

## BUILDING COMMUNITIES OF SENTIMENT: Remittances and Emotions among Maya Migrants

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*By focusing primarily on economic transfers, studies of remittances overlook migrants' non-monetary contributions to development. I examine the role "sentient resources"—sentiments such as love and concern distributed within a migrant circuit with the intention of improving the quality of life of its members—play in the formation and maintenance of Maya migrant communities in Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula. I argue that such non-monetary resources also sustain and develop an indigenous community in Mexico, enhancing the quality of life of rural residents and strengthening community ties. Studying sentient resources offers social scientists the opportunity to understand the kinds of relationships that develop as a result of migrant contributions and the affective ties underlying these practices. I conclude by discussing the relevance of this research for transnational communities. [Key words: indigenous migration, remittances, sentiments, development, Maya families, Mexico]*

Recent studies demonstrate that “migradollars” play an important investment role in natal communities. Remittances—transfers of cash and goods—are typically used to improve housing, open small businesses, and provide access to medical care (Marcelli and Lowell 2005). As a result, understanding migrant remittance practices has become a critical area of study for migration scholars (Durand 1994; Lozano Ascencio 1993). But by focusing primarily on economic transfers, these studies overlook migrants' *non-monetary* contributions to development. Sean McKenzie and Cecilia Menjivar (n.d.) point out that the emotions attached to remittances matter just as much as, if not more than, the economic benefits these transfers provide. Likewise, Peggy Levitt argues that “social remittances”—the ideas, values, behaviors, and social capital migrants acquire in the migrant site—also transform the cultural, social, and political life of natal communities (1998). Following these

efforts to address non-monetary migrant contributions, I examine the role the emotive plays in the formation and maintenance of migrant communities by investigating Maya migrants' resource allocations in Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula.<sup>1</sup> I focus on the love and concern involved in sustaining migrants' ties to and within such communities, and analyze how gender and ethnic relations manifest themselves in this type of intimate labor.

My work builds on third world feminist scholars' endeavors to recover marginalized men and women's voices and agency by bringing together formerly separate modes of thought, namely, migration research and the politics of sentiment (Anzaldúa 1987; Pérez 1999; Sandoval 2000; Zavella 1987). Indeed, the role of the emotive in social processes has been overlooked by scholars' emphasis on the rational, the logical, and the structural. This dualism of feeling and thought is a Western cultural construction that values reason above sentiment. Chicana/Latina feminists have questioned divorcing economics, politics, and religion from the domestic, affective, and sexual realms because doing so occludes the very real contributions women of color make to their communities and society (Anzaldúa 1987; Broyles-González 2002; Delgado Bernal 1998; Lara 2008; Ochoa 2004; Pardo 1998; Sandoval 1998). Although third world feminists' research on immigration reveals that migration is structured by loss, melancholia, and desire (Ibarra 2003a; Salazar Parreñas 2005; Schmidt Camacho 2006; Zavella 2006), an emphasis on rationality continues to pervade theories of migration (see, for example, Donato 1999; Durand, Malone, and Massey 2003; Durand and Massey 2006). As a consequence, we know very little about how affect is reproduced and becomes productive within broader "structures of feeling" (Williams 1977, 132).

Analyzing how affective ties are sustained across space and through time, and how these attachments may be converted into resources is critical to

our understanding of migration and globalization. I argue that, along with remittances, sentient resources—sentiments such as love and concern that are distributed within a migrant circuit with the intention of improving the quality of life of its members—also sustain and develop an indigenous community in Mexico by providing emotional and social support to natal families. In the same vein as James House, I define “emotional support” as “providing empathy, caring, love, and trust” (1981, 24). The distribution and use of sentient resources suggests that they enhance the quality of life of rural residents and strengthen community ties. Studying sentient resources within an internal migrant circuit offers social scientists the opportunity to understand the kinds of relationships that develop as a result of migrant contributions and the emotions underlying them.

Much of the research on remittances focuses on international rather than internal migration. This is not surprising in light of the large sums of money circulated internationally. But understanding how communities are developed through migrant contributions does not require an international dimension. Remittances, albeit on a significantly smaller scale, are circulated regionally. More important, since the monetary value of remittances is small and mobility is not inhibited by crossing an international border, migrants’ non-monetary contributions may be far more apparent within a regional circuit than an international one. Nonetheless, identifying the absence or continuing presence of these resources presents an opportunity for us to reflect on how the local shapes the transnational, how immigrants construct a transnational community, and on what binds people together—or tears them apart—as they cross national boundaries.

### **Rethinking Remittances**

Remittances have become increasingly central to the economies of developing

countries like Mexico, El Salvador, the Philippines, and Pakistan. In Mexico, remittances—estimated at \$25 billion in 2007—constitute one of the top three sources of foreign exchange earnings. By using improved tracking methods to highlight new trends in remittance practices, scholars challenge narratives of underdevelopment (Durand 1994; Lozano Ascencio 1993; Vásquez 1994). They argue that the countryside is slowly being developed over time. Economic contributions develop communities through investments in small-scale subsistence production and informal enterprises, by infusing cash into local and regional businesses, by improving educational opportunities for local residents, by providing rural residents with access to basic services such as running water and electricity, and by improving housing conditions (Cohen and Rodriguez 2005; Rothstein 1992). In Yucatán, remittances from the United States have been used primarily to sustain households, but also to pay for health care and educational expenses (De la Gala, García, and Molina 2007). This research highlights the potential impact of remittances on the regional economies of underdeveloped countries (Martin 2001).

