

# POSTHUMOUS TRANSNATIONALISM

## Postmortem Repatriation from the United States to Mexico

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*Abstract: This article discusses the sustained and increasingly institutionalized transnational practice of repatriating the bodies of deceased Mexican migrants from the United States to their hometowns in Mexico. Far from being a strictly private transnational practice, migrants' desire for a posthumous return and burial in their homelands is popularly expressed in the memories, music, and everyday exchanges of the Mexican diaspora. Drawing on transnational ethnographic research in Los Angeles, California, and Zacatecas, Mexico, this article documents how the Mexican state has institutionalized this process at the transnational, national, state, and municipal levels of governance. Last, the article discusses the role of migrant family and social networks in these repatriations. The goals of this article are to provide a preliminary cultural and institutional understanding of the practice of repatriating cadavers from the United States to Mexico and to discuss the implications of this process for the scholarly debate on migrant transnationalism.*

Nuestras vidas son un continuo peregrinar entre el aquí y el allá . . .

*Octavio Paz*

This article discusses the increasingly institutionalized practice of repatriating the bodies of deceased Mexican migrants from the United States to their communities of origin in Mexico. Strikingly, this practice has not been confined to migrants who die in attempted border crossings into the United States. In addition to the hundreds of migrants who die at the border each year, there are also thousands of temporary, long-term, and settled U.S. migrants who form part of this posthumous return migration. Since 1997, the number of migrants who die trying to cross the Mexico-U.S. divide has averaged more than three hundred per year (Inda 2007). By comparison, posthumous repatriations have averaged around ten thousand annually in recent years (Lestage 2008). The vast majority of Mexican migrant deaths occur not at the border but inside the territorial United States as a result of work-related or vehicular accidents, homicide, and natural or other causes (Lestage 2008). There are a wide variety of circumstances under which posthumous repatriations occur, and the deceased repatriates span the

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full gamut of legal statuses—undocumented migrant, legal permanent resident, naturalized U.S. citizen. In some instances, it is a decision made by the remaining family in the village of origin who, lacking legal entry into the United States, want to see their loved one for the final time. Other times it is the decision of the immediate family in the United States who are planning on eventually returning permanently to Mexico. Yet in other circumstances, it is the expressed desire of migrants in life to be returned to their community of origin in death, thus exercising more decision in the matter.

For the scholars of Mexico-U.S. migration who document the cross-border flows of financial and social remittances and transnational politics, it should not be difficult to accept this as yet another form of migrant transnationalism (see, e.g., Rouse 1991, 1992, 1995; Goldring 2002; Fox 2005; Smith 2006; Fox and Bada 2008; Smith and Bakker 2008). However, for the skeptics of transnationalism, this practice raises a set of theoretical and normative questions. An insistent critique of the transnationalism literature suggests that over time, migrants in the United States experience foreign detachment. The sociologist Roger Waldinger makes a compelling case that international migration is not simply a social phenomenon but a political one as well. "States seek to bound the societies they enclose," he writes; "they strive to regulate membership in the national collectivity as well as movement across territorial borders" (Waldinger 2007, 343). Correspondingly, "Nationals, believing in the idea of the national community, endeavor to implement it, making sure that membership is only available to some, and signaling to the newcomers that acceptance is contingent on conformity" (344). The bounded community or container society exerts a series of assimilatory pressures on migrants, thus leading to foreign detachment over time. "[A]s the ex-foreigners nationalize, they accept and internalize the social models prevailing among the nationals, replacing old country with new country solidarities" (347).

In a more recent iteration, Waldinger (2008) further nuances his argument, suggesting that the degree and nature of "trans-state activity" depends on where migrants stand on the trajectory of political or social incorporation. "Given the rise of massive state apparatuses controlling population movements between states, not everyone can move from 'host' to 'home' country and back with equal ease." Further advancing his political caging hypothesis, Waldinger insists: "states 'cage' the populations residing on their territory, constricting social ties beyond the territorial divide, while reorienting the activities toward the interior." In this view, settlement is the end result. Over time, "ties to the home environment wither: the locus of significant social relationships shifts to the host environment as settlement occurs" (9). If this account is to be accepted, then the transnational practice of repatriating the bodies of migrants who have died in the United States, particularly long-term migrants, becomes even more intriguing and worth examining.

