos (12).

Hñähñu shamanic tradition is replete with predatory beings, whether they are sorcerers who send their nahuales to attack a victim’s life force, witches who suck children’s blood or malos aires that catch unwitting travelers in their paths. Shamans work to protect and strengthen people within this dangerous cosmos. As I outlined earlier, a theme of danger, protection and empowerment lies at the heart of early Pentecostal conversion stories. For today’s Pentecostals, the cosmos has not lost its dangerous, predatory nature. Just as light shamanism cannot function without dark shamanism, Pentecostal prayer and faith healing cannot be understood without the presence of Satan and his agents.

Pentecostal sorcery beliefs extend the “active, participatory relationship with the cosmos” that characterizes shamanic systems (Whitehead and Wright, 15). We must go further, however, if we are to understand the specifically global nature of the sorcery beliefs that my informants express. The pastor speaks not only of wolf-boys and turkey-witches near home, but also of child-eating sorcerers in Africa. He insists that people in the United States make pacts with the devil just as frequently as they do in Mexico. Evil is expressed in el norte not only through drinking and drug addiction, but also through concrete practices such as Ouija-board divination.

As international migrants and as consumers of global entertainment media, Pentecostals from El Alberto are immersed in a cosmos that is ever shifting to
encompass new images, new people, and new material goods. While the logic underlying Pentecostal sorcery beliefs draws heavily from hñähñu shamanic principles, we are still faced with the task of understanding which symbols, which objects, and which people Pentecostals perceive as evil today, and why. To explore this question, I turn to a PowerPoint presentation that Pastor Marcelo gave during an evening service at the Iglesia Betel in July of 2009.

**Mapping the Global Sacred Landscape**

The pastor had recently returned from a two-week visit to Betel’s sister congregations in Phoenix and Las Vegas. Just off the plane, stories and greetings from fellow hermanos fresh upon his lips, he roused the congregation with the usual opening songs. Rather than giving a sermon, however, the pastor told us that he had something new in store for us that evening. He was going to teach us to recognize a range of evil symbols that surround us, symbols that can corrupt our lives if we are not careful.

The pastor opened by reading from the Bible: “My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6, NIV). He proceeded to unveil, slide by slide, a series of images from ancient religions and contemporary culture. He had purchased the presentation, he told me later, at a Spanish Christian bookstore. Each symbol was followed by a brief interpretation. The pastor read the interpretations and elaborated upon them.

There were at least a dozen symbols, perhaps 20. Many hailed from the ancient world. There were symbols of Celtic, Mediterranean, and ancient Indian origin. These were pagan symbols, the pastor told us, through which sorcerers have long called upon the powers of Satan to bring evil into the world. None were of pre-Columbian origin.

“The pentagram,” the pastor explained, showing us a five-pointed star surrounded by a circle, “represents the four elements, surrounded and controlled by the Evil Spirit.”
The fifth point of the pentacle had another referent that I do not recall. The elements of earth, air, water and fire are important within hñähñu cosmology and are symbolically represented at the closing of the Caminata. By manipulating representations of those elements, the pastor suggested, sorcerers act upon the elements themselves. The next symbol was the hexagram. The hexagram resembles the Star of David, the pastor noted. Unlike the Star of David, however, it is surrounded by a circle and thus, like the pentagram, enveloped in evil.

The logic involved in the pastor’s explanation is not unlike that involved in ritual paper cutting. By acting upon the paper representations of a person’s life force, hñähñu shamans and sorcerers influence that force itself and thus affect the well-being of the person. Similarly, drawing a circle around a representation of the four elements is an essentially dangerous act capable of affecting the physical world.

The next symbol was the ankh. The pastor explained that the ankh is an ancient fertility symbol. Today barren women often wear the ankh as a pendant in the hope that it will help them conceive. The pastor maintained that there is nothing wrong with seeking fertility, but one must not call upon dark powers to do so. Instead, infertile women must place all of their trust in God. To reinforce this point, he shared the story of a woman from a neighboring congregation who had tried everything possible to conceive. Even the doctors could not help her. She finally became pregnant with the help of God.

The slideshow continued with symbols of more recent origin, including the swastika, the angular “SS” of the Nazi Schutzstaffel, and the peace sign, described as the broken cross. The slide presentation explained that the initials SS stand for Servicio Satanas,
or “Satan service.” The jagged double “S” also appears in the name of the rock band Kiss, the presentation continued. The pastor shifted to a discussion of popular music. That summer the death of Michael Jackson was fresh in the public imagination. News of Jackson’s death flooded the television channels, and bootlegged CD’s of his music were available by the dozen in the market in Ixmiquilpan. The late king of pop, the words on PowerPoint slide explained, had become famous not by natural means but because he had made a pact with the devil. “We have no problem,” I copied into my notebook, “with rock and roll. God created music. We are not opposed to rock and roll but rather opposed to people like Michael Jackson who sell their soul to the Devil in order to become rich and famous” (my translation). The star’s premature death, the pastor continued, is a sign that the Devil claimed him in the end.

As we have seen, the notion that people can make a pact with the devil to obtain power is present within hñähñu tradition. The pastor elaborated upon Michael Jackson’s satanic dealings by drawing upon observations from his travels in Mexico City and the U.S. Today, he explained, some young people—los chicos emo, the “emo kids”—also make devil pacts. By “emo kids,” the pastor referred to a contemporary style of dress among young people that is associated with strong emotional expression. You can tell who they are, he noted: they paint their nails black, cut their hair in strange styles, and often have tattoos.

At this point we have before us a rich array of symbols, some from ancient culture, some from the entertainment industry, and some from youth culture. I turn to the work of Michael Taussig (1980) to begin to unravel the significance of my informants’ devil references. Taussig argues that devil beliefs among laborers in Colombia and Bolivia
are deeply tied to economic change. By making a pact with the devil, these laborers believe, people can obtain quick wealth. Such pacts produce intensive short-term gain but are ultimately unsustainable. By objectifying individualistic greed and exploitation in the figure of the devil, Taussig argues, laborers on the fringes of a capitalist economy manage to retain a critical awareness of their situation.

Like the laborers that Taussig describes, residents of El Alberto are poised between the global capitalist economy and the collective economy of their home town. Many have worked for years in the United States yet remain deeply invested in the communal labor system of El Alberto. Although agriculture is no longer the main source of subsistence, the ecotourism park offers a new framework through which old forms of collective labor continue. We may well ask whether witchcraft, sorcery and devil beliefs in El Alberto serve to mediate the tension between the two economic systems.

I suggest that although sorcery beliefs do express anxiety about wealth and power in some cases, they are more than a response to changing economic relations. If we look closely at the accusations, we can see that they are directed not toward residents of El Alberto but toward outsiders: an unknown woman travelling by the side of the road, Michael Jackson, teenagers in Mexico City. Often, the accused work in secrecy. For example, the pastor explained that much as priests bless objects and places with holy water, Satanists apply evil substances to pentagram necklaces, ankh amulets, and other pieces of jewelry before selling them to the unwitting public. Christians can counteract the Satanists’ efforts by applying holy oil to objects and spaces, for the oil represents the Holy Spirit. The sorcery beliefs presented here are best understood as
an effort to neutralize and control the predatory actions of unknown agents on the global scene.

My observations mesh with Birgit Meyer’s (2002) work among Ghanaian Pentecostals. Meyer finds that Ghanaian Pentecostals use prayer to neutralize the danger embodied in the manufactured goods. Because commodities are produced by distant unknown actors, they are highly dangerous and are even deemed “able to impose their will on their owners” (248). Prayer transforms such objects into innocuous utilitarian items.

Meyer offers a new spin on Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism. The Ghanaian Pentecostals are not blinded by the illusions of capitalism. By attributing agency to products, they recognize that, in buying them, they are stepping into potentially volatile relationships. Behind each product lie globally dispersed designers, investors, and advertisers who do not necessarily have the buyer’s interest at heart. Prayer is an attempt to strip the product of its dangerous potential, much as rites are used to integrate initiates or transition individuals within society.

The sorcery beliefs that I have described in El Alberto do not center on commodities per se. However, the PowerPoint presentation centered on another, less tangible but equally consumable “product:” global entertainment media. Evil is embodied in the music of Michael Jackson and in the music of the band KISS. Danger is present, too, in Spiderman films and film-related products. Like foreign-made objects bought in the Ghanaian market, rock music and blockbuster movies are not neutral. They act upon the consumer as much as the consumer acts upon them. Movies look back at the viewer. Music shapes the mind of the listener. Rather than sit passively awash in a sea
of dangerous influences, people can arm themselves with prayer to protect themselves and their loved ones.

The pastor’s response to global media reflects both a strong relational view of the cosmos and a firm effort to assert local control over global images and symbols. Yet the slide presentation contained not simply images from the entertainment industry and global youth culture, but also religious symbols from the ancient world. Michael Jackson and the ankh, emo kids and the broken cross, the Nazi SS and the pentagram whirl together in a phantasmagorical cross-section of an imagined world landscape (Appadurai 2008).

Appadurai argues that the images, symbols, and products shaping people’s imaginations today are not contained within the boundaries of nation-states but rather flow throughout the world in complex and often disjointed ways. Migrants cross borders, transnational corporations manage money at lightening speed, and news media reaches opposite sides of the globe instantaneously. As “money, commodities and persons are involved in ceaselessly chasing each other around the world” (56), the task of achieving coherence falls to the individual imagination. The imagination is, as Appadurai puts it, “a form of negotiation” through which actors assimilate, contest, and sometimes subvert the “globally defined fields of possibility” they are faced with on a daily basis (30).

As Pastor Marcelo had bought the slide presentation at a Christian bookstore, the symbols it contains had been assembled by others. The presentation drew heavily upon global evangelical notions of space, time, and causality. Yet as he interpreted each symbol he drew upon local examples and invited responses from those present.
Although the symbols hailed from across the globe, the logic through which he and others interpreted them was in large part their own. The service that day was a veritable laboratory for “glocalization” (Robertson 1995; Vásquez and Marquardt 2003), that is, for a mutually transformative interchange between local and global ideas and processes.

As we have seen, in the hñähñu shamanic system the cosmos is inhabited by countless other-than-human persons, many of whom are dangerous. People are joined to the cosmos through their life force, and sorcerers and shamans act upon that life force to kill and to cure. During the service described here, the pastor worked to map out a global spiritual landscape in new ways. He strove to render its contours visible to the members of the congregation so that they would not be “destroyed from lack of knowledge.” (Recall that a hñähñu shaman is, literally, “one who knows.”) The new spiritual landscape is, like the old one, replete with agency and potential danger. In this case, however, agency lies not only in the many other-than-human beings that inhabit the natural world, but also within the global entertainment media and globally dispersed symbols from ancient religions.

Not only did the pastor map out the contours of the global sacred space; he also charted out a sacred timeline. After discussing the entertainment media, he discussed evidence that we are entering the end times. One such piece of evidence was the Masonic all-seeing eye. The eye atop the pyramid, he explained, represents unbounded human power, human attempts to surpass God’s omniscience.

“If you’ve ever held an American dollar bill,” said the pastor—and most of those in attendance had indeed done so—“you can find the all-seeing-eye upon it.” During Pope
John Paul II’s visit to the U.S., the pastor explained, the U.S. made a pact with Rome to place the symbol on its dollar. Now, as a result, the U.S. economy is heading downhill. As the pastor spoke, the economic crisis in the U.S. was at the forefront of public conversation.

In the past, the pastor continued, the U.S. dollar held the phrase “God Bless America.” And God indeed blessed the country. Ever since Americans put the all-seeing-eye on the bill, however, the economy has declined, while the Euro has gained strength. And it is said that there will be but a single currency upon the earth during the end times.

At this point one of the members of the congregation raised a question. Don’t people say, he asked, that “www” has significance in Hebrew? Hasn’t it been shown that the Hebrew letter “w” is equivalent to the number 6, due to its order in the alphabet? The pastor answered that this was indeed the case. “And what do the letters ‘www’ stand for, in English?” he continued. “‘World’ means mundo,” he translated. “‘Wide’ means ancho. ‘Web’ means tela, like a spider’s web.” The internet is like a global spider web, the pastor explained, through which the devil works to ensnare the world. After the service, I told the pastor that I would think twice the next time I used the internet. He told me not to worry. “Everything is planned,” he said. Although the signs of evil are present in the world, they have been foretold by the book of Revelation.