By focusing on remittances conceived of as only cash and durable goods, these studies fail to include other resources that may also sustain and develop natal communities.<sup>2</sup> Recent work on transnationalism demonstrates that migrants' political leadership and social remittances play a significant role in community development. In her work with Dominican migrants, Peggy Levitt demonstrates that money and goods are not the only resources being transferred across borders (1998). Levitt argues that social remittances are highly influential in the politics of daily life in the Dominican Republic, encompassing migrant contributions of leadership skills and social capital—that is, social networks that can be converted into economic capital.<sup>3</sup> Gaspar Rivera-Salgado points out that, for indigenous communities, these resources flow in both directions (2000). Local knowledge can serve as a cultural and

political resource, as evidenced by indigenous social movements on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border (Rivera-Salgado 2000). Similarly, Ester Hernandez argues that remittance practices and rhetoric create and sustain an imagined community between migrants in Los Angeles and their natal communities in El Salvador, in which the home nation and historical-structural factors in the United States pressure migrants to remit (2002). Luin Goldring cautions us, however, that the political clout and economic impact of migrants' political remittances (e.g., in the form of hometown associations) vary by gender, across organizations, and within geographic and ethnic flows (2002, 2003).

Building on these efforts to address migrant contributions beyond the economic, I look at the *non-monetary* contributions migrants make within a regional migrant circuit. In so doing, I aim to broaden our understanding of what a "resource" is, to disentangle this concept from economics, from models of rational choice and limited goods. On the other hand, I do not wish to exclude economics from the emotive. As Viviana Zelizer points out, "plenty of economic activity goes into creating, defining, and sustaining social ties" (2005, 2). Indeed, remittances provide more than money and goods; they also generate intimacy and reinforce social ties (McKenzie and Menjívar n.d.). Rather, I consider sentiments to be a resource that do not necessarily originate from an economic rationality, but can stem from anger, pain, and memory. I suggest that, like money, information, and social capital, sentiments—feelings that can bind us together or tear us apart—are a resource that migrants and their families use to cope with border crossings and displacements that result from the realignments of local political economies under neoliberal projects.

Emma Pérez suggests that the process of uncovering voices, histories, and practices involves engaging with a "decolonial imaginary" that resurrects "interstitial subjectivities" (1999). She urges us to explore the subtle

interventions that, silenced by Eurocentric history, by knowledge production, and by patriarchy, have been relegated to a third space. According to Chéla Sandoval, love, when contemplated as a mode of differential consciousness, as a counternarrative, or as a state of being in a third space, can generate decolonial practices that uncover agency relegated to this interstitial site (2000). Similarly, Patricia Zavella shows that Mexicans from immigrant families use melancholia to negotiate tensions around cultural, racial, sexual, and national differences (2006). Additionally, Alicia Schmidt Camacho suggests that narratives of melancholia and loss constitute political acts that challenge the success of neoliberal projects along the U.S.-Mexico border and remind us of their inherent violence (2006). As a consequence, yearnings and dreams serve as powerful motivators for women to go to *el norte*, even when these border crossings result in pain and disillusionment (Hirsch 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Ibarra 2003a).

Indeed, feminist scholarship of Maya society suggests that, with the advent of structural adjustments and globalization, affect has become increasingly central to our understanding of contemporary Maya communities. Mary Elmendorf regarded Maya women's experiences and especially their feelings as critical to the success of development projects and as central to the origins of female migration (1976). Similarly, Ana María Juárez, in her study of Maya women in Tulum, Quintana Roo, examines how these global and economic shifts have resulted in the exaltation of romantic love as the foundation for marriage, displacing the traditional practice of arranged marriages between families (2001). Maya women strategically deploy narratives of filial devotion and love to maintain their respectability as they migrate and venture into the workforce (Castellanos 2007; Greene 2001).

Although research on Maya migration and community development narrates the pain, anger, and joy that result from migration (Adler 2004; Juárez 2002;

Kintz 1998; Re Cruz 1996, 1998), it sheds little light on the capacity of these emotions to sustain families and build communities. The feelings—tenderness, concern, and joy—that Kuchmil migrants and their families transmit often form the foundation for social practices, such as companionship and caregiving, that bolster family and community ties.<sup>4</sup> The circulation of these sentient resources is informed by the reciprocal exchange system embedded in village life, where continual involvement results in migrant contributions beyond cash and goods. Thus an analysis of what is circulated provides a model of the resources that are crucial to the economic, political, and psychological survival and reproduction of natal communities, particularly within an indigenous social network.

### **Building Communities of Sentiment**

Scholars may agree that remittances have the potential to promote development, yet continue to disagree on what constitutes “development” (Goldring 2004; Saldaña-Portillo 2003).<sup>5</sup> Within the social science literature and among migrant communities, including Maya communities, the growth of infrastructural development and economic investment has served as a proxy for modernization (Escobar 1995). How much money is sent and how remittances are spent have become the yardsticks by which we measure the growth of rural communities. Within an internal migrant circuit, however, remittances are limited and thus cannot support the types of public works funded by immigrant hometown associations and government programs such as “Tres por Uno” (Three for One), in which the government matches remittances allocated to development projects. Nevertheless, internal migrants’ cash transfers, however limited their impact on infrastructural development, do in fact “develop” communities.<sup>6</sup> They provide a variety of resources that contribute to the social and physical welfare of a community. Indeed, Maya communities are concerned with their ability to promote both economic progress and social well-being.

