

RECONNECTING ALASKA: MEXICAN MOVEMENTS AND THE LAST FRONTIER

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ABSTRACT

This paper* discusses the initial findings of on-going research with Mexican migrants and immigrants to Alaska. The paper outlines the historical and on-going connections between Alaska and Mexico and explores how and why those connections have been obscured or ignored. Powerful imaginaries are associated with places: Alaska, and 'the north' more generally, and Latin America, and Mexico specifically. My research shows how interesting things happen when they are brought together through movement.

People from Acuitzio del Canje, Michoacán began travelling to Alaska (Anchorage, and elsewhere) to work in the 1950s, and movement between Mexico and Alaska has continued across generations since then. Today, many Acuitzences who live in Anchorage maintain a close relationship with friends and family members in Acuitzio, and travel back and forth regularly. However, this movement is obscured by ideological work that makes Alaska seem separate, isolated, wild, and a place where Mexicans are not imagined to be. Mexican movements into Alaska over time disrupt this vision, showing how Alaska is connected to multiple other geographies, and making the US-Mexico border a salient reference point in everyday life in Anchorage. When the South moves into the North, it can make us think about both 'Alaska' and 'Mexico' in different ways. When the US-Mexico border is relocated to Anchorage, if only for a moment, it can elicit a reaction of humour or surprise. Why is that? And what does this have to do with how people actually live in an interconnected place?

KEYWORDS: Alaska • Mexico • transnationalism • place-making • belonging

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INTRODUCTION

I stood with the dancers as the adults deliberated about what to do. On a cool, cloudy summer day in Anchorage, the Mexican dance and culture group Xochi-quetzal-Tiqun had been asked to perform for the road race. But they thought there would at least be a stage! Or a sound system! After a quick vote, the group decided to go ahead and dance anyway, “after all, we’re already in costume.” Every now and then an exhausted runner passed, running up the hill, past the parking lot where we were standing, and towards the race finish downtown. Spectators on the sidelines cheered as each runner passed. As the dancers got to their places in this nearly empty parking lot along the race route, someone backed the Suburban up and opened the doors so that the dancers and runners could hear the music. Someone hit play and the youngest dancers with girls in colourful dresses and boys in charro suits and big sombreros danced to a *jarabe* in the Jalisco style. As they danced, parents and supporters of the group chatted on the sidelines. One woman joked about how the runners would be confused by the scene; they’ll think that they’ve run all the way to Tijuana! The group erupted with laughter as the adult dancers took to the parking lot – women dressed in white lace dresses, dancing to a song from Veracruz.

This brief vignette says a little bit about how, through the lives and travels of people of Mexican background, Alaska is connected to multiple other geographies. The name of the group¹ and the kinds of dances they perform are intended to bring Mexico and Alaska together. However, this mobility is often obscured by ideological work performed by powerful state, media, and academic actors and taken up by everyday people who make Alaska appear separate, isolated, wild, and a place where people of Mexican background are not imagined to be. The joke that the runners will think they have run all the way to Tijuana evokes how, even though the dancers in the parking lot connect Alaska and Mexico with their coordinated movements, there is something somehow unexpected about it.

My on-going field research conducted in Acuitzio, Michoacán, Mexico and Anchorage, Alaska, USA, examines the historical and continuing connections created between Alaska and Mexico by multi-generational families of Mexican background. For people who have been moving back and forth between Mexico and Alaska for several decades, the old anthropological assumption that there was a neat correlation between a culture and a place becomes more problematic than ever. Instead of looking for roots, my research is looking at how places are continually produced through connection with other geographies. In particular, I focus on the spatial practices of families living in Anchorage, and how their constructions of a new sense of belonging in Alaska are entangled with on-going patterns of mobility, practices, and imaginings that connect them with Acuitzio, their town of origin in Michoacán, Mexico. I also explore the tensions that emerge between these people’s patterns of transnational mobility and the more rigid spatial imaginings that dominate representations about Mexican migrants in the United States and about Alaska as a space of wilderness and of “real Americans”. These representations are subverted, appropriated, or maintained by movements that connect Mexico and Alaska and play a role in the construction of a sense of belonging for people of Mexican background.

Based on research that I have been conducting in Alaska and Michoacán since 2005 (Komarnisky 2009) this paper takes up the tension between representation and practice, between movement and its control, between entangled spaces and radically separated ones to explore how it is produced by and plays out in the everyday lives and intergenerational family relationships of people of Mexican background in Alaska. I feel that this tension between connection and disconnection is key to the transnational experience. As demonstrated by the opening vignette of this paper, Anchorage has become a site for the negotiation of the US-Mexico border despite its physical distance from the actual border. It is a site for the social production of the boundaries between Alaska and the rest of the United States, between the United States and Mexico, and between Latin America and elsewhere. Families of Mexican background in Alaska are not people out of place, but part of a conjectural space with repercussions in all directions (De Genova 2007: 98). Indeed, as other scholars have noted: Latin America does not end at the US border (Rouse 2002; Kearney 2004; Beasley-Murray 2010). To illustrate these dynamics, this paper centres on the spatial practice of one multi-generational family of Mexican background in Alaska – the Bravo family. This family’s experiences and perspectives encourage a critical examination of the type of geography Alaska is. It is also an important illustration of the processes of belonging in and between Alaska and Mexico.