**Navigating Satan’s Web**

Space and time are intertwined in the pastor’s vision, as a global cast of symbols indicate the imminent return of Christ. As Satan’s web encircles the globe, one population runs the greatest risk of becoming ensnared: the youth. While the millenarian theme clearly derives from the global Pentecostal script embodied in the
slide presentation, the pastor’s emphasis on youth draws from concerns intrinsic to El Alberto’s position as an indigenous migrant community in the midst of social transition. Within the pastor’s lesson that evening, the youth and the bodies of youth were a prominent theme. After speaking of the “emo” kids, the pastor warned us about the “cholo” greeting in which people punch their fists together and slap palms. There were giggles of recognition in the congregation. The greeting is no laughing matter, the pastor continued; it is dangerous. Rather than shake hands in that way, he continued, we would do well to resurrect the greeting that our grandparents used. In that greeting, he said, there was true respect. I knew the greeting he referred to, for a few elderly people in the town have drawn my hand close to them, lightly kissed it, and indicated that I do the same.

It is the young people among whom the traditional greeting has been lost, the pastor implied, and it is the young people who are most in need of protection. Not only are their minds poisoned by the wrong sorts of television and music, but their bodies can literally serve as sites for the transmission of evil. Children, in particular, must be protected. One of the images within the presentation’s long succession of symbols was a picture of Spiderman. Some people laughed. Yes, even Spiderman is dangerous, said the pastor.

“What must we remember?” he asked. “No Spiderman”—

“Because that’s bad!” yelled a little boy. Some laughed. It is important, the pastor continued, to protect children from seemingly innocent cartoons and movies that contain references to the dark side. We must also prohibit children from participating in Halloween.
“Why do you think so many children are lost in the U.S. on October 31?” he asked. They are captured, he explained, for sacrifices. Halloween occurs at about the time of the Day of the Dead in Mexico, he explained, implying that the popular Catholic celebration is no safer than the American holiday.

The notion that children are vulnerable to attack and must be protected has roots in Mesoamerican tradition. As we have seen, infants and children fall prey to bloodsucking witches. They may also fall ill from the “mal de ojo,” or evil eye. Yet I suggest that the pastor’s focus on youth during this presentation also derives from young people’s position at the crux of massive social and economic change. Throughout my interviews, when I have asked Pentecostals about the negative influences of migration, most are quick to refer to los jóvenes, the youth. It is they who bear the contradictions of migration and development in their flesh. If the first migrants travelled to the U.S. and worked their fingers to the bone, their children are the teenagers and young adults of today who often grew up with televisions in place of parents, with the conveniences of shoes and packaged food in place of moral foundations.

It was for the sake of the youth that the Caminata Nocturna was first concocted, and it is for the youth that the Betel congregation frequently fasts and prays. As the children of migrants or potential migrants themselves, their decisions will shape the future course of the community. As travelers within global culture and consumers of global media, they bring new objects, actions, and desires into the home. Their bodies are a site of potential danger that must be protected, mediated, and controlled.
The pastor’s lesson that evening charted out the global spiritual landscape in which the town is embedded and through which migrants, many of them young people, must travel. Not only did he map the contours of that landscape, but he also indicated to the congregation how they might best navigate it. Immediately following the PowerPoint presentation, the pastor presented a slideshow of photos from his recent trips to Phoenix and Las Vegas. The photos depicted neighbors and relatives from El Alberto, fellow brothers and sisters in the faith, in their homes and in worship. There were pictures of them preparing food and eating together. There were pictures, in particular, of children. The pastor introduced each person by name.

“There’s the hermana Estela, with her new baby Lucita—Estela’s been in the U.S. five years and look, now she has a child. . . . Here’s brother Carlos and his wife Natalia; they waited for us until three in the morning when we were driving in from Phoenix. . . . Here, this little one is their son Jonathan, born two months ago.” Each photo produced murmurs of joy and recognition, as congregation members saw long-absent loved ones on the screen before them.

It is significant that the pastor showed this presentation immediately after the presentation of evil symbols. If predatory sorcerers work to poison children’s minds and curse the bodies of the youth, if the media projects dangerous images through the airways, if Satan spreads his web of evil across the world via the internet, the pastor suggested that Christians can cast their own webs of protection in response. The final slideshow drew upon the tools of international travel and digital technology to send a protective circle of prayer and community around those hermanos, and especially their young children, in the United States.
The events described here are but one means through which residents of El Alberto are orienting themselves within a shifting global landscape. In this case, they protect themselves from the dangers of mobility by embracing the very deterritorializing forces that threaten them, including the internet and high speed travel. They do not retreat from the global landscape; rather, they appropriate its tools and put them to the service of God. In chapter that follows, I turn once again to the Caminata project to explore a final layer of its very different approach to territory.
CHAPTER 8
INDIAN TERRITORY

Crossing through Indian Territory

In 2009, two new characters joined the cast of the Caminata: the self-described “indios,” a pair of wild-haired, barefoot beings who receive the tourists with trepidation but ultimately offer them assistance. I first saw the indios during a Caminata in late May. That night the guides had taken us through two tunnels. One was wide enough to stand in. I had passed through it before. The second tunnel was scarcely three and a half feet high. We stooped low to fit in, and lower still to avoid the sharp wires protruding from the concrete above. It was pitch black. I had to touch the back of the person in front of me to find my way.

As the last person emerged, a guide told us that we must proceed with caution, for we were now entering “Indian territory.” As we rounded a bend we were startled by a figure clothed in rough white cotton. He was covered in dirt. He had long, disheveled black hair and his face was darkened by what I later learned was charcoal. An animal skin flapped from his back. Scarcely had we taken in the image when the guides hurried us to the ground. The figure began to shout. He lit about eight torches, revealing a ramshackle hut whose crooked angles bent and twisted in the firelight. Gourds, clay pots, animal pelts, and skulls hung upon the gnarled branches that were propped about.

The figure yelled brusquely at us in a language that I recognized as simplified form of hñähñu. “Hyudl!” he yelled. “Sit!” the guides translated. The indio told us to avert our eyes. He was angry at us for passing through. Too many people have been crossing through this area, he said. He then began to consult with a woman whom we could not
see. We were making doña Petra angry, he explained, because we were killing all of the animals.

The indio demanded that we reveal our leader. “Him, him!” one of the guides whispered, pointing to another guide in the back. The indio seized the young man and tied him to a post, where he remained immobile for the rest of the scene. Soon another figure, as wild and disheveled as the first, emerged from the hut. Although the characters did not introduce themselves by name, the man who plays the second indio later told me that his character's name is “Chaleque, and the other is named don Caco.” Chaleque, he explained, “is a name of the Indians from here, who existed around here in the Valle del Mezquital, it’s from that dialect. Caco is also an Indian name.” Chaleque and Caco spoke to one another brusquely. At times they seemed to forget about our presence. The boundary between actors and audience faded in and out of view. The guides remained firmly on our side, serving as translators and intermediaries.

“Sit!” Caco ordered Chaleque. “Eat!” He brought out some big, fat insects and laid them on the ground. “I like to eat these! They’re my favorite food!” don Caco explained, turning to us. He made an exaggerated show of gobbling up the bugs. Some tourists groaned. “We don’t eat tortillas,” he explained. In a charming non sequitur, he blurted out, “I have a pet crocodile!”

The indios made it clear that our presence was not welcome. We had invaded their territory and offended doña Petra. As time passed, however, they warmed up to us. Don Caco brought out a gourd of pulque. He explained that he had ten cups. We must give those ten cups to the people who felt the weakest, for it would give them strength for the journey. The cups that he passed out in fact contained agua miel, sweet,
unfermented agave nectar. Next, the indios brought out a map. Stitched in brown yarn on the underside of a small sheepskin, the map depicted the space of El Alberto without houses. It was part drawing, part view from above. The Church of San Alberto rose prominently on the right-hand side. A river cut through the map’s center, crossed by two bridges. Four roads marked a rectangle across the space. A human figure stood near the upper left-hand edge, a curved line indicating a path in front of and behind him. The only other landmark was a collection of crosses marking the cemetery. Don Caco indicated where we were to travel and bid us on our way. As we crossed out of the clearing, we caught a glimpse of a donkey tied in the shadows behind the hut.

During a second performance several weeks later, only don Caco was present. The show was much shorter. As before, he called out to doña Petra and spoke of the animals being killed. This time, he also spoke to the water. He looked hard at a stream behind the hut, as if listening to it. Something plopped loudly in the water, as though someone had thrown a stone into it. “The water is angry,” he interpreted, “because it’s about to start raining very hard!”

**Past Indians, Border Indians**

The day after I observed the indios in the Caminata for the first time, several men who were working a shift at the park told me that the characters represent Native Americans at the border. “It’s real,” one man explained. “So many things happen at the border—there are some Indians there who don’t want people to pass through.” When I asked which tribes people from El Alberto have had contact with, no one knew for sure. One man mentioned the Yaqui. Others mentioned towns belonging to the large Tohono O’odham nation that lies along the Arizona border.
While the initial explanation I received was that the *indios* represent Indians at the border, the actors themselves gave an additional explanation. Raymundo, who plays don Chaleque, confirmed that people from El Alberto do occasionally encounter Native Americans at the border. “Yes, it’s true, we find Indians . . . Those Indians there in Arizona, there are some who help us by giving us water and food and sometimes they hide us so that Immigration doesn’t see us.” Those at the border, however, are “another kind of Indian.” Raymundo explained that the “Indian” he depicts is the local version, from Hidalgo. “To this day I say that Indians exist, like we dress [in the Caminata], that’s what the Indian in Mexico and Hidalgo has been like . . . how they live and how they dress.”

Those who portray the *indios* say that the characters represent El Alberto’s residents in the years of isolation before development arrived on the scene. While the savage *indio* is a blatant stereotype, the motivation of those who stage it is sincere. The *indio* represents a dimension of the past that is very real in the collective memory of El Alberto. As we have seen, people of all religious backgrounds state that El Alberto was once conflict-ridden and hostile to the outside world. Negative as it was, that past was their own, the era in which their grandparents and great-grandparents lived. Something intimately treasured is woven into those stories. The *indios* show brings to light El Alberto residents’ ambivalence toward their own past and toward their indigenous identity today. Yet the *indios* also represent contemporary Native Americans whose reservations serve as prominent crossing zones along the U.S.-Mexico border. The border “Indian” joins the historic “Indian” in a single character who offers tourists a new map of border space. The *indios* call upon a notion of territory that lies deeper than the
spatial schemes imposed by national governments. Rather than punish tourists for violating an abstract national boundary, the indios reprimand tourists for failing to respect the land and those who dwell within it. As Native Americans such as the Tohono O’odham voice frustration at the encroachment of migrants, drug traffickers, and Border Patrol Officials upon their territory, the “indios” in the Caminata voice frustration at the ways in which migration disrupts intimate local ways of knowing and being in the land.

“Playing Indian” in Mexico and Beyond

Every weekend in the Caminata, the residents of El Alberto “play Indian” for an audience of Mexican tourists and, sometimes, international reporters. The Indian that they enact is at once a border Indian, the indio of El Alberto’s past, and the present-day indio of the state of Hidalgo. As Raymundo and Cirino shed their shoes, don black wigs and dress in ropa de manta, they join in a long and complex history of “playing Indian” in Mexico, the United States, and beyond.

In the United States, people of European and even African descent have dressed and acted like Native Americans for centuries (Deloria 1998; Green 1988). During the early colonial period, “playing Indian” was less a game than a survival strategy. Whites hunted, farmed, and sometimes even dressed like Native Americans in effort to adapt within a hostile new land. During the Boston Tea Party, the image of the Indian was lodged irrevocably in the national imagination (Green, 35), and over time the Indian became an essential character within the myth of the First Thanksgiving. While the most extreme example of “playing Indian” is carried out by role-playing Native American hobbyists (42), the “Indian” is also a continuing object of fantasy for the larger public, as seen in the continuing appeal of movies like Dances With Wolves.
Green argues that the image of the “Indian” is powerful precisely because it lies at the core of American identity. Nations are united through common myths of origin, Green argues, and the “Indian” is central to the American origin story. When Euro-Americans “play Indian,” they “are connecting to the very beginnings of the mythological structure called America” (48). The potency of the Indian image depends upon the near-extinction of actual Native Americans. “Indians” can only be performed, Green argues, at the brink of their death (31).