Among rural Maya communities, development refers to a discourse of progress and entitlement, grounded within the evolutionary model of modernization and the postrevolutionary mandates of land, liberty, and justice. At the same time, the sense of independence Maya communities gained as a result of the Caste War of 1847 has altered this orthodox understanding of development. This translates into an expectation by rural communities that government intervention, whether national or international, will be limited to infrastructural projects and economic investment, and will not extend to an undisputed promotion of the free market and an unchecked desire for private property. For example, in spite of changes to the agrarian law that permit the privatization of *ejido* lands, the community of Kuchmil has chosen to remain communal. Residents rely on the state to build the roads, sewage system, and other physical markers of “progress” because it has the resources and funds to do so. But it is the community members themselves who are responsible for maintaining a sense of civic responsibility, for cultivating a knowledge of community history, for promoting Maya customs and traditions, and for practicing what community members call *convivencia* (living together and participating harmoniously in shared social and cultural practices). How the community of Kuchmil is defined and developed is thus intimately linked to the social and ethnic ties connecting its members. Within this context, we cannot consider development to be wholly a matter of physical structures and economic investments.

My research is based on an ethnographic study of the migrant circuit formed by the agrarian Maya village of Kuchmil, Yucatán, and its migrant community in Cancún, Quintana Roo. According to Roger Rouse, a migrant circuit transcends the boundaries of place by foregrounding the circulation of and linkages between ideas, objects, and people as the site where community is constructed (1991). Given that, for many Maya families, migration to Cancún has served as a precursor to international migration (Adler 2004; Cornelius,

Fitzgerald, and Lewin Fischer 2007), studying the formation of an internal circuit may provide parallels to the evolution of international circuits.

Located in the southeastern region of the Mexican state of Yucatán, Kuchmil is organized into an *ejido*, a communal landholding system in which farmers work individual land plots dedicated to the cultivation of corn. Kuchmil's 123 inhabitants are organized into twenty-seven households, all of whom speak Maya and are subsistence farmers. The wealthiest households are made up of established families with adult children who use remittances to farm extra land and thus sell corn for profit, whereas the poorest households consist of newly married couples or families with young children. Since the 1970s, Kuchmil farmers have increasingly relied on wage work to supplement their income because land erosion, chemical degradation, droughts, and disease have decreased corn yields. Although most farmers find extra work in the neighboring city of Valladolid, at least a third of the *ejidatarios* migrate seasonally or for short periods of time to work as wage laborers in Cancún. Prior to 1990, men dominated this migrant flow, but after a paved road was built and daily bus service established, women joined this migrant flow. Most young men migrate to the city after they have completed the *secundaria*, the equivalent of junior high school, to work in construction or as service employees in Cancún's hotels.<sup>7</sup> Young women also migrate at this stage in their lives, but work as domestic servants in Cancún. Thus the participants in this study were predominantly young, although ranging in age from fifteen to forty-five.

As part of a migrant circuit, Kuchmil migrants remain in constant touch with their families in the countryside and visit them as often as they can. Likewise, rural families travel to Cancún to deliver goods, as well as money on occasion, and to spend time with their migrant relatives. The migrant community in Cancún includes slightly more than 100 inhabitants residing in multiple

neighborhoods throughout the city. Two-thirds of the households in Kuchmil receive direct or indirect economic support from migrants in Cancún. Since the families who received remittances were able to parlay them into social capital and profit, remittances increased class stratification within Kuchmil.

My research is based on thirty-one months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 1991 and 2007, most of it from September 2000 to September 2001. I first began visiting Kuchmil as an undergraduate student to study the Yucatec Maya language. I continued working there for my doctoral research and first book project, returning frequently because I was committed to long-term fieldwork and to developing lasting relationships with this community. As a result of these visits, I was able to establish rapport with four generations of families. Initially, Kuchmil's residents considered me a novelty and outsider: despite my dark hair, dark eyes, and dark skin, they identified me as a *gringa* (a foreigner), who traveled alone and spent her time involved in activities typically performed by men or the government (e.g., conducting a household census and attending *ejido* meetings). With each return visit, however, the community viewed me less as a source of amusement and suspicion. They became engaged with my efforts to document their local history and migration experiences. Because the sentient resources migrants provide to their rural families are difficult to capture through formal interviews, I conducted participant-observation in the Kuchmil-Cancún migrant circuit. I followed up with in-depth interviews of twenty migrants and their natal families in Kuchmil.

### **Companionship and Stand-in Migration**

As I looked at what Maya migrants gave their families, I noticed it was not simply cash and goods; they also gave care and love. Kuchmil migrants provide sentient resources that attend to the physical and emotional well-being of their

rural families. Migrants' families feel lonely without them, especially those whose children have all migrated or moved to another community. Likewise, Maya migrants experience alienation and isolation due to the social segregation of urban living and the demanding work schedule of the tourist economy. To ameliorate this loss, provide companionship, and care for each other, migrants travel home and their families travel to Cancún. To alleviate the emotional strain caused by their departure, migrants make frequent or emergency visits home; stagger their migrations; return home for extended periods of time, from several months to several years; and pay for their parents to visit them in Cancún. Shaped by feelings of affection and empathy, these practices constitute the sentient resources that sustain the selves and communities involved in migration. The following case studies involve all of these practices and illuminate the productive qualities of sentiments and their implications for community development.

