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Mixtec Farmworkers in Oregon: Linking Labor and Ethnicity through Farmworker Unions and Hometown Associations

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Beginning in the early 1980s, the Mexican immigrant farmworker population in Oregon began to reflect the emergent pattern in California: its composition was increasingly indigenous. By the mid-1980s, Mixtec farmworkers were a significant presence in the state and were among those who received legal residency in the United States through the Special Agricultural Workers (SAW) program of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA). Since that time, family members of amnestied workers and others have joined the population of indigenous immigrants in Oregon. By 2002, indigenous immigrants accounted for a significant part of the state's temporary and permanent farmworker population and had moved into other sectors as well, including canneries, nurseries, construction, home care and child care, and other service and food-related industries.

As their numbers grew, Mixtec workers became a significant constituency for Oregon's farmworker union, Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United (PCUN). The union was able to attract Mixtec members initially through its Immigration Service Center and through organizing campaigns in the growing season that targeted farms with significant numbers of Mixtec workers. The multiple legal statuses that Mixtec workers and their family members held (undocumented, legal resident, citizen), as well as their position as low-wage agricultural workers, were significant facets of the Mixtec experience that the union supported.

For many Mixtec farmworkers, the ethnic dimensions of their identity and experience in Oregon came to be realized through family networks and through participation in hometown associations such as the San Agustín Atenango Improvements Committee (Comité Pro-Obras de San Agustín Atenango), which has branches in Chicago and Las Vegas; in Madera, Oxnard, Santa Maria, Vista, and Santa Elena, California; in Portland and Salem, Oregon;[1] and in Grand Canyon, Arizona. Such associations can provide a social framework for men and women to come together and work toward a common goal in relation to their communities of origin. They also help maintain the rights and obligations that members of a particular community have, to institutionalize political practices that allow community members to engage in collective projects to benefit their hometown, and to engage in information exchange and practices that stretch across national boundaries and rework the concept of community in a transnational space (Rivera-Salgado 1998). The cultural and even physical sense of "place" or "community of origin" is accommodated to the realities of individuals and families who live their lives in several locations simultaneously and have done so for quite some time (see Rouse 1992; Kearney 1998). In the process of participating in hometown associations, the pan-Mixtec and local (community-of-origin) dimensions of their ethnic identity are often reinforced.

This chapter takes an ethnographic approach to understanding the multiple ways that Mixtec farmworker men and women have organized collectively in the state of Oregon, and how their participation in multiple organizations works to validate the different dimensions of their experience living and working in Oregon. I focus in particular on Mixtec participation in the PCUN and in one hometown association branch in Salem. Because of their unique position as indigenous persons within the Mexican immigrant population and the institutionalized racism against indigenous peoples, in both Mexico and the United States, in combination with their (often undocumented) status as low-wage workers, Mixtecs in Oregon and elsewhere have developed survival strategies that defend, maintain, and strengthen their ethnicity as well as their status as workers. In a state where indigenous politics refers to the original native peoples of Oregon (Coquille, Grand Round, Siletz, and others), being Mixtec is not part of the "native peoples map." On the other hand, when "diversity" is discussed in terms of the state's population, the categories of "Latino" or "Mexican" are

[1] The Salem branch began in October 2001.

often used to identify Mixtec immigrants, thus erasing their ethnic identity through Mexican nationalism or a pan-Latino identity. As discussed by Kearney (1998), hometown associations can act as visible forms of Mixtec self-differentiation—distinguishing them from U.S. Native Americans and Latinos. They thus serve as a focal point for ethnicity and for what we might call a public self-consciousness about ethnicity. As discussed here, participation in such ethnically identified and constituted organizations can occur simultaneously with people's participation in class-based forms of organization such as labor unions.

THE MIXTEC PATH TO OREGON

Oregon Mixtec farmworker life-history narratives reveal a migration pattern similar to the one documented for California (Runsten and Kearney 1994; Kearney 1995; Rivera-Salgado 1998; Zabin and Hughes 1995). Many workers now in their 40s describe childhoods spent in the Mexican state of Sinaloa, where they went to harvest tomatoes, returning occasionally to their home communities for annual fiestas or for a family life-cycle event. Some have few memories of being children in Oaxaca. Delfina Cruz Vera,[2] forty years of age and now a resident in Salem, Oregon, describes her childhood as primarily taking place in Sinaloa.

> My parents worked in Sinaloa. We went to Culiacán and worked picking tomatoes, cucumbers, and peppers. My parents would leave in September and stay in Sinaloa until May. As kids, we almost always stayed in Sinaloa. Sometimes my father would go back to Oaxaca to check up on the house. I never went to school.... In Sinaloa there were whole families working in the fields. There were no restrictions on how old you had to be to work there. Everyone worked.

Delfina met her husband when she returned at twenty years of age to her natal community of San Agustín Atenango, Oaxaca.

From Sinaloa, some Mixtec workers who eventually came to Oregon went to Baja California, following the commercialization in the 1970s of tomato and strawberry crops for the North American market. Many spent

[2] This and all other names are pseudonyms unless otherwise specified. Interviews cited in this chapter were conducted from 2000 to 2002 in the Willamette Valley region of Oregon, primarily through two projects supported by grants from the Wayne Morse Center for Law and Politics in collaboration with PCUN.

time as fieldworkers in San Quintín, Baja California, and have family members who own small homes and land there.

