

IMPRESSIONS OF TRANSNATIONAL MEXICAN LIFE IN ANCHORAGE, ALASKA: *ACUITZENCES* IN THE FAR NORTH

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ABSTRACT

Labor migration to Alaska was first noted in a central Mexican *mestizo* community in 1966 at the beginning of longitudinal research there. Nearly forty years later, research follows connections from this community to Anchorage in order to begin documentation of work and living experiences of Mexican immigrant workers in seasonal and more long-term sojourns in Alaska. Individual and familial migration as livelihood strategy is examined in the context of a global political economy that propels increasing and ever-more-distant labor migration from Mexico. Attention is given to social relations of transnational living and implications for identity dynamics.

KEYWORDS: transnationalism, labor migration, social relations

INTRODUCTION: *VAMOS AL NORTE*

Alaska is no exception to increased reliance on Mexican labor in the United States. Mexican migrant workers have been moving from their long-established place in the agricultural harvests of the American southwest and low-paying industrial jobs of a few northern cities, like Chicago, to work in many sectors of the economy and diverse regions of the United States and Canada. As the film *A Day Without Mexicans* (*Un Día Sin Mexicanos*) whimsically illustrates, life in “America” comes to a virtual standstill without this labor force. Mexican workers continue to be the backbone of agricultural production in the U.S., but have come to be the mainstay of the food service industry (and not just Mexican restaurants, but Asian restaurants in particular). They also have moved to dominate yard, garden, and home maintenance services and are fast coming to prominence in the construction industry throughout much of the U.S. (Pew Hispanic Center 2007).

Although a relatively new frontier for Mexican labor, there have been long-term work experiences in the state of Alaska since the mid-1950s. Anchorage, Alaska,

is becoming a favored destination of a number of central Mexican communities, a fact not widely known. The expression *Vamos al Norte*¹ has taken on a new significance as Mexican workers have literally moved northward in the U.S. (see De Genova 2005; Smith 2006; Stephen 2007), including the very “North” of Alaska. Climate, cost of travel, and living costs have weighed significantly on who goes to Alaska, how long they stay, and how frequently they return to Mexico, but so do global economic and political conditions that underlie widespread transborder movement of workers in a post-NAFTA time of economic volatility and uncertainty. Social connectedness under such conditions is particularly important in a mobile livelihood (Duany 2002), as is a sense of “community” among transnational workers.

This paper offers perhaps the first descriptive account of Mexicans in Alaska who are living and working transnationally. I explore transnational social relations among Mexicans who originate largely from one central Mexican community in the state of Michoacán. What can they tell

1. “We [Let’s] go North” has for a long time been the expression used for going to the United States for work.

us about how livelihoods and relationships are negotiated in boom labor scenarios and rapidly changing cultural spaces like present-day Alaska? What is the character of transnational connectedness, and of practices, events, and symbols that reflect strength of ties to the community of origin? To what extent is spatial distance still a significant factor in transnational living with current advanced communication (cell phones, telephones, e-mail)? What are the pulls and tugs of places of origin, and how do they compete in the imaginations of transnationals with other places that can also come to be called “home”?

Beginning with a brief historical backdrop to Mexican labor migration to Alaska from the central Mexican *mestizo* community of Acuitzio del Canje, Michoacán,² I proceed with a discussion of conceptual notions and theoretical constructs that shape the study and describe the research methods. I then probe the attractions of Anchorage as a transnational work location, the work environment for Acuitzences there, and social relations as part of living in Anchorage and maintaining linkages to the community of origin in Mexico.

THE RESEARCH CONTEXT: HISTORICAL BACKDROP, THEORY, AND METHOD

I first came to know of several villagers working in Alaska as part of my research into labor migration impacts on household and family organization. My in-depth random sample of the village in 1966–67 included one family with a member at work in Alaska. At that time, a number of workers from Acuitzio were engaged in the Trans-Alaska Pipeline construction, the fisheries, and in food services as waiters and even as restaurant owners/employers. In 1973 I made a passing reference to migration to Alaska: “Mexicans who temporarily and recurrently migrate to the United States are employed primarily in agriculture, although an increasing number find employment in Los Angeles and Chicago factories. Some Acuitzences also work in construction or in bakeries in Alaska” (Wiest 1973:185).

Until 1983, I regularly revisited and conducted research in Acuitzio (e.g., see Wiest 1973, 1979, 1983a, 1983b, 1984), and made informal contacts with Acuitzences in California. After a twenty-year hiatus, I returned in 2004 to begin a three-year multisited investigation of Mexican transnational labor in Acuitzio del Canje; Anchorage, Alaska; and the Dinuba-Reedley area of the San Joaquin Valley, California. This paper focuses on the Acuitzio connection to Anchorage; it is based on a one-month period of fieldwork in Anchorage in the fall of 2005 plus a three-month period in Acuitzio, during which time I was able to continue with Acuitzences who returned from Alaska to visit later that year.

Because I have farm roots in California, I had a natural interest in, and chose to focus my research on, rural proletarianization in Mexico and connections with California agriculture. Hence, nearly forty years passed before I gave specific research attention to Mexicans in Alaska. Personal knowledge of Acuitzences in Alaska, and conversations with some of them in Acuitzio over a period of four decades, left a lingering curiosity as to why Mexicans in Alaska remained below media and even academic radar. To my best knowledge, there is yet no published anthropological discussion of Mexicans in Alaska. Even in Anchorage the influx of Mexican workers has not yet drawn formal attention, including within the academy.³ Indeed, the surprise reaction among both academics and nonacademics in the “lower United States” regarding the large presence of Mexicans in Alaska is striking. A common assumption is that Alaska would offer Mexicans few if any desired traditional foods, amenities, and/or sense of community, yet there is a thriving Mexican food industry in Anchorage and a rising sense of a Latino community, predominantly Mexican. There are more than fifty-five Mexican restaurants in Anchorage, the vast majority being independent or local enterprises rather than global chain franchises. This general unawareness of “Mexico in Alaska”⁴ conforms to the lower profile of immigration as an issue of concern; we did not detect the negative interpretation of

2. Acuitzio del Canje, Michoacán is *cabecera* (head town) of the small municipality of Acuitzio. Acuitzio lies in the cool uplands (*tierra fria*), about 35 kilometers south southwest of Morelia, capitol of the state of Michoacán (see Wiest 1973). The 2005 population of the *cabecera* increased to 7,000 from the 1970s population of 3,600. People from Acuitzio are known as “Acuitzences.” All of the workers referred to in this article are from the *cabecera*, Acuitzio del Canje, generally glossed as “Acuitzio” in this paper.

3. Upon presentation of a paper in the Anthropology Department at the University of Alaska Anchorage (Naylor 2005), colleagues acknowledged that immigration of Latin Americans, Asians, and others was only beginning to garner attention. The Society for Applied Anthropology 2006 conference panel in which a version of this paper was presented had its origins in a discussion between Kerry Feldman and me on the importance of encouraging research on recent immigration to Anchorage.

4. “Mexico in Alaska” is the name of one Anchorage restaurant, but it also is an expression that rings well to capture the Mexican presence in Anchorage (see Komarnisky this volume).

immigration that is widespread in the lower forty-eight states. Anchorage has not (yet) become caught up in the United States media, public, and congressional debate and hysteria around undocumented immigration and growing Latinization, as is widespread in borderland regions and northern U.S. urban centers such as Cincinnati, Chicago, New York, or Portland, OR (e.g., *Chicago Tribune* 2007; Cornelius 2006; Garcia-Navarro 2007; Massey 2006; Portes 2006; *The Oregonian* 2007). Preoccupation with lack of documentation is lower in Alaska and consequently there is less fear of being categorized as illegal (see Stephen 2007:152–153). In Anchorage we often heard, and noted in the media, positive comment regarding immigrants—that increasing ethnic diversity adds interest to the local scene, that recent immigrants are very hard workers, and that they are a welcome part of the Alaska boom. Alaska is an increasingly attractive destination, particularly for Hispanics and Asians (*Anchorage Daily News* 2006). At official levels, however, there is some concern with income loss to Alaska from “nonresidents.”⁵

Although Acuitzio connections with Alaska have a considerable history, Alaska is still a “frontier” for Mexican workers in the sense that it represents a significant climatic change, involves greater spatial distance and comparatively more costly transport, and today involves expanding work opportunities largely outside the scope of prior experience for many immigrant workers. This broadened range of employment prospects is consistent with the post-NAFTA rise in Mexican transnational migration in general (Kandel and Massey 2002), and the development of a “culture of migration” (see Cohen 2004) in which the youth, particularly males, express their entry to adulthood by seeking work in the U.S.