In Kuchmil, daughters not only help their mothers with the labor-intensive tasks of maintaining a rural household, but also serve as their mothers' companions. After completing the chores of preparing the *nixtamal*, sweeping the house, washing the laundry, and feeding the animals during the early morning hours, when the heat is less taxing, mothers and daughters spend a few hours in the afternoon relaxing and enjoying each other's company. They watch and animatedly discuss the twists and turns of the televised soap operas; they drink ice cold lemonade while listening to the *música tropical* blaring loudly from the stereo; they sit companionably side by side, lulled to silence by the rhythmic pumping of their feet as they sew *huipiles* (the regional ethnic dress of Maya women) on nonelectric Singer sewing machines; or they take a *ximb'al* (walk) to visit and gossip with a neighbor about the latest government program, the upcoming fiesta, or the new trends in *huipil* design. A young woman's departure from her home, whether to marry or to migrate,

is mourned deeply by her mother, especially when she does not have other daughters remaining at home. After the daughters of the family with whom I lived left Kuchmil to migrate and to marry, I was unofficially designated the companion to their mother. As female migrants ventured into the workforce, they, too, lamented the loss of this companionship. Consequently, they staggered their migrations and worked in flexible occupations at the migrant site to ensure that they had the freedom and time to fulfill their filial obligation as their mothers' companions. The case of the Can Uc family offers an example of the yearnings that motivate this practice.

When I met the Can Uc family in 1991, I was impressed by the leadership role held by Julia Can Uc, who worked as *promotora* (health promoter) and managed the community clinic. At the time, it was not common for a young unmarried woman (Julia was twenty-one years of age) to hold a salaried position of authority in Kuchmil. Julia traveled frequently to Valladolid to attend meetings and training sessions at the hospital and to collect medications. Since don Gilberto and doña Candelaria had seven children, six of whom were girls, the Can Ucs benefited from Julia's wages. Their only son, Alberto, had left Kuchmil nearly a decade before to study in Valladolid. After a brief period working in Cancún's hotel industry, he chose to settle in Valladolid with his wife and daughter because of the city's proximity to Kuchmil. Two of the Can Uc's daughters, Mónica and Diana, lived in Cancún with their husbands. When Mónica left Kuchmil after getting married, Diana joined her in Cancún at Mónica's request. Initially, Diana helped care for Mónica's newborn child, but, after a few months, she began working part-time as a domestic servant. She sent part of her income to her parents. When Diana married a migrant from Kuchmil, she stopped working. Alberto, Mónica, and Diana pooled their resources to send money and supplies to their family every few months, but this aid could only be stretched so far for such a large family,

which could not afford to pay for the cost of don Gilberto's medical bills and for the cost of their daughters' schooling beyond the sixth grade.

In 1992, Julia and Isadora Can Uc, along with six other girls, left Kuchmil to work as domestic servants in Cancún to pay for their sister Minerva's school expenses and for their elderly parents' medical bills. Julia laughed as she recounted how she convinced her father to let her migrate. "I asked my father if I could go work in Cancún. This way, I said, we can help you with the *milpa* [cornfield]. Before it was impossible, he worked alone. There are no sons [at home]. Since we are all women, we don't go to the *milpa*... Since he was so sick—he almost died when he was sick—we had no way, as women we did not know how to work the *milpa*." Their parents were not persuaded until Julia reminded them that their older sister Diana would "cuidarlas" (take care of them—by safeguarding them from physical and sexual harm). Julia explained, "We had someplace to stay. If we did not have family [in Cancún], they would not have allowed us to leave." Their younger sister Carmela, who preferred to work rather than study, quickly followed in Julia and Isadora's footsteps. When I visited the three sisters in Cancún, they excitedly told me about their adventures. Although they spent much of their time working, on their days off and after mass on Sundays, they attended local dances, window-shopped in the commercial district, and watched soccer matches in the park. In spite of these exploits, they proclaimed that they did not plan to remain too long in Cancún because they missed their friends and family in Kuchmil.

After Minerva completed the *secundaria*, she informed her sisters that she, too, planned to migrate. Her sisters reminded her that she could not leave their parents alone, especially since they were ill. "Why did I study?" Minerva asked them, "What am I going to do here? I also want to work." Since Minerva had spent her summer vacations in Cancún and was headstrong enough

to travel alone, her sisters gathered together to discuss this predicament. They agreed that Minerva should put her education to use, but they also did not want to leave their parents alone, fearing that loneliness, isolation, and the stress of chronic illness would take a heavy toll on them. Faced with Minerva's imminent departure, doña Candelaria implored her daughters to come home to help with household duties and to keep her company. After much discussion, everyone agreed that the unmarried sisters would take turns caring for their parents, a practice I refer to as "stand-in migration": deliberate turn-taking by migrant daughters to provide a mother who remains in the countryside with a female companion, friendship, and help with domestic responsibilities. Through stand-in migration, Julia and her sisters could continue both to remit money home and to care for their parents.