Of course, many groups have moved into and out of Alaska over time, connecting it to other geographies. Interconnections between people of Siberia and Alaska (Fitzhugh, Crowell 1988), and of Russian explorers and colonists and indigenous Alaskans (Haycox, Mangusso 1996; Luehrmann 2008) have produced Alaska through interconnection. Other movements that connect Alaska to elsewhere include: individuals who went north seeking their fortunes in Klondike and Alaskan gold rushes, the construction of the cold-war era Distant Early Warning Line, service in one of the state’s military bases, building the Alaska Highway, the construction of the Alaska pipeline and the oil boom that followed, workers in Alaska’s fisheries or canneries, miners, tourists, and probably many others (Norris 1984; Friday 1995; Haycox, Mangusso 1996; Dombrowski 2001; Kollin 2001; Kurtz 2006; Feldman 2009; Willis 2010). Among those who have moved into Alaska to live and work, this study adds people of Mexican background whose presence in Alaska has so far been obscured.

CONNECTED PLACES

My study brings together two municipalities in two nation-states, Anchorage, Alaska, USA and Acuitzio, Michoacán, Mexico. The Dena’ina people had settlements along Knik Arm for years, but the city of Anchorage itself was originally established as a tent city for workers building the Alaska railway beginning in 1914. Anchorage is now the largest city in the state of Alaska, with a population of 291,826, about half of the population of the entire state. The city itself is located between the shores of Cook Inlet and the peaks of the Chugach Mountains. Over 7,800 kilometres south and east is Acuitzio del Canje, the hometown of the people who are central to this study and the capital of the municipality of Acuitzio. Acuitzio means ‘hill of snakes’ in P’urhépecha² and the full name, Acuitzio del Canje, commemorates an exchange of Belgian and French prisoners for Mexican ones in 1865 during the brief French occupation of Mexico. It is located in the cool uplands of

the state of Michoacán, near the capital city of Morelia (Wiest 2009). The population of the municipality is approximately 10,500. Acuitzio has a long history of migration to the United States in general but also to Alaska in particular, as you will see.

I first travelled between Anchorage and Acuitzio in 2005, when I was collecting data for a Master's thesis about food and transnationality (Komarnisky 2009). I spent five months in Anchorage and one month in Acuitzio, meeting and interviewing people who move between these two places as well as cooking and eating with them. Since then, I have kept in touch with a number of contacts through the Internet, telephone, and occasional visits south and north. In 2011, I again travelled to Mexico and Alaska to collect data for my PhD dissertation project. I lived in Mexico for two months and in Anchorage for nearly ten months. This paper is based primarily on my dissertation fieldwork, but represents an accumulation of knowledge and experiences since 2005.

In Anchorage, Hispanic/Latinos now comprise 7.6 per cent of the population (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). Estimates about the number of people from Acuitzio currently living and working in Alaska vary. But of the 11,526³ individuals living in Anchorage who are of Mexican origin (ibid.), my participants estimated that about 1,000 men, women, and children in Anchorage are from Acuitzio, a number that fluctuates depending on the season. So yes, there are Mexicans in Alaska. How they got there and what they do now is an interesting story. Let me unravel it a bit.

In January 2012, I interviewed Gonzalo Calderón over the telephone in a boardroom office at the University of Alaska, Anchorage. Or rather, I was in the office, he was at his home in southern California, where he now lives. Sr. Calderón grew up on a *rancho*⁴ located a few kilometres outside of Acuitzio. He told me that his brother went to Alaska first, but did not stay long. Gonzalo was in medical school in Morelia in the early 1950s when he had to start working to earn money to pay for school. He had a brother who was working in Los Angeles at the time, and he encouraged him to come and work in the United States instead of in Mexico City, which was where he was originally planning to go. He went to the US Embassy to get a work permit, and he went to Los Angeles in April 1953. When he got to LA, he found out that his brother had already left to work in Alaska. One day after arriving in Los Angeles, a card from his brother arrived. It had a cheque inside and it said "*toma el avión y vente*" (take the aeroplane and come).⁵ With the help of his aunt, he cashed the cheque and bought his ticket and arrived in Alaska around April 22, 1953. "*Qué sorpresa, oiga! Yo nunca había visto el nieve!*" (What a surprise, hey! I had never seen snow before!) He ended up leaving school and working in Alaska for twenty years, with regular visits to Mexico. He told me about working to construct houses at Elmendorf Air Force Base, felling trees, working in restaurant kitchens, reconstructing portions of the Alaska railway, working in construction camps along the Yukon River, serving as a cook at the military facility on Amchitka Island and many other jobs he held along the way.