Reina Bautista was born near Juxtlahuaca, Oaxaca, in 1975 but moved with her parents to Sinaloa when she was a year old. When she was six years old, her family arrived in San Quintín, where her father was already living. She remembers moving around quite a bit before arriving in San Quintín, where she went to school for several years. After leaving school and working for six years in San Quintín, Reina followed the path of an older sister and came directly to Woodburn, Oregon:

> When I was very small my parents left Oaxaca and went to Sinaloa. They were working there, and when the work ran out I remember that we went all over the place. We went to Culiacán and other places, and then when we got to Baja California, to San Quintín, we stayed there. We didn't move, and I got to go to school for three years.... I used to work during school vacations, and then when I got out of school at age nine or ten I started working all of the time.... We worked in tomatoes, potatoes, peas, whatever there was.... All the kids began to work when they were nine or ten years old. We worked all day long.... My parents bought a little piece of land and put up a small house.... I stayed there until I was sixteen, when I came to the United States. We were there with a lot of kids from the town where I was from.
>
> [What memories do you have from San Quintín?]
>
> Well, on the one hand it's a little sad because I would have liked to have studied more, but I didn't have the opportunity. The only nice memory I have is being together with my parents.
>
> [Did your whole family stay, or did some of them come to the United States?]
>
> My oldest sister came first, and afterward she sent for my father, my other sister, and then for me.
>
> [Where did they go in the United States?]
>
> Well, they went to San Bernardino and then to Fresno. Then in 1991 one of my sisters came here to Woodburn, Oregon, and she stayed. Then she sent for the rest of us. In 1991 we came directly to Woodburn from San Quintín.

While women like Reina were likely to come directly to Oregon from Mexico to reunite with family members who had already established themselves, many male migrants now over the age of forty first crossed into the United States from Baja California to work in California. They later moved to Oregon as part of circular migration routes. If they received legal U.S. residency as a result of IRCA, they eventually brought their families to Oregon. In the 1970s these men began to cross the border into California to work in berry and tomato fields near San Diego and Oxnard. From there they went on to harvest grapes in Fresno and often to other parts of California as well. As a part of that circuit, they began to arrive in Oregon in the late 1970s and early 1980s, usually brought by labor contractors.

Rodolfo Contreras first crossed the border near Tijuana in 1979 to work in Carlsbad and Oceanside, California. Like many migrants in San Diego County at the time (and to this day), he lived under ground in a hidden camp he and others fashioned to avoid detection by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS)—and to save on rent. He went from there to Madera, California, where he got to know a labor contractor who brought him to Oregon and Washington to work in a variety of crops, from strawberries to Christmas trees. Around 1987 he received amnesty through papers supplied by the labor contractor, and he became a legal permanent resident. He then brought his wife to Oregon directly from Oaxaca in the late 1980s. As he recalls:

> I came over to this side by Tijuana and San Ysidro. It was cheap then. I paid a coyote $100 there in Tijuana, and I arrived in Carlsbad and Oceanside. There were other people from my town there as well. Some of them had come from San Quintín. After I got here I built my house ... but I made it under ground. We dug under the ground and made it deep enough so we could fit fifteen or twenty people. We made it there because we didn't want anyone to see us. We used a green branch and would pull it over the opening for our door. We slept there. That was how I started out when I first came here.
>
> [How did you get to Oregon?]
>
> Well, first we were in Madera, California. I got to know a *señora* who rented us rooms for $2 per night. That is where we got to know Miguel. He asked us if we wanted to plant pine trees and cut them down. So we went with him to

> Klammath Falls, Medford, even to Washington State.... He wasn't so good because of the way he would treat us.... We worked with him all year. We worked in the Christmas trees and then in strawberries and wheat.... I did my amnesty with Miguel in 1988. Before that, when we first got to this country, we didn't have anything and we were really afraid. When you don't have papers, you don't go into the street. You stay inside so that no one from the *migra* [INS] will get you.... That's how we were when we came to Oregon.

FROM SINGLE MEN TO FAMILIES AND BACK AGAIN

The majority of the agricultural workers granted legal residence through the SAW provisions of IRCA were men. Overall, approximately a million people were legalized under the SAW. In Oregon, 23,736 Mexicans received permanent residency. While this statistic reflects the number who applied and completed the SAW program in Oregon, a figure between 40,000 and 50,000 may be more realistic because many workers who now reside in Oregon completed the SAW program in California. Although it is not clear how many of those legalized under the SAW were Mixtec, informed estimates put the current permanent Mixtec population in Oregon at about 10,000 and the circulating population at between 20,000 and 30,000. In their 1994 survey of Oaxacan village networks in California, Runsten and Kearney found that about "one-half of U.S. migrants from Oaxaca were legalized by IRCA" (1994: viii). There are no similar statistics for Oregon. It might be reasonable to assume, however, that about half of the Mixtec workers (primarily men) who were seasonal workers in Oregon in the mid-1980s received amnesty.