Julia was chosen as the first one to return home. "Once she was tired [of being at home], someone else would replace her and so on," explained Isadora sheepishly. The sisters who remained in Cancún promised to provide Julia, as well as their parents, with a monthly allowance. Soon after Julia returned to Kuchmil, don Gilberto died. Isadora and Carmela, Julia remembered disappointedly, "told me that they would replace me, but once [they] married, well, no one returned to replace me." Minerva did not marry, but she also did not volunteer to substitute for Julia. Instead, she remained in Cancún, although she continues to send remittances. After her father died, Julia considered returning to Cancún because replacing her father's labor in the *milpa* was very costly. "I thought about returning again [to Cancún] but once I got used to being [in Kuchmil], well, I didn't want to return. When I go there, it is too hot. I am no longer used to it." More important, she could not conceive of leaving her bereaved elderly mother alone. According to Julia, her return was predicted in her dreams before she left Kuchmil. "My dead grandmother told me that I shouldn't go to Cancún—before my father died. I came back and I

haven't returned to work there." For Julia, recalling this dream helped soothe the disappointment she initially felt at not being able to return to Cancún.

As soon as Julia returned to Kuchmil, she was recruited by the community to serve once again as *promotora* and director of the Casa de Salud (Health Center), a position she held before migrating. Julia was also an active participant in the *ejido* meetings, where she represented her mother, who became an *ejidataria* upon her father's death. In spite of not having married, a liminal status that obliges young women to remain under the authority of their parents, Julia has held important leadership positions in Kuchmil. Through these roles, she had gained status and the respect of her community, which made it difficult for her even to consider returning to Cancún to work as a domestic servant. And most surely she would have to take on this very work. When her sisters invite her to visit, Julia explains, "they want [me] to work. In the city, everything must be purchased." Julia can no longer imagine returning to the drudgery, repetition, and insecurity that marked her previous life in Cancún.

Despite their reservations about the city, Julia and her mother made frequent trips to Cancún. "We think about [my sisters]," said Julia, "if a month passes before they come home." Doña Candelaria explained that not only did she cry for her daughters, she also dreamt of them often, especially around the time of her husband's death. "I cry for my daughters...dream of them...I think about them [when they are far]." Migrant children and parents constantly talk about how they dream about each other. This discourse is rooted in affect because dreams among the Maya provide a way for people to demonstrate their devotion and concern for one another and to construct a forum through which people can talk about loneliness, nostalgia, and yearnings. According to Julia, dreams index feelings buried in one's subconscious. When you dream of someone, it is "because you love that person very much." Likewise, migrants

yearn for their parents while they are in Cancún. “We thought about [our parents] a lot when we went to Cancún to work,” Julia recalled. This yearning motivates migrants’ return visits home. “[My sisters] will all of a sudden arrive here. They don’t leave us alone. If not, they call by telephone to see how we are doing.” For these women, migration not only entails sending money and goods home, but also requires the continual transmission of emotional support through love and by providing companionship to natal families, regardless of the distance between Kuchmil and Cancún.

Migration has a deep impact on a town the size of Kuchmil. Every family has a relative—a son, daughter, father, or cousin—who has migrated. According to Wayne Cornelius, migration has transformed many towns in Mexico into “nurseries and nursing homes” (quoted in Zolberg and Smith 1996, 34). By staggering their migrations, Kuchmil migrants like Julia and her sisters minimize the physical and emotional impact of their absence. To decrease the isolation and loneliness experienced by relatives in Kuchmil who may not have the resources or good health to travel, female migrants—and in some instances male migrants—return home to serve as their parents’ companions. In the process, return migrants decrease the loneliness and isolation they, too, experience in Cancún. For the community of Kuchmil, these return migrants also represent a new type of leadership—well-educated, bilingual, and urban. Not surprisingly, all of the return migrants, male and female, hold leadership positions. In the process of fulfilling filial obligations, they end up serving—and transforming—their community. Thus, companionship, through its transmission of devotion and care, helps sustain and develop Kuchmil.

### **Caregiving Across Space and Through Time**

Studies that examine relationships between nannies, maids, and elder care workers and those for whom they care point out that care work is relational

and demands emotional labor (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Ibarra 2003b; Romero 1997; Stone 1998).<sup>8</sup> But what does this tell us about the ways we care for our families? We know from studies of transnational families that domestic workers may find it difficult to take care of their own family according to normative gender behaviors (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 2003; Salazar Parreñas 2005). By splitting families apart, migration takes a toll. But what happens when it is the children who migrate and the parents who are left behind? How does this displacement shape feelings of longing and belonging?

Another sentient resource circulated within the Kuchmil-Cancún migrant circuit is caregiving—the actual practice of caring and supporting a parent or other family member by helping with or taking over daily responsibilities during illness or distress. Coping with illness or distress draws upon a different set of migrant practices than being a mother's companion. Caregiving also draws upon a different set of expectations. Maya women consider companionship to be an obligation, whereas Maya men become companions by default. The role of companion does not motivate male migrants to return to Kuchmil, but upon remaining in Kuchmil, they fulfill it. In contrast, caregiving is expected of both men and women. Scholars note that caregivers tend to be women (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Ibarra 2000, 2003b), but both men and women perform this role in Maya society. It is customary as parents grow older for children to care for them and for grandparents to help care for their grandchildren. Nonetheless, given conventional gender roles, women, more so than men, are relied upon to do the intimate work of caregiving. Men and women who fail to provide such care are seen as heartless and unfeeling. Migration threatens the ability of both men and women to fulfill this obligation and to meet gender expectations, and thus transforms how migrants provide care. How is caregiving provided in a community where most children migrate as early as the age of fifteen? And, given the distinction between

companionship and caregiving, what does caregiving entail? To address these questions, I focus on two case studies of caregiving, one that occurred during an illness and another that occurred during economic distress for a migrant household. These cases reveal the multiple ways that caregiving is provided, what caregiving involves, and how this type of support becomes a sentient resource for Maya communities. They also reveal how sentient resources are gendered, although not in the ways we might anticipate.