Gonzalo also told me about the first time he went back to his hometown in Michoacán in 1957. He flew to Los Angeles to visit his sisters and then bought himself a brand new convertible and a fancy suit. He planned to drive all the way to his hometown from LA with a friend who he met in a construction camp near Tanana, Alaska who wanted to visit Mexico. He said they crossed the border and he started noticing the differences between Alaska and Mexico, especially the poverty. They arrived in Morelia, and realised it would be very difficult to get his car to Acuitzio. The town is located up in the

hills, and at that time it was very difficult to get to on bumpy dirt roads traversed by trucks and buses, not low-to-the ground American convertibles. Somehow, he made it into town and parked on Riva Palacio, the one cobblestone paved main street into town. Gonzalo described feeling *fuera del lugar* (out of place) in his hometown after living abroad, and he decided to go back to Alaska instead of continuing his medical studies in Morelia. The way he told it, everyone was amazed to see him and extremely impressed by his shiny new American car, his clothes, and his money. After that, everyone wanted to go to Alaska.

Some of them did. I met or heard about eight Acuitzences who went to Alaska for work in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, Luis Bravo Sr. said that he was first working in California making \$2.50 as a dishwasher when he heard that you could earn \$4.50 as a dishwasher in Alaska. To him, this seemed like enough of a reason to go, and he and his brother headed north. He started out washing dishes and cleaning offices, but after the 1964 earthquake he found more profitable work first in construction, rebuilding the city, and later on the Trans-Alaska pipeline. In fact, now retired in Acuitzio, he continues to receive a pension from this work. He was also able to arrange work visas for his sons, who left high school early to work in Alaskan restaurant kitchens. Now Don Luis lives in Acuitzio, and most of his sons, daughters, and grandchildren live in Alaska.

The case of Acuitzio is unique because most immigrants to the United States had green cards very early on (Wiest 1973). I am working primarily with multi-generational family and *compadrazgo*⁶ networks, most of whom are citizens of both the US and Mexico and who have a relatively long history of movement between Alaska and Mexico. Because many Acuitzences who have travelled to Alaska to work and live are connected through kin relationships in this way, I chose to focus on multi-generational family units to explore movement between Alaska and Mexico over time. I asked about relationships between Acuitzences I met – family, *compadres*,⁷ friends, or just *conocidos*.⁸ Migrants do not act alone but as members of families, and the history of migration from Acuitzio to Alaska is family history. In fact, it is often described as such by research contacts. Families shape attachments to places of origin and new homelands (Olwig 2009). “[P]laces involved in migratory moves will be viewed through the lens of social relations making up the migrants’ social field” (ibid.: 12). What this means is that Acuitzio and Anchorage may remain as important sites of personal belonging for people as migrants maintain close relations with people in the site, but these locations may become a more abstract place of identification if the centre of migrant social relations shifts (ibid.).

In interviews, I asked migrants of different generations and genders about their experiences in Alaska and their replies demonstrate how spatial practices and senses of belonging are not homogenous and unitary, they are multiple and filled with contradictions and tensions. In other words, as age and gender are shaped by political and economic processes they also shape those same processes (Collier, Rosaldo, Yanagisako 1982; Collier 1997; Gamburd 2000; Hareven 2000; Constable 2003; Hirsch 2003; Cole, Durham 2007). For instance, that nuclear family members (father, mother and children) reside in geographical proximity to each other in Anchorage is a direct result of US immigration policy and of changing family relationships. The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act granted a path towards legalisation for some Mexican migrants, allowing them to gain US citizenship. A change to Mexican law in 1998 allowed dual citizenship, meaning that individuals could acquire US citizenship without relinquishing

their Mexican citizenship. Moreover, since 1965 the United States has emphasised a family reunification policy in immigration law, which is supposed to allow spouses and young children to join family members in the US. The first generation of migrants from Acuitzio to Alaska, like Sr. Calderón and Sr. Bravo, for example, involved men migrating alone, leaving mothers and children behind in the village for extended periods. However, this has changed over time.