How common is the practice of repatriating the bodies of migrants who die in the United States? Although posthumous repatriations appear to be a minority affair, like other forms of transnationalism, the numbers are not insignificant. Lestage (2008) estimates that one of every six Mexican migrants who dies in the United States is repatriated to Mexico. Figures from Mexico's Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) report an average of thirty deceased Mexican migrants

repatriated from the United States each day. The recorded transfer of deceased Mexican migrants increased from 9,877 in 2004 to 9,913 in 2005 and 10,398 in 2006. Mexican consulates throughout the United States are responding daily to co-nationals' need to repatriate their dead, as are hometown associations and informal social networks in migrant communities. These patterns raise a couple of interrelated questions. First, why do Mexican migrants desire and realize a burial in their communities of origin, and what does this practice imply for dual loyalties and migrant ethnic attachments? Second, who are the government and institutional actors involved—on both sides of the border—and what is their role and view of this practice? Drawing on transnational ethnography between Los Angeles and Zacatecas, Mexico, this article presents interviews with elected and appointed officials, unpublished data from the Mexican consulate in Los Angeles, and qualitative interviews with the families of twenty deceased repatriates to provide preliminary answers to these questions.<sup>1</sup>

Focusing on Zacatecas offers several analytic advantages. Located in north-central Mexico, Zacatecas is one of the historical migrant-sending states and has had among the highest out-migration rates. Over time, the state government of Zacatecas has taken a pioneering role on issues related to the diaspora ranging from job-creation schemes using migrant remittances, to allowing migrants to run for office in state and municipal elections. In that sense, Zacatecas has been at the forefront of issues concerning migrant rights. To determine whether the same pattern applies to posthumous repatriations, it makes sense for Zacatecas to be the initial site of research. In addition, Zacatecas represents, in some respects, a microcosm of the broader landscape of migration in Mexico as a whole, offering variations in migration historicity across municipalities. Although the central and southern municipalities have seen recurrent circular migration to the United States for more than a century (e.g., Jerez), some of the northern municipalities such as Río Grande have experienced U.S.-bound migration on a large scale only since the 1980s, thus allowing for interesting comparisons at the substate level.

In providing an account of how the Mexican government has institutionalized this practice, I avoid reproducing the dichotomized debate regarding whether this is state-led transnationalism or strictly migrant-led transnationalism and suggest instead that, in the context of this practice, the two are interactive. In other words, even though this demand has existed among migrants well before the Mexican government responded to it in a systematic fashion, the recent effort by the Mexican state to institutionalize these repatriations certainly provides a political opportunity structure that will facilitate them in the future. Rather than making a unidirectional argument of institutionalized repatriations driven by the Mexican state, I make the case that repatriations are the outcome of a reciprocal process or "synergistic loop" negotiated by migrants and Mexican state institutions and actors (Iskander 2010, 255). Indeed, policy change around posthumous repatria-

1. Smith and Bakker (2005, 131) define transnational ethnography as "an ethnography of *places* and their *interconnections* rather than a place-focused ethnography of single locales." As part of a broader project that involves interviews with the families of deceased repatriates on both sides of the border, this study constitutes a transnational ethnography. The interviews presented here are with relatives of deceased repatriates in Mexico.

tions involved power struggles between migrant deputies, who prioritized this and other diaspora demands, and political actors not concerned with migrant affairs, whereas the Mexican state overall seems to follow its tendency to capitalize on such programs, if not co-opt them altogether. As Smith (2008, 709) puts it, "The increasing creation of extra-territorial or diasporic bureaucracies, and laws regulating diasporic behaviour, enables greater and more effective channeling of migrant demands, but also their regulation and limitation."

In this article I develop a cultural analysis to illustrate that posthumous repatriation is a recurring theme in the transnational imaginaries and cultural production of rural mestizo Mexican migrants. Next, I present data from interviews with bureaucratic actors to document how the Mexican state has institutionalized posthumous repatriations at the transnational, national, state, and municipal levels of governance, as part of its broader effort of rapprochement with its diaspora. Finally, I discuss the role of migrant family and social networks in the cross-border process of repatriating cadavers.

#### UNDERSTANDING POSTHUMOUS REPATRIATION: CULTURE OF DEPARTURE, CULTURE OF RETURN

A sustained exodus over the past several decades in villages throughout rural Mexico has set in place not only the social networks necessary for emigration but also an entrenched culture of departure that has proved difficult to break (Quinones 2007). A constant influx of dollars has made local economies dependent on remittances to the extent that residents have few economic alternatives other than leaving for the United States (Moctezuma 2003). Migrant purchasing power on display in their home villages in the form of homes and other goods entices other villagers north. The journalist Sam Quinones (2007, 10) chronicles how the homes that migrants build in their communities of origin are a reminder to the locals of the "difference between emigrating and staying put." Every year, migrants return and add to their homes, "intending to retire to them one day." The homes, Quinones observes, "are immigrants' promise to return for good one day." "Yet, amazingly," he writes, "few immigrants ever retire to them." With urban jobs and school-age children in the United States, the trip home becomes increasingly difficult for these migrants. Although few migrants keep the promise of return, "the dream nevertheless lives on," Quinones (2007, 13) describes, "surreally filling Mexico with empty houses."