Despite the greater distance and separation by two nation-states (U.S. mainland and Canada), the Mexico-Alaska connection cases I deal with conform largely to migration between Mexico and other places in the U.S. If we consider strength of association and emotional attachment, it is as if people can indeed be “two places at once,” much like those people living in the Tijuana-San Diego region or El Paso-Juarez (Hsu 2007). As several people in Acuitzio expressed it to me, “*Están allá y viven aquí*” [“they are there and live here”], which embodies important elements of transnationalism.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Appearance of a “transnational perspective” on migration (Glick Schiller et al. 1992) offered a framework for explicit recognition of “social fields that link together . . . country of origin and . . . country of settlement” and the identity and organizational implications of “multiple relations . . . that span borders” (Glick Schiller et al. 1992:1). Kearney (1991:53) notes that transnational migration spans “boundaries” (legal spatial markers of nations) as well as borders (geographic and cultural contact zones), or connections and relationships of individuals and institutions in different places or states (Kearney 1995; Levin 2002:3). Stephen (2007:19–23) adopts the expression “transborder” migration as a more accurate reflection of the fact that Mexican transmigrants cross a variety of borders (ethnic, cultural, and regional) in both Mexico and the United States, so “transnational” then becomes a subset of transborder movement. The analysis in this paper, however, emphasizes transnational migration, or “movement of people across the borders that differentiate nation-state spaces,” as expressed by De Genova (2005:2). For most Acuitzences, transnational living has come to approximate what Duany refers to as “mobile livelihoods”—“the spatial extension of people’s means of subsistence across various local, regional, and national settings” (2002:358).

Mexican transnational migration has been, and continues to be, primarily *labor* migration (De Genova 2005:6; Wiest 1973), but it now involves a wider social class range in response to economic conditions in Mexico. More than ever before, educated and skilled men and women are joining the rural and urban disenfranchised to work and live transnationally. As one well-educated Mexican in Anchorage stated in response to post-NAFTA conditions in Mexico, “It’s not about adventure, man. It’s about survival” (Naylor 2005:8), making the point that even educated young professionals cannot find work in Mexico.

Transnational labor migration is largely induced by conditions that necessitate the search for livelihood alternatives and/or income supplementation, but there is much more to transnational living than earning money and sending out remittances. Transnational mobile livelihoods are made up of social, economic, and political

5. Identified from the two most recent years’ Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend (PFD) data, nonresidents are workers who have not received a PFD in one of the two most recent years. Income loss from nonresidents is considered to be around \$1 billion if half the earnings are spent outside the state. According to the Alaska Department of Labor, “a significant portion of the direct income, amounting to hundreds of thousands of dollars and thousands of jobs, is lost to the Alaska economy” (Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development 2006a:21).

involvements in multiple sites; weighing contradictory ideas and practices as well as identity options and pressures (see Levitt 2004; Mountz and Wright 1996; Striffler 2007); and active juxtaposition of one's own past, present, and pondered future. The specific contexts in which transnational migrants live and work are also dynamic, exhibiting moments of dramatic change that can have profound effects on labor markets and social receptivity. Public opinion shifts, together with individual narratives that reflect contentious representations of self and community, reveal contradictory ideas and practices among transmigrants (also see Grimes 1998:126–127). I encountered hostile criticism of NAFTA among Acuitzences, yet embrace of free markets (as did Grimes 1998:127) and opposition to agricultural labor solidarity in California (not deemed in their interest as temporary seasonal workers). Repression of such apparent contradictions is fueled by at least three interrelated attributes associated with Acuitzio. First, there is a class-based control over land that impedes development of a local labor market and strangulates even small private landowners (*pequeños propietarios*) who commonly migrate to the U.S. for work. Second, there is a pervasive suspicion of political process, especially at the local level, that impedes organized resistance and consequently impels people to seek livelihood options elsewhere. Third, atomistic family-focused connections, together with absence of effective community-based collective initiatives, have propelled individual and family dependence on transnational migration.

Radical shifts in assessment of migration to the United States in Acuitzio also reflect changing perceptions of the political economy—from uncritical embrace of out-migration for work and widespread emulation of migration as livelihood strategy (e.g., “migrant syndrome,” Reichert 1981) in the 1960s and 1970s, to contentious opposition to labor migration dependency in the late 1970s when Mexico announced oil reserves and major development plans. Then, with the onset of the Mexican debt crisis in 1983, Acuitzences were back to warm and uncritical embrace of migration as a strategy that continues unabated today. Today, even among those who remain critical of dependence on transnational migration for livelihood, there is recognition that nearly every Acuitzio household depends on transnational migration to some extent and that local commerce and construction could not be sustained without it in the current political economy of Mexico.

Many transmigrants quietly confront identity stereotypes (see Stephen 2007:209–230) by actively maintaining

several identities in connections with different places, e.g., homeland and labor site (Grimes 1998:19–20). For Glick Schiller et al. (1992:11), maintenance of multiple identities is an expression of “resistance to the global political and economic situations that engulf them, even as they accommodate themselves to living conditions marked by vulnerability and insecurity.” In his study of Mexicans in California, Rouse (1991, 1992) illustrates how workers internalize proletarian values (punctuality, reliability, etc., typically glossed by Acuitzences as “time is money”) of the host society but retain meanings and values of their home community. The two are sometimes contradictory, resulting in confusion and tension in workers’ lives, and in what Rouse (1992:41) calls “cultural bi-focality”—alternating views of the world.

Acuitzences confront transnational migration and discrimination with considerable comparative advantage. First, Acuitzio is not an indigenous community; Acuitzio is a *mestizo* community that can still be usefully glossed as “nation oriented” (Wolf 1956). Compared to Mexican transnational migrants from indigenous communities, Acuitzences experience fewer barriers to entry into the mainstream of life in the U.S., where class and ethnic differentiation is becoming more apparent in transnational migration, especially in urban settings. Second, Acuitzences in Alaska are largely in a propertied class in Acuitzio, with access to and use of considerable social capital. Third, Acuitzio has long had an unusually high number of people with immigrant visas or “green cards” (Wiest 1973:184), a legacy that has given momentum to continued favorable positioning for regulation of immigration papers. Although entry to the U.S. without documents is now widespread in Acuitzio, Acuitzences who go to Alaska for the most part have gained legal entry that stems from the parental generation or was acquired through previous work in California in a form of step migration. This underscores a fourth attribute—the considerable generational depth of migration to Alaska from Acuitzio—addressed in this paper.

The importance of networking among Mexican transnational workers to assist in border crossing and job acquisition is well established in the literature (e.g., Cohen 2004; Massey et al. 1987; Kandel and Massey 2002; Stephen 2007). Acuitzences make a strong point of this, including those who have worked in California or elsewhere in the U.S. They readily and regularly highlight that strong social connections with others already working in Alaska are especially important for entry and work there.

Since focus is on social relations with people in Acuitzio, Acuitzio as “place” is used as a convenient gloss on origin identity in this paper. Many Acuitzences in Anchorage do maintain close relations with each other, but there is no organization that encourages assembly of persons from Acuitzio. Spatial distribution in Anchorage has a bearing on interactions, as do long-standing family lines of association and disassociation (i.e., estranged families, although I am unaware of any serious problems between Acuitzences in Anchorage). While Acuitzences are quick to make strongly positive association with their community of origin, they are not typically standoffish; individual Acuitzences may easily have more in common with other Michoacanos, or some other Mexicans, than with each other. Michoacanos may well have a reputation as “self important (*presumidos*),” as noted by Oaxaceños in Oregon (Stephen 2007:213), but we did not note, nor seek out, such attributions in our relatively brief period in Anchorage.