Luis Jr. is Luis Bravo Sr.'s son and he left high school to work in Alaska as soon as the immigration papers his father arranged for him came through. In a recorded interview in 2011, he told me about the first time he saw snow. He had just finished a shift as a dishwasher in a restaurant, and he walked out of the kitchen to see large, puffy snowflakes falling. He said to a waitress, "*está cayendo* ice cream!" She laughed and said, no, here they call this snow.⁹ When he met his wife, Juana, on a visit back to his hometown, he was still working in Alaska. After they married, with the money he had saved he decided to stay in Acuitzio, investing in livestock. Many men took out loans in the late 1980s and early 1990s to start livestock operations, but a market crash in 1994 after the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) meant that many lost their shirts. Their livestock all of a sudden was worth nothing, and for Luis as well as other men of his generation, it meant they had to go back to Alaska to work and pay off their debts. It was at this point, Juana told me, that she issued her husband Luis an ultimatum after a few years of renewed migration-related separation: "Either you come back to Acuitzio to live with us, or you find a way to bring us with you." He arranged their papers, and his wife and their young children arrived in Anchorage in 1996. Ever since then, they take annual vacations to their hometown, lasting one or two months. Many other families currently living in Anchorage follow a similar pattern: they live together in Anchorage most of the year, and travel back to Mexico for annual visits or special occasions.

In this family at least, as they become more settled and financially secure in Alaska, they take more trips to Acuitzio. I have noticed a similar pattern among other families in Anchorage. Even though it is described as most difficult to be away from Mexico early on, financial constraints or immigration status makes it difficult to travel back and forth in the first few years in the far north. For the Bravo family, now that Luis and Juana both work full-time, their children have part time jobs, everyone collects an annual Permanent Fund Dividend¹⁰ check, and they actively earn travel rewards to save on travel, they are able to travel back to Acuitzio every year for vacation, with an extra trip for family emergencies or very special occasions.

Economic imbalances between the US and Mexico and long-term patterns of migration mean that migration to the United States has been a way to provide for families in Mexico for generations now. Alaska, with its resource-based economy, has been an especially attractive option for migrants of Mexican background and otherwise with the social and economic capital to get there. Exchange rates between the US dollar and the Mexican peso make it easy for former pipeline workers, now receiving pensions in US dollars, to retire in Mexico, with annual or biannual visits from sons, daughters, and grandchildren who live in Alaska. These shifts in which genders and generations move over time have to do with changing political, economic, and technological circumstances, as well as changes in desired kinds of family relationships (Hirsch 2003). These are only some examples of the entangling of political and economic processes, the particularities of places, and family and intergenerational relations.

This is travel as a spatial practice. Spatial practice emphasises the material dimension of social activity and interaction, the everyday kinds of actions that link places together – for instance, the routes and networks which link up the places set aside for work, private life, and leisure (Lefebvre 1991: 38). Spatial practice also includes how this material dimension of the elements of space are perceived, or grasped by the senses. My research illuminates the kinds of spatial practices that bring Alaska and Mexico together to produce an interconnected space, a transnational social space. Building on work of philosophers and anthropologists who have theorised about space and place, I understand these places, and in fact all places, as socially and historically produced (ibid.). What this means is that all spaces are social, all spaces are made by the repetitive actions of individuals and institutions, and as such, they “embody and imply social relations” (ibid: 83). Moreover, I believe that spaces are produced through the tension between movement and interconnection and the control of movement and more stable representational practices. I thus see Mexico and the United States as profoundly entangled places, “unstable processes made and unmade through practice and through the connections these places maintain with each other” (Gordillo 2004: 253). Similarly, global connection means that cultures and places are continually co-produced in interactions that Anna Tsing (2005: 4) calls friction: “the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference.”

These dimensions describe some of the kinds of spatial practices I have explored in my fieldwork, how they vary by gender and generation, how they change over time, and how they interconnect and entangle the two places. But this is only part of the story.

SEPARATE SPACES

Spaces are not only produced through spatial practice, they are produced through the tension created between movement and the control of movement, or by the entangling of spaces and the erasure of that connection. In other words, places are contingent, interconnected and entangled assemblages made to appear stable through the exercise of power, for instance by controlling movement into the nation-state or by creating representations that control, erase, or obscure mobility. As a result, I draw on theorists who have drawn attention to the productive tension between movement and control (for example, Deleuze, Guattari 1987; Lefebvre 1991; Massey 1994; 2005; Cresswell 2006; Rockefeller 2010). Movements of deterritorialisation are always entangled with processes of reterritorialisation, and migrations across international borders are one of the processes of mobility whose flow the state tries to code and regulate, although not always successfully (Gordillo 2011). The intrinsic multiplicity of space is controlled and “tamed” (Massey 2005) by implicit imaginings about space linked to powerful actors, primarily the state. Indeed, Gupta and Ferguson (1992: 6) argue that representations of space in dominant discourses and also in the social sciences are dependent on images of break, rupture, and disjunction so that each society, nation, or culture is presented as occupying its own discontinuous space. Nation-states are based on the idea of territorial separation and boundedness (Gupta, Ferguson 1992; Anderson 2006) and a “sedentarist metaphysics” in which “people are often thought of, and think of themselves, as being rooted in place and as deriving their identity from that rootedness” (Malkki

1992: 27). However, instead of seeing places as bounded and separate, with cultures and peoples profoundly localised within those spaces, many authors emphasise the contingent, entangled, interconnection, and co-production of spaces, undermining the apparent stability, boundedness, and timelessness of places (Gupta, Ferguson 1992; Gordillo 2004; Massey 2005; Tsing 2005; Rockefeller 2010).