Quinones's observations resonate with the academic perspective on the "myth of return."<sup>2</sup> Although Mexican migrants often plan for a return, scholars suggest, few return for good, in life. However, as this article suggests, many Mexican migrants are indeed returning permanently after death, thus fulfilling that dream posthumously. Because a return in life is uncertain, the desire for a posthumous return to the community of origin is a recurring theme in the collective memories, everyday exchanges, and cultural production of rural Mexican migrants. The

2. I take the term "myth of return" from a chapter by Jones-Correa (1998).

following section describes how migrants express their desire for posthumous repatriation in their music.

### *Music, Migration, Repatriation*

An enduring desire for a return to their *tierra*, even after death, is a recurring trope in the transnational imaginaries of rural Mexican migrants. Although posthumous repatriation involves private and kinship-based decision making, the sentiment behind this practice is a common theme in the cultural production of the Mexican diaspora (on the difference between public and private transnational practices, see Itzigsohn and Saucedo 2002). Mexican regional music and its diasporic reproductions are a particularly rich social text in which one can find repeated references of a desire for a burial in Mexico. Posthumous repatriation and diasporic nostalgia are recurring themes in the lyrics of such popular artists as Vicente Fernández and the late Antonio Aguilar, whose songs are ubiquitous in the Mexican diaspora.

In a song titled “Mi ranchito,” a song not necessarily about international migration but certainly about departure and conceptions of homeland, Vicente Fernández describes the two as follows:

*Allá atrás de la montaña, donde temprano se oculta el sol,  
quedó mi ranchito triste y abandonada ya mi labor. . . .  
Ay, corazón que te vas para nunca volver, no me digas adiós.*

Over there, behind the mountain, where the sun sets,  
is my sad little ranch and abandoned my labor . . .  
Ay, dear heart that departs to never return, do not bid me farewell.

Far from being mere romantic or pastoral language, Fernández’s lyrics capture the nostalgia shared by many Mexican migrants who were displaced from their agrarian lives in Mexico’s destitute ranching states. In contrast to conventional accounts of a voluntary labor migration, the lyrics illustrate the difficulty of abandoning the community of origin and the loved ones therein. Like many of Fernández’s songs, “Mi ranchito” is a longtime favorite in Mexican regional music. Tellingly, Cumbre Norteña, a Los Angeles *norteño* band comprising U.S.-born Mexican youths, recently covered the song and perform it regularly in nightclubs throughout the city to audiences of recently arrived and U.S.-native Mexican youths.

Similarly, in their song “Zacatecano,” Conjunto Río Grande, a *norteño* band similar to Cumbre Norteña but whose members are Zacatecas natives, describe the reasons for migrating and subsequent diasporic identity:

*Adiós amigos, adiós mi linda tierra. Me voy muy lejos, la pobreza me lleva. . . . Cuanta tristeza al dejar a mi familia, con la esperanza de darles mejor vida. . . . Hoy que me encuentro muy lejos de mi tierra, por un destino en un lugar lejano, te juro hermano por Dios que no es mentira, que orgullo siento de ser zacatecano.*

Farewell friends, farewell my beautiful land. I leave to a distant place, poverty takes me away. . . . How sad I feel to leave my family, with the hope of providing them a better life.

... Now that I am far from my land, in a distant place, I swear to you brother, how proud I am to be Zacatecan.

Again, these lyrics challenge the notion of Mexican migration as an autonomous process by pointing to rural poverty as the condition of exit. Moreover, the song conveys the recurrent nostalgia for the local homeland (in this case, Zacatecas), as well as the invigorated ethnic pride that migrants experience when they are displaced from their land. Although the members of Conjunto Río Grande reside in Zacatecas, their music is popular in the Zacatecan diaspora, and they often perform in migrant communities in cities like Los Angeles, Dallas, Denver, and Chicago. Not surprisingly, Conjunto Río Grande and the L.A.-based *norteño* bands like Cumbre Norteña take after one another and share their musical repertoire. In this manner, musical forms between cultural actors in Mexico and the diaspora synergistically interact around notions of homeland and identity.

In addition to the recurrent themes of diasporic nostalgia and attachment, specific references to posthumous repatriation are not uncommon in Mexican regional music. To cite one of Vicente Fernández's most known songs, "México lindo y querido":

*México lindo y querido, si muero lejos de ti, que digan que estoy dormido y que me traigan aquí. . . . Que me entierren en la sierra, al pie de los magueyales.*

Mexico beautiful and adored, if I die far from you, let them say I am asleep and have them bring me to you. . . . Bury me in the sierra, by the maguey plants.