Because many Mixtec migrant men would return to their communities of origin at least once a year in the 1980s—and sometimes had to stay longer in order to fill community service roles (*cargos*)—not everyone who was an agricultural worker in the mid-1980s was able to apply for amnesty at the right time and receive legal residency. Nonetheless, some workers who were not in the United States during the period specified in the SAW were nevertheless able to receive amnesty. Further, it is widely acknowledged that the number of people who received amnesty was far greater than the number probably employed in agriculture. The SAW program was expected to grant legal status to 350,000 undocumented immigrants. More than 1.3 million applied, and about a million eventually received legal permanent residence (Schlosser 1995: 6). A significant number se-

cured amnesty using letters they had purchased from labor contractors and/or growers—whether or not the applicants technically met the SAW qualifications. Such letters were important in helping a significant number of people secure legal residency. Some growers and labor contractors also used letters like these to secure laborers in 1987.

From the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, Oregon's Mixtec farmworker population changed significantly in two ways. First, many of the men who became legal permanent residents sent for their wives and children. Second, once their families arrived, they settled more permanently and, in communities like Salem, came to form significant clusters of people from the same community. These clusters were often built around groups of siblings who established families or who brought their nuclear families with them from Oaxaca, San Quintín, or sometimes California. For example, most of the twenty or so nuclear families that compose a cluster of natives from San Agustín Atenango in Salem, and that now have their own branch hometown association, arrived in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Most of these families were established by about 1994, and they have children, both undocumented and U.S. citizens, now working their way through the public school system and, in some cases, junior college. While many families continue to have some "undocumented" members, all of these people have documents of a kind and are working. As Schlosser (1995) noted, "Counterfeit green cards, Social Security cards, driver licenses, SAW work histories—the documents necessary to obtain employment as a farmworker—can be easily obtained in rural California for $50.00. The process usually takes about an hour." This continues to be the case in Oregon as well.

The pattern of men coming to Oregon to work, attempting to receive amnesty, and then sending for their wives and children was not without consequences for the women left behind in Oaxaca. María de la Luz Contreras was married in her hometown of San Agustín Atenango in 1980. Immediately after the wedding her new husband returned to Oregon, and she spent seven years living with her in-laws. During that time her husband visited sporadically. As she recalls:

> I lived with my mother-in-law ... for seven years. Seven years and then I came here in 1987 when Enrique sent for me. All of this time I was in my hometown.
>
> [So your husband returned to the United States right after you got married?]

> Yes. He was only around for fifteen days after we were married, and he came back to the United States and didn't come back for another ten months. He stayed another two weeks and then went back to the United States. And there was one time when he left me for four years in our village—with nothing to live on, without anything. I had to live with a lot of doubts for four years.... It was really hard for me to be there for those four years.... For the first two years, Enrique wrote to us and sent us money, but during the last two years he was very distant.... I had to wash and iron clothes and sell tortillas in order to earn money for food and to help out my mother-in-law.
>
> [Were there other women in your community who had this same experience of being left for four years incommunicado?]
>
> There were a lot of women in this situation. I wasn't the only one. There were a number of women who were in this situation and others whose husbands never returned. Their husbands got together with another woman on this side of the border, and they completely abandoned their wives at home.

In September 1987, Luz's husband sent for her and her two children, and they came directly from San Agustín to Salem, where he had rented an apartment. Luz's husband had been working in Oregon since 1984. She began working in the strawberry harvests the following summer while she was pregnant. In 1989 she started working in the local canneries as well as in the fields. She had two more children in the United States; her oldest two are now in junior college. Luz continues to work in two local canneries and frozen food plants, as does her husband. They work on opposite shifts so that someone can always be home with the younger children. Luz and her husband both became active in Oregon's PCUN farmworker union.

While undocumented relatives of established Mixtec families continue to come to Oregon, over the past four to five years new waves of young men have come to occupy an important niche in the state's seasonal berry and other harvests. The trend of family settlement and female migration has slowed considerably, and once again seasonal workers tend to be lone men, often young (see McConahay 2001). They are found primarily in labor camps and are brought by labor contractors who work them through a circuit encompassing California, Oregon, and Washington. As in the past, some are Mixtec, but recruiters are reaching into Triqui communities and

Veracruz State as well. Kissam, Intili, and García note this trend, particularly emphasizing the recruitment of teenagers as farmworkers:

> In 2000, we find that indigenous ethnic minorities within a Latino farm labor force are making up a greater and greater proportion of the local farm labor force throughout the country.... Along the entire length of the Eastern Seaboard, there are increasing numbers of Guatemalan and Mexican Maya, Zapotec workers from central Oaxaca state and smaller numbers of Mixtec and Triqui migrants from western Oaxaca state and the eastern areas of the state of Guerrero which adjoins the leading sending regions of Juxtlahuaca and Silacoyoapan. Along the Pacific Seaboard, there is an equally dramatic increase in the numbers of indigenous farmworkers but dominant networks are the Mixtec and Triqui ones; interestingly the ethnic composition of the labor force of working teenagers in California and Oregon is now very similar to that of Baja California in the late 1980s (Kissam, Intili, and García 2001: 6).