So, although movement and processes of belonging between Alaska and Mexico connect these geographies, they are also ideologically and representationally kept as separate, as different, as extremely distant. This happens on many levels and differs when produced inside and “Outside”¹¹ the state. This section briefly outlines some of the different stories about Alaska that work to keep it separate from elsewhere.

For example, in the United States, a powerful representation of space that produces separation and controls movement is immigration law, specifically the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA). This allows the state to control, regulate, and limit movement by legally defining who may cross the border into the US and who may not. In this formulation, borders are presented as unproblematic delineations that demarcate separate nation-states and cultures (Malkki 1992). This has very real effects for migrants – the INA operates as much more than a representation of space since it allows the state to create and enforce its vision of the United States as a bounded geography. Through mechanisms of surveillance, many of which are outlined in Title II of the INA, state discipline “fixes; it arrests and regulates movements; it clears up confusion; it dissipates compact groupings of individuals wandering about the country in unpredictable ways; it establishes calculated distributions” (Foucault 1995: 219). Alaska, as part of the United States, is part of this bounded geography, and so the US-Mexico border is in many ways as salient here as elsewhere.

Immigration law is a national representation of space that controls movement, but there are other imaginaries that are more specific to Alaska. Alaska is produced by individuals and collectives inside and Outside the state as an exceptionally separate and isolated geography, due in part to its location in the far north of the continent, not physically connected to “the lower 48”.¹² The spatial practice of Mexican people in Anchorage thus becomes entangled with the production of Alaska as wilderness or frontier, both somewhat different separate and isolated kinds of spaces. Alaska is also framed as “Hometown USA”, or the home of “real Americans”. It is also produced as Native land, a vast historically culturally produced landscape. Here I introduce some of these stories of Alaska, and explore how they are taken up and reproduced by Acuitzences in Alaska.

Wilderness erases history, a static, unchanging past, or even potentially a backwards region, the very opposite of modernity (Raffles 1999). Wilderness spaces are set apart both spatially and historically from other geographies. Other researchers have demonstrated how this sense of Alaska as a “sublime wilderness area” in the American spatial imagination (Kollin 2001: 5) has been produced through literary representations, and conflicts between environmentalists and developers over development projects in the state (ibid.; Willis 2010). “For a country anxious about the disappearance of wild places, Alaska had become the last American space where true nature could be found” (ibid.: 22). This production of Alaska as America’s last great wilderness allows for certain kinds of projects. Places that are produced as ‘wilderness’ can serve important functions, such as sanctuary or escape (Kollin 2001). But these constructions of ‘nature’ or ‘wilderness’ can also obscure or erase the presence of indigenous people (Cronon 1996;

Braun 2002; Cruikshank 2005), force their relocation (Moore 2005), or even make illegal migrants passing through US-Mexico border wilderness areas look like a threat to nature (Sundberg, Kaserman 2007). In the case of Alaska, I argue that the state is produced as radically disconnected from elsewhere not only because of its geographic location and natural landscape but also through its production as a wilderness space.

Entangled with Alaska's production of wilderness is its production as a "Last Frontier". In a moment of historical convergence, when the frontier of the continental US was closed but the promise of the Klondike gold rush loomed large, Alaska became the Last Frontier – a space conceptually attached to the rest of the US where history and development could proceed in a way similar to how it did on the western frontier (Willis 2010: 14). Turning Alaska into the last frontier lessened frontier anxiety by giving the US a new 'free land' to settle and it rendered Alaska comprehensible to Americans (ibid.). Similar dynamics have been written about in other global contexts, for example, Tsing (2005) described how frontier-making processes in Indonesia clear the way, creating wilderness and unmapping the landscape to make resource extraction possible. Although frontier-making practices here connect Alaska to the lower 48, they also clear the landscape for development, erasing presences. Whether frontier or wilderness, the imaginaries associated with Alaska leave it empty, obscuring the movements that criss-cross it.

However there is another imaginary associated with Alaska: that of quintessential small-town America, or for 2008 Vice-Presidential Candidate Sarah Palin, the home of "real Americans".¹³ This imaginary connects Alaska to the rest of the United States, but erases other kinds of presences, such as new immigrants. Alaska is supposed to be as American as apple pie, not as tamales or chiles rellenos.