Here, Fernández makes a specific reference to posthumous repatriation that also invokes pastoral imagery. To connect this to "Mi ranchito," the lyrics suggest a posthumous return to the rural landscape that was initially abandoned. Chicano historians such as Gilbert González (1999) and others have borrowed directly from these lyrics to argue that "Mexico lindo" immigrants have historically been at the whim of government-orchestrated nationalism and thus politically demobilized at the interest of the Mexican and U.S. governments. In contrast, I argue that migrants' attachment to their homelands represents an autonomist connection that develops free from, if not against, the influence of the Mexican state, such that migrants' loyalty is to their local political communities, not necessarily their government. (For a discussion of how these local attachments and identities were historically constituted contra the central Mexican government, see Valerio-Jiménez 2002.)

References to posthumous repatriation occur across the different genres of Mexican regional music. From the corrido sphere, the late Chalino Sánchez sings:

*Adiós rancho de Las Milpas, del estado de Durango. Nunca te puedo olvidar, yo siempre te he recordado. Cuando muera me sepultan, ayá en mi rancho adorado.*

Farewell *rancho* Las Milpas, from the state of Durango. I can never forget you; I have always remembered you. When I die, bury me in my beloved ranch.

Here, we see a similar diasporic memory and longing for the home locality. In this corrido, the homeland is specified beyond the state level to the particular *rancho*, indicative of migrants' tendency to identify primarily with their *patria chica*.



The following excerpt is from a song by Los Invasores de Nuevo León, characteristic of Monterrey's norteño genre:

*Estoy tan lejos de esa tierra tan querida, de mi familia que me espera en Nuevo León. Ahora estoy preso, sentenciado de por vida y mi salida será con rumbo al panteón. . . . Solo me queda soñar con mi linda tierra. . . . No me arrepiento de todo lo que me pasa, por la esperanza de querer vivir mejor. Solo quisiera que el día que yo me muera me sepultaran en tierra de Nuevo León.*

I am so far from that beloved land, from my family who awaits in Nuevo León. Now I am imprisoned, sentenced for life and my release will be to the cemetery. . . . All I can do is dream of my beautiful land. . . . I don't regret everything that happened to me, all for wanting a better life. I only wish the day I die, I'll be buried in Nuevo León's soil.

Like the previous selections, this passage makes reference to a beloved local homeland and family left behind. In addition, this song alludes to the racialized criminalization that migrants encounter in their pursuit of a "better" life in the United States. In this song, the protagonist is literally and symbolically imprisoned. This scenario is symbolic in that the United States itself acts as a prison for many undocumented migrants, as Waldinger (2008) has argued. However, neither the protagonist's immediate cell nor the militarized U.S. border can effectively constrain his ability to "dream of my beautiful land" or his desire for a posthumous return to Nuevo León, as a final wish.

In a more commercial vein, Los Tigres del Norte make reference to posthumous repatriation as follows:

*Como el águila en vuelo . . . desafiando fronteras, defendiendo el honor, he pasado la vida explorando otras tierras para darle a mis hijos un mañana mejor. Si la muerte me alcanza en su loca carrera, envuelto en mi bandera que me lleven allá. Que me canten el himno de mi patria diez meses o me muero dos veces si me entierran acá.*

Like the eagle in flight . . . defying borders, defending honor, I've spent my life exploring other lands to provide my children a better future. If death meets me in its frantic race, draped in my flag, I ask that I be taken over there. Sing my country's national anthem for ten months or I will die twice if I am buried here.

As this section illustrates, a desire for a posthumous return to the community of origin is a recurring theme across several of the musical genres of rural Mexican migrants. Although posthumous repatriations cannot be directly attributed to the return ideologies expressed in these lyrics, they are not entirely a function of the political opportunity structure recently created by the Mexican government. A look at the historicity of posthumous repatriations in one classic migrant-sending municipality reveals that this practice predates the Mexican government's efforts at institutionalizing them (see figure 1). Before discussing the Mexican government's institutionalization of these repatriations in greater detail, a word on gender and migration is in order.

#### *Gendered Accounts of the Homeland?*

It is important to consider that these accounts of the rural community of origin may be a function of "gendered memory" (Goldring 1996). In other words, recollections of the rural landscape of origin are informed by the social relations