FIELDWORK METHODS

Beginning with a substantial list of contacts in Anchorage based on continued contact with people in Acuitzio, the objective of the research in Anchorage was to locate, interact with, and conduct informal interviews with as many of the Acuitzence population as possible in one month of fieldwork in Anchorage. The recently organized Hispanic Heritage Festival in Anchorage took place within our first few days in Anchorage. Among a sea of apparent strangers, I began to ask about Mexicans, then about Michoacanos (i.e., persons from the state of Michoacán), and eventually about the presence of Acuitzences. Within minutes I was referred to Monica,⁶ who turned out to be from Aguililla, Michoacán, and who in turn referred me to Maria, from Acuitzio, who was extremely busy with the festival. Having made the costumes, Maria was helping to coordinate the dance performances, including the engagement of her own children. She nonetheless took time to meet me. In short order she made an effort to establish who I was through genealogical connections I was familiar with, reconstruct

from her childhood memory recollections of our earlier presence in Acuitzio, and provide me with contact information. Some days later I followed up with this connection, and from there we used referrals,⁷ social gatherings, and networking to expand the study sample. My laptop computer with recent photos from Acuitzio turned out to be an effective introduction for Acuitzences with whom I was unfamiliar, readily capturing their interest (see Figure 1).

Our sample was largely based on snowballing, but serendipity played a role, as the above example illustrates. Direct queries about “Acuitzio” often led nowhere, but on one occasion served well, which in itself told us something about social networking among transnational workers. Research assistant Sara learned that the French Oven bakery not far from her residence regularly made *pan dulce* (Mexican sweet breads). She invited us to join her in a visit to the bakery to help arrange an interview with the owner. Inquiring directly about Acuitzences, within minutes we learned that someone from Acuitzio lived upstairs and worked part-time in the bakery and that one of the larger restaurants nearby was owned and operated by Acuitzences. From that moment on we developed a wide enough range of contacts that the time was too short to engage all of them to the extent desired. I worked with a total of thirty-six persons while in Anchorage, including twelve married couples.⁸ After the



Figure 1. Ethnographer showing participant families scenes and people from Acuitzio. Photo by Shirley Wiest.

6. This name is a pseudonym, as are all other personal names used in this article other than “Sara” and “Shirley.”

7. Sara Komarnisky participated in this project as graduate research assistant (see her article in this volume). While Sara focused on her own particular project objectives for the MA thesis, we cooperated in expanding the social networks that provided our research base. We sometimes met with new contacts together and conducted a few interviews jointly, but for the most part our work took different paths and timetables. Sara remained in Alaska for several months after I left for Mexico.

8. My spouse, Shirley, sometimes accompanied me for interviews. Her presence helped to set an easy tone of sincerity and confidence; she also assisted my recollection of our earlier contacts and experiences in Acuitzio and helped to draw people out on food-related issues (an interest shared with graduate student Sara Komarnisky). Shirley’s presence made it easier to interview women and discuss sensitive topics with them.

fieldwork in Anchorage and our return to Acuitzio, the return of Acuitzences from Alaska enabled us to follow up with several of my research participants as well as others we had been unable to interview while in Anchorage. Our interactions continued as we were invited guests to familial festivities and/or in the form of explicit follow-up and more detailed interviews. These contacts in Acuitzio added an additional young man, six reunited married couples (i.e., six married men working in Alaska reunited with their wives during our stay in Acuitzio), the spouses of two men who remained in Alaska during our stay in Acuitzio, and two other men who recently returned from a period of work in Anchorage, together with their spouses who had remained in Mexico.

Interviews were informal; some were tape-recorded, but most resulted in notes later fleshed out as computer-stored text files. Useful information on the study topic came from discussions with groups of male workers sharing accommodations, with married couples, and with groups of married couples.⁹ Statistical information on immigrants in Anchorage was drawn from Alaska government websites, U.S. Census data, and local media sources. We also consulted with anthropology colleagues at the University of Alaska Anchorage.

WHY GO TO ANCHORAGE, ALASKA?

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 2005 American Community Survey, there were 18,584 Hispanics or Latino (7.0%) in Anchorage (population 266,281), of which 8,531 (3.2%) were Mexican.¹⁰ It is very difficult to say how many are Acuitzences and related family members. In the absence of a club or other organization based on identification with Acuitzio, assessment of this question was at best a combination of independent guesses.

None of our research participants had reflected much on the total Acuitzio-derived population in Anchorage, and estimates among them ranged from 200 to over 1,000, variably considering time of year the count would be made and who is being flagged, e.g., just those known to be in

the labor force, or conjugal pairs and children and other relatives; or documented immigrants only, or also undocumented immigrants. The high estimate we encountered seems suspect, but based on the number of contacts we made in August and September 2005 and specific others we were referred to, a total of 500 persons laying claim to Acuitzio as place of origin or affiliation is plausible.

For most Acuitzences, the leap to Alaska is a studied option based on information passed on among family and friends. Indeed, a considerable number of present-day Acuitzences in Alaska follow in the footsteps of a parent, relative, *compadre*,¹¹ or friend. These connections are no less than three generations deep in at least a half-dozen cases, going back to early work on the Alaska oil pipeline in the 1960s and 1970s. The special attraction of Alaska today is readily available work and growing opportunity to move into stable jobs that pay well. Among Acuitzences, we recorded wages of \$9 to \$11 per hour for restaurant waiters, and \$14.50 per hour for a sous-chef, although we were also told that restaurant workers often made only minimum wage (\$7.15 in 2005). Construction workers earned \$13.50 per hour, construction superintendents \$19 per hour, and landscaping/yard caretakers \$15 per hour. These wage rates are within the range of 2006 Alaska wage rates (Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development 2006b), falling typically at the 75th percentile in the food services area (well above the means), and between the 25th and 50th percentile for those in home construction and painting (slightly below the means).

Wages and earnings among Acuitzences are generally higher in Alaska than in California and other parts of the U.S., but so is the day-to-day cost of living. Alaska ranked fourth in 2004 U.S. median household income at \$57,027, ahead of ninth-ranked California at \$51,185, compared to the U.S. average of \$44,684 (Fried and Windisch-Cole 2005:10). Fried and Robinson (2006:4) note, “[A]lthough it’s still more expensive to live in Alaska than in much of the rest of the country, the gap is gradually narrowing.” Food costs at home for a week for a family of four, December 2005, were \$118 in Anchorage, compared to

9. Discussion with married women in the absence of husbands was limited in this brief period of fieldwork, although my general observations are corroborated by the work of assistant Sara Komarnisky, who spent more time in Anchorage and conducted much of her research alone with married women (Komarnisky 2006).

10. The margin of error is $\pm 1,939$, which likely reflects rapidly changing ethnic identity criteria and uneven participation in census-taking affected by lack of documentation among some immigrants (see U.S. Census Bureau 2005).

11. Literally “co-parent.” Although part of the godparent system in Mexico, there are multiple institutionalized bases for establishing *compadrazgo* relationships in which the primary relationships are those between the co-parents. Such relationships create horizontal bonds between equals as well as vertical bonds between people of different social classes and unequal power relations (see Dávila 1971). There also are known cases of connection between *padrinos* (godparents) and *ahijados* (godchildren) as stimulus for migration.

\$109 in Portland, Oregon (Fried and Robinson 2006:9). However, housing costs, while increasing rapidly, are on par with or below those in many parts of urban California. In 2005, median monthly housing costs in Anchorage for mortgaged owners was \$1,628, and for renters \$871, with 44 percent of renters spending 30 percent or more of household income on housing. Anchorage housing costs are well above the mixed urban and agricultural area of Fresno County, California, another of my research sites with Acuitzences. In Fresno County, median monthly housing costs for mortgaged owners was \$1,335, and for renters \$710, but with 51 percent of renters spending 30 percent or more of household income on housing (U.S. Census Bureau 2005).

Acuitzio men go to Alaska for work, but women don't go alone. For Acuitzences, this is not notably different from other migration destinations in that women still tend not to migrate by themselves to the U.S. for work. Until the early 1980s, adult women tended not to migrate to the U.S. under any circumstances, but increasing numbers of women are now accompanying their spouses, which is also true in the case of migration to Anchorage. A goodly number of women with Acuitzio or other Mexican origins who have work experience in the U.S. were taken there by their parents, some remaining there as young adults even if their parents or one parent returned to Acuitzio. Indeed, youthful experience elsewhere in the U.S. does serve as a stepping-stone for migration to Alaska among some women there, including a spouse of one Acuitzio man. Prior work experience in the Lower Forty-eight is common for those without prior family or friendship connection with Alaska.