For the most part, academic discourse about Alaska does not focus on immigration or migration to Alaska, past or present. Alaska in this discourse is not empty; rather, it is a historically produced rich cultural landscape. However, this academic emphasis leaves out cities, urban Alaska Natives, and a lot of the ethnic complexity of Alaska. This is because the focus of anthropological studies in Alaska has been almost exclusively about Alaska Native peoples in rural areas, even though Anchorage is the largest "Native village" in the state (Feldman 2009: 10). It is not only the lives of urban Alaska Natives that are missing from academic discourse, but also the stories and living situations of the 95 ethnic and language groups now residing in Anchorage, many since the early 1900s (cf. ibid.: 11).

For all of these reasons, many people, especially those who live outside of Alaska, do not imagine Mexicans in Alaska, and express surprise when they find out that in fact, people of Mexican background have been moving between these geographies for decades, a century even.¹⁴ And for their part, people who themselves move between Alaska and Mexico take up and reproduce some of these imaginaries, producing Alaska as separate in their everyday lives. Emphasis on Alaska as very different and distant is one way that they do this. Another way is taking up Alaskan phrases that discursively separate Alaska from the lower 48 or Outside. Among my research participants, the lower 48 is used as an English phrase even when speaking Spanish to talk about other places in the US. In addition, stereotypical representations of the state move to Mexico. People there ask those returned from Alaska if they live in igloos, if they have moose for pets, if there is snow all year, if there is electricity. People also travel with souvenir

goods, decorating their homes with images of sled dogs, of Denali Mountain, of bears, moose, igloos, and northern lights.

However, by far the most salient representation of Alaska that travels is the land of opportunity. In some ways, Alaska holds the promise and opportunity that brings people from Mexico to work *al otro lado*¹⁵ – the American dream. Hard work, good pay, and a better life. This is “real America” in some ways, and hopeful migrants still seek it out.

ANCHORAGE DEL CANJE: PRODUCING TRANSNATIONAL SPACE¹⁶

Transnational migration is, in part, a spatial practice that produces an interconnected space, a transnational social space. Many scholars have written about transnational migration patterns that connect places elsewhere in Mexico and the United States (for example, Smith 1998; Rouse 2002; Cohen 2004; Kearney 2004; De Genova 2007; Stephen 2007; Striffler 2008). This interconnected space has been referred to with different terms: “the transnational migrant circuit” (Rouse 2002), a “transnational community” (Striffler 2008), the “articulatory migrant network” (Kearney 2004), a “transnational conjectural space” (De Genova 2007), or as involving “transborder lives” (Stephen 2007). Such spaces are seen as producing dual identities, “cultural bifocalities” (Rouse 2002) or a sense of belonging “neither here nor there” (Striffler 2005). Other scholars refer to “the Mexican diaspora” (Gutiérrez 1999; Rinderle 2005), which also evokes interconnected space through displacement, hybridity and travel (Clifford 1994). However understood, the everyday spatial practices and lived experiences of Mexican migrants produce hybrid spaces which are in productive tension with the dominant representative spaces of the nation-state as a bounded and cohesive whole. In Alaska, this hybrid space is also in tension with the spatial separation and erasure of flows that Alaska as frontier, wilderness, or hometown USA produces. Transnational culture flows and mass movements of populations mean that “familiar lines between ‘here’ and ‘there’, centre and periphery, colony and metropole become blurred” (Gupta, Ferguson 1992: 10). These translocalities produce identities that challenge and test the territorial boundedness of the nation-state (Appadurai 2003). My research has shown that this productive tension is key to the transnational experience, and for the migrant-immigrant leads to conflicting feelings of being either in-between or neither here nor there.

Mobile livelihoods produce transnational space and so travel is important to the production of transnational space. However, there are other kinds of place-making that happen when people are more in place, in Anchorage or Acuitzio as somewhat bounded units. The first question that emerges is: do people who live between Anchorage and Acuitzio produce a sense of belonging between places, not quite here but not quite there either? And then: how do they do this?

To illustrate, I will continue to draw examples from the same multi-generational family, the Bravo family. Verónica is Luis and Juana’s daughter, and Don Luis’s granddaughter. She was born in Morelia and spent the first few years of her life in Acuitzio with her mother and brother. When the family relocated to Anchorage in 1996, Verónica was barely old enough to remember much. What she does remember is travel, time spent in airports, sleeping on flights, late taxi rides home: “The first thing I actually remember is the first time we went back to Mexico. That was in December and I was around five years old. I remember being at the airport a lot.”