Lorenzo Morales, a forty-five-year-old Mixtec farmworker who was a labor organizer for PCUN, spoke with me in 2000 about how contractors work in his home region of the Mixteca in Oaxaca. Part of Lorenzo's organizing work has taken him to visit workers during the off-season in their home communities in Mexico, often in the marginalized regions of Oaxaca, Guerrero, and Veracruz. Lorenzo has followed the path of contractors for quite some time as well, as he explained:

> Well, I will tell you a little bit about how the system actually works, because there are more indigenous immigrants coming now.... The reason why more and more people are coming from the furthest places, like Oaxaca, Guerrero, and parts of Veracruz, is that the growers are using this kind of tactic to control the workers.... The growers have their contractors, and the contractors have connections to the *coyotes*, the ones who transport the workers.
>
> [And who are the contractors?]
>
> The majority are Mexicans, but they can also be Chicanos. They have their connections with the smugglers, the *polleros*. They use these *coyotes* to bring people here, but the people

they are bringing don't know anything about their rights and they often can't even speak Spanish. So these contractors bring them here and really control them.... We spoke with some recent immigrants who came from Mexico to a labor camp, and they started to tell us that the *coyotes* said "Come with us, there is plenty of work, there is free housing, even washing machines." Well as you know, there is housing, but it isn't free. At that camp they charge workers $4 per day. So the *coyotes* tell this to people in Mexico, and they come here and then the contractors and *coyotes* control the workers. When they bring people who are more and more marginalized in Mexico, they know less and less what their rights are. In the last years of the 1990s, they began to bring people from the most marginalized areas of Oaxaca and Guerrero.

[Where are the contractors going?]

They are going to Copala, Jutla ... indigenous regions.

[So contractors are going to the corners of Mexico and collaborating with coyotes and others. So contractors are important?]

Well, the growers are the key part of this system because it stems from them. They say, "How can we dominate the workers? How can we do this if all of those people who already came have rebelled against the conditions? Well, we have to bring more new people." And that is what they have been doing all of these years. They are trying to bring new people every time who are more and more marginalized so that they [the growers] can maintain their position.

[Do you think that with time the workers come to realize some of what goes on?]

They are seeing part of what goes on, but at the same time they think that maybe the contractors did them a favor. The contractors tell them that they did them a favor by bringing them. The contractors tell them this, as if they were doing them a favor by charging them $1,500 for bringing them and giving them work.

[How much would it cost me to come from Copala now?]

About $2,000 to $2,500. And since the indigenous person or worker doesn't have the money to pay this up front, there is

> an agreement between them and the labor contractor that they have to work here and the contractor takes the money out of their checks. And so the worker has to at least finish the season with the grower in order to be free of this debt ... to be free of the "favor" the contractor did for him.
>
> [Is it possible to come and work for four months and go back to Mexico with nothing?]
>
> Exactly; with nothing. A lot of workers come with the idea that they will stay for four months, but they end up staying for a year or more in order to cover their expenses and to save a little bit of money to be able to return to Mexico.

Increasingly, as Mixtec families have settled in Oregon, they have moved out of the seasonal farm labor sector and into other kinds of agricultural work, primarily in nurseries. Some continue to work in food-processing and freezing plants, but as they age they prefer to stay out of the fields. Children of Mixtec migrants who settled in Oregon between 1988 and 1994 are employed primarily in the service sector, in jobs at K-Mart, gas stations, KFC, and the like. Meanwhile, berries and other field crops are increasingly being picked by young, male, indigenous recruits.

PCUN AND MIXTEC FARMWORKERS

Oregon's farmworker union—Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United, or PCUN—has its origins in the 1970s, when several organizers, inspired by the work of César Chávez, envisioned a social movement of Mexican immigrants and farmworkers in Oregon. Their initial organizing strategies were influenced by the hostile attitudes toward Mexican immigrant farmworkers in the Willamette Valley at the time. In May 1977, the Willamette Valley Immigration Project (WVIP) opened to provide legal representation for undocumented workers, first in Portland. In 1978, WVIP moved permanently to Woodburn. WVIP staff and organizers went on to facilitate the creation of PCUN in 1985, with the initial goal of changing working conditions for tree planters and farmworkers. The eight-year track record already established by the WVIP was key to gaining the trust of the farmworker/tree planter community and enabling an open discussion of a farmworker union. During the 1990s the union engaged in a series of actions aimed at opening up political and cultural space for immigrant Mexican farmworkers and raising farmworker wages. It was also at this time

that PCUN negotiated its first contracts with small organic growers. In the summer of 2002 the union was finalizing negotiations with NORPAK, a large cooperative of growers which had been the focus of a ten-year boycott (see Stephen 2001).

Securing Amnesty for Oregon Farmworkers

Most Mixtec farmworkers and tree planters first came in contact with the union in the mid-1980s. Some of them were living in labor camps targeted by PCUN for organizing. The vast majority, however, came to know the union through help they received in processing their amnesty cases in 1986 and 1987. Within days of IRCA's enactment in November 1986, PCUN held a number of forums that were attended by more than eight hundred people in Woodburn, Salem, Independence, and other locations in Oregon.