Most Acuitzences make a carefully reasoned commitment to work in Alaska. Because travel is more costly, it means more extended time away from Acuitzio, family, and special events in Acuitzio. There are subtle features that balance against the added distance and cost. Some kinds of work (e.g., landscape and garden work, and to some extent construction and exterior painting) have a seasonal character in Anchorage that does not interfere with return to Mexico in the winter season and can mesh well into a mobile livelihood agenda. This slack period for work in Anchorage coincides with favored festivities in Acuitzio: December 5, *Día del Canje* (marking the exchange of Mexican prisoners for Belgian and French pris-

oners in 1865 during the French intervention in Mexico, 1861–67); December 12, *Día de Guadalupe*; as well as other celebrations of a Christmas season that extends to *Día de los Reyes* (Epiphany), January 6. Married couples with school-aged children in Alaska are more limited in their return options, but December departures from Anchorage minimize absence from school (due to seasonal holidays) and also coincide with the most important festive period in Mexico. December is also the best time to enjoy family outings at Mexican beach resorts. Some families eligible for the annual Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend¹²—which has been around \$1,000 per person in recent years—apply the dividends towards round trip travel costs to Mexico.

Acuitzences in Alaska maintain strong ties to their community of origin in Mexico, especially given the ease of communication by telephone and now e-mail. The actual amount of time spent in Acuitzio is influenced by immigration status (undocumented migrants are constrained in their transnational movements), the seasonal character of some jobs that facilitates time away, the cost of transportation, and the overall earning plan (e.g., some married couples have clear earning goals to supplement Mexico-based earnings for a limited duration). Married men attempt to return to Acuitzio at least every two years, if not annually, with great pressure to return annually if there are children. Young unmarried men tend to remain in Alaska for several years without return to Acuitzio, although there are clear cases of parental pressure to return. Indeed, in one case a man went to Alaska primarily to monitor a young son, staying only long enough to work off the costs of travel. Younger single men are less inclined to have immediate vested interests to attend to in Acuitzio, but it is also the case that these single young men are the most likely to be undocumented, a fact that makes international travel very difficult by air, and even more difficult by car due to the added entry into Canada. To my knowledge, none of our informants had traveled by cargo ship to Seattle or Portland.

Acuitzences in our research regularly expressed appreciation for a less hectic and more relaxed pace in Anchorage in comparison to California or Chicago—an attraction that they say offsets the greater isolation from Mexican culture, particularly local accessibility of desired foods such as

12. To be eligible for the Permanent Fund Dividend, one must have been an Alaska resident for the entire calendar year preceding the date of application for a dividend and must intend to remain an Alaska resident indefinitely at the time they apply for a dividend. Resident children are eligible too. Temporary absence up to 180 days is allowed, as long as applicants meet these criteria (Alaska Permanent Fund Dividend, accessed August 4, 2007).

chile (see Komarnisky, this volume). With mounting time between returns to Acuitzio, and especially as children enter the school system, learning English becomes a higher priority and facilitates broader involvement in Anchorage society. As several noted to us, the attractions of living and working in Anchorage can easily result in pressure for permanent relocation there as families become connected with the city through the school system and especially given the relative ease of periodic visits to Acuitzio. Nonetheless, the expressed intent of most Acuitzences working in Anchorage is to return to Acuitzio, both regularly and eventually. Furthermore, even the most established of Acuitzences in Anchorage are propertied in Acuitzio and continue to hold long-term interests there with both family connections and business interests.

WORKING IN ANCHORAGE

The main employment attraction in Anchorage used to be the food services industry, largely because it was a safe and year-round employment opportunity and one based in family and friendship connections to Acuitzio restaurateurs. A few Acuitzences (both men and women) are owners of restaurants and/or specialized bakeries, and while their workforce is not limited to other Acuitzences or even other Mexicans, they readily provide jobs to Acuitzences based on social connections and reputation. Indeed, the ambience of Acuitzence-owned restaurants encourages explicit nostalgia of Acuitzio as “home” through photos and artwork on the walls and in menus (e.g., see Figure 2).

Today, Acuitzences are employed in bakeries, in landscaping and garden service firms, and increasingly in the construction industry as carpenters, drywall workers, and painters (see Table 1). Even men with professional training, such as dentistry, work in several of these occupations in Anchorage, rationalizing they can earn more than attempting to practice dentistry in lower-paying and saturat-

ed professional arenas of Mexico. Typically, there is little prospect for professionally trained persons to work in their profession in Alaska since English language proficiency is required and certification for practice there is a lengthy process; hence, it is easy for them to become locked into jobs in the food services industry or construction.

Table 1 provides an overview of the Acuitzences at work in Anchorage with whom we had direct or indirect contact in 2005.¹³ Among thirty Acuitzio men who work—or recently worked—in Alaska, 36 percent are associated with food services as restaurant cooks, waiters, dishwashers, or bakers (see Table 2). Only one person worked part time washing dishes and part time as a cook, but the three restaurant owners (management) spend part of their time bartending or assisting in the kitchen. Forty-five percent



Figure 2. Acuitzence restaurant menu in Anchorage: Carlos Fine Mexican Restaurant. Note “Acuitzio” photograph on upper left side of menu. Photo by Raymond Wiest.

13. Each individual is identified in Table 1 with a gendered identification number (men are odd numbers; women are even numbers). The occurrence of two persons together (a man and a woman) in the “ID No” column indicates a conjugal pair living together in Anchorage, so this column offers a clear sense of cases where women accompany their husbands to Anchorage versus cases where married women remain in Acuitzio. The next column to the right notes the marital status of each individual and/or conjugal pair. The columns on the left of “ID No” group the individuals into “relationship clusters,” an analytic device to draw attention to relatively strong family and kin connections, joint business ventures, and friendships that involve co-residence in Anchorage. Those within specific clusters tend to have a higher frequency of interaction, but persons assigned to different clusters are in some cases closely linked to persons in other clusters. The Kinship and Generation columns provide a more precise sense of how people are related within clusters and between clusters, using standard kinship nomenclature conventions. However, rather than using “F” for “father” and “M” for “mother” to note the senior men and women in a cluster of related families or family members, I repeat the gendered “ID No” to facilitate easy identification of descendent kinship relationships within and between families, and among others in the table. “Generation” is obvious within family clusters, but between clusters the assignment is based on relative age. Within clusters of families, information under “generation” indicates the relationship to the identified senior link(s), i.e., the number(s) before succeeding letters. For example, “17 SWB+SWBW” is person 17’s son’s wife’s brother + his son’s wife’s brother’s wife.

Table 1. Relationship clusters and employment: Acuitzences in Anchorage, 2005

	ID No	Marital Status	Kinship and Generation			First entry	Men's Employment	Case Notes
			1	2	3			
A	1	M	1			1964	Pipeline construction; retired	Retired in Mexico
	3, 4	M		1 S+SW		1985	Home construction manager	
	5, 6	M			1 SD+SDH	2000s	Retail manager, DVD rental shop	
	7, 8	M			1 SD+SDH	2002	Home construction foreman	
	9, 10	S			1 SS+SSgf	1980s	Home construction	
	11, 12	M		1 D+DH		1990s	Restaurant co-owners with 21 & 22	
	13, 14	M		1 S+SW		1990s	Restaurant waiter	Trained as dentist in Mexico
	15, 16	M		1 S+SW		1985	Restaurant waiter, floor manager	
B	17, 18	M	17			1963	Pipeline construction	Now helps sons in restaurant
	19, 20	M		17 S+SW		1996	Restaurant cook for 11 & 21	Visit Acuitzio once per year
	21, 22	M		17 S+SW		1992	Restaurant co-owners with 11 & 12	Visit Acuitzio once per year
	23, 24	M		17 SWB+SWBW		1992	Section manager, major box store	
	25	M		20 MBS		2003	Restaurant cook and dishwasher	
C	27, 28	M		27+28		1992	Baker in major box store	Visit Acuitzio once per year
	29	M		27 B		1993	Landscape and yard care	Seasonal in Alaska, May–Oct.
D	31	M		33 B		1999	Former restaurant sous-chef	Now accountant in Mexico
	33	M		31 B		2002	Restaurant sous-chef	
	35	M		27 ZH		1999	Restaurant waiter for 43	
	37	M		45 MZS			Landscape and yard care	
	39	M			37		Landscape and yard care	
	41	S			39		Landscape and yard care	
E	43	D	43			1968	Restaurant owner	
	45	M		43 BWB		1986	Restaurant waiter & manager for 43	
	47	M		47			Restaurant waiter	
F	49	M		49		2005	Painter, construction	
	51	S			47 S	2005	Painter	
	53	M		49 WB			Painter; returned to Acuitzio	
	55	S			51 BS	2005	Painter	
G	57	M	57			1996	Seasonal construction	Retired utilities worker, Mexico
H	59, 60	M	59+60			1964	Fish cannery; retired	59 returns to Mexico in winter
	61	D		59+60 S		1980s	Fish cannery	

Kinship codes: F=father, M=mother, S=son, D=daughter, B=brother, Z=sister, H=husband, W=wife, gf=girlfriend (*novia*).