Non-natives have not been the only ones to “play Indian.” In a study of postcard images from 1900 to 1970, Albers and James (1983) found that photos of Native Americans in the Great Lakes region gradually took on cultural features from the Plains region. Photographers pandered to the expectations of tourists who recognized the stereotypical headdress and teepee of the Plains region as authentically “Indian.” Albers and James describe the figures that appear in postcards as “mystified abstractions” that have little or nothing to do with actual Native American lives (140). Beard-Moose (2009) describes a similar process among members of the Cherokee Nation. In what is known as “chiefing,” Cherokee men pose for tourists in feathered headdresses, often near teepees. Chiefing began shortly after WWII when tourists began to visit the Great Smokey Mountains National Park in large numbers (81). Members of the local Cherokee Nation soon learned that headdresses and teepees from Plains culture attracted more tourists than did their own clothing and housing styles. Today, “chiefs” describe the practice as genuine profession through which some have earned enough money to send their children to college (80). Once they have gotten tourists’ attention by catering to stereotypes, “chiefs” welcome the opportunity to
teach about Cherokee culture. Yet as a Cherokee woman who once acted as an Indian princess explains, “tourism is always a balance, some painful and some good” (Beard-Moose, 83). Those who engage in chiefing face pressure to represent themselves in ways consistent with stereotypical images of Native Americans in the mass media.

In the indios show, as within “chiefing,” tourists’ tastes and expectations play a strong role. Like Cherokee “chiefs,” the indios of the Caminata are abstractions who scarcely resemble those who live in El Alberto today. Yet Cirino and Raymundo are not entirely subject to mass media stereotypes. Rather, the indio is a selective mask that they use at certain times for certain purposes. While Rayna Green argues that “playing Indian” can only happen when genuine indigenous people are on the verge of cultural extinction, Cirino, Raymundo and others survive and thrive as complex beings who playfully manipulate images of their own culture. I witnessed Cirino’s creative versatility when I stayed behind the indios show one night to take photographs. Although the tourists were gone and Cirino and Raymundo both knew me well, they did not break character. They gestured silently, striking dramatic poses with the donkey, the sheepskin map, and a rifle. Only when my camera was stowed did Cirino wipe the charcoal from his face and wipe don Caco from his demeanor. As he hastily packed away the props, he evaluated the night’s performance and asked me for my reaction.

The enthusiasm of Don Caco is never far beneath Cirino’s skin. Once, Cirino stopped to offer me a ride. His clothing was conservative and unassuming, but he tilted his head toward the back seat. “I’ve got my merchandise,” he grinned. Looking in the rear-view mirror, I caught a glimpse of the black wig and something that looked like a dead animal.
Given the country’s unique history, the implications of “playing Indian” are quite different in Mexico than they are in the United States. While European settlers in the present-day U.S. tended to look upon Native Americans as a nuisance that must either be relocated or exterminated, such was not the case in colonial New Spain. Instead, colonizers looked to the native population as a source of potential labor. As a result, the boundary between colonizers and colonized in present-day Mexico today is much less clear than it is in the United States. While less than 2% of the U.S. population is Native American, indigenous people represent over 10% of Mexico's current population. More than two thirds of the country’s inhabitants are mestizo, or of mixed indigenous and European ancestry. When Mexicans “play Indian” or otherwise represent indigenous people, the “indio” they represent is not a complete “other,” but rather intimately tied to mestizos’ own ancestral heritage.

Throughout Mexican history, the state has alternately scorned and idealized, rejected and embraced indigenous people as it has sought to establish a national culture. In the struggle for Independence against Spain, the criollo population drew upon ancient Aztec warriors for inspiration (Quinn-Sánchez 2006: 34). While later Liberal rulers had little use for what they saw as Mexico’s “barbaric” indigenous past (34), post-Revolutionary Mexican leaders once again embraced indigenous identity as they sought to rebuild the nation. In early post-Revolutionary Mexico, Minister of Education José Vasconcelos proposed a new, racially-based vision of Mexican national identity: the raza cósmica, or “Cosmic Race.” Following brutal years of revolutionary struggle, Vasconcelos proclaimed that the Cosmic Race was to be an expression of humanity at its highest potential (Higgins 2004: 106). Much as cross-breeding fosters
resilience in plants, interchange and hybridity would produce a strong, adaptable class of mestizo human beings. Rather than treat the indio as a despised racial inferior whose only hope for betterment lay in “whitening,” Vasconcelos embraced indigenous people as an ingredient that would add robust flavor to the national stock. Yet the raza cósmica was a top-down ideology. Rather than value indigenous people in their own right, the notion of the Cosmic Race subsumed difference to a single national ideal.

Vasconcelos’ efforts lay the groundwork for indigenismo, a Mexican government policy that sought to assimilate indigenous people into the national society through education and development (Quinn-Sánchez, 56). A strong proponent of indigenismo during his presidency in the 1930’s, Lazaro Cárdenas made a concentrated effort to reach out to members of the rural population and listen to their concerns (Higgins, 113). He implemented ejidos in a concentrated effort to destroy the hacienda system (Quinn-Sánchez, 56). A large part of the visionary power behind indigenismo came from the anthropologist Manuel Gamio. Gamio championed indigenous art, culture, and tradition. At the same time, he deemed it essential that indigenous people be educated and westernized. In order for the national society to flourish, in Gamio’s opinion, European culture and indigenous culture must meet one another half-way (47). Persons of European descent must learn to understand and appreciate indigenous culture, and indigenous people must be educated and integrated into the national economy. While Gamio sought to overcome hundreds of years of indigenous marginalization, under indigenista policy indigenous people were still treated as inferiors who must be improved.
Throughout Mexican history, indigenous people have been the objects of totalizing national projects of identity formation. They were exploited for slave labor during the colonial period, marginalized during the early years of independence, and integrated—often forcibly—during the indigenista policy of the early twentieth century. Today, Mexico is officially a multicultural nation. The government has no official language and recognizes indigenous languages as legitimate. The state guarantees children the right to a bilingual education and honors ethnic diversity by backing events such as the Día Internacional de la Lengua Materna, or International Mother Language Day. In practice, however, the ideal of pluralism is not so easily maintained. Bilingual education rarely extends beyond elementary school and, as demonstrated by the Zapatista conflict, claims for genuine indigenous autonomy meet with significant government resistance.

While the stereotypical "Indian" in American imagination is the headdress-wearing chief modeled upon Plains culture, a stereotypical indio in Mexican national imagination is the Aztec or Mexica warrior, as enacted by concheros dancers in Mexico City (Rostas 1991 and 1998). The concheros are a common sight for tourists visiting Mexico City's central historic district. Dressed in loincloths and bearing drums and rattles of pre-Hispanic origin, they identify themselves as warriors fighting for indigenous autonomy (1991:3). The dance arose in the nineteenth century among indigenous communities in Central Mexico and was became urbanized as more people migrated to Mexico City (4). Today, dancers hail from a wide variety of backgrounds. Some speak indigenous languages, some are mestizo artists hoping to preserving indigenous tradition, and others participate out of an interest in New Age spirituality (1998:88). Although they dance for tourists, the performance has a ritual quality grounded in a syncretic
reinvention of indigenous spirituality (1991:5). I have observed the concheros on several occasions in Mexico City. After one performance, the dancers offered tourists an ad hoc history lesson about pre-Colombian Mexico. The speaker, who had a strong anti-colonial message, called the tourists to join him in recovering the country’s indigenous past. On another occasion the dancers handed out photocopied images of the Aztec calendar for a small fee.

As most tourists who participate in the Caminata are from Mexico City, it is likely that many of them are familiar with the concheros. The guides’ rhetoric during the Caminata at times resonates with the intentional, spiritualized indigenous identity that the concheros promote. One section of the Caminata takes tourists to a space near a river where the ground is covered in small, round stones. Introducing the place as a traditional sacred ground, the guides gather tourists into a circle. During one Caminata, the guide told tourists that “we [the people of El Alberto] still believe in certain things. We believe in spirits, and what else?” Inviting audience participation, he explained that people here still believe in the nahual, or animal double. “Look, we believe in many things that are phenomena that aren’t proven, but yes, we can see them.” The guide challenged tourists to rediscover that intuitive connection with the land that, apparently, their own ancestors had once possessed. He asked them to close their eyes and pick up two stones, one that gave them a “good vibe” and another that gave them a “bad vibe.” He told them to hurl the stone with “bad energy” into the river.

In the scene at the river, the guides invite tourists to partake in an idealized indigenous identity that is tinged with New Age spirituality. The phenomenon is comparable to what Philip Jenkins calls “dream catching,” the embrace of Native
spirituality by non-native people in the United States (Jenkins 2004). There is, however, an important difference. Rather than whites seeking to appropriate the spiritual power of a people that their ancestors colonized, most of the Caminata tourists are of mixed indigenous and European ancestry. Some speak indigenous languages themselves or have parents or grandparents who do so. As tourists pick up “good energy” stones by the river and observe Don Chaleque and Don Caco at their hut, they interact with fictive, idealized representation of a part of their ancestral past. The Caminata becomes a pilgrimage not only through space but also through time. It challenges tourists to reflect on where they come from and where they are going, not simply in a spatial sense, but also historically.

**Don Beto, Don Caco, and Doña Petra**

The Caminata confronts tourists with two representations of the *indio*: both the respectful, legendary don Beto and the savage duo, Caco and Chaleque. These characters appear within a performance context that encourages tourists to reflect upon their own indigenous heritage. They also represent two faces of a complex and conflicted indigenous identity within El Alberto today.

Cirino, who plays don Caco, states that although the initial idea to enact the *indios* was his, the characters have been shaped through dialogue with others. Others from the community give a bit of critique or input, “so it’ll have flavor, like food has salt.” He and Raymundo perform not only for tourists, but also for their own neighbors and relatives. After the tourists left the scene of one *indios* enactment, I noticed that half a dozen women and children had been sitting in the shadows slightly uphill from the tourists. They were residents of El Alberto who had come out to see the *indios* perform.
Although the *indios* represent both Native Americans at the border and people from El Alberto in the past, the aspect that Cirino most emphasizes is the *indio* of the past.

Cirino was in his late fifties at the time of the interview. I had met him two years earlier when I visited the Gran Cañón area for the first time. At the time, Cirino was working giving motorboat rides to tourists on the river. I rode in a boat with two women from El Alberto who were visiting from Phoenix during their children’s summer vacation. Cirino pointed out animals and rock formations and told stories to the kids. When he began the *indios* show, he was working as comité of El Alberto’s health clinic. By day, he drove to and from the clinic, overseeing a renovation project and attending to other leadership responsibilities. By night, he donned a black wig, smeared his face with charcoal, and became Don Caco.

Cirino cannot read or write. He speaks Spanish with a heavy hñähñu accent and limited vocabulary. Yet he is dynamic, creative, and intelligent. The recording I made of my interview with him was hard to follow, for during it he moved about, acting out the stories. “One of my neighbors says, ‘why, you’re working, you’re coming up with many ideas, and you don’t know how to write?’ ‘No, but I have my mind’ I told him . . . . My mind is working, but not just for myself—for my community.” Unable to record his memories in written form, Cirino uses performance to bring the *indio* to life. He hopes to make a video of his performance available to the community and to hñähñu speakers in the United States.

Cirino views the enactment as a way to preserve a living memory of the past. He states:

I had the idea [sic] how we lived before, because before there was no road, nothing like that, no hanging bridge, nothing. Entirely on foot . . . one little
path, see, a very narrow little path, like this! Let’s go take the water out of the river to drink. . . . I’d like for the people to see . . . the Indian who was here, the original people here before. So that [people] wouldn’t forget.

Cirino traces his inspiration for the *indios* to conversations with his grandfather as a child. In the evenings, when he and his grandfather would sit together after coming back from work, Cirino would ask him how people used to live. “Pure fighting,” his grandfather would answer, “pure machetes.” Yet again the theme of conflict raises its head. Cirino insists that he represents the *indio* in a rough manner because that is how people in this region once were. As his grandfather put it, “pure fighting, pure machetes.” Cirino did not give a clear answer when I asked about his own religion.