What is interesting is that in her case, as in many others, the whole Bravo family works hard to accumulate skills, knowledge, relationships, and other forms of social and material capital that makes it possible to live between here and there. For example, Juana ensures that her children can speak both English and Spanish. Some families are more successful at this than others, especially considering that in Alaska, life outside of the home is conducted almost entirely in English. Her three children speak English fluently without an accent, and the family takes pride in the fact that they also speak Spanish without an American accent, and without the difficulty some other youth are said to experience.

This duality is present in language and elsewhere. Many people rely on both Spanish and English to express themselves. You need to know both languages to express yourself fully sometimes. However, it is not enough to be fluent in both languages: you also need to have enough experiences, skills, and relationships in both places in order to participate fully between them. This family has also celebrated the *quinceañeras*¹⁷ of their daughters in Acuitzio, as well as the baptisms of all of their children just before leaving for Alaska in 1996. Celebrating milestones like these in Acuitzio re-affirms kin and other relationships. For example, Verónica said that her *quinceañera* was when she made friends of her own age in town. Since she did not go to school in Acuitzio, making non-familial relationships in Mexico could have been difficult. However, as she explains, she started meeting different people because of her *chambelanes*.¹⁸ A young woman who is celebrating her *quinceañera* is expected to learn and perform dances with her *chambelanes* and so they will meet for practice on a regular basis leading up to the *quinceañera*. In this case, Verónica said that her close friend and cousin initially suggested possible *chambelanes* to her. After practice she would hang out with her *chambelanes*, they would introduce her to their friends and “that’s how I started meeting people over there.” When Verónica first mentioned this to me in an interview, I was surprised! Although I realised that a fiesta like a *quinceañera* reaffirmed and solidified existing bonds of family and friendship, I had not thought of a *quinceañera* as an opportunity to build *new* social relationships in the hometown. But it makes a lot of sense.

Her brother, who did not have a *quinceañera* of course, has met men his own age through the weekly *caballgatas*, or horse parades, on the Tuesday evening men-only¹⁹ rides into the mountains, followed by food, drinking and socialising. In an interview he told me he met his oldest friend in Acuitzio there, and was soon introduced to friends of friends. “That’s how I started making friends,” he said, and he met even more people when his younger sisters had their *quinceañeras*.

However, even if you have worked to develop social relationships in Acuitzio and Anchorage, being ‘there’ is never exactly like being ‘here’. In an interview, Verónica talked about how each time she travels to Mexico, it takes some time to “get used to” life in Mexico and speaking Spanish. In contrast, other people told me in interviews and informally that *uno tiene que acostumbrarse* to life in Alaska.²⁰ These are the times when people make comparisons between Alaska and Mexico, emphasising similarities that make it easier to *acostumbrarse*, or differences that make it difficult to get used to life elsewhere. In addition, although Verónica and her siblings can speak Spanish and English fluently, they are not able to read and write as proficiently in Spanish as in English, and their vocabulary is more limited.

The tension between connection and separation inherent in the transnational experience manifests itself in interesting ways. For instance, Verónica has lived most of her life

in Alaska, yet she told me in an interview that she feels more at home in Mexico. Later on, however, she said that she would not live in Mexico, she would rather continue to live in the United States. For Verónica, and others like her, this is a way of expressing that you belong, here, there and nowhere. These are examples of the kinds of processes of belonging that people work at to produce a transnational space to live in, demonstrating the “multiplicities of attachments that people form to places through living in, remembering, and imagining them” (Malkki 1992: 72). It also indicates how entangled and interconnected Anchorage and Acuitzio are, in spite of the distance and the difference between these two geographies.

CONCLUSION: RE-CONNECTING ALASKA

My on-going fieldwork in both Mexico and Alaska seeks to examine Anchorage as a site for the negotiation of the US-Mexico border despite its physical distance from the actual border. My preliminary research findings show that Anchorage is a site for the contingency of boundaries, for the continuing social production of the boundaries between Alaska and the rest of the United States, between the United States and Mexico, and between Latin America and elsewhere. However, it also shows that these geographies become tangled in the lives of people who move between them. Families of Mexican background in Alaska are not people out of place, but part of a conjectural space with repercussions in all directions (De Genova 2007: 98). Indeed, as many scholars have noted: Latin America does not end at the US border (Rouse 2002; Kearney 2004; Beasley-Murray 2010). Like Mexican Chicago, Mexican Alaska may “signify a permanent disruption of the space of the US nation-state and embodies the vital possibility of something truly new – a radically different social formation” (De Genova 2007: 100). I think the spatial practice of families of Mexican background in Alaska can encourage a critical examination of the type of geography Alaska is and of the type of social collective made up by Mexican migrants in this state.