The first meetings focused on the various ways that undocumented people could apply for U.S. residency under the 1986 law. PCUN staff also warned about potential discrimination against Latino workers because of the employer sanctions included in the IRCA legislation. During 1987, staff from PCUN and the Farmworker Service Center (CSC) devoted a great deal of time to working with those seeking amnesty through the IRCA and SAW. Between June 1987 and June 1988, the combined staffs of PCUN and CSC (just ten people) managed to process 1,300 legalization cases, at that point representing more than 10 percent of the total number of amnesty cases in the state. Their work significantly increased the union membership; from October 1986 to June 1988, PCUN signed up nearly two thousand new members, about a third of whom were probably Mixtecs (mostly men but also a few women). When these men later brought their wives and children from Mexico, some of these family members went to the CSC for assistance in petitioning for their residency. Since 1986 the immigration services that the union offered have been a key reason why Mixtec workers continue to relate actively to PCUN. Mixtec workers were deeply involved in negotiating the first PCUN contracts, have been recruited as labor organizers, and have come to occupy key spots on the union's governing board and in a spin-off women's organization.

Improving Conditions for Mixtec Farmworkers and Others

For Mixtecs who had been working in Oregon for up to six years without documents, PCUN's assistance in securing legal residence was—and is—greatly appreciated. After the union's membership grew dramatically in

1987, it began to concentrate on the struggle for collective bargaining. In 1991 PCUN began the first union-organized strike in the history of Oregon farm labor, and in 1992 it intensified the pressure on key growers by initiating a boycott of the NORPAK grower cooperative, which included growers that workers had strongly criticized. In 1995, PCUN began a massive organizing campaign to honor their tenth anniversary and to raise the wages of strawberry workers.

During the campaign, PCUN broadcast trilingual radio spots in Spanish, Mixtec, and Triqui. It also sent organizers to Madera, California, to alert workers headed to Oregon about the campaign.[3] In this campaign, the union self-consciously acknowledged the indigenous ethnicity of a significant fraction of the workers they sought to represent. Many of these Mixtec and Triqui workers spoke little or no Spanish and were completely under the thumb of labor contractors. In order to communicate with them, the union used—and still uses—multilingual organizers and radio broadcasts.

Lorenzo Morales began working as a union organizer in 1997 and was still active in this role in April 2002. He exemplifies the union's efforts to reach out to Mixtec workers. During the winters of 2000, 2001, and 2002, he spent several months in Mexico visiting workers in their home communities in Oaxaca, Guerrero, and Veracruz. During these visits he warned potential workers about the kinds of "come-ons" contractors would use, and he told them about the real working conditions and about the union. For two years he was able to track some workers from labor camps in Oregon back to their home communities. Visits to workers in these three states were an important part of the union's effort to build support on a particular farm to which some of the same workers returned year after year.

The final years of the 1990s brought PCUN a historic victory when it signed Oregon's first farmworker collective bargaining agreement, with Nature's Fountains Farms. Three other agreements were signed later. These agreements provided more than a dozen rights and protections for farmworkers not afforded by law, including seniority, grievance procedures, overtime, paid breaks, and recognition of their union. María de la Luz Contreras, a Mixtec immigrant worker introduced earlier in this chapter, led one of the negotiating teams that worked on the first PCUN contracts. For her, the contracts were an important step toward better treatment and working conditions. In the fall of 2000 she discussed what the contracts meant to her:

[3] Madera is a stopping point for many Mixtec migrants who come seasonally to Oregon to work. Some have now moved permanently from Madera to Woodburn, Oregon.

> [What were working conditions like when you had the contract? Were they different than before?]
>
> They were not the same [with the contract]. We had clean bathrooms, we had fresh water to drink, we each had a glass with our own name on it for water. We got our break, and we got to eat lunch. We never got this before. In the other places, the bathrooms were filthy, they gave us warm water to drink. And we never even drank water, took breaks, or ate lunch because we had to keep picking in competition with others or we wouldn't have enough work. In other places where I worked, if you didn't get to the fields early and keep working in a big hurry, you wouldn't even earn enough money to pay for your food.... Under our contract they paid us the minimum and guaranteed eight hours of work per day.

For Mixtec immigrant workers like Luz and Lorenzo, PCUN offered legal assistance at a crucial time (following the IRCA and SAW legislation). By demonstrating that the union had the resources and skills to help people gain legal residency in the United States, PCUN staff won their confidence and began to talk to them about their working conditions as low-wage workers in the fields. Lorenzo and Luz became involved in union activities and eventually became key parts of the organization and important links to its growing Mixtec membership. In helping workers like Luz and Lorenzo meet two of their primary needs—legal residency and improved working conditions—PCUN was able to engage with them along two dimensions of their experience of marginality in the United States.

Participation in a hometown association offers a different form for organizing Mixtec immigrant workers. In contrast to the union, hometown associations allow these workers to focus more centrally on their links to Oaxaca, linguistic and cultural identity, and transnational status.

STAYING CONNECTED IN HOMETOWN ASSOCIATIONS: THE COMITÉ PRO OBRAS DE SAN AGUSTÍN ATENAGO

> It's really nice having this Mixteco language. But a time is going to come when this language will be lost, when it will be forgotten. Our children do not want to speak it. I tell them that it would be good for them to learn a little bit of Mixteco. But they don't listen to me. I tell them that it is important to

> have this Mixteco language and that they shouldn't forget it. For my generation, speaking Mixteco makes me think about my youth and the kids I knew growing up. We used to speak Mixteco in school. We had a teacher who told us that we shouldn't speak Mixteco, that we should speak Spanish among ourselves. That is what he said. But we didn't know how to speak Spanish. Our parents spoke pure Mixteco. My mother and father didn't know how to speak Spanish. That is why I couldn't speak Spanish growing up. Now, speaking Mixteco reminds me of where I come from. When I get together with other men here and talk in Mixteco, I feel different (Víctor León Gómez, age fifty-five).