Raymundo, who is Catholic, points to a moral ambiguity within the character of the *indio*. I had asked him why he and Cirino act in such an exaggerated manner, as though they are making fun of indigenous people. “We aren’t making fun of the *indios*,” he responded. Rather, “the *indio* that exists here is very bad and doesn’t like to associate with people from the city, that’s why we act like this and we’re bad, although there are good and bad.” In a familiar refrain, Raymundo explained that in the past people would “make pulque and in the afternoon they would fight, and there was nobody to tell us what to do and to put us to work.” That was, until Eulogio Barrera came along. “Barrera was the first man born here who made us better; he had that spirit of union.”

Raymundo states that even the highly esteemed Barrera “was a person who was sometimes good, and sometimes bad.” The *indios* in the Caminata are rough and bellicose because, quite simply, that is part of a reality that cannot be denied. While Pentecostal narratives confine the darker aspects of indigenous self-identity to the past, the *indios* show concentrates them in the bodies of two living, breathing figures.
Through the dueling figures of Don Beto and Don Caco, the creators of the Caminata wrestle with the ambiguity of self-identity, past and present. The angry, insect-devouring indio is the ugly yet energetic underside of the harmonious, self-sacrificing Don Beto.

I asked don Raymundo how he identifies himself, he answered, “I’m Mexican, member of the town of El Alberto. I’m an Indian from here, from El Alberto, because I grew up here with beans, nopales [prickly pear], I didn’t grow up eating meat . . . when I was a child I didn’t have shoes, I just had the clothes on my back.” In the identity markers he lists, “Mexican” comes first, followed by town of origin and finally, indigenous identity. Note that poverty, expressed in terms of food and clothing, is the defining feature of Indian identity for Raymundo. Yet it is an identity feature that is grounded in the past. Raymundo is an “Indian,” in his explanation, because he once ate beans and went barefoot.

Like all human beings, residents of El Alberto are multifaceted beings who defy categorization. They have concentrated aspects of indigenous identity into select masks that they deploy at different times within the tourism project. Those masks are present not only in the characters of don Beto and the indios but also in the architecture of Parque EcoAlberto. Both don Caco’s hut and the tourist cabins in the Gran Cañón are inspired by the agave cactus-walled dwellings once typical of the region. Yet they could not be more different. The cabins for which tourists pay 1000 or more pesos per night combine rustic authenticity with feng shui precision. They are clean and perfect, complete with track lighting and elaborate embroidery on each linen pillow. The cabins are, in their own way, a performance, as is the indios’ dirty, skull-strewn shack.
I also observed dueling masks of indigenous self-representation during a planning meeting for the 2007 anniversary of the Gran Cañón. The anniversary has become a yearly celebration that to some extent replaces the Catholic fiesta system with a new, secular format. While the anniversary offers a chance to celebrate, it is also a large, costly advertisement for the tourism park. It brings in hundreds of people from surrounding towns as well as visitors from Mexico City and beyond. Approximately 30 people were present at the planning meeting I attended. The bulk of the meeting concerned the type of food would be served. It was decided that members of committees would pool their resources to provide chickens, goats, and soft drinks. Each participant would also provide one traditional dish, such as squash-blossom empanadas. There was much joking, especially on the part of the younger men. One man burst out, “pizzas! I’ll bring some pizza.” “I’ll bring blood!” another chimed in. Traditional Valle de Mezquital fare includes a dish made of blood, and pizza is far from foreign to members of this migrant community. As these young men’s jokes made clear, they are both pizza eaters and blood eaters, at once more “civilized” and more “savage” than a sanitized, tourism-packaged version of indigenous identity would allow.

On some occasions, town authorities use fines to enforce the performance of indigenous identity at the level of the community as a whole. When MTV visited El Alberto to document the ecotourism project, the town assembly decided that everyone would dress “de indigena,” donning ropa de manta. Such clothing is a powerful cultural marker, associated both with shame and with pride. It is the stereotypical clothing of the impoverished and unacculturated. It is the clothing of the “India María,” a popular comic film character who embodies the difficulties of a rural indigenous woman striving to
adjust to urban life. It is also the clothing embraced by those who wish to revitalize the culture, fetching high prices at craft fairs and specialty shops. Some told me that they wore the clothing gladly during the MTV visit, for they are proud of their heritage. Others, however, expressed resentment at having to dress like “Indians.” All complied to avoid being fined by the town authorities.

Two idealized faces of indigenous identity, don Beto and don Caco are bound together in the creative story of El Alberto’s origin described in Chapter Four. Raymundo explains that the character named doña Petra to whom he speaks in the show lived in the time of don Beto, roughly 400 years ago. She was “the mother of here, of this town, and don Beto is the patron of all of it.” While I eventually gathered that doña Petra is, like don Beto, a “legend” of recent origin, Raymundo insists that the story of doña Petra is “not invented. It’s something that exists.” He describes her as “a woman who is up on the hill, she never comes down but I go and see her, she gets angry because they kill the animals of the brush and of the hills.”

Cirino, likewise, describes doña Petra as “an old lady, before, no? . . . A little old lady, who had a lot of animals there.” He told me that he intends to “find a little old lady” who can represent doña Petra in the show. Cirino explained that the indios tell tourists not to cross through because “in that time, no one buys anything. Sometimes someone sells some things, and keeps the money, but sometimes, who knows where they kept it. Sometimes someone finds it. That’s why you can’t pass through there.” Later, he explained that the indios tell tourists not to cross through their territory “because many, many animals that were there, up on the hill, are dying.” As with the story of don Beto, there is a grain of truth within the fictional character of doña Petra. That truth lies in her
call for respect toward the natural world. In Cirino and Raymundo’s words, it is unclear when and where the animals are dying. Raymundo explains that the tourists:

have to go carefully, protecting the animals because sometimes they pass and find animals, and kill them, and that’s why we don’t like what they do, because we’re conserving the animals. Here in the hills we have raccoons, we have armadillos, coyotes, rabbits, badgers, and many more.

By claiming that “here in the hills we have” a variety of animals, Raymundo appears to refer to the local fauna. Yet when I asked him who is killing those animals, he replied, “immigrants at the border.” Past and present time, border space and local space converge in the indios’ warnings. The ambiguity invites tourists to reflect, simultaneously, on the local and international repercussions of their actions. While it is the local wildlife that doña Petra seeks to protect, the “immigrants at the border” are the ones who threaten it. The indios’ words suggest that the lifestyle of migration itself is unsustainable, threatening not only the border ecosystem, but also migrants’ relationship to the flora and fauna in their places of origin.

Raymundo and Cirino also mentioned border danger when I asked why their characters tell tourists not to pass. Once again, local and distant landscapes intertwine in their explanation. Raymundo states that “in the border there are cholos, a lot of bad people. . . . One runs a lot of risks, there are animals, bad people, so many Mexicans and Central Americans have lost their lives.” Cirino explains that “it’s very dangerous, if you cross, you’re going to die there . . . only Indians live here.” The indios’ order echoes the voice of the Border Patrol actors who repeatedly warn tourists not to cross the border. As we saw in Chapter One, Border Patrol actors state that the region is “very dangerous.” They warn tourists of the dangerous animals they might encounter. Most importantly, they urge the “migrants” to remember the wives, children, and others
that they are leaving behind. Through the unlikely voice of the *migra*, Caminata actors send out a sincere message that they hope will work upon tourists’ consciences at a deeper level. The *indios* bring a new voice to that same basic message.

**Crossed by the Border: Indians, Aliens, and the State**

Although Cirino stresses that his principle motivation for the *indios* skit is to preserve the traditions of the past, he and others state that the *indios* also represent Native Americans at the U.S.-Mexico border. In the 1990s, as the U.S. “prevention through deterrence” strategy drove immigrants away from urban areas and into the desert, tribal lands on the border, especially the over 4,000 square mile Tohono O’odham reservation in southern Arizona, became prime crossing regions. Two years before the *indios* show was invented, a former migrant from El Alberto, Eduardo, described having crossed through the O’odham reservation. I had asked him to tell me about his most recent migration attempt. He replied:

> The last time I went there, to the North, I suffered a lot. We didn’t have anything to eat, nothing, we’d brought two packets of cookies, and there were seven of us... We got to a place named Santa Rosa... and we came upon some Indian houses... I told them... that we were hungry, and could they give us something to take with us. They gave us something to eat, a sandwich, and that was enough.

When the *indios* offer *aguamiel* to tourists, they reenact the hospitality that some people from El Alberto have received at the hands of Native Americans on the border. Although the actors offer tourists the rustic homebrew of their grandparents’ generation rather than a sandwich, the basic gesture is the same. Raymundo has also had contact with what he calls “*indios*” at the border. When I asked whether they could understand one another, he replied, “sometimes they understand me and sometimes they don’t.”
As the *indios* actors assert the importance of maintaining respect for the land and its animals, they also allude to the frustration of Native Americans who, due to the location of their lands, find themselves caught in the midst of an ugly drama of large-scale migration, border enforcement, and drug trafficking in the region today. As Luna-Firebaugh (2002) notes, the Tohono O’odham are one among various Native American populations—including the Yaqui, Kickapoo, Kumeyaay, and Cocopah—whose lands were “crossed” by the border as the result of a series of treaties between Mexico and the United States (60). The Mohawk and Blackfoot have suffered a similar fate in the north. I focus here upon the Tohono O’odham and the Yaqui, the tribes with whom migrants from El Alberto are most likely to have come into contact.

The president of Humane Borders states that migrants occasionally find antlers upon the water stations that his organization places in the desert. The antlers are “a symbol used by the local Yaqui Indians to signify ‘God bless you and your whole lineage’” (Hagan 2008:120). Displaced from their homelands in Sonora under Porfirio Díaz, some of the Yaqui fled to present-day Tucson and Phoenix (Luna-Firebaugh, 167). For years, members of the Yaqui nation maintained contact with their ancestral homelands through frequent travel and pilgrimage. Today, border militarization has made travel increasingly difficult. Key leaders who are essential to the proper conduction of ceremonies, for example, face restrictions at the border (167).

Like the Yaqui, members of the Tohono O’odham Nation struggle to maintain social, cultural, and religious ties across the border. Due to their location, they also face an additional set of challenges. O’odham lands have become a prime corridor for the passage of migrants and drugs. As Luna-Firebaugh notes, Tohono O’odham land
covers an area along the border “longer than the state of New Mexico and Chihuahua” (164). Originally, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo placed all of O’odham land within Mexico. The Gadsden Purchase later drew the border through O’odham lands, separating people from their relatives and from ceremonial sites. As a response to the separation, the O’odham in the United States granted full membership and tribal rights to Mexican members (166). In theory, the O’odham have the right to cross members of their nation through tribal lands. However, as changes in border enforcement in the mid-1990s drove greater numbers of migrants through O’odham lands, Border Enforcement officials have begun to demand U.S-government issued documentation of O’odham members.

A comparison of two newspaper articles from 2005 and 2010 offers a vivid illustration of the changes that the Tohono O’odham have faced in recent years (Hendricks 2005; Eckholm 2010). Of the 473 U.S.-Mexico border deaths in 2005, over a quarter occurred within O’odham reservation land (Hendricks). At that time, maintaining order and offering emergency aid cost the tribe about 10% of its annual budget. Members of the tribe shared a loose working relationship with Border Patrol agents. As one man quoted in the newspaper article explained, “Sometimes I’ll stop a group of illegals, and I’ll call the Border Patrol, but they’ll say they won’t have anyone available until the next shift in six hours. . . So I’ll let the people go and tell them which way to Phoenix” (Hendricks). In 2005, a barbed wire fence was the only thing separating Tohono O’odham lands in the U.S. from those in Mexico. Some tribal representatives stated that they opposed the construction of a wall, for it would impede
the passage of wildlife and make it more difficult for members of the tribe to cross the border to attend their own ceremonies.

By 2010, tightened border security and drug enforcement had contributed to a rise in the level of marijuana trafficking through the reservation (Eckholm). As the tribe suffers high unemployment, smugglers have succeeded in pressuring some members into transporting drugs. Eckholm reports that hundreds of the tribe’s members have run into significant legal trouble. Tribal members speak of being afraid to travel into the desert lest they stumble upon a drug shipment. While in 2005 tribal leaders debated construction of a wall, today large metal barriers are already in place, and the tribe has agreed to the construction of “electronic surveillance towers that in coming years will make a ‘virtual fence’ across their lands” (Eckholm). Yet tribal members themselves are not safe from the gaze of immigration enforcement. ICE officials sometimes mistake them for undocumented immigrants and ask them to produce identification.