My goals here are to disrupt stereotypes about Alaska to show how Alaska is far from empty. Instead, it is and has been vitally connected to the rest of the world. People inside and Outside Alaska realise that resource booms bring people to Alaska but where those people come from and what happens afterwards is not investigated. Stories like these also disrupt usual stories about Mexican migrants. For one, the idea that Mexicans first moved to California and the American Southwest early on, and only recently have expanded elsewhere is troubled. Here, migration to Alaska happens early in history, at the same time or shortly after California. Moreover, it also illustrates that not all migrants are desperately poor and entering the country without state authorisation. I also extend the US-Mexico border to Alaska because the effects of that border are felt there as well. It is important to look at the whole of North America, at the links between south and north in producing larger systems and structures and to understand the fundamental influence of the US-Mexico border and the inequalities that produce it across all of North America, and not just along the border zone itself.

Roger Rouse (2002: 159) writes that:

Migration has always had the potential to challenge established spatial images. It highlights the social nature of space as something created and reproduced through

collective human agency, and [...] reminds us that, within the limits imposed by power, existing spatial arrangements are always susceptible to change.

In practice, academics have rarely used Mexican migration to critically reappraise existing images (ibid.), but here I think the spatial practice of people of Mexican background in Alaska can encourage a powerful critical appraisal of images of both Alaska as a place and of Mexican migrants as a group of people. It can also encourage us to view North America as a whole, since there are people who traverse its entirety in their annual movements and everyday lives.

NOTES

1 The name of the group is Xochiquetzal-Tiquin. Xochiquetzal is an Aztec goddess, and Tiquin is a Dena'ina word for wolf. The Dena'ina people are the original inhabitants of the Anchorage area.

2 P'urhépecha are an indigenous ethnic group of Michoacán. They and their language are also sometimes referred to as Tarascan.

3 3.9 per cent of the population of Anchorage.

4 A small rural settlement.

5 Any and all translations are my own.

6 *Compadrazgo* means 'co-parenthood' and refers to the tie between the parents and godparents of a child.

7 *Compadres* are the parents and godparents of a child. This is an important relationship between people from Acuitzio, and it usually reinforces a prior kin or friendship relationship.

8 Acquaintances.

9 In Spanish-speaking Acuitzio and Anchorage, people use the same word, *nieve*, for both snow and ice cream. In fact, going for *nieve* (ice cream) in the plaza is a very popular activity in Acuitzio.

10 The Permanent Fund Dividend is paid to all Alaska residents on an annual basis. The money comes from investment earnings of state mineral royalties (State of Alaska 2011).

11 Alaskans regularly discursively separate Alaska from elsewhere by use of the term "Outside" to describe everywhere outside the bounds of the state. You hear this in everyday speech, on newscasts, and even in newspaper obituaries, where recent deaths are listed by region of Alaska or "Outside".

12 This is how Alaskans typically refer to the contiguous 48 states. In this formulation, Alaska and Hawaii are kept discursively separate.

13 Thank you to the anonymous reviewer, who pointed out that I had neglected to include this important imaginary of Alaska.

14 While in Anchorage, I worked with citizenship records held at the National Archives at Anchorage and a researcher collected information for me at the Alaska State Archives in Juneau. While not the subject of this paper, these documents show that people from Mexico have been immigrating to Alaska since at least 1901, and probably before.

15 *Al otro lado* means 'on the other side' and is a very common phrase used by people of Mexican background in Mexico and in the United States. You do not have to specify, 'the other side' is always the United States.

16 A field contact told me once that they should call it Anchorage del Canje because there are so many people from Acuitzio del Canje there.

17 A *quinceañera* celebrates a young woman's fifteenth birthday and marks her transition to womanhood. In the Bravo family, girls are discouraged from dating until after their *quince* and

Alejandra, the youngest Bravo daughter, told me that after her celebration, she had a lot more responsibility and her parents treated her like less of a child.

18 The young woman celebrating her *quinceañera* selects formal escorts. *Chambelanes* are male escorts and *damas* are female. The number of *chambelanes* and *damas* in a young woman's court can vary. At the *quinceañera* I went to in 2011, there were four *chambelanes* and no *damas*. All of the *chambelanes* but one were family members (a brother and maternal cousins) and the final one was a friend of another maternal cousin.

19 I am not sure how rigidly this gender divide is enforced, since I have never gone to a *caball-gata* myself. Juana told me that she went once in place of her husband, who had already paid but could not go. She said, "honestly Sarita, it was quite boring."

20 You have to get used to life in Alaska.

SOURCES

In this paper I draw on open ended, tape recorded interviews with people from Acuitzio del Canje, Michoacán who have lived and worked in Anchorage, Alaska at some time in their lives. I also use fieldnotes collected during ethnographic fieldwork in Acuitzio in June and July 2011 and in Anchorage from August 2011 to July 2012. In addition I draw somewhat on previous ethnographic fieldwork in Anchorage and Acuitzio from July to December 2005, and on-going interactions with research contacts in both field sites.

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