Víctor León Gómez first arrived in Oregon in 1979 from Ensenada, where he worked a circuit picking berries. He returned to Oregon in 1981 and again in 1988. From 1981 until 1986, he served as communal land commissioner in his home community in Oaxaca, a position of local leadership that later pushed him to the forefront of his hometown association. He brought his wife and older children to Oregon in 1994. He has been unable to legalize his residency, and his entire family remains undocumented. Víctor is a member of PCUN and sometimes attends union events, though his passion is the hometown association, which he helps to lead, along with his involvement with other migrants from his town and their efforts to raise money for expanding the community cemetery.

Víctor's hometown, San Agustín Atenango, has contributed sister populations to many parts of California. There are approximately a hundred families from San Agustín in Vista, California, another fifty in Santa Maria, California, and about twenty in Salem, Oregon. Other clusters are found elsewhere in California and in Chicago, Arizona, and Las Vegas. In the fall of 2001, San Agustín's mayor (*presidente municipal*) sent an official letter to his townspeople living in Salem, an event that Víctor describes:

> On October 19th, we received an official letter from Baltazar Ávila Arena, our town authority, telling us that there was a piece of land for sale.... Baltazar's letter said the owner was willing to sell this land to the community for our cemetery. After we got the letter, we called all the people from our town living here. We had a big meeting in a nearby park to see who was interested. Whole families came to the meeting. We asked if they wanted to help out in purchasing the land. They said yes, they agreed. So they named some of us to a

> committee. It had a president, secretary, treasurer, and two *vocales*. Everyone nominated us. And they voted. We were named to the committee. I am the president.

During this informal interview, Víctor asked another friend (also in the committee's leadership) to bring the list of names. His friend Lorenzo (introduced above) returned with a computerized list in tiny, six-point type. He and Lorenzo counted the names and announced that there were eighty people in total, including children and even single mothers. Víctor then continued describing the committee.

> The work we do is really important. We worked hard on this because it is about the needs of the town. Every person gave $200, and we raised $7,899 right here in Salem. We were in contact with all of the other committees, and we had a big meeting in Santa Maria. We rented a hall and had a meal. Then we began to report on our money.

Lorenzo became increasingly animated as Víctor talked, and he began adding details about the get-together in Santa Maria, the phone calls to other committees, and their ideas for new projects.

By the fall of 2002, more than $60,000 had been raised from all branches of the San Agustín Atenango Improvements Committee. The money was taken to the community, and when the original parcel of land became unavailable, a different one was purchased for the cemetery expansion. Through the fall and winter of 2002–2003, community members contributed volunteer labor (*tequio*) to build a wall around the acquired land. Lorenzo returned to San Agustín from October to March and served as an *alcalde* in the town's civil *cargo* system, a job he has filled on a rotating basis with a colleague.[4] When his term was over, Lorenzo returned to work in Salem's fruit and vegetable freezing and packing industry.

For Víctor, Lorenzo, and others, their participation in the Improvements Committee has been rejuvenating, largely because it provides ongoing contact with others from their community. One male member described the committee as being "like a community," and the men involved in the committee have clearly found it to be an important cultural and

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[4] In many Mixtec communities, the local governance system is run by pairs of men—and now sometimes women—who rotate in and out of *cargo* positions for four- to six-month periods. This division of labor allows transnational families to move back and forth between the hometown and the United States.

social space. While they report that most meetings are conducted in Spanish—"because the young people don't speak *dialecto* [Mixteco]"—the committee leaders often switch to Mixteco when they get together to plan for larger meetings. This, they stated, reminded them of how community assemblies were run at home in Oaxaca: "There we have to speak in Spanish and Mixteco," reported Víctor. "There are old people who don't speak Spanish and now young people who don't speak much Mixteco. So we need both languages."

For the men from San Agustín (particularly for those between the ages of thirty and sixty), many of whom also belong to PCUN, the hometown association seems to have opened up an important cultural space where they can reconnect with the Mixteco language, with the governance structure of their community, and with their childhood memories and experiences. The emergence of the Improvements Committee has also connected them with other clusters of *paisanos* and increased their feeling of interconnectedness in the United States.[5] Community is thus reconstituted not only in specific locales but also through networks in the United States and in Mexico, transnationally, as described by Kearney (1995: 232) and others. For Mixtecs in Salem, Oregon, the Comité Pro-Obras has provided an ethnically based mode of organization.

MIXTEC WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: WOMEN-ONLY ORGANIZATIONS AND LEADERSHIP SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Although women attend meetings and vote in the San Agustín Improvements Committee in Salem, none was named to a leadership position on the committee. This mirrors the dynamics of community assemblies in San Agustín, where women now can attend meetings but have not yet been named to *cargo* positions. Community leaders used to be chosen by those present in the assemblies, but ever since the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) began to campaign actively in the community in the early 1990s, civil *cargos* have been elected through political parties. While this process can take partial credit for the inclusion of women in local meetings, it has not resulted in their election to leadership positions. In the context of the hometown association in Salem, women are present but not particu-

[5] As pointed out by López, Escala-Rabadán, and Hinojosa-Ojeda (2001), hometown associations can also provide collective remittances that are used to build shared community infrastructure and collectively engage migrants in efforts to develop their communities.

larly vocal or central to the activities of the committee beyond paying their quotas and discussing projects. The San Agustín hometown association does not appear to be a mechanism for expanding women's political participation, and it may even serve to preserve and strengthen male-dominated political culture in the United States (see Goldring 1996).