As members of the Tohono O’odham Nation bristle toward migrants and ICE agents alike, they bring a new voice to the immigration debate. Their concerns overlap, to some degree, with the concerns of nativist groups such as the Minuteman Civilian Defense Corps (CDC). Through their “Border Fence Project,” Minuteman civilian volunteers have built a model barrier within stretches of privately owned ranch land, hoping to set an example for the U.S. government (Simcox 2006). Through the Border Fence Flags initiative, they invite Americans to donate money for memorial flags to be placed upon that fence, thus fusing the boundary of the nation with the deaths of loved ones. Through these projects, Minuteman CDC members engage intimately with the
border landscape, seeking to preserve order in the midst of the chaos of illegal migration and drug trafficking.

Like members of the Minuteman CDC, members of the Tohono O’odham nation seek to preserve a local way of life in the midst of large-scale migration and the drug trade. The resemblance, however, ends there. While members of the Minuteman CDC call upon the authority of national boundaries and look to ICE agents as partners, members of the Tohono O’odham operate out of a notion of territory that was in place long before the U.S.-Mexico border came into being. Like undocumented immigrants, members of border tribes such as the Tohono O’odham are all too familiar with the experience of being the “other” against which nationality and citizenship are defined.

In the North American continent, “Indians” and “aliens” share a common fate: they are both outsiders against which the nation-state has and continues to define itself. As we saw in Chapter One, U.S. border enforcement is in part performative, serving to reinforce the concept of national citizenship by criminalizing undocumented immigrants at the border line. As undocumented migrants, many of El Alberto’s residents are outsiders within U.S. society. As members of an indigenous community, they are also outsiders within Mexico. Historically, they are the indios that the government has alternately marginalized and sought to “uplift” for the sake of national development. At the border, migrants from El Alberto come in contact with Native Americans who have, themselves, been outsiders to the nation-building projects of Mexico and the U.S. Ironically, those Native Americans now cry “do not pass!” to people from places like El Alberto.
Members of the Tohono O’odham nation and migrants from El Alberto clash with border enforcement officials, but in different ways. As residents of El Alberto travel in search of work, they cross a border that they had no hand in creating. Members of the O’odham nation do not cross the border. Rather, the border crossed them. They are “legal” but only tenuously so, for they must continually justify their presence to ICE agents. As Luna-Firebaugh notes, U.S. government agents’ “insistence on official U.S. documentation, rather than recognizing Tohono O’odham Nation membership identification, strikes at the heart of Indian sovereignty” (159). While migrants from El Alberto run into trouble at the border because of their mobility, the O’odham run into trouble because of their groundedness in a particular place. Yet mobility and locality are not the core issues at stake. What matters is that in each case, the U.S. government claims ultimate authority over people’s decisions to move or to stay put.

It is no mistake that residents of El Alberto have included the character of the indio within the border simulation. The indios are not merely another spectacle used to add variety and thrill. Rather, they add a crucial dimension to the Caminata’s message. They are at once the “Indians” at the border and the indios of El Alberto’s not-too-distant past. Rough, dirty, and unshod, they are characters of ambiguous moral fiber. Yet it is through these unlikely characters, through the voice of those who are “sometimes good, sometimes bad,” that Raymundo, Cirino, and others have chosen to convey a message to tourists. Violent and crude though they may be, the indios embody a strong local knowledge and a fierce commitment to place that is integral to the Caminata’s anti-emigration effort. Their notion of territory runs deeper than U.S. and Mexican spatial schemes, for it is grounded in a different sort of authority than that which underlies
national boundaries. By initially forbidding tourists’ passage and, finally, letting them through, the indios attempt to structure tourists’ experience of space.

**Border Territory, Border Space**

As Henri Lefebvre argues, space is not merely a blank substrate for human action. Rather, it is a social product (1991:26). Generated through ongoing human action, spaces in turn shape and constrain human behavior. A given society’s social relations are embodied in its government buildings, homes, streets, hospitals and, for our purposes here, its borders. Lefebvre maintains that a society’s spatial practices reflect and reinforce certain “representations” of space, that is, the conceptual abstractions generated by people such as architects and urban planners. Embodied in diagrams and lodged in the mind, representations of space are “the dominant space in any society” (39).

The U.S.-Mexico border reflects the dominant spatial representations held by ICE agents and other U.S. government officials. As Border Patrol agents scan the border for unauthorized migrants, they reinforce a vision of the border as a single line that divides the land in two. Yet the dominant “representations of space” in a given society are never absolute. Lefebvre refers to those spaces “which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate” as “representational spaces” (39). As humans live in and move through the world, they subvert and transform the dominant representations of space operative in their society.

U.S. border enforcement policies work to shape and constrain social relations as they forge a particular type of space within the border zone. Barriers and surveillance towers mark a line of separation in the desert as they draw a line between legal and illegal, between citizen and alien. Intentionally anti-structural, the Caminata counters
such border-making acts by stirring new possibilities to the fore. As seen in the first chapter, the Caminata meets the order of border enforcement with creativity, humor, and the unexpected. As tourists thrash through mud, lose their belongings, and are caught off guard by pranksters snorting in the underbrush, they are challenged to question the many borders they carry within them on a daily basis.

While the Caminata project as a whole works to question, subvert, and dissolve the spatial practices of U.S. border enforcement, the indio characters bring a new layer of complexity to an already conflicted border space. Like Border Patrol officials, the indios initially forbid migrant passage. Rather than accuse migrants of violating the boundary of the nation-state, however, they accuse tourists of violating customary norms of engagement with the local environment. The indios reach through the subverted border space of the Caminata to offer tourists a new map. It is a coarse map, hand-drawn on the skin of a sheep raised and killed in El Alberto. It is a map grounded in local, experiential knowledge. Far from the abstract view of de Certeau’s “voyeur-god” (1984:93), it is the view of the character don Caco and the man Cirino who has walked through that space on foot many times.

Cirino’s role as map-maker extends beyond the character of don Caco. He occasionally takes young people on excursions in the hills around El Alberto to show them where the town’s boundaries lie. Cirino explains that “some young people still don’t know where the territory of El Alberto is . . . . That’s why I’m helping them. Two weeks ago we went to take a look up there, above, we go on the path up there. . . . We’re covering the route so they find out where it is.” The boundaries are indicated by stone markers that lie half-buried beneath brush and cacti. During one faena, a large
group of people from the community made an excursion to the town’s border and worked all day to clear the brush and repair the stone markers. Several people later told me about the work with pride. The hills surrounding El Alberto and other villages in the Valle de Mezquital are traditionally regarded as animate beings, the source of water and other good things. Although I have not heard residents of this largely Pentecostal town openly reference such beliefs, I sensed that the work of boundary maintenance was for them far more than a utilitarian act. They spoke of the excursion with something akin to wonder.

In daylight hours, Cirino passes on treasured knowledge of his own town’s borders to his young neighbors. It is a knowledge that cannot be conveyed simply by drawing it or writing it down. Rather, the boundary’s location must be conveyed by walking through the rough terrain and pointing it out personally to others. As Keith Basso reminds us, “wisdom sits in places”—the land triggers memories and stories for those who know it well (2009). A guide to his neighbors by day, by night Cirino offers a tourists map of the U.S.-Mexico border zone in the guise of don Caco. This map features no international boundary but rather local landmarks such as El Alberto’s church, the cemetery, and the hand-built hanging bridge. The indios bid tourists to continue, but only after supplying them with this new, locally relevant representation of space. They remap the U.S.-Mexico border by diverting tourists’ gaze toward their immediate surroundings.

The indios’ rough, savage demeanor is in part a stereotype shaped by years of tension between indigenous Mexicans and the national government. Yet it also has a grain of truth, for it represents how people like Cirino’s grandfather have spoken about
their town in the past. As those angry, violent *indios* yell “do not cross,” they convey multiple messages on multiple levels. To the tourists from Mexico City, they demand respect and recognition of Mexico’s rural areas. To their own neighbors, they warn of the deleterious effects of migration upon the natural environment and upon the web of relationships it contains. As Native Americans at the U.S.-Mexico border, they admonish Mexican migrants for trashing the border environment, killing its animals, and overwhelming its resources. The solution, in all cases, is a return to a sense of space that precedes national boundaries. Space, in the world of the fictive *indios*, is not a merely inert matter through which one can draw a boundary line. The space of the Caminata’s “Indian territory” is active and dynamic, forged through the interlocking paths of myriad footsteps, and held together by a matrix of relationships invisible to those who do not know the land well.
CHAPTER 9
CONCLUSION

Border Embodied, Border Imagined

Despite the recent economic recession in the United States, border deaths have not abated. In fiscal year 2009, the U.S. Border Patrol’s Tucson sector recorded 213 border deaths. Taking the number of apprehensions into account, the risk of death during attempted border passage has doubled in the past five years (McCombs 2009). Residents of El Alberto witnessed their first migration fatality a few years ago, as did members of the neighboring community of El Dadho. A young man from El Dadho put it quite bluntly: “they go to the North, and they come back as ashes.”

The explicit logic of U.S. border enforcement policy is that greater security measures will decrease the flow of illegal immigrants, drugs, and other unauthorized materials across the boundaries of the United States. The effects of border enforcement upon migration patterns, however, are far from straightforward. We have seen that the prevention through deterrence strategy of the mid-1990’s simply drove people toward remote crossing areas, resulting in a rise in the annual migrant death rate at the border. Reyes (2004) has found that tighter border security may even encourage migrants to stay in the United States for longer periods of time. More recently, the buildup of fencing, technology, and additional Border Patrol agents has perpetuated the trend of driving migrants toward remote, potentially deadly routes (McComb).

Border enforcement is only one dimension of U.S. immigration policy. Throughout American history, immigrants have alternately been welcomed to the U.S. or selectively targeted and expelled (Ngai 2004). Today we are witnessing a period of contraction, as Arizona’s recently passed Senate Bill 1070 indicates. The bill extends immigration
enforcement far beyond the border line by making it a state crime to be in the United States without legal documentation. As other states debate following Arizona’s lead, we can no longer claim that border enforcement is simply performative, serving to establish a façade of control at the nation’s southern boundary while the flow of migration continues relatively unchecked (Andreas 2000). Yet the border is still one of the most visible and volatile points of interaction between unauthorized migrants and the state. It is the place where undocumented persons commit the original, now criminal act of setting an unauthorized foot on U.S. soil.

Just as migrants are far more than rationally calculating actors, the border is far more than a simple, utilitarian barrier. As soon as border enforcement touches human lives, it becomes an object of the collective imagination, extending from the most intimate, embodied experience to the realm of stories, nightmares, and dreams. One of the guiding assumptions of this work has been that we can learn much about how people are grappling with questions of legality, illegality, and citizenship by examining their popular representations of the border. But the border is not simply conceptual, not simply a classifying device. Individuals experience the border as embodied beings. Its physical space places certain strains upon them, confronting them, even, with the possibility of death. My second guiding assumption has thus been that the undocumented journey challenges people to confront questions the reach far beyond citizenship and legality, touching upon the limits of life, death, and the relationship between human beings and the divine. Building upon the work of Hagan (2008), I have assumed that the greater the risk migrants face during the undocumented journey, the
more they will rely on religion. I have sought to understand how individual, embodied migration experiences play out in shared narratives and practices.

The border is and has been many things in the collective imagination of El Alberto. In the eighties it was a place of adventure, the setting for a game of hide-and-seek with Border Patrol agents who often turned a blind eye. In today’s journeys adrenalin and expectations of the possible are shot through with the possibility death. For some the border is a literal and biblical desert where migrants, far from food and water, call upon divine aid. It is a battleground within a global process of spiritual warfare. Armed with the blood of Christ, Pentecostal migrants cross that battlefield impervious, in their eyes, to physical and spiritual attack. The border is also a zone where multiple systems of space collide, where the lived-in territory of the Tohono O’odham clashes with U.S. territorial schemes at the same time that Mexican migrants, grounded in yet another system of territory, seek passage. The many actors in the border zone include not only migrants and Border Patrol agents but also cholos, drug traffickers, and “indios” whose ambiguous mixture of hospitality and hostility call to mind El Alberto’s indigenous past.