Children below employment age and children in school and preschool are not included in this table.

“First entry” denotes first year of entry into Alaska; those with the “s” (e.g., 1980s) are approximation.

are involved in construction.¹⁴ This includes two men already retired from earlier work on the pipeline in Alaska. It also includes those working in landscaping and yard work since there is a close connection between landscaping/yard work and new housing. Two of the men working as homebuilders are foremen/site managers. Management as a category (13.5%) includes three persons as restaurant owners who also work as bartenders and/or assist in the kitchen (Table 2 employment distribution reflects these task divisions to some extent). Work in fish canneries accounts for two persons (6%), although one is now retired.

Table 3 provides limited information on the employment of women who are spouses of Acuitzio men or daughters and daughters-in-law of these men, as well as the employment of the men. The data are arranged in this table to group together married couples who are together in Anchorage versus cases where the woman stays in Mexico. About half of the married women in Anchorage are primarily “homemakers,” as are the women who remain in Mexico. This reflects the fact that the majority of those described as “homemaker”¹⁵ in Table 3 are taking care of young children. Acuitzio women in Anchorage together with their children give priority to staying at home until children reach school age. Upon children reaching school age, married women do seek wage-earning jobs or become involved in volunteer community work. Childless married women actively seek employment, generally as grocery or department store cashiers. A small number of Acuitzio-linked women with advanced education and training are employed in retail firms or banks or in social services—childcare, health care, and education—while awaiting employment possibilities in their areas of training. Facility with the English language is an asset in most jobs, but essential for jobs beyond the food services industry or retail store cashier jobs.

Acuitzences who live and relate transnationally in Anchorage have chosen Alaska as a place to work in part to deal with the realities of discrimination, surveillance, job competition, and other such pressures more prevalent in the Lower Forty-eight. At the present time they experience a relatively welcoming and supportive society in Alaska, with secure job opportunities and satisfactory earning

prospects. However, there is a paradox between presenting to others the opportunities experienced in Anchorage and facilitating their access to jobs on the one hand and contributing to job competition on the other hand. It is only the currently expanding demand for workers that mutes the potential problem.

I discussed with several Acuitzences whether they experienced discrimination in Anchorage and/or whether they felt that Mexicans in Alaska were taken advantage of. One participant, Rubén, paused and then responded with considerable thoughtfulness.¹⁶ He said that some Mexican immigrants experienced lower than standard wages, but that this generally was not an issue with Acuitzences. I asked whether it would be more the case among undocumented immigrants. Rubén said that one tries to keep undocumented status unknown and that employers generally do not ask. Even then, he noted, some employers attempt to take advantage in the form of lower wages and/or extra work assignments to those who do not have legal recourse. Rubén was underscoring the importance of connections, something he felt was widely appreciated and generally built upon among Acuitzences and certain other Mexican workers he knew of. He maintained that, unless undocumented status becomes known, it is generally not a factor in treatment of workers outside of some unscrupulous employers whose reputation is known among immigrants from Mexico.

Beyond pointing to the strategic character of social networking in recruitment and placement among transnational workers, the example above draws attention to possible systematic exploitation in some firms that may effectively concentrate vulnerable undocumented workers with employers who readily take advantage of workers in exchange for continued work opportunities under a “godfatherly watch.” More than one respondent (none of whom are Acuitzence restaurant owners) told me that a particular restaurant chain had a reputation for taking advantage of those without papers and that Acuitzences tended to avoid seeking work there. My inquiries in that chain suggested a preponderance of waiters from one north-central Mexican state, and several Acuitzence workers agreed this to be the case. While undocumented

14. Percentages are used in Table 2 only to facilitate easy comparison; in such a small sample their use has little statistical relevance to the larger population.

15. The term “homemaker” is employed in the table to concisely reflect nonwaged, stay-at-home persons primarily occupied in domestic routines and childcare. Admittedly, the term does not reflect the complexity of responsibility and work among women in Acuitzio (see Wiest 1983a) or in Anchorage, but it is a term that is at least marginally more satisfactory than “housewife.”

16. The expression here is based on reconstructed notes recorded after the interview, hence, not a direct quotation.

Table 2. Men's employment: Thirty-one Acuitzences in Alaska, 2005

Food Services	#	Construction	#	Management	#	Fish Cannery	#
Cooks/Bakers	4.5	Pipeline, retired	2.0	Restaurant owners	2.2	Retired	1.0
Waiters	5.8	Homebuilders*	4.0	Retail store section	2.0	Active	1.0
Dishwashers	0.5	Painting	4.0				
		Landscaping, yard work	4.0				
Totals	10.8		14.0		4.2		2.0
Percentages	34.8		45.2		13.5		6.2

*Two of these homebuilders are also managers/foremen.

Table 3. Acuitzence married couples and employment, 2005

♂		♀		
ID No	Men's Employment in Alaska	ID No	Women's Employment and Location	
3	Home construction manager	4	House cleaning after construction	AK
5	Retail manager, DVD rental shop	6	Homemaker	AK
7	Home construction foreman	8	Studying for real estate licensing	AK
11	Restaurant co-owners with 21 & 22	12	Homemaker	AK
13	Restaurant waiter	14	Homemaker	AK
15	Restaurant waiter, floor manager	16	Restaurant waitress	AK
17	Pipeline, retired; helps sons in business	18	Homemaker	AK
19	Restaurant cook for 11 & 21	20	Homemaker, volunteer work; plans to work as baker	AK
21	Restaurant co-owners with 11 & 12	22	Prepares food for school district	AK
23	Section manager, major box store	24	Office work; application to school district	AK
25	Restaurant cook and dishwasher	26	Homemaker	AK
27	Baker in major box store	28	Medical office worker	AK
59	Fish cannery; retired	60	Homemaker; grandchild care	AK
1	Pipeline construction; retired	2	Homemaker	MX
29	Landscape and yard care	30	Homemaker	MX
31	Former restaurant sous-chef	32	Teacher	MX
33	Restaurant sous-chef	34	Homemaker	MX
35	Restaurant waiter for 43	36	Baker	MX
37	Landscape and yard care	38	Doctor	MX
39	Landscape and yard care	40	Homemaker	MX
45	Restaurant waiter & manager for 43	46	Restaurant waitress	MX
47	Restaurant waiter	48	Homemaker	MX
49	Painter, construction	50	Homemaker and small retail business	MX
53	Painter; returned to Acuitzio	54	Baker and bakery owner	MX
57	Seasonal construction	58	Teacher, retired	MX

Note: AK = Alaska; MX = Mexico

immigrants are taken advantage of in some contexts, the rising need for workers in many sectors of the economy has left workers in the favorable position of not needing to preoccupy with immigration status because it is not a priority issue in Alaska at the present time. The most obvious drawback is the constrained mobility in crossing borders between Alaska and Mexico.

SOCIAL RELATIONS IN ANCHORAGE

Acuitzences, like other transnational workers, do venture to new places in the United States, but they more commonly build bridges to locations where other Acuitzences have made inroads. As previously noted, social connections are considered particularly important for Alaska, largely to have a place to stay upon first arrival. Antonio made a strong point of this in citing how important it was to have relatives, friends, *compadres* or *abijados* to help one build a secure base.