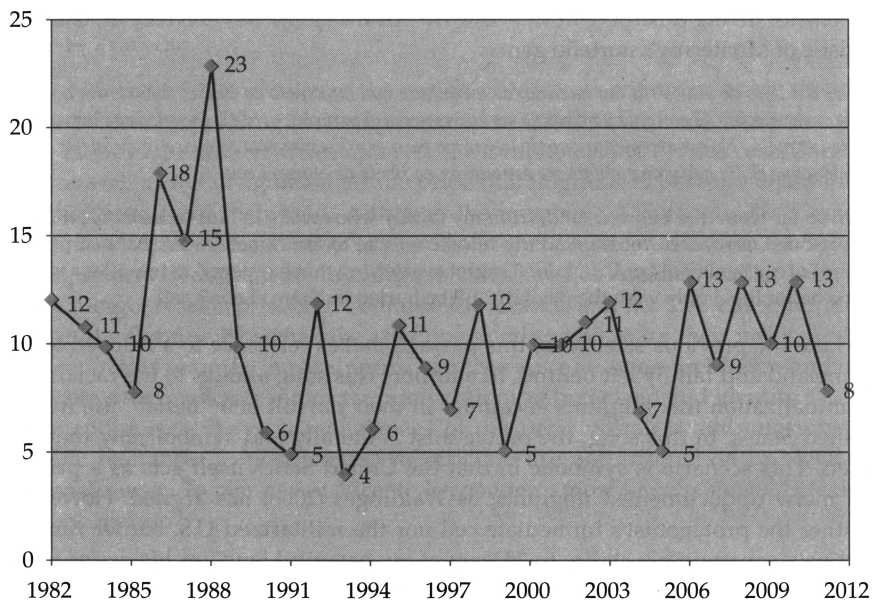


Figure 1 Posthumous Repatriations to Jerez, Zacatecas, 1982–2011

Note: Data collected by author from the *Notaria Parroquial* archive in Jerez, Zacatecas, and the Los Angeles Family History Center archive in California. Of 305 deceased repatriates accounted for between 1982 and May 2011, 69.5 percent were male and 30.5 percent were female.

and gender dynamics therein, thus producing contrasting return ideologies between male and female migrants. To this I add the transformative effect that international migration can have on gender norms and ideologies within Mexican migrant families (see Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). From the perspective of female Mexican migrants, for example, memories of the village of origin are associated with the surveillance of women and the social sanctions reserved for behavior deemed deviant from rancho and/or rural normativity (Goldring 1996). With the feminization of Mexican migration to the United States, women's entry in the labor force and their increased recourse to social-institutional outlets for redressing issues such as domestic abuse are among the factors challenging men's patriarchal authority in Mexican migrant households. Important life cycle events experienced in the United States also seem to consolidate settlement for migrant women therein. As Goldring (1996, 313) states, "being a mother in the United States tends to strengthen ties to the country—women who migrate are likely to bring their children to the United States or have children there. As children grow up and go to school in the United States, they too will most likely remain, marrying and raising their own families there. Women said it is very important to them to be near their children and grandchildren." This and other factors partly explain why migrant women envision their futures in the United States.



Gendered memory also partly explains male migrants' divergent return ideologies. In Goldring's and other ethnographic studies (Rouse 1992), Mexican migrant men envisioned the United States as a site for work and increasingly settlement, whereas they viewed the community of origin in Mexico as a site to visit for leisure, relaxation, and eventually retirement. Unlike women, most men in these studies expressed a desire to permanently return to Mexico upon retiring. The factors described previously, whereby male's influence over the micropolitics and gender norms of the family diminishes, may partly account for the desire to return. Related to this point, male migrants remember the rural community of origin as a place where they are free from the social and spatial discipline of life in the United States. In addition, the village of origin also offers the opportunity for male migrants to re-create and partake in traditional rural cultural activities—*coleaderos* (Mexican rodeo), *peleas de gallos* (cock fighting), and so on. Whether desire to return constitutes nostalgia for reclaiming male migrants' diminished *ranchero* masculinity or, conversely, their ethno-territorial identities—which are bound up in gender, class, and so forth—is open to debate. Nevertheless, the argument of gendered analyses of transnationalism is well taken: "The romanticization of rural place is belied by women's experiences there and should be guarded against to the extent that it privileges some voices and plans for the future while ignoring others" (Goldring 1996, 323).

The following section shifts focus to the view of bureaucratic actors involved in the process of repatriating cadavers from the United States to Mexico to trace how the Mexican government has institutionalized this practice at the transnational, national, state, and municipal levels of governance.

#### TRANSNATIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY:

##### THE VIEW FROM INSTITUTIONAL AND STATE ACTORS

###### *The Transnational Level: Mexican Consulate—Los Angeles*

Interviews with bureaucratic and state actors at the transnational, national, state, and municipal levels of governance proved useful in understanding the logistics, requirements, politics, economics, and culture behind posthumous repatriation.<sup>3</sup> At the transnational level, a joint interview with the consul in charge of administering these repatriations and the public relations director at the Mexican consulate in Los Angeles revealed that this was the first of fifty consulates to offer a subsidized program whereby Mexican families who are financially disadvantaged can receive material assistance to repatriate their dead. To facilitate this process, the consulate has partnered with six mortuaries in the county. The consul described the development of this program as follows:

Each consulate has diverse needs. I don't have the same demands as [the consul in] Calexico, Chicago, Atlanta, or Salt Lake City. Here [Los Angeles], given the demand and thanks to the consul general's efforts, a partnership was established with several mortuaries in the

3. The information for this section is from the author's interview at the Mexican consulate in Los Angeles in March 2007.

county. This is the only consulate with such an agreement. Thanks to this agreement six funeral homes in the county have offered a basic service at a very low cost. This basic package includes a coffin made of compressed wood, processing of all documentation necessary for the repatriation, embalming, and transportation of the body to an international airport.