The border is a key marker within El Alberto residents’ maps of space and time. Its significance in the collective imagination runs deeper yet, for the border is biological, present in the most intimate moments of the life cycle. The border is present in pregnancy and birth. Fetuses have been shaken in the womb as their mothers clamber down high fences and are transported in the lurching backs of migra vehicles. The border is also inscribed within the transition from childhood to adulthood. Children cross it at age 14, seeking to expand their options as did parents, aunts and uncles before them. And the border is part of that final transition, death. In the most extreme cases it
takes bodies in and sends them forth as ashes. Other bodies it sends back live but broken or paralyzed, with eyes and hearts that have seen the beyond.

When I first travelled to El Alberto, I assumed that the Caminata Nocturna reenactment was a response to the danger of crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. What I found was that the project has as much to do with the larger experience of living and working across an international border as it does with the migration journey per se. Through religion and other collective practices, the residents of El Alberto were indeed coping with the difficulty of border passage. But that is not all they were doing. They were also engaging in critical reflection about the lifestyle of migration as a whole. In the Caminata project, border militarization was merely the impetus for confronting larger questions about mobility, place, and identity. In the religious landscape of the town, people were grappling with questions of what it means to live well with others in the midst of a transnational social field (Glick-Schiller 1999) and a changing global landscape. Keeping the embodied, spatial dimensions of the migration journey front and center, I expanded my scope to explore the role the border crossing journey plays within people’s efforts to chart out their place in Mexico, the United States, and beyond.

In what follows, I explore what the case of El Alberto can contribute to our understanding of the role of religion in the migration process. I also bring the case of El Alberto into dialogue with the broader scholarship on transnationalism and globalization, and sketch the limitations of the current work as well as directions for future research. First I turn to my definition of religion in order to clarify the Caminata’s place within the religious landscape of El Alberto.
Religion, Ritual, and the Caminata Nocturna

I understand religions as systems of practice and belief through which people locate themselves in the cosmos and define their relationships with others. Drawing upon Tweed (2006), I recognize that people use religions both to “make homes and cross boundaries” (54). That is, religions provide a medium through which people establish themselves in space and time. They also facilitate passage across bodily, earthly, and cosmic boundaries. Not only do religions help lay out the contours of the spaces people inhabit, they also establish guidelines for action. Religions tell people where they can and cannot step and what they can and cannot wear. They tell people with whom they can interact and under what circumstances. Religions make sense of time. They provide stories about the past and they tell people where they are headed in the future. Rarely do people dwell in a single place, home, or body forever; thus religions provide guidelines for passing from one physical or spiritual state to the next.

If religions provide “both watch and compass” (Tweed 85), ritual is a vehicle through which people put those watches and compasses into practice. Tweed’s analysis of worship at a Cuban Catholic shrine in Miami provides a fitting illustration (2002). As devotees pray and make offerings at the shrine whose coastal location focuses attention toward the land they left behind, they unite in a shared expectation for a free Cuba. Much as worship at the Cuban-American shrine serves to orient devotees toward their homeland, the Caminata Nocturna project and Pentecostalism within El Alberto serve to orient migrants, tourists, and others within the North American continent.

The Caminata is the shared creation of Protestants, Catholics, and Spiritualists, and others who not identify with a particular religion. The project is not overtly religious, for
it is part of the system of labor obligations in which all citizens of El Alberto participate. There are Catholics and Protestants alike who embrace the project with enthusiasm, and there are Catholics and Protestants alike who are ambivalent toward it. For some Pentecostals, the Caminata is a harmless tourist show that brings in much-needed revenue. For others it is a valiant effort that directly supports Pentecostals’ own goals of preserving family unity and saving the youth from sin in the U.S. Others, however, have their doubts. Roberto, whose conversion story we heard in Chapter 7, stated that Christians have no business participating in the Caminata. “Lots of evil enters in there,” he explained, as torches are lit in the darkness and young people cavort about in the bushes. El Alberto’s first Pentecostal pastor told me quite frankly that “neither pagan fiestas nor the Caminata Nocturna” were of interest to him.

Although the Caminata is not overtly religious, the enactment is similar enough to ritual that it generates tension with institutionalized religions. The Caminata is, like ritual, efficacious, for it calls forth “the presence and action of powers which, without ritual, would not be present or active in that time and place, or would be so in a different way” (Driver 1998:97). While the “powers” the Caminata invokes may not be as explicit as, say, the Holy Spirit, the event generates moods that would not otherwise be present. Poncho, the creative mind whose many antics in the Caminata I described in Chapter 2, states quite openly that the reenactment is, for him, “a rite.” The ritual quality is most vividly illustrated in the act of lighting torches. Some nearby communities still use torches to build giant luminaries on mountainsides as part of an effort to call the rain during the festival of the Santa Cruz (Sanchez Vásquez 2003). The Caminata recreates that basic action within a new context. When he began to light torches during
the first Caminata, Poncho recalls, others were reluctant to participate. But as they gradually joined in, “magic,” he says, took over.

We need not falsely expand the boundaries “religion” to see that the Caminata is functions like a religious rite. Drawing again upon Tweed’s theory of religion, we can understand the Caminata Nocturna as a type of performance that shares many of the home-making and boundary crossing functions of religion. As Tweed notes, religion is not the only social or cultural process through which people chart out their place in space and time. What sets religions apart is that through them, people make sense not only of earthly but also of ultimate horizons, such as the boundary between life and death and the boundary between this world and the next.

The Caminata does not venture into the realm of ultimate boundaries. While it challenges people to engage more fully with the world, it does not lead their gaze beyond it. Although the guides make reference to magic or to the nahual, they do so in a playful manner that some tourists take with a grain of salt. Yet the Caminata serves as “watch and compass” in other ways. It calls people to rethink their place within the continent and to reflect upon the future trajectory of their country. It plays at the boundaries that separate one person from the next and that separate human bodies from the natural world. It presents people with the contradictions and complexity of U.S.-Mexico border space. The Caminata is, like ritual, “a mode of paying attention” (Smith 1987:104). It uses space—in this case an imagined border space superimposed on local territory—to focus and direct people’s gazes toward certain possibilities.

**The Migration Journey**

Through the Caminata project and through their religious practices, residents of El Alberto are charting out their place within the continent and within the cosmos as a
whole. The case of El Alberto offers new insight on the role of religion in the migration process. I offer new findings not only on the particular type of strength and empowerment that religion offers migrants, but also on the ways in which people use religion and other forms of collective performance to contextualize and critically reflect upon the migration journey.

Drawing upon Peter Berger’s notion of religion as a socially constructed “sacred canopy” through which people keep chaos at bay, Hagan (2008) maintains that religion provides migrants with the comfort and support necessary for dealing with the “psychological trauma” of the journey (5). Hagan argues that the less control migrants feel over their situations, the more they turn to religion. Loss of control has indeed emerged as a key theme within migration narratives in El Alberto. People speak of having to blindly trust their coyotes. They speak of enduring extremes of hunger, thirst, and exhaustion. Loss of control has pushed some migrants from El Alberto to call on divine aid. In Francisco’s case, crossing the border produced the ultimate loss of control: a near-death experience.

Yet I have found that people do not merely turn to religion to cope with the difficulty of the migration journey. Through collective, creative action, they also seize that difficulty and put it to work for themselves. For Pentecostals, the border crossing journey is far more than a mere ordeal to be overcome. It is fodder for religious conversion, for the propagation of salvation narratives, and for ritual innovation. Residents of El Alberto as a whole have recreated the loss of control they experience at the border and applied it to new ends in the Caminata Nocturna.
My work also builds upon Hagan’s by paying closer attention to questions of embodiment. Here I draw yet again upon Tweed’s definition of religion. Tweed states that religions are both “organic and cultural,” meaning that they are at once intimately embodied and socially shared (66). Religions reflect the basic fact that most of us have two eyes, two hands, and two feet. Likewise, the religions within a community facing high levels of migration are likely to reflect and respond to some of the bodily experiences that the migration lifestyle demands. As Orsi (1999) maintains, religions emerge out of and respond to the gritty reality of everyday existence. The hunger, thirst, and exhaustion that migrants endure in the desert find direct expression in their religious practices. Pentecostals draw metaphors between thirst for water and thirst for the Holy Spirit. The act of fasting ritually recreates the involuntary experience of hunger that some have experienced while crossing the desert and that others have experienced as part of the dire poverty that initially drove them there.

I have sought to understand not only whether migrants draw upon religion for strength, but also the particular quality of that strength and the cultural context out of which it arises. Today’s migrants draw upon a notion of survival and prosperity that can be traced to the moment the first converts received the visceral gift of health. The blessing of well-being extended through their ever-expanding efforts to seek a better life for themselves, their children, and their community. Pentecostal migrants travel as members of a town that, as they see it, God has led out of the darkness of poverty and into the light of abundance. They carry with them far more than individual aspirations for a better life. They carry memories and inherited miracle stories that reinforce the conviction that the life they pursue in the U.S. is in accordance with divine will.
My work also builds upon previous literature on religion in the migration process by paying attention migrants’ theological explanations of the border. While it is important to remember that religion is a lived phenomenon that emerges out of the sweat and dirt of daily experience, it is also important not to move so far in the direction of practice as to neglect belief. Marta, Paola, Francisco, and Pastor Marcelo confront the problem of illegality by referencing the authority of a God for whom there are no borders. While they recognize, in accordance with Romans 13:1-2, that the governing authorities have been put in place by God, they also state that those authorities have not fulfilled the divine command to love one’s neighbor. These Pentecostals recognize that migrants travel not only with divine protection, but also with the authorization of a moral system that transcends earthly politics.

As Tweed points out, religions provide not only a “compass,” but also a “watch.” As Pentecostals locate the border within a global spiritual landscape, they also place it within an ultimate chronology. In the Pentecostal map of the cosmos, the border is a mere scratch upon the earth, dwarfed by the spiritual realm beyond. In the premillenarian vision that Francisco and other Pentecostals in El Alberto embrace, borders are not permanent. They are human constructions subject to the intervention of the God who has destroyed entire cities and will not hesitate to do so again.

While U.S. border enforcement tactics seek to prevent undocumented passage and to categorize unauthorized migrants as aliens, Pentecostalism provides migrants with alternate reference points. It transforms accidents and near-death experiences into spiritual battles in which the saved ultimately prevail. Pentecostal migrants travel under the guidance of the same God who once led their town out of poverty and into
prosperity. They cross the border with the assurance that the very God who once saved their relatives from illness and spiritual attack will now shield them from harm.

The Caminata Nocturna responds to the same experiences that drive some Pentecostals to call upon divine support, but it does so in different ways. The larger vision of the border that it proposes differs from the Pentecostal vision, as well. Like Pentecostalism, the Caminata fosters a sense of possibility. While U.S. border enforcement officials seek to prohibit unauthorized passage and divide people into the categories of “citizen” and “alien,” the Caminata challenges those categories and offers new spaces for solidarity to emerge. It refashions the loss-of-control experience into an opportunity for transformation and empowerment. The Caminata differs, however, in the source of that empowerment and the ends toward which it is applied. For Pentecostals, protection and empowerment come from God. Empowerment is an open-ended benefit that allows migrants to interpret the journey in a positive light, regardless of whether they make it to the United States. In the Caminata, empowerment lies in the innate potential and collective energy of human beings. That empowerment is specifically channeled toward critiquing the lifestyle of migration and developing a sustainable Mexican future.

**Indigenous Experience and the Migration Journey**

While much of the literature on religion and Latin American migration to the U.S. has focused on Christianity, the present work offers insight on the unique challenges facing indigenous migrants, as well as the roles indigenous religiosity and ethnic identity play in helping people carve out spaces of belonging across borders. As seen in Chapter 8, indigenous people and undocumented immigrants share the common fate of being outsiders to national territorial projects. While “aliens” are outsiders because they cross
national boundaries without authorization, “indios” are outsiders within their own lands. As indigenous immigrants, people from El Alberto are doubly excluded. Centuries of colonial and state policies have sought alternately to bind them to the land or uproot them from it. Today, they regularly cross into a country where many of them have little hope of obtaining legal authorization. The stigma of illegality in the United States is yet a new variation of a dynamic of exclusion with which members of communities like El Alberto are well acquainted. As they confront that stigma, they draw upon religious and cultural resources forged through centuries of resistance. One of those resources is the strong town-of-origin identity discussed in Chapter 5.