The sense of community goes beyond the village of origin; friendship networks and voluntary associations in Anchorage include congenial Mexican compatriots from elsewhere in central Mexico (typically from Michoacán or Jalisco). They also include other village settlers or sojourners in other parts of the U.S., especially California, because many who work in Alaska have spent previous years in California, and some marriages among Anchorage conjugal pairs are made up of relationships between Californians of Mexican descent and Acuitzences now in Alaska.

With a sizeable “community” of Acuitzences in Anchorage, there is considerable support gained from linkages to the same “home” community—“*las piedras rodando se encuentran*” [“rolling stones find each other” or “...are drawn together”]. They reside in four different zones, but residential dispersion is no more an impediment to social connectedness in Anchorage than it is between Anchorage and Acuitzio. Most Acuitzences in Anchorage own or have access to occasional use of an automobile.

Basic social features among Acuitzences in Anchorage can be appreciated by referring back to Table 1. Attention is drawn to social relations clusters that reflect the importance of social connections between Acuitzences in Anchorage. Cluster A is a set of families with a three-generation depth of work in Alaska, including a second and third generation of whole families living in Anchorage. Clusters B, F, and H involve two generations of work and family living in Anchorage. Clusters A and B are linked through restaurant ownership and work there. Cluster C involves broth-

ers, one of whom has his spouse and children with him in Anchorage, and the other brother lives with them. Person 19 of Cluster B is *compadre* of 27 in Cluster C. Person 20 in Cluster B is cousin of 25 in Cluster C, and 25 is an in-law of 35 in Cluster D. Cluster D is made up of men who share a common residence while at work in Anchorage; most are married men with spouses in Acuitzio. In addition to linking to Cluster C as indicated above, person 37 is a cousin of person 43 in Cluster E. Cluster E consists of an early migrant to Alaska who became an early restaurant owner there, plus some of his workers whose kinship relationship was not determined with certainty. Finally, Cluster G consists of a man retired from a utilities commission in Mexico. He connects socially via *compadrazgo* with other Acuitzences in Anchorage, and works in Anchorage seasonally to supplement retirement income and to support his children’s education.

Acuitzence men working in Alaska range from 18 to nearly 70 years of age. Our sample consists of four single men (generally younger men, one engaged), thirteen married men migrating alone and supporting families in Acuitzio, twelve married couples arriving jointly in Alaska or who have been united after some period of geographic separation, one older divorced man, and one younger man who married a local Native woman and later divorced. We learned of a few cases of separated or divorced Mexican women, but none from Acuitzio. Unmarried single women from Mexico are still a rarity in Anchorage. Among married couples, the birth of children, the children’s ages, and the capacity to acquire a house figure importantly in the timing of women and children’s journey to Alaska.

Social interaction between families outside the workplace reinforces the sense of interdependence and trust, maintains assistance networks for newcomers from Acuitzio, and offers occasions to reminisce and appreciate mutually enjoyed special Mexican foods, music, and dance. Yet, being Acuitzence does not mean all Acuitzences celebrate together. Families get together in smaller closely linked parties for festive occasions and enjoyment of food, which is similar to who among them would be invited to festivities in Acuitzio. Food is not only appreciated for its taste and material pleasure, but it is one of several symbolic signs of home in Acuitzio (see Komarnisky, this volume). Clothing, dance costumes, music, and artwork are other important items that introduce valued sentimentalities of Acuitzio. For example, an art piece from Acuitzio (see Figure 3) is not only valued as a shared reminder of Acuitzio, but in this case, according to Ivonne, is intentionally displayed on a



Figure 3. Wall art reminder of home: street scene from Acuitzio; art by José Rangel Garcia. Photo by Raymond Wiest.

staircase to be appreciated “from above so my husband can see the street as he would see it from his mother’s house.”

Compared with my earlier experience in Acuitzio, a changing attitude toward marriage and gender roles is operable in the sense of community among Acuitzences in Anchorage. The conjugal pairs we worked with in Anchorage can be described as “companionate marriages,” as Hirsch (2003:2–12) refers to recent marriages characterized by *confianza* (confidence), cooperation, and sexual intimacy. Other marriages, most typically among the older couples, resemble the more traditional form underscored by *respeto* (respect) and exhibit more influence of the *machismo* (manliness) ideology (see Wiest 1983a).

Known marriages between Acuitzence men and Alaska (Native) women have not been long lasting, but do have a bearing on social relations in the larger family when children are involved, in one case engaging extended family to deal responsibly with the needs of children.¹⁷ For example, a paternal grandmother (person 60) stays in Anchorage over the winter months to meet schooling needs of a grandchild whose divorced parents live outside of Anchorage, even though her husband (the grandfather, person 59) returns to Acuitzio during the cold winter months to avoid the pain of cold-induced arthritis and/or rheumatism.

Among married couples who have considerable economic and social investment in Anchorage, discussion about where “home” really is drew out difference of opinion—a difference I found to be gender-marked, at least in superficial expression. Men (including those whose spouses

are with them in Anchorage) are typically outspoken about their desire to return to Mexico, at least in retirement, but for sure to die (as if to underscore the point of finality). Men want to retire and eventually be buried in Acuitzio, because burial in Acuitzio expresses more the sentiment of “important relationships” and “belonging” that is embodied in the representation of place so often used to identify self. Our women informants were far less dogmatic about where they want to end up, even in death, openly challenging their husbands in our presence. Although exhibiting plenty of positive emotionality about their homeland, these women were more practical and reasoned in their response. On weighing the strength of their ties, women pondered their future in terms of their children, including consideration of both expected and unknown changes that may come. So they are considering the future in terms of ages of their children, children’s education, and even what their children might do as adults. And very common among them was the response that they would likely want to remain with their children. They would admit that contemplating an unknown distant future may yield quite different responses from their more immediate futures that give high priority to returning to Mexico, if not to stay, at least for regular visits. Women’s responses reflect the gendered character of parenting (Parreñas 2001); however, the issue is more complex, as I will illustrate.

Most of our discussion was conducted with both husband and wife together, and sometimes in groups of conjugal pairs. Upon hearing the women’s views, men tended to hold to their more dogmatic expression, although as if in some jest, eventually conceding that future conditions may give them reason for a different response than currently envisaged. Although this kind of open exchange around differences is consistent with embrace of a companionate marriage model, I noted that the men I spoke with about their attachments and future plans were all in the age range and circumstance of concern for aging parents in Acuitzio, especially their mothers. Thus, it is likely that relationships with aging parents in Acuitzio that involve direct responsibility of the transnational migrant figure very importantly in the attachment to or quintessential imagining of Acuitzio as “home.” The gender difference noted in acclaimed priority to the Mexican homeland is often reinforced by men’s property interests

17. It is not unusual for undocumented immigrant Latin American men to marry Alaska Native women. The commonly attributed motive draws attention to such unions as a way of achieving landed immigrant status. These marriages are sometimes referred to as “marriages of convenience,” especially when they are short-lived and end in early divorce.

there, hence men's fervent expressions of desire to be buried in Acuitzio. Differential and perhaps competing senses of responsibility to parents and children may even produce tensions between married couples for a time, especially in cases of women remaining dependent on men's earnings. However, the married couples with whom we worked exhibited mutual support, even when one partner was forced by circumstances to temporarily give priority to parental attention over those of spouse and children. For example, Antonio experienced the death of a brother and both his father and mother at different times in one year; consequently he returned three times to Acuitzio from Anchorage, each time adding to the urgency to return to Alaska to help cover costs. Both he and his spouse acknowledged the consequent sacrifice and hardship. Several of our women interviewees indicated that women at home with children in Anchorage are very unlikely to be able to return to Acuitzio in the face of the death of aging parents or other crisis in Acuitzio, once again underscoring the gendered character of parenting.

Married men who deliberate going alone to Anchorage versus taking the wife and children with them do weigh the cost of housing, but also the impact of isolation on the family, especially considering the closed environment in winter that is compounded by not knowing English. But there are other considerations; for example, Ernesto expressed the strong desire that his children have the opportunity to know Alaska before he stops working there. Unmarried men, or married men who leave their spouse and children in Mexico, can live relatively cheaply, especially when accommodated by kin or *compadres* or having access to shared residential arrangements among village associates.