Migrant women met their caregiving obligation by returning home to care for their ill or distressed parents for brief or extended periods of time. They purchase and prepare medications, transport their parents to the doctor, alter meals to fit dietary restrictions, and take over domestic chores. To do so, female migrants seek out jobs, primarily as live-out domestic servants, that make this type of labor possible. Live-out domestic servants may find it difficult to cultivate a personal relationship based on mutual respect with their employers (Chaney and García Castro 1989; Constable 1997; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Romero 1992; Salazar Parreñas 2001), but, as domestic servants in a city where indigenous servants are coveted, Maya women are able to negotiate with their employers for extended leaves of absence (from several weeks to several months) or for brief absences during emergencies. In contrast, Maya men's jobs as hotel bartenders, waiters, and cooks are less flexible because they are employed by transnational hotel corporations that frown upon granting extended leaves for personal matters, especially to low-level employees. To get a few days off, however, employees can swap work shifts with coworkers. Consequently, migrant men provide caregiving during emergencies through brief visits home, on their own or by alternating with their migrant siblings. Carolina Rosas points out that in our endeavors to understand how migration is gendered, we have been attentive to migrant women's desires and dreams,

but have neglected understanding the affective dimensions of men's migrations (2007). Indeed, the international service industry is structured by patriarchal ideals that favor men over women (and vice versa) to fill specific jobs (e.g., men work as bartenders and waiters; women work as domestic servants) and thus bolster women's roles as caregivers, but that make it difficult for men to expand masculine behavior to include the intimate work of caregiving. The following case study examines migrant men's efforts to convey love and tenderness to their natal families and, as a result, broaden masculine ideals.

The May Kauil family's story provides an example of how migrant men coped with illness. When the matriarch of the family, doña Olga Kauil Pech, was stricken with appendicitis, her eldest son Román, who lives in Kuchmil, drove her to the hospital in Valladolid. Enrique, another son who lives and works in Valladolid, informed his three younger brothers (Reynaldo, Horacio, and Leonardo who lived in Cancún) of their mother's illness. Enrique provided housing and food for his father and siblings from Kuchmil and Cancún while they visited their mother in the hospital. All three migrant sons requested time off from work to visit their mother in the hospital. They were each given a day's leave. They arrived in Valladolid in the early morning on the day they were contacted. Covered by Reynaldo's medical plan, doña Olga was interned at the *seguro social* (state-run hospital). Despite her declarations of severe pain, the doctor announced there was nothing wrong with her. Reynaldo, Horacio, and Leonardo agreed to cover the costs of transferring her to a private hospital, where she was immediately diagnosed with appendicitis and sent to surgery that very day. After his siblings and father returned to their respective homes in Cancún and Kuchmil, Enrique was put in charge of caring for his mother during the remainder of her hospital stay. He visited her daily, bought her medications, paid the hospital bills, prayed with his mother, and kept her spirits up. The operation cost 15,000 pesos (roughly equivalent to 1,500 dollars),

the bulk of which was paid by Reynaldo, Leonardo, and Horacio. Although it depleted their savings, they willingly paid this money. As Reynaldo tearfully explained, “She’s my mother. How could I not help? I would do anything for her.” It is important to note, however, that this generosity is not always forthcoming or even possible. When Enrique asked his brothers to share the cost of the Omnilife herbal treatment that Enrique believed would improve their mother’s health, they refused. “How could they not help? Can’t they see that it is helping her get better?” Enrique recalled with bitterness.

Dofña Olga’s sons were accustomed to visiting their mother in the hospital because she was frequently sick with gall bladder infections. During each hospitalization, they made the trip to Valladolid. Since it was difficult to get time off during the high tourist season (December through April), her sons alternated making these trips. Horacio informed me that making these visits was important. He explained that it was easy to send money with a relative, but these visits were his way of showing his mother that he cherished her. Although this role was not as physically demanding as the one expected of Maya women, it involved the same sentiments. These men eagerly sought to demonstrate their devotion, empathy, and commitment to their families through their brief visits. Indeed, just as Mexican masculinities are not static but “diverse and contradictory” (Gutmann 1996, 246; see also Amuchástegui and Szasz 2007; Brandes 2002; Carrillo 2002; Gutmann 2007), what it means to be a man in Maya society involves more than stereotypical representations of masculine behavior. It also entails displays of vulnerability, compassion, and duty toward one’s family. Maya men’s and women’s expressions of affect may sometimes be displayed in distinct ways, but their feelings spring from the same sense of obligation and social ties. As third world feminists have shown, men’s and women’s social identities and community activism are deeply influenced by affective ties (Delgado Bernal 1998; Ochoa 2004; Pardo 1998). Examining

the multiple ways Maya men and women care for their families helps us think critically about how gender, work, and love shape both men's and women's experiences of migration and community development.