An important question when evaluating the gender dynamics of hometown associations is whether they are an appropriate or likely space for women to expand their roles in political participation and leadership. Two recent experiences—in Oregon and California—suggest other possibilities.

In the 1990s, PCUN began to respond to the increasing number of women migrating from Mexico to Oregon, often following husbands who had been legalized in the mid-1980s. The women's needs were different than the men's, and they demanded a different kind of organizational space. Women Fighting for Progress (Mujeres Luchadoras Progresistas) was formed in 1997 to provide a place for women who came from communities in Mexico where they seldom attended public meetings or expressed opinions outside of extended family gatherings. Begun as a women's income-producing project, which each year sells hundreds of Christmas wreaths (nearly 1,200 in 2002), the group also provides farmworker women with an opportunity to foster pride and mutual support, and to learn new skills in public speaking and leadership. The group provides a refuge for women, and members describe its meetings as having a "family feeling." Mixtec women have played a prominent role in the development of the group and its leadership.

One Mixtec participant in the women's project, Francisca López, first came to the CSC at PCUN in 1997 in order to straighten out an auto insurance claim. She joined the women's project and eventually became very involved. The space this group of women has created provides many new arrivals—who are often socially isolated, lonely, and missing their extended families in Mexico—with a haven for sharing their feelings and working collectively to resolve common issues. Having a women-only space also gives women the confidence to speak up. Once they have gained self-confidence within the women's group and are comfortable taking positions and speaking up in public, they can translate these skills to other arenas, including union leadership slots, local political forums such as PTA meetings and city council meetings, and renegotiation of domestic roles. As Francisca stated:

> A lot of women who come to the group have lived in poverty.... They have families where the husband works, but it

> isn't enough to maintain the children and also pay rent. We also have single mothers who don't have anyone to help them. They come to the group, and we help them. They come here and work and earn a little money.... And when they come here with us, they begin to talk. It feels like coming to visit your family. When women come to be with us, they feel comfortable and they begin to talk, and it really helps. We can help women who want to talk about their problems.... It's different here. Women won't talk about things this way in a group of men. But this is a group of women, and they come and talk about their personal lives.... They talk about what they have done, what kind of suffering they are going through, and we help each other.

In 2002, Mujeres became independent of PCUN. Union activists and the women in Mujeres both view this as a success, an indication of the women's capacity to be self-supporting and run their own organization. The women's group has been the source of many up-and-coming leaders in the union and the community of Woodburn. Through having a "women-only" space, Mixtec women were able to cultivate political skills that they might not have been able to develop in the hometown associations.

A second recent development, this one in California, also suggests the importance of women-only spaces in allowing Mixtec women to consolidate their political skills and leadership. At the October 2003 conference on "Indigenous Mexican Immigrants in the US," held at the University of California, Santa Cruz, Mixtec and Triqui women announced the formation of a network of Oaxacan indigenous women leaders. In the discussion preceding their decision to form the network, the women considered the different organizational spaces in which they operated—hometown associations, broader women's organizations, and multiethnic immigrant rights organizations—and concluded that they needed to form their own organization. "There are a lot of general organizations for women, but they don't know the particular problems of indigenous women," commented Oralia Maceda of the Oaxacan Indigenous Binational Front (FIOB) (Meléndez 2002).

The women commented about their great difficulty in getting their issues integrated into the priorities of hometown associations and federations of such associations. The issues they named included: how to provide for their families, discrimination against them as indigenous women workers (sometimes expressed as subtle sexual harassment by contractors),

monolingualism, lack of education, and very early marriage ages for girls (thirteen to fifteen). They also acknowledged that some organizations, such as the Oaxacan Indigenous Binational Front, had made progress in integrating women into their leadership structures. Nevertheless, the women felt the need to form their own network, independent of both transnational indigenous organizations and U.S. feminist organizers and academics, in order to formulate their own agenda and priorities. Since the formation of the network, its members have held several California-wide meetings and workshops.

The recent experiences of Mujeres in Oregon and the formation of the network of Oaxacan Indigenous Women Leaders in California suggest that hometown associations may not be the best place for women to develop political participation and leadership skills. Women-only organizations can be an important resource for helping to expand women's confidence, skills, and analysis in ways that, further down the line, may enable them to be more active in hometown associations if they so desire.

Leaders such as Centolia Maldonado of the FIOB have commented on the progress women have made in their home communities in Oaxaca as they moved to fill the vacuum in local political participation and leadership opened by migrating men:

> Migration has forced indigenous women to open up spaces in community assemblies and other local political arenas.... At first there was conflict with the husband, the father, and local authorities and between the women themselves.... Leaving the house and conquering their fear of speaking up, meeting with other women who share the same situation and ambitions, obligated them to reflect and change perceptions about some local customs (Stanley 2002).