Unlike Lestage's (2008) interpretation, which suggests that the repatriations occur as a result of the Mexican government's efforts to institutionalize them, the consul describes posthumous repatriations as a diaspora demand that emerges from migrants and their families, one to which the consulate subsequently responds. Lestage's analysis suggests that the Mexican government's efforts at institutionalization began in the administration of Vicente Fox. However, figure 1 illustrates that migrants' demand around this issue precedes the Mexican government's institutionalization, thus suggesting that state-led transnationalism and migrant-led transnationalism are mutually constitutive.

To qualify for this subsidized program, "the applicant must prove that he/she is financially disadvantaged and cannot cover this cost," the consul stipulated. "Aid is authorized for Mexican nationals," he added. "Part of the requirements is to accredit the identity and Mexican nationality of the deceased. Those are the two fundamental requirements: identity and Mexican nationality. Identity can be established by an official document belonging to the deceased and nationality can be established with a birth certificate, Mexican passport, a declaration of Mexican nationality or even a certificate of Mexican naturalization." When asked about dual nationals, the consul responded, "so long as you come to me and prove that the deceased is a Mexican national, not an American citizen, I can provide the aid."

Regarding the politics behind this program, the consul provided a detailed account. In 2004, the Mexican congress provided consulates with funds specifically designated for subsidizing posthumous repatriations. Under this arrangement, the central authorities established a spending cap for the aid destined for repatriating a body: "No consulate can provide more than [US]\$1,500.00 in financial support for this end, except for exceptional cases. What are those cases? Well, for example, if there are two or more deaths in the same family, in which case the financial cost for the survivors is too great. Under such circumstances, the appropriate consulate solicits authorization and the central authorities decide whether financial assistance will exceed the established amount."

It was apparent from the consul's tone that the legislation allocating aid specifically for posthumous repatriation was not well received by all policy makers involved: "There may be officials who prefer to invest these funds elsewhere. Some have inquired, 'why invest in the dead instead of on migrants who are still alive?' A lot of money is invested in these repatriations. In 2004, out of the 120 million pesos authorized by congress, 55 million were designated for the dead. It does not make sense. Half of the budget to transfer the dead? That money could be utilized to facilitate legal processes."

Mexico's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been committed to assisting posthumous repatriation since the 1980s, according to the consul. "However, the budget was limited then. If an applicant received \$200.00 that was generous."

Again making reference to the increasing demand, the consul added, "But the issue became more and more salient. And of course, it also matters how some legislators or state governing bodies view this issue. If legislators have made it an issue to allocate 50 percent of the consulate budgets exclusively for posthumous repatriation, then so be it." This comment suggests an important role played by certain legislators, likely those from high-emigration regions in Mexico, a point I return to in the interview with the late federal congressman Andrés Bermúdez.

Regarding the large sum devoted to posthumous repatriation, the consulate provided the following data. In 2005, the consulate in Los Angeles assisted a total of 216 families to repatriate a deceased loved one, spending US\$277,636. In addition, the overall number of bodies repatriated with and without financial assistance from the Mexican consulate in Los Angeles during the period 2003–2005 increased from 1,344 to 1,418.

Regarding where posthumous repatriation happens more often, the consulate provided the number of deceased repatriates by state of origin for the years 2004–2007. Not surprisingly, high-emigration states such as Jalisco and Michoacán were near the top of the list. However, other traditional sending regions such as Zacatecas were relatively lower. This could be a function of mortality rates, or more interesting, it could be an indication of socioeconomic status and/or immigrant incorporation in the United States. As the director of public relations suggested, "It also depends largely on the amount of time spent in the U.S. by Zacatecas. For instance, there may be a lot of Zacatecas who no longer have links to Zacatecas and thus are buried here. Not everyone wants to be buried over there because the whole family is now here." Considering an alternative explanation, she stated, "Or perhaps Zacatecas have enough money to repatriate their dead without support from the consulate." Although this article is an initial attempt at addressing this question, the idea that burial site may be an indicator of migrant loyalty and/or attachment merits further consideration.

When asked about the motives behind posthumous repatriations, the consul responded, "Some say 'it was his/her last wish to be buried in the community of birth' . . . but I believe that one of the reasons why they do not bury them in the U.S. is simply the cost. It is much more expensive to bury them here."