The May Kauil's experience was typical of how male migrants from Kuchmil cared for their ailing and elderly relatives in the countryside. Although men's emergency visits did not involve the physical acts of nurturance, such as cleaning and feeding their mother, that women typically performed, they did involve transmissions of love and empathy. Such practices uphold the community ideal of *convivencia*. Caring for elderly parents, even in the most elementary form of an emergency visit, reflects Maya men's efforts to maintain and reproduce cultural practices that are deeply embedded in Maya life—that is, to respect elders, care for one another, and support one's family. In Maya society, the nuclear household is the primary unit of social organization, and its independence is central to community life, especially in a subsistence economy. It is not surprising, then, to find that social relationships are highly localized and gendered. Over half of the migrant households in Kuchmil installed landline telephones or purchased cell phones to facilitate contact with their families and transmit emotional support.

Indeed, caregiving flows both ways. Even as migrants served as caregivers during illnesses and other family crises, their families did so as well. Thus Maya parents traveled to Cancún to care for their sick children. They also took care of their migrant children's offspring. The case of Ofelia Kauil Mo provides an example of this type of caregiving. Ofelia's parents were migrants from Kuchmil. Tanya, Ofelia's mother, left Kuchmil as a young girl in order to work as a domestic servant and nanny for a schoolteacher in a neighboring town. When Tanya turned eighteen years of age, she moved to Cancún because her aunt informed her that domestic servants earned higher wages. In Cancún, Tanya reconnected

with the small community of migrants from Kuchmil. She eventually married a young migrant from Kuchmil, and then quit working. For years, they squeezed their family of six into a rented apartment while they saved money for a down payment and petitioned the Instituto de la Vivienda del Estado de Quintana Roo (Housing Institute of Quintana Roo, or INVIQROO) for a plot of land. Once their petition was granted, however, they did not have enough money to build a house. At this point, Tanya decided to reenter the labor force. Her neighbor offered to care for Tanya's three sons after school, but since she could not find anyone to care for three-year-old Ofelia during the day, she sought help from her parents in Kuchmil. They agreed to care for Ofelia there.

After Tanya's house was built, Ofelia did not return to Cancún. Instead, her parents decided to leave her in Kuchmil for four years. They did so for two reasons. First, the fees for preschool and kindergarten were lower in Kuchmil than in Cancún, which allowed them to save more money. Second, they considered Kuchmil a much safer place to raise a child. Unlike her older brothers, Ofelia did not spend her early childhood locked up in a tiny, cramped, and poorly ventilated apartment. Instead, she spent her afternoons playing and roaming the village and nearby forest with other children her age. Although her parents missed her dearly, they considered this exposure to be invaluable for the development of Ofelia's cultural identity. They were troubled by their three sons' limited fluency in Maya and lack of knowledge about Maya cultural practices, traditions, and history. By living in Kuchmil, Ofelia grew up speaking Maya and learning the customs and traditions of her ancestors. Ofelia is the only child in her family to speak fluent Maya, to know personally every family in Kuchmil, to consider her grandparents as second parents, and to participate in the rituals and traditions beyond the annual fiesta, during which most migrants return to Kuchmil. As a result, Ofelia's emotional attachment to Kuchmil runs deep.

Indigenous communities facing increasing migration must come to terms with the loss of many vital members. As they raise their families in Cancún, Maya migrants also struggle to retain their cultural and ethnic identity, an identity that for many years has relied upon originating from a particular locale, from knowing their ancestors' *b'eh*—the path their ancestors took to preserve their family ties, customs, and traditions in the face of war, starvation and the indentured servitude imposed by colonial and postrevolutionary governments. Although migration does not sever these connections, it does limit one's exposure to this history and way of life. To avoid their children's alienation from these roots, Maya migrants send their children to Kuchmil. These extended stays provide these children with a sense of belonging and of knowing from where they come, and they foster an attachment to a particular landscape, place, and people. Without these ties, Maya migrants believe their children will be lost. In the process, Kuchmil has gained new members that are committed to the community's vitality, traditions, language, and people. To thrive and avoid ending up as a repository for the elderly, Kuchmil needs this type of exchange. Progress for indigenous communities, then, is not just rooted in economics, but also in maintaining and strengthening emotional relationships across space and through time. Expressions of joy, respect, and concern motivate practices like caregiving that promote *convivencia* within and among families in Kuchmil.

### **Conclusion**

Robert Alvarez suggests that people's decisions to migrate and their migration experiences cannot be fully explained by economic and political factors. Similarly, what people give cannot be fully understood through cost-benefit analyses (1987). As we strive to understand the complexity of migration experiences, third world feminists remind us that we need to concern ourselves with how affect in conjunction with political and economic factors shapes these experiences for both migrant and natal communities. Indeed, through acts

of care and love expressed by both women and men, albeit in distinct ways, Kuchmil migrants contribute to their families' physical and emotional well-being. Women show their devotion and concern through both companionship and caregiving, whereas men demonstrate these feelings through brief acts of caregiving. These sentiments did not always challenge or transform gender relations; in some instances they were predicated on sustaining such relationships. Nonetheless, sentient resources increased solidarity between migrants and their natal families and promoted a sense of belonging and community. It is this process that builds communities of sentiment and reminds us of the intimate work that both men and women perform.