As Rescher (2006) argues, the concept of local citizenship among indigenous populations in the Valle del Mezquital provides a ready-made format for the formation of transnational ties (231). Migrants from El Alberto travel not only as Mexican citizens but also as ciudadanos, or “citizens,” of a comunidad. Within the context of migration, the comunidad is both a source of limitation and a source of strength. As a legal, economic, and social institution, the comunidad places constraints on migrants’ options. At the same time, it serves as a potential site of resistance against the deterritorializing and fragmenting forces of the global economy. Understanding indigenous citizenship can also help challenge popular representations of undocumented immigrants in the United States. While the term “illegal immigrant” carries heavy connotations of lawlessness and criminality, many such immigrants are deeply bound by strict rules of citizenship in their towns of origin.

Another way in which attention to indigenous experience can contribute to studies of migration is by bringing questions of locality and the natural environment front and
Residents of El Alberto selectively draw upon rhetoric of tradition and connection to the land as they seek to garner national and international support for the Caminata Nocturna project. As Escobar (2008) argues, such place-based forms of knowledge and activism are common among indigenous populations (2008). As they attempt to survive within the world economy, indigenous groups bring global tools to bear on local, territorially-grounded struggles. This strategic tension between rootedness and flexibility forms the larger backdrop of indigenous people’s religious responses to the migration journey.

Finally, attention to indigenous notions of personhood and causality can enrich our understanding of the role of religion in the migration process. Hñähñu migrants emerge out of a cultural tradition in which people are connected to the natural world through various vital forces, and in which ritual specialists are capable of acting upon others through remote means. For hñähñu migrants in the United States, the gaze of illegality falls not merely upon a bounded, individual body but rather upon a complex person consisting of multiple forces (Galinier 2009). While hñähñu migrants may be susceptible to spiritual attack, they also carry with them long-cultivated resources for countering such attack. Even Pentecostal migrants draw upon a logic of divine protection that incorporates indigenous hñähñu notions of danger, protection and empowerment.

Transnationalism and Globalization

When people in El Alberto reflect on the migration journey, they do so within the context of a larger dialogue about what it means to live, work, and maintain social ties across an international border. One of the defining features of the collective life of El Alberto is the sheer number of the town’s members who reside in or travel regularly to
the United States. El Alberto is a transnational community. It is also part of a shifting global landscape. In the space that follows I offer some final observations on Pentecostalism and the Caminata in light of the scholarship on religion, globalization, and transnational migration.

A transnational perspective, Peggy Levitt maintains, “begins with a world that is borderless and boundaryless, and then explores what kinds of boundaries exist, and why they arise in specific times and places” (2007:23). To apply a transnational gaze is to recognize that some social processes are rooted within yet extend beyond particular countries. Religion plays a key role in transnational processes because, as Levitt argues, it is “the ultimate boundary crosser” (12). Religions simultaneously connect immigrants to their countries of origin, help them adapt to new settings, and link them to networks that are global in reach.

For residents of El Alberto, Pentecostal churches perform the triple function that Levitt describes. They help people forge and maintain cross-border ties. Iglesia Betel’s affiliated congregations in Las Vegas, Phoenix, and Salt Lake City were created with the specific purpose of administering to the needs of migrants. Pentecostals state that the spiritual strength, social support, and busy schedules of the congregations help families to withstand the destabilizing effects of cross-border existence. Yet the Pentecostalism that residents of El Alberto practice is also part of a larger, rich social field. Today, the plethora of license plates from California, Utah, Texas, Colorado, and other states suggests that residents of El Alberto are embedded in geographically diverse and constantly shifting employment networks.
Pentecostalism has helped residents of El Alberto adjust themselves to a global economy that is, in the words of David Harvey (1990), characterized by a principle of “flexible accumulation” (1990). Beginning in the 1970’s, Harvey argues, corporate leaders have encouraged short-term production and consumption practices—including outsourcing and subcontracting—that are specially adapted to a shifting global market (147). An accompanying sociocultural climate of individualism and instability conditions workers to accept short-term, geographically shifting work as the norm. As Vásquez and Marquardt (2003) have noted, Pentecostalism is uniquely suited to the regime of flexible accumulation. It offers access to fluid, transportable spiritual networks that help migrants adapt to the new spaces they encounter as they chase fleeting jobs across the continent. Adolfo, for example, states that one of the first things he did when he found construction work in Washington State was to locate a Spanish-speaking evangelical church. “Wherever you go, you can find them,” he explains.

While Pentecostalism in El Alberto facilitates border crossing and mobility, it also offers a space for people in the town to critique aspects of global culture and to seize a measure of control within it. In the face of rampant individualism, Pentecostal sermons and practices reassert the importance of family and community and offer embodied practices through which global forces that are deemed unfavorable or dangerous can be neutralized and transformed. My findings support Vásquez and Marquardt’s observation that Pentecostalism’s combination of localizing and globalizing functions makes it uniquely suited to transnational processes. On one hand, Vásquez and Marquardt argue, Pentecostalism embraces the tools of global media and culture and puts them to spiritual use. On the other hand, it helps believers “to renew broken selves
and build tight affective communities” in an increasingly destabilized world (55). Pentecostalism helps answer to another, closely related challenge of globalization, the need to provide “new spatio-temporal arrangements and emerging cognitive maps” to navigate the “new landscapes generated by globalization” (52).

The Caminata Nocturna responds to some of the same challenges of transnationalism and globalization addressed by Pentecostalism, but it does so in different ways. While Pentecostalism empowers residents of El Alberto to travel the continent under the authority of a God without borders, the Caminata project redirects migrants’ time and resources toward their home town. While Pentecostalism offers some resources for gaining stability within the global economy, Caminata makes stability and rootedness its central focus and places a strong emphasis on origins, locality, and indigenous identity.

The Caminata, as I have shown, is part of the system of collective labor obligations required of all adult citizens in El Alberto. That system of labor emerged in its present form in the early 1980’s and continues to evolve today. As Rescher (2006) has shown, the institution of ciudadanismo among indigenous communities in the Valle del Mezquital has recently evolved into a notion of transnational citizenship, as migrants in the U.S. continue to refer back to the comunidad as a source of identity and belonging (231). The Caminata project is a key site through which transnational citizenship is negotiated in El Alberto. While the public face of the Caminata makes a unified call for a “Mexican Dream” free of migration, behind the scenes the project is a site of contestation through which the institution of the comunidad seeks to exert influence over migrants’ time and resources.
While the Caminata is one community’s effort to control the effects of transnational migration upon its shared future, the project has also attracted national attention because it provides a space for timely dialogue about the relationship between migrants, the Mexican government, and the Mexican public as a whole. As Glick-Schiller (1999) argues, recent changes in the ways markets cross borders have caused politicians in both sending and receiving countries to pay closer attention to the cross-border movements of their populations. Just as immigrants in receiving countries may serve as “racialized others against whom national identities are built” (115), leaders of sending countries find it politically and economically advantageous to recraft their countries’ identities in transnational terms (95). Glick-Schiller’s observations can help us to understand the Caminata’s success in attracting the attention of the Mexican government and, with it, grant money for additional projects. While the reenactment rejects the authority of U.S. border enforcement officials, it also draws upon national imagery to encourage tourists and potential migrants to make Mexico the focus of their collective sentiment and material investments.

Transnational ties are so deeply implanted in El Alberto that the Caminata’s anti-emigration message may appear simplistic. The project condenses a complex system of relationships into the single decision of whether or not to migrate. It counters U.S. border enforcement efforts with a strategic assertion of Mexican identity. Yet the project is not merely a naïve attempt to recapture a complex cross-border reality within the container of the nation-state. The dilemma that the Caminata poses—the choice of whether or not to emigrate—is in fact shorthand for a larger and more subtle body of decisions that members of El Alberto face on an ongoing basis. The question is not
whether El Alberto’s residents’ lives will be transnational in coming years, but to what extent they will be so, and in what ways.

We must move beyond the transnational lens, however, to fully understand the Caminata’s efforts. The project is a response to cross-border life, but it is also a response to the same global economic and cultural trends with which Pentecostalism wrestles. It represents an assertion of autonomy and stability in the midst of a global economic regime of flexible accumulation. It represents a refusal to surrender one’s integrity and core values in order to chase fleeting jobs across the continent. The Caminata highlights what Castells calls the “space of places” as an antidote to the rootlessness and chaos of the contemporary global economy (1996:13). The event starts and ends at sites rich with history. It begins outside the sixteenth century church of San Alberto and closes at the bottom of a canyon whose name—the Gran Cañón—playfully roots global geography in local sacred space. Guides point out legends behind certain trees and rock formations. They incorporate the story of don Beto, the legendary first settler who gave assistance to travelers when El Alberto was little more than a few huts in the wilderness. Little matter whether the story of don Beto is of ancient or recent origin: what matters is the urge to reference a place-based form of identity. In the words of Ramón, the visionary whom I quoted extensively in the third chapter, “the important thing is origin. Who you are, where you’re going . . . everything consists of origin.”

**The God without Borders and the Mexican Dream**

In the introduction I stated that I see a basic tension in El Alberto, a tension between the Pentecostal “God without borders” and the Caminata’s “Mexican Dream.” While Pentecostal worship facilitates the formation of a globally transportable spiritual
brotherhood, the Caminata calls people to embrace their place of origin. Both efforts, however, are complementary, for both seek to expand El Alberto’s residents’ options in the face of the fragmenting and deterritorializing forces of the world economy.

The Pentecostal “God without borders” is, on the one hand, a god of empowerment. He is a god who inspires El Alberto’s residents to demand options that their grandparents never dreamt of pursuing. He offers an alternate system of authority beyond the identities and spatial schemes imposed by nation-states. He is the divine guide of Francisco who, lying in bed post-accident, states that “someday soon, there will be no borders.”

Yet the “God without borders” also helps to spin the fibers of self-deception and enslavement in the contemporary global economy. He makes unbearable conditions bearable and unfeasible conditions feasible. He helps people willingly fashion themselves into workers adapted to an unpredictable market. He unites spouses across the frontier by binding them in congregations whose support guards against infidelity. He buffers people against the dark, chaotic dimensions of mobility by arming them with the weapons of spiritual warfare.

The “God without borders” is a god of unsustainable practices. He is the god who has witnessed a virtually seamless but troubling transition from the abject poverty of a few decades past to a cycle of production, consumption and desire that some of El Alberto’s members fear is spiraling out of control today. He helps keep the Southwest stocked with the construction workers who build new rounds of mansions in Las Vegas as others sit vacant just beyond (Streitfeld 2010). And he is the god who inspires U.S. missionaries to reach out to residents of El Alberto while turning a blind eye to the root
causes of migration, just as El Alberto’s own missionaries turn a blind eye to the cycle of internal migration that draws indigenous workers from the state of Guerrero to fill the agricultural jobs left vacant by Hidalguenses in the U.S. (Raesfeld 2009).

Only by understanding the intertwined processes of migration, development, and religious change in El Alberto can we fully appreciate the tension between rootedness and mobility that the town’s residents grapple with today. In this work I have thus sought not only to understand the variety of responses to migration within El Alberto, but also to explore the historical trajectory of those responses. Early converts viewed Pentecostalism as a liberating force, and for many it still is. Recall Tomás, whose family converted when he was a young man. Tomás states that Pentecostalism “opened people’s eyes. Those who thought of today, now think of tomorrow.” Pentecostals like Tomás state that the new religion helped to lift them out of the ignorance and isolation of the past. They state that it helped them gain critical insight onto their oppression within the municipal economy. Pentecostalism appealed to those early converts in part because it was not the religion of the colonizer but the religion of the land that offered them new economic opportunities. Just as working in the U.S. empowered people to move beyond their old place of marginalization within the local economy, Pentecostalism offered access to new sources of spiritual authority.

While Pentecostalism may have helped “open people’s eyes” to their oppression within the municipal system, their eyes have remained closed to a new type of bondage, this one all the more dangerous because of it is voluntary. That bondage is migrant wage labor and its seductive flipside, consumerism. The Caminata is an effort to open people’s eyes to the deleterious effects of U.S. migration, to make them aware of the
subtle ways in which such migration is sapping away their autonomy and vitality. We arrive here at the significance of the blindfolds used to cover tourists' eyes near the close of the enactment. On one level, the blindfolds simulate the disorientation a migrant feels in the hands of a coyote. On another level, however, they point to the blindness of those who view labor migration as an unquestionable necessity. In the words of Víctor, a Pentecostal who serves as a guide in the Caminata, the point of the blindfolds is to show participants that “Mexico can change. Mexico will be different. And we don’t need to walk to many places to be able to survive. Rather, jobs can be created here itself.”