Such changes are significant and may eventually influence how immigrant Mixtec women participate politically in the United States. When organizations like hometown associations follow traditional patterns of political participation that largely exclude women or render them voiceless, then it makes more sense for women to hone their political skills and organize around issues unique to their position in other kinds of organizations, such as the network created in California. As women gain confidence and experience, they may want to continue working in women-only organizations, but they can also expand their roles in hometown associations, federations, and other types of organizations. A factor limiting the political

participation of many indigenous migrant women, however, is their continuing responsibility in the areas of housework, cooking, shopping, and childcare.

LINKING LABOR, ETHNICITY, AND GENDER THROUGH FARMWORKER UNIONS AND HOMETOWN ASSOCIATIONS

My interest in this chapter has been in exploring the experiences of Mixtec men and women who have worked as farmworkers in Oregon and have participated in two specific organizational forms, the PCUN farmworker union and the recently formed San Agustín Atenango hometown association in Salem. The farmworker union originally captivated people's attention and enthusiasm through its legal services center, which played a pivotal role in helping undocumented workers receive amnesty in the mid-1980s, and through campaigns to raise wages for strawberry workers and others. Since that time, Mixtec workers have played key roles in negotiating contracts and providing leadership in field organizing efforts. Because the union is primarily focused on labor relations, immigration, and broad defense of Latino immigrants' rights, Mixtecs have valued the union's assistance and commitment. Apart from their significant participation in the union, Mixtec workers have also formed hometown association committees that provide a cultural and organizational space for expressing specific local ethnic identities that span the U.S.-Mexico border. Through a series of networked committees, Mixtecs are able to draw unity from their links to a single community in Oaxaca.

Although the Salem-based hometown association includes women in its membership and meetings, men dominate its organizational structure by carrying out most of the national and international networking aspects of the committee (see Goldring 1996). Thus, while Mixtec men in Oregon have found a way to participate organizationally in multiple spheres that validate the various aspects of their identity and experience in the United States—as Mixtecs, low-wage workers, and, sometimes, undocumented workers—women have not found an equivalent outlet in which to express their cultural identity and connections to their home community. For a small number of Mixtec women, Mujeres Luchadoras Progresistas has provided support for key issues in these women's lives and offered a chance to develop leadership and organizing skills. This women-only venue has been quite successful in raising women's confidence and participation levels, not only in the PCUN union but in other venues as well.

The patterns of organizational participation I have documented in this chapter suggest that the concerns of transnational Mixtec migrants remain focused on a range of issues: the relations of production, the politics of immigration and immigrant rights, culturally based issues like language and local cultural expression and maintenance, collective memory and connection to communities of origin, the creation of community across borders and through networks, raising family income, and the gendered dynamics of immigration, work, and home life. This list of concerns certainly suggests that Mixtec migrants are not assimilating into "mainstream" U.S. culture and that they continue to cultivate ethnic distinctiveness in relation to both people of Mexican descent in the United States and Native Americans. They have created transnational communities that operate in multiple sites and social fields (see Goldring 1999). This finding concurs with the work of Kearney (1996, 1998), Rivera-Salgado (1998, 1999), Smith (1999), and others.

Based on my work with Mixtec migrants, I offer the following suggestions for strengthening the organizational structures in which Mixtec workers participate and for promoting dialogue across organizational spaces.

- Given the fact that many states' farmworker populations are increasingly indigenous, farmworker unions can continue looking at how indigenous ethnicity among farmworkers might affect their organizing strategies. Farmworker unions necessarily retain a focus on improving the working and living conditions of all farmworkers. Working to represent the diversity within the farmworker population is an ongoing challenge, and many organizations are making significant efforts in this direction. Such efforts should be supported.
- The presence of significant numbers of Mixtec farmworkers who participate simultaneously in farmworker union activities and in a hometown association suggests the importance of exploring the possibilities for collaboration between these two organizational spaces. Hometown associations can provide a link to workers who may not be aware of union activities, and can also provide advice and assistance to farmworker unions that are interested in developing a more central focus on ethnicity, specifically Mexican indigenous ethnicities, in their work. Unions can provide important information on labor rights, immigration rights, and other issues. Within such a dialogue, a special place must be reserved for the plight of undocumented workers and the struggles of families whose members hold different legal statuses—that is, undocumented, citizen, resident (see Stephen 2001).

- While some Mixtec men appear to have found a satisfying way to remember, maintain, and further Mixtec cultural identity at local levels and through networks of hometown association committees, Mixtec women have been somewhat marginalized in these processes. Within farmworker unions such as PCUN, women have been encouraged through special projects and leadership training to take on more active roles. Hometown associations, federations, and farmworker unions can support, encourage, and collaborate with women-only organizational spaces in their efforts to focus on issues particular to indigenous women migrants and to develop organizing and leadership skills.

Farmworker unions and hometown associations have much to share and much to learn from one another. The fact that the same population is often participating in both kinds of organizations simultaneously suggests the importance of making institutional links—and personal ones—between the two. As global competition for cheap rural labor heightens, indigenous workers leaving rural Mexico are likely to remain the dominant source of farm labor in the United States. Dialogue and collaboration between unions and hometown associations will be an important part of the process in continuing to defend the rights of Mixtec workers.

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