A housing arrangement for men in Anchorage, well known among Acuitzences, cultivates a sense of "community" if not "family" among Acuitzences. A place known as "Big Brother House" is a rented A-frame building that accommodates six men. Located near landscape and yard-care firms and restaurants (Mexican and other) where Acuitzences work, this accommodation has developed a respected reputation within Acuitzence circles as a tightly organized arrangement to keep living costs low while maintaining cooperative and congenial relations among men with different interests and temperaments. Newcomers are taken in if the resident collective approves, meaning that social networking weighs heavily and carries the pressure to conform to collective expectations. Acuitzio married men whose wives remain in Acuitzio are strongly attracted to live there if they do not have ac-

commodation with kin or *compadres*. Acknowledged success currently is based on trust of one individual resident with demonstrated ability as task and financial coordinator. The explicit understanding is that all residents make a contribution to the operation, yet not everyone is expected to do the same things. For example, some enjoy cooking more than others and are appreciated for their skill, so they spend more time cooking than others. Everyone is expected to help clean house, wash dishes, and honor the space of others, including the need for quietness to accommodate differing work shifts. The coordinator presents a monthly operational budget to which each one responds with equal contribution for rent, utilities, and food. This fairly long-standing arrangement has had various coordinators over the years, all guided by the Big Brother House reputation as a desirable living accommodation. Its success lies in the confluence of particular conditions present in Anchorage and the vision of its organizers and offers an attractive model for transnational workers compared with work camp environments elsewhere.

Acuitzences have continued to be largely Catholic, although relatively secular in their expression. Most relevant to the present discussion is that Acuitzences in Anchorage say attendance at Mass is more important to them while in Anchorage than it is in Acuitzio. The connection between church and the family is much more pronounced than in Acuitzio. In Acuitzio, families do not attend Mass together, nor do they sit together, whereas families sat together in Anchorage masses, with parents giving close attention to their children. Men whose families remained in Acuitzio expressed that Mass had a comforting effect on them, reminding them of their families in Acuitzio and offering a moment to nurture their faith in reunification with their families. For Ernesto, attendance at Mass was part of anticipating confirmation of one child and baptism of a newborn upon his return to Acuitzio a few months later.

Spanish-language masses are regular events at the downtown cathedral and at a nearly completed new church in the Anchorage west end designed to serve the growing Filipino and Hispanic population. Significantly, it is named Our Lady of Guadalupe, after the patron saint of Mexico, and resembles early Spanish missions of northwest Mexico and California (see Our Lady of Guadalupe, accessed August 4, 2007).

Catholic churches present occasion and place to meet other Hispanic immigrants, to strengthen the sense of connection with community of origin through familiar religious symbolism, to offer a venue for periodic community

fund-raising events in the familiar form of home (i.e., the *kermesse* [social]), and are the most common contexts for ritual events of baptism, first communion, *quinceañeras*,¹⁸ and on occasion even marriage.

Among Acuitzence transnational workers in Anchorage, sentimentalities for their Mexican homeland are expressed on several levels, invoking shared symbols that range from kin and friendship bonds to national sports and flags and including food preferences, music, and dance. Indeed, several levels are important simultaneously and they almost always are conjoined. In Anchorage, there are times when being Latino or Hispanic is celebrated and marked by special newspapers, festivals, dance troupes, etc. Among Hispanic Latin Americans, Mexicans show prominence in number of population, in number of restaurants, in availability of specialty foods, and coordination and participation in, and teaching of, regional dances of Mexico (see Figure 4, Mexican dances at the Hispanic Heritage Festival 2005, cast as a “family event”). Maria is one Acuitzence who, despite having a very limited command of English, actively volunteers with other Mexican immigrants to introduce Mexican dance traditions to children in Anchorage public and private schools (see *El Sol de Alaska*, accessed October 15, 2005). Acuitzence participation in teaching Mexican regional dances and designing and making suitable dance costumes for the participants answers to a nostalgia, an expressed desire to assure that children growing up as transnationals become familiar with the musical and dance heritage and associated symbols. It also answers to the need for meaningful involvement in the local scene. Participation does not end with those directly involved but embraces the many appreciative Mexican and other Latino or Hispanic observers.



Figure 4. Mexican dance troupe and Acuitzence-made costumes, Hispanic Heritage Festival 2005, Anchorage. Photo by Raymond Wiest.

The swelling Latino community is making its cultural mark while offering opportunity for new combinations of Mexican and Alaskan traditions. This is true not only in the arena of cultural events but also an important feature of the Latino community restaurant scene. The direct participation of Mexican and other Latino restaurants at public events is not only good for their business but contributes a tangible sense of Mexican and/or Latino identity that bridges between nostalgia for homeland culture and dynamic engagement in relationship building in a new environment. Participating in events of a Latino community serves the dual purpose of retaining familiar elements of Mexico while engaging the local scene by actively introducing and recreating familiar and valued practices, yet reaching out to embrace elements of local tradition. These efforts are finding receptive platforms in churches too.

ACUITZENCES IN ALASKA: TRANSNATIONAL MOBILE LIVELIHOODS

Acuitzences in Alaska express the tensions noted by Rouse (1992) in a measured way, and with ambivalence. They may resist “Americanization” (represented by preoccupation with money over social relationships, with a “rat-race” pace, and with depersonalization), but see the Alaska frontier more open to diverse expression than elsewhere in the U.S., and consequently less oppressive.

Aware of the proletarian values of American society, they consciously embrace and adhere to those values as part of holding good jobs in Anchorage. At the same time, they hold dear the prospect of returning to a social and cultural context in Acuitzio that honors time for family and friends. For most Acuitzences in Anchorage, work and leisure should be in balance. They speak openly about trying to resist conditions that deny people sufficient time to maintain family and other social relationships and to enjoy life beyond their jobs. This juxtaposition engenders ambivalence about remaining in Alaska, but at the same time they appreciate that Anchorage offers relatively less job competition, high paying jobs, more satisfaction in work expression, and comparatively more flexibility—due to seasonal breaks—to make return visits to Acuitzio without compromising employment. But home mortgages, purchase of vehicles, etc., put them on a course of preoccupation with the kind of consumption that can interfere with the social values represented by life in Mexico. Hence,

18. Celebration of a young woman’s fifteenth birthday, which marks her transition to womanhood.

the oft-heard expression of measured time in Alaska, and intent to return to Mexico, especially since comparative conditions in Mexico still permit acquisition of comfortable housing and even housing investments there.

Class-based resource control beyond immediate family connections has been a considerable political barrier to collective action in a community like Acuitzio. Consequently, at the present time, villagers view transnational migration not only as a necessity, but also as an alternative to local resistance and collective action (see Gledhill 1998:282–283). Transnational mobile livelihoods are seen as both possible and attractive alternatives in place of resettlement in shantytowns of Mexico City or local marginalization if not impoverishment (see Grimes 1998:126) that are also extolled as offering opportunity to contribute to Acuitzio in ways that will reduce the need to leave home for work. This idea, widely expressed by Acuitzences in Alaska, is eloquently stated in writing by Juan Pablo Jaramillo Ruiz, an Acuitzence in Chicago (*El Canje*, Feb. 2006, p. 6):

Todos tenemos una meta: ser mejores personas, salir adelante y algún día regresar a nuestro pueblo con la firme idea de construir un mejor pueblo para que nuestras futuras generaciones no tengan que salir de este maravilloso Acuitzio. . . . [We all have a goal: to be better persons, to advance and one day return to our village with the firm idea to construct a better village so that our future generations will not have to leave this marvelous Acuitzio. . . .]

Anchorage, Alaska—the transnational link in the present study—is viewed as an attractive alternative both for work and for living, but Acuitzences have not yet organized there for co-operative action in Acuitzio.¹⁹ Indeed, transnational workers in Anchorage were reluctant to respond to open solicitation in Acuitzio to form collective initiatives among workers in Alaska, most probably because they value what might be called the “frontier freedom” of Alaska.