The tension between the Caminata’s “Mexican Dream” and the Pentecostal “God without borders” in El Alberto can bring a necessary voice to public debates about immigration in the United States. Such debates are often polarized between those who prioritize American interests and those who look beyond national borders to examine the global and transnational forces shaping migration. Whether one refers to unauthorized immigrants as “illegal” or “undocumented” has become a powerful marker of one’s place in the conversation. In their efforts to counter the limitations of national exceptionalism, members of “undocumented” camp often privilege metaphors of mobility, borderlessness, and universal humanity. While it is necessary to question the romanticized, territorially bound identity often associated with the nation-state, we must also find space within the immigration debate to take seriously migrants’ own assertions of origins and place-based identity. As an anti-migration effort based in Mexico rather than the United States, the Caminata Nocturna challenges us to do just that. The Caminata voices difficult questions about the ultimate sustainability of migratory labor,
questions that are sometimes posed with a much different agenda by members of the American exceptionalist camp. We must ask what it means when migrants themselves critique the lifestyle in which they are embedded. While we must continue to support people’s fundamental right to travel in search of work, we must also find ways to support their even more basic right to stay home. This does not mean that we ought to reject global and transnational levels of analysis and return to the safety of the bounded nation-state. Rather, it means that we would do well to recognize that rhetoric of mobility and groundedness alike can be used in ways that serve the interests of power.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The most significant limitation of this dissertation is the underrepresentation of Catholic voices. Initially, I had planned to examine the Caminata Nocturna within the context of El Alberto’s changing religious landscape, giving equal attention to Pentecostal and Catholic responses to the migration journey. However, I eventually chose to focus on Pentecostalism, particularly Pentecostalism as practiced by the members of the Iglesia Betel.

My decision to focus on Pentecostalism and, in particular, the Betel congregation was in part strategic. Pentecostalism is the strongest religious presence in El Alberto, both in the traditional measure of church attendance and in terms of the identity that the town projects to the outside world. Each service that I observed at Betel was attended by 50 or more people. Services at Sinai were attended by over 70. The Catholic services, by contrast, were often attended by little more than a handful of people. I chose to focus on Pentecostalism to reflect the reality that I encountered in the field. I also chose to focus on Pentecostalism due to its special relationship with the rise of migration in the region. The religion was originally brought to the Valle del Mezquital by
return migrants. In the popular imagination Pentecostalism is closely associated with North American culture and values. In contrast to Sinai, Betel has greater institutional ties to churches in the U.S. and thus offered better promise for examining transnational processes.

My heavy emphasis on Pentecostalism is also the result of difficulties encountered in the field. While I had initially intended to divide my time equally between El Alberto’s three churches, the conventions of religious participation in this small, close-knit town made it virtually impossible to do so. Although residents of El Alberto embrace rhetoric of interreligious harmony and attend one another’s major fiestas, membership pressures in the town’s two Pentecostal churches are very strong. The pastor of Sinai put it quite clearly: while I was free to attend services, I would be best advised to choose one congregation stay there. Although I explained my research objectives to each of the church’s leaders, the first services I attended were at Betel in the company of my host family. As a result, I was soon associated with the Betel “family” and found it more difficult to gain a foothold in the other congregation. I may have, with some difficulty, managed to observe an equal number of services at each of the churches. However, it is unlikely that I would have obtained the level of trust necessary for exploring members’ responses to the migration journey and transnational life in depth.

Catholic voices may also be underrepresented here due to the manner in which I chose to identify myself in the field. As my interviews involved asking informants highly personal questions about their religious beliefs, I decided to be honest when informants in turn asked about my own religious background. I explained that I had been raised non-evangelical Protestant and that I had strong ecumenical beliefs; that is, I felt that
each religion has something valuable to offer. I also explained that the Protestant
tradition within which I was raised was quite different from that practiced in El Alberto’s
Pentecostal churches. Despite my efforts at explanation, my identity as a non-Catholic,
Anglo North American frequently resulted in my being categorized as a *cristiana,* or
evangelical.

In future work I intend to gather more Catholic narratives of the migration journey.
Thus far I have noted several parallels between Catholic and Pentecostal responses to
migration. Like Pentecostals, Catholics set aside a moment near the beginning of each
service to pray for relatives in the U.S. Catholic informants state that they frequently
use prayer to place potential migrants in God’s care. When loved ones depart for the
U.S., one Catholic man explained, “we turn them over to God daily. . . . We ask God to
give them the freedom to pass. . . . And yes, we’ve seen that there have been results.”
Santiago, a lay leader in El Alberto’s Catholic church, states that migrants occasionally
ask for a special mass as a blessing before travelling north. Communities throughout
the Valle del Mezquital hold masses in honor of migrants during their yearly patron saint
festivals. Catholic theological reflections on the border also resonate with views
expressed by Pentecostals. Agustín, for example, states that “God has no borders,
anywhere. For us God is great, on a global level. He’s the very first father we have.”

Given these observations, the “God without borders” may not be confined to
Pentecostalism. Yet the fact that some people convert to Pentecostalism during
migration suggests that Catholicism does not always sufficiently answer to the unique
challenges of the journey. Additional observation and interviews are necessary in order
to better characterize the differences and similarities between Pentecostal and Catholic
migration responses. At the same time, I wish to be careful not to overdraw the boundaries within El Alberto’s complex and dynamic “religious arena” (Burdick 1996). While each congregation has a core group of members, a good number of El Alberto’s residents do not attend any religious body on a regular basis. Each religion represents a field of options and possibilities to members of the town have varying degrees of commitment and exposure. Some people return to Catholic practices after the initial experience of Pentecostal conversion. In future research it will be fruitful to pay closer attention to the migration narratives of those who do not easily fit within Pentecostal and Catholic categories but rather draw upon multiple religions throughout the course of their lives.

In addition to gathering additional Catholic migration narratives, I also intend to obtain more Catholic perspectives on the process of development and religious change described in the chapter “This Religion Opened People’s Eyes.” I also hope to observe El Alberto’s patron saint festival, as scheduling constraints have prevented me from attending thus far. The current patron saint, El Alberto Magno, is of relatively recent origin. As I revise the current work, I would like to provide an additional chapter which traces the transformation of the fiesta from an agriculturally-based phenomenon that engaged virtually all of the members of the community to a smaller fiesta representing but one of several religious options in El Alberto.

Besides the Catholic voice, several other religious voices deserve mention. On the one hand, there is a small but significant espiritualista or Spiritualist presence in El Alberto. This presence is largely centered in one extended family that has produced key leaders in the town. Early Spiritualists in El Alberto turned away from Catholicism for
some of the same reasons that Pentecostals left Catholicism, that is, due to the perceived immorality and conflictive nature of the Catholic fiestas. It may also be fruitful to explore the relationship between migration and the small Latter-day Saint presence in El Alberto, as one of the town’s main centers of U.S. settlement is Salt Lake City.

In addition to providing a more complete view of the multiple religious voices in El Alberto, in future work I intend to provide a more thorough theoretical analysis of the relationship between religion and the Caminata Nocturna. While I have characterized the Caminata as a performance that crosses into the realm of ritual, additional theorists must be brought into the conversation. I would like to explore the Caminata as a rite in the Durkheimian sense; that is, as a collective activity that serves to generate social solidarity. I also intend to draw upon the works of van Gennep (1960), Turner (1967), and the more recent approaches of Grimes (2002) and Davis-Floyd (2004) to flesh out the ways in which the Caminata functions as a rite of passage.

As I further theorize the relationship between the Caminata and religion, I inevitably face questions about the limitations of the category of religion and about the problematic boundary between “religion” and “culture.” I have argued that although the Caminata is not overtly religious, it acts upon participants like a religious ritual. Not all of its participants interpret the Caminata in the same way, however, or approach it with the same degree of seriousness. In future work on the Caminata I will draw insight from Chidester (2005), who challenges us to rethink the divide between religion and culture by noting the religious qualities of supposedly “profane” activities like sports and other forms of popular entertainment.
Another dimension of my work that calls for further theoretical analysis is the role of indigeneity and the nature of indigenous religiosity in El Alberto. Beyond overt differences in Christian belief and practice, the town’s members draw upon a deep-seated indigenous tradition in which religion is inseparable from other areas of life. Indigenous elements play out within Pentecostalism, Catholicism, and the Caminata alike in complex ways. I intend to draw upon the literature on indigenous Christians (Wright and Vilaca 2008; Treat 1996; Steigenga 2004) to better analyze the interlocking relationship between religion, migration, and ethnicity in El Alberto. Although her work does not focus on religion per se, Rivera Garay (2006; 2009a; 2009b) has focused on the crucial role of ethnicity in the success of grass-roots organization and development in El Alberto. Rivera Garay also gives needed attention to changing gender roles in El Alberto and to the interplay between internal and external actors in the town’s tourism projects.

While I have focused on the motivation behind the Caminata and the immediate ways in which it acts upon participants’ bodies, I have devoted relatively little space here to the effects of the enactment upon participants’ attitudes about migration and, if relevant, their personal migration decisions. In future work, I would like to analyze tourists’ verbal responses to the Caminata and compare them to the reflections of young people from El Alberto who have assisted with the Caminata and now face the decision of whether or not to cross the border. Finally, I would like to examine the effects of religion and of the Caminata upon members of the second generation living in the United States.
Residents of El Alberto

______.  June 2, 2009, El Alberto.  Field notes.


Tourists and Others


APPENDIX B
GLOSSARY OF SPANISH AND HÑÄNU TERMS

Note: Hnahnu terms are italicized.

atole—traditional Mesoamerican beverage containing corn flour

ayuno—religious fast

badi—literally “one who knows;” a hñähñu ritual specialist

bracero—temporary laborer from Mexico contracted to work in the United States beginning in the early 1940s

Caminata Nocturna—Night Hike

cangandho—stone statues occasionally found in farm fields and attributed to the ancestors

casa culto—Pentecostal worship service held in a home

cholo—slang term for gang member

comunidad—community. In Mexico, a distinct legal entity referring to a group of people, often indigenous, who are granted shared rights to a particular property based on their prior, customary use of that property

costumbre—traditional Mesoamerican religious and cultural practices

coyote—paid border-crossing guide

culto—church service

delegado—town leader appointed by the General Assembly; serves for one year

ejido—collective property intentionally established by the Mexican government

epazote—*Dysphania ambrosioides*; a pungent native to Mexico and used for flavoring

faena—collective work party

hermano/ hermana—brother/ sister; term used among Pentecostals to refer to fellow members of the faith

iglesia—church

indigenismo—Mexican government policy beginning in the 1930’s that sought to
assimilate indigenous people into the national society through education and development

malos aires—“evil winds” or “bad airs” which, in Mexican folk healing, are believed to bring illness upon those who encounter them.

mayordomo—Catholic festival sponsor

migra—slang for U.S. Immigration officials

milpa—Mesoamerican form of swidden agriculture; also a social institution through which patterns of inheritance are channeled

mosca—fly (insect), slang for Border Patrol helicopter

nahual—in hñähñu and other Mesoamerican belief, an human-animal double

nopal—edible pad of the prickly pear cactus

pollero—literally “poulterer,” a coyote or border-crossing guide

pulque—an alcoholic beverage made of fermented agave nectar

quelite—lambsquarters; an edible green

ropa de manta—clothing made of rough cotton fabric

secundaria—three-year secondary school; usually for students age 12-15

verdolaga—purslane; an edible green

wema—in traditional hñähñu religion, the bones of giant ancestor beings believed to have the power to cure people and to send illness

zaki—in hñähñu religion, life force
LIST OF REFERENCES


Willems, E. 1967. *Followers of the new faith: Culture change and the rise of Protestantism in Brazil and Chile.* Vanderbilt University Press.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Leah M. Sarat was born in Illinois in 1980 and grew up in a rural community in upstate New York. Her interest in migration emerged during an undergraduate research project within squatter settlements in Nepal’s Kathmandu Valley. After receiving a Bachelor of Arts in comparative cultures and fine art from Alfred University, she worked for two years as a resident volunteer at a women’s shelter in Ciudad Júarez, Mexico. Leah began researching the relationship between religion and migration while pursuing a Master of Arts in religion and culture at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario and later while completing a doctorate in religion with a certificate in Latin American studies at the University of Florida. Leah has accepted a position as Assistant Professor of Southwest Borderlands Religion in the School of Philosophical, Historical and Religious Studies at Arizona State University.