The view that the decision to repatriate a cadaver is the result of a simple cost-benefit analysis is at odds with the cultural framework presented in this article, as expressed in the interviews with the relatives of deceased repatriates. The following section scales down to the state level of analysis and focuses on two institutions central to the process of repatriating cadavers: the Zacatecas international airport and the state migration institute.

#### *The State Level: General Leobardo Ruiz International Airport, Calera, Zacatecas*

Indicative of the Mexican government's effort to institutionalize this process at the state level, in January 2008, public health authorities in Zacatecas appointed a full-time medical doctor to the state's international airport to oversee and administer the arrival of cadavers on international flights, making this the first interna-

tional airport in the country with such an arrangement.<sup>4</sup> The doctor described the nature of his work as follows:

Over the course of the last six months we have coordinated with the airport authorities, through committee meetings, and we requested that we receive all official medical documents concerning every cadaver that arrives at this airport. Previously there was no such coordination or no established process. . . . Now there is a commitment on behalf of the actors involved in carrying out these repatriations and those receiving the cadavers. Thanks to our committee meeting and our request per the Zacatecas public health services, they are now following these guidelines and honoring the commitment on behalf of the agency that processes these repatriations.

The doctor also described the work of the different actors involved in the international process of repatriating a cadaver:

The transfer of the body is coordinated by a foreign funeral agency, via the consular network which approves of the participating funeral agencies and the persons in charge of preparing the preservation of the body. Thereafter, the body is transferred from the place of death, which is often their place of residence abroad, back to the place of origin, which in most cases is here in Zacatecas or in a neighboring state like Durango or any other state that may not have access to an international airport. Finally, from this airport we hand the body over to a local funeral home.

Upon arrival at the airport, the doctor and his staff expect that each cadaver have the appropriate medical documentation, ranging from the death certificate to the mortuary that prepared the preservation of the body. "We also corroborate that the body is transported in an appropriately sealed container so that it can leave the airport to the cemetery."

Although the international airport in Calera, Zacatecas, has taken a leading role on this matter, the doctor said, "We still have challenges to overcome and actions to consolidate." Ideally, the doctor detailed, every cadaver should arrive along with a series of documents accrediting not only the death certificate but also "a signature from the preparer and the procedure they followed for the preservation of the body. In this manner, they are in some ways guaranteeing that the body will not arrive in a state of decomposition." Regarding this documentation, "some are very thorough," he said, but most are not.

All cadavers should arrive with the necessary documentation, they should not simply arrive and hand them over to me. They should first furnish all of these documents, including the note from the Mexican consulate, the certificate from the embalmer and an official document from the doctor who certified the death. Only upon reviewing these three key documents should I authorize the exit of the cadaver from the airport and its transfer to the cemetery. This should be the process for the reception and exit of each cadaver. But it rarely happens this way. In some cases many of these documents are missing. I need these three documents as per the official procedure of repatriating cadavers. This should be consolidated not only in this country but in every country and in every state of this country. This is fundamental for public health and for the repatriation of cadavers.

4. Information for this section is from author's interview at the Zacatecas international airport in June 2008.

The doctor suggested that the increasing institutionalization of this transnational practice is in large part because of the efforts of the Zacatecas state government.

When a *paisano* dies abroad and there are no resources for the autopsy, the embalming of the corpse, its repatriation to this airport and to its place of origin, part or all of the costs are absolved and the process on the U.S. side is expedited. It has been the prerogative of the governor of Zacatecas, Amalia García, that when somebody dies in the U.S. the state government assist the family members here who otherwise might not have the resources to repatriate their loved one for burial in their place of birth.

As the doctor described, and as the following section shows in greater detail, the Zacatecas state government has invested considerably in this process: "I think this is due to the sensibility of two key actors: the *gobernadora* Amalia García Medina and the director of health services in our state to take proactive action to guarantee the health of our citizens in Zacatecas and beyond."

In contrast to my interview at the Mexican consulate in Los Angeles, my respondent at the international airport in Zacatecas had a very different opinion regarding the reasons migrants and their families repatriate their loved ones who have perished in the United States. Whereas my informants at the Mexican consulate suggested a simple cost-benefit calculation, the doctor in Zacatecas felt the reasons were profoundly cultural:

There is a popular proverb that says that where you bury your umbilical cord, that is where you ought to grow, reproduce, die and be buried. As a result of international migration, however, which is a multicausal phenomenon due to economic or ecological factors, people are displaced. However, to leave a loved one in a distant place once he or she is dead, would be like never accepting their death. People here say, "I want to see him/her to know for certain that he/she is dead." It is a common experience of mourning to not accept death. Having the corpse before you helps relatives accept death. On the other hand, this also allows them to share the last moment with the body, the *velorio* [wake] attended by the deceased's family, friends, and neighbors before burying him/her in the land of his/her birth; often times next to the tombs of his ancestors, father, mother, or brothers. In some cases, when a body was buried in a place other than his place of birth, there have been family disputes over this.