When I returned to Acuitzio from Alaska, I learned from Rubén that there are varied interpretations of the Alaska work opportunity and how the earnings are used. Rubén had worked for several years in Anchorage before he passed on the job he held to a close relative and returned to settle in Mexico. To again paraphrase Rubén from a reconstructed discussion:

I could easily earn \$100 USD per day or more, and in a fairly short time one could amass a significant amount if one lives frugally while away. I went to Anchorage with a clear vision that it would be an opportunity to earn additional income for a limited time period. In the case of married couples, much depends on how couples are situated with jobs in Mexico. If the wife has an advanced education and an income source with which she can more or less maintain herself and children with her earnings, the husband’s earnings abroad can then be very much above what is needed for day-to-day living. With a clear plan for their joint future, a married couple can then rationalize to make the sacrifice of familial separation for a limited time in order to achieve some joint goals, such as purchase or construction of a house, start-up of a business, etc.

For Rubén, there is a big difference between persons who go abroad to maintain their families solely from their earnings abroad, and persons like him who had a clear plan of what they were targeting through work abroad. Those relying solely on the earnings of the one working abroad find themselves needing to return over and over, and it is hard, if not impossible, to break out of that cycle. This is the more general experience of Acuitzences noted in my previous research (Wiest 1973, 1983b, 1984).

Rubén emphasized the importance of not being driven by consumer goods, especially expensive items like vehicles (cars and/or pickup trucks). He noted this to be the slippery slope driving the mobile livelihood of a considerable number of transnational workers, citing the case of a close relative who, he suggested, would see no clear end for the need to stay away at work in Anchorage because the relative’s wife lacked access to resources beyond her husband’s earnings, and on top of that there was considerable pressure from teenage children in the family to acquire a late model pickup truck—a status-marked vehicle in Acuitzio. Rubén drew attention to domestic group organization and planning as most critical for those engaged in transnational labor. However, his sharply critical characterization of options with respect to transnational migration reflects differences in resource control and social capital. Those who already have a viable livelihood in Acuitzio can readily enhance their lifestyle and educational prospects for their children by adding income

19. A new initiative based on use of collective remittances (the 3x1 Program in Mexico), is attempting to challenge stereotypes with clear demonstration of cooperative community-based effort (see Bada 2003; Garcia Zamora 2007:11–12). Originating in Chicago labor unions, the movement has organizational features that may yield success. Impacts in Acuitzio are beginning to be noticed, especially since one of the Chicago organizers is from Acuitzio (Wiest 2006; also see Levitt 2004).

earned abroad. Those who migrate because there are no viable opportunities for them in Mexico, or to provide a higher level of income than available, are usually trapped in a long-term mobile livelihood and sustained transnational living or permanent relocation abroad (see Wiest 1973, 1983b, 1984). The situation for many transnational workers is that the current economic and political conditions in Mexico impel even people with considerable social capital to search for livelihood options abroad, including professionally trained people.

As Duany notes, "Circulation is a way of mobilizing personal and family resources spread widely in space and transcending geocultural boundaries between two or more localities" (2002:380). Most Acuitzences in Anchorage are engaged in the kind of circulation that goes beyond emotionally supportive contacts and regular remittances for maintenance of family members. Property acquisition, particularly investments in lots for potential housing, and house construction itself, is a prominent feature of transnational circulation among Acuitzences at the present time and a pattern repeated throughout much of rural Mexico (see Garcia-Navarro 2007). Those who invested in relatively cheap land in the last ten years as potential urban housing lots (land unsuitable for cultivation but adjacent to the village bypass road), now stand to gain considerably as the real estate market in Acuitzio has surpassed levels associated with the city of Morelia. Hence, for a number of Acuitzences working in Anchorage, property acquisition includes more than one's own home site; it includes investment in housing lots for future development, rental or sale. These business dealings in themselves influence continuity with the village.

A sense of responsibility to family, especially spouses and children who remain in Acuitzio, and aging parents, continues to be paramount for Acuitzences in Alaska. The very coming and going acts to reinforce the importance of connection, and the rekindling of the sense of "home" drawn from the community of origin in Mexico. Returns to Acuitzio involve participation in events and associated symbols that reinforce relationships and connections to home of origin. But that does not mean the sense of "home" is a static notion; it is being renegotiated constantly in the light of changing goals and changing circumstances in Mexico and Alaska—the age profile of transnational families, gendered familial responsibilities, social relationships and agreements, community engagements, earning opportunities, work conditions and wages, living conditions,

educational needs and opportunities for children, tax laws, and currency exchange ratios, etc.

When I asked research participants to speak to their sense of belonging and affiliation, and how place plays into their sense of identity, virtually all participants from Acuitzio said they were "Acuitzences" who happened to be living abroad for particular reasons—reasons that basically iterated the need to address the absence of livelihood options in Mexico at the present time, and to take the opportunity to earn decently in Alaska and thereby contribute to family well-being in Mexico or to contribute to construction of a home in Acuitzio. As one Acuitzence expressed it, "*Mi corazón está con México y mi emoción, pero mi dinero con los Estados Unidos*" ["my heart is with Mexico, and my passion, but my money is with the United States"] and then added, "at least for now." In Acuitzio, people say of family and friends in Alaska, "*un pie allá y otro aquí,*" or, "*están allá y viven aquí*" ["one foot there and the other here," or "they are there and live here"]. While both versions capture transnational living, the latter version expresses community of origin sentimentality, suggesting sojourn abroad and "home" in the village in Mexico.

CONCLUSION AND RESEARCH SUGGESTIONS

This study of a community of Mexican workers in Anchorage who originate from, and share a common affiliation with, the Michoacán village of Acuitzio del Canje offers a glimpse of their work and social relations in Anchorage and the connections they maintain with their homeland. Although our research in Anchorage was of relatively short duration, the study is based in a long-term examination of Acuitzio and follow-up work with Acuitzences returning to visit in Mexico.

While Acuitzences are drawn to Alaska by the same forces that propel transnational migration from Mexico more broadly, this study suggests that they stand in relatively class privileged positions for entry to Alaska and access to jobs there. Transnational living among Acuitzences working in Anchorage parallels much of what is already known about Mexican transnationalism, but highlights some of the special attractions for Mexicans working and living in Anchorage at the present time. A hitherto relatively unknown Mexican urban community of the Far North is shown to be vibrant in its transnational linkages; creative in adaptations to the challenges of climate, living arrangements, and social relations in Anchorage; and facilitated

by wage levels and seasonal work slowdowns in bridging the added distance from Mexico.

The Anchorage research experience was positive for my overall project but offered few surprises since vivid and accurate observations had been offered to me over the years in Acuitzio. Mexican food in Anchorage more than lived up to my positive anticipation, both in homes and in restaurants; and the warmth of personal contacts among Acuitzences, together with people of Anchorage, was striking. However, the high cost of short-term living arrangements quickly gave me an appreciation for the effectiveness of social networking among my research sample. Perhaps most impressionable was the living arrangements of the Big Brother House, which I would single out as worthy of a focused study in itself.

The experience with Acuitzences in Anchorage suggests a rather dynamic engagement with urban life there, while at the same time retention of selected values of their Mexican heritage that are reinforced in their active transnational linkages, including transport of foods, traditional music and dance, and art. Drawing attention to the cases of three-generation families suggests little diminution of Mexican identity and continued strong attachment to the Mexican homeland. I came away from the experience with a firm sense that Anchorage currently welcomes the work quality and cultural contributions that Acuitzences and other Mexicans bring but that Acuitzences are not losing touch with the values of their homeland.

The reflections offered in this paper on transnational living among Mexicans in Anchorage will hopefully stimulate more attention to its mounting ethnic diversity. Among populations originating from complex societies of other countries, particular attention might be given to:

1. ethnic, class, and gender differences in access to jobs and/or job choices, to wage differentials, to treatment of workers, and to social benefit access (e.g., health care, English as additional language training, etc.);
2. innovative worker-organized living arrangements to accommodate primarily married men whose spouses remain in their country of origin;
3. incentives and barriers for women who migrate to Anchorage alone;
4. the extent to which ethnic enclaving affects identity construction in Anchorage and how this may affect communities of origin of transnational workers; and
5. the identity dynamics associated with wider collective social initiatives identified as Hispanic, Latino, Asian, Pacific Islanders, etc.

Further research on such issues promises an enriched urban anthropology of a key northern city.

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