The case studies presented here suggest that development takes place in far more complex and subtle ways than the narratives of underdevelopment have led us to believe. By providing emotional support for their rural families, migrants filled a need that is rarely addressed and recognized by government programs. Feelings of love, commitment, and belonging are necessary for indigenous communities like Kuchmil to retain members who are tempted to migrate and to propel those who have migrated to return. To fully understand how rural and indigenous communities are developed, we must also recognize that migration is a gendered experience—even what migrants give and how they give is gendered (Castellanos 2003). Maya women's and men's migration experiences challenge the patriarchal ideals that continue to determine who migrates, where migrants work, and which filial responsibilities men and women assume as they move back and forth between Kuchmil and Cancún. In many cases, what constitutes "progress" in rural Mexico may be premised on patriarchal assumptions that men will lead and women will follow. In contrast, these case studies show that, among Maya men and women, women can lead and men will follow, that men as well as women desire to express their feelings, and that experiences of intimacy strengthen community ties and enhance development projects.

My findings suggest that love, anger, and loneliness help imagine community and their lack may weaken social relationships across transnational borders (cf. Espiritu 2003). Yet studies of transnational communities address belonging and citizenship largely in terms of political and civic engagement; indeed, an emphasis on rationality continues to pervade theories of migration. If we are to more fully understand both transnational communities and migration itself, we must also understand the sentiments and affective ties that undergird migrants' experiences of transnational belonging and citizenship. Recent work by third world feminists has begun to address the role affect plays in the formation and maintenance of transnational communities (Gutiérrez Nájera 2007, forthcoming; Ibarra 2003a; McKenzie and Menjívar n.d.; Pérez 2004; Schmidt Camacho 2006; Zavella 2006). These studies show how feelings are used to propel women to *el norte*, to negotiate difference, and to challenge neoliberal policies. But feelings also have the capacity to produce community. In the case of Kuchmil, they build and sustain an indigenous community and give migrants a sense of belonging rooted in Maya customs, traditions, and language. I urge researchers to examine the productive capacity of sentient resources within the context of transnational migration. I pose the following questions to guide future research: How do sentiments construct class, gender, race, and power relations within transnational communities? How do feelings promote or undermine notions of belonging? How does affect shape what citizenship means and how it is experienced?<sup>9</sup>

Tracking the distribution of both monetary and non-monetary contributions improves our understanding of the complex ways that migrants and immigrants participate in their natal communities. This comprehensive approach to what migrants give offers an alternative vision of what modernity and development mean to indigenous residents of the Mexican countryside, and of how community may be imagined by indigenous and mestizo

immigrants in the United States. It reminds us that sentiments matter and play a constructive role in community formation and in the maintenance of transnational ties.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> To avoid over reliance on the term “sentiments,” I use it interchangeably with the terms “feelings,” “affect,” “emotions,” and “the emotive,” although I acknowledge that the multiple meanings of these terms may not coincide.

<sup>2</sup> Economic remittances vary in form (cash, savings, and durable goods; Durand 1988), function (wages, investment, and capital; Durand 1994), and type (family, collective, and entrepreneurial; Goldring 2004).

<sup>3</sup> My definition of “social capital” is based on Pierre Bourdieu’s work (1986). Bourdieu’s interest in the “disinterested,” that is, the non-economic aspects of mercantile exchange led him to suggest that capital manifests itself not just as an economic form, but also as cultural and social phenomena. The disinterested, emotive aspects of social relationships and exchange have been overlooked within social capital theory because they do not necessarily convert into economic capital. By examining the emotive aspects of relationships within a migrant circuit, this study attempts to address this oversight. See Bourdieu 1986, 243.

<sup>4</sup> I use pseudonyms for my informants, their village (“Kuchmil”), and the surrounding rural communities, but not for cities such as Valladolid, Cancún, and Mérida.

<sup>5</sup> The concept of development and how it is experienced has changed as development policies have been put into action. Rooted in efforts to improve the living conditions of former colonies in the 1930s and 1940s, development programs, with the aid of affluent nations, are intended to modernize and to create social change among poor nations. Once implemented, this “development orthodoxy,” which included “foreign aid and investment on favorable terms, the transfer of knowledge of production techniques, measures to promote health and education, and economic planning,” would give poor nations the chance to catch up with rich, industrialized nations (Cooper and Packard 1997, 2). The impact of these programs has varied from region to region and from nation to nation; few actually decreased the widening income gap between the “first” and “third” worlds. Not surprisingly, development programs have been critiqued for adopting an evolutionary, capitalist framework that, in many cases, neither respects nor incorporates local, cultural and economic practices, and for generating an apparatus of control and surveillance by which affluent nations can exert influence over poor ones (Escobar 1995). Nevertheless, this

discourse of development has been difficult to escape, as María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo clearly shows for revolutionary movements in the Americas, which continue to promote teleological conceptions of subjectivity and agency (2003).

<sup>6</sup> Here I place “development” in quotation marks to differentiate this type of social change from the “development orthodoxy” that dominates local and international conceptions of progress.

<sup>7</sup> In Mexico, children proceed from elementary school to the *secundaria*, which includes grades seven through nine.

<sup>8</sup> Arlie Russell Hochschild defines “emotional labor” as “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial or bodily display” within a work setting (1983, 7). Studies of care workers have broadened Hochschild’s definition by showing that the feelings required or expected in this type of work are not just displays, but can also stem from true expressions of tenderness and concern.

<sup>9</sup> These questions guide my new research project with Maya immigrants in Los Angeles. I consider sentient resources to be vital in nurturing the emotional health of migrants and their relatives in Mexico. Additionally, I examine how an attachment to a particular geographic and social space affects indigenous migrants’ efforts to build transnational communities.

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