The doctor substantiated his observations with the nature of his work:

We have worked not only behind our desks, we have worked for many years in the field. We know the collective sentiment of the people, the cultural beliefs that they cherish during this process of immense loss and pain. I have seen people crying for their deceased loved one to be repatriated, and they continue mourning until they bury the body and they continue crying for days thereafter. They do not accept the person is dead until they have the body with them.

*Instituto Estatal de Migración, Zacatecas, Zacatecas*

My interview with the then director of the State Migration Institute (Instituto Estatal de Migración, IEM) in Zacatecas revealed the degree of policy convergence and increasing coordination between the Mexican federal and state government

with regard to posthumous repatriations. According to Fernando Robledo, "The state government and the federal government have the same policy regarding the repatriation of cadavers." As stated earlier, the federal government provides support via the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its consular network in the United States. Correspondingly, Robledo explained, state governments have followed suit and attended to this "social exigency concerning the repatriation of cadavers." In the view of Robledo, this demand "is gradually increasing year after year."

In response to this demand, the IEM in Zacatecas, like the Mexican government at the transnational and national levels, has taken steps to institutionalize and streamline the process of repatriating deceased migrants by establishing a bureaucratic protocol. The IEM has made an effort to systematically document these repatriations on a case-by-case basis. "In this office," Robledo shared, "we have statistics for years 2005 and 2006, including cause of death, which show an annual increase." In 2005, IEM attended to fifty-four repatriations in the state, whereas in 2006 the figure increased to seventy-six. Before 2005, the numbers were less reliable, again indicative of the recent efforts to institutionalize the process of repatriating deceased migrants. On record, IEM shows fourteen repatriations for year 2004, although Robledo suggested that the figure was closer to thirty-six and probably around thirty for 2003. "I was appointed to this office in November 2004 and that was all we could document because we did not have prior records or data," which suggests that the earlier groups of civil administrators had not thoroughly streamlined, institutionalized, or documented these repatriations since the IEM had been founded in 1999.

As per the protocol, "and as a matter of principle," Robledo explained, "as soon as family members walk into this office seeking aid, the staff immediately contacts the family in the U.S., in the presence of the party who is seeking assistance." Second, the staff contacts the corresponding consulate in the United States. "We don't leave it for another day, we attend to this issue at that very instant," Robledo continued. "This is an issue of principle and humanitarianism because death is a severe matter," he concluded.

Robledo emphasized that the state government of Zacatecas has established clearly defined criteria for administering posthumous repatriations: "The *gobernadora* [then Amalia García Medina] determined that we provide all the assistance possible. The earlier protocol required participation from four parties: the participation of the family of the deceased repatriate, the participation of the consulate, participation from the municipal government and from the state government."

When García Medina took office, she streamlined this protocol by eliminating the role of the municipal government, "due to the delay in providing funds on its part and the conflicts this would generate." Thus, the governor streamlined the protocol into three contributing parties: "contribution from the family, from the consulate, and from the state government" via IEM. Robledo mentioned that there are exceptional circumstances under which family members can go directly to the governor, who can then determine how to compensate the relatives of the deceased repatriate(s). In large part, these cases would be determined according to the "magnitude and social impact" of the repatriation(s), "for example, in case of collective deaths," Robledo explained. Under these circumstances, the gover-



nor may determine to cover most or all of the costs on the basis of his or her own judgment. When it is a border death, the SRE covers the cost of the repatriation in its totality. Exceptional cases notwithstanding, the point is that there is an institutional “mechanism to provide assistance for families who seek it,” he emphasized.

These “exceptional” cases of collective deaths, as Robledo suggested, often provide state actors the opportunity to respond in ways that can be widely construed as humanitarian. “When there are collective migrant deaths, say, for instance, a car accident in the U.S., this becomes news and this news takes on a different connotation,” Robledo stated. “For us [IEM], there is no difference administratively speaking. Relatives seek assistance from us in the same way that anybody else would. But when we are talking about collective deaths, the matter becomes politicized by municipal presidents and other officials and it becomes newsworthy. It becomes of political interest and you see the intervention of deputies, municipal presidents, and even the press requesting assistance, in some cases, before the family has sought us out.”

“What is very clear in the state government, thanks to the *gobernadora*,” Robledo emphasized, “are clearly defined institutional procedures for repatriations.”

Robledo concluded the interview by returning to the point of humanitarianism. “There is an administrative predisposition during this difficult process for families that is deeply humanitarian on the part of the public servant. There is profound humanitarian conviction here and it shows in how we deal with this process administratively,” he emphasized. The irony, of course, is that historically the Mexican government has failed to sufficiently address the structural causes of migration to begin with (e.g., rural poverty, unemployment).

#### *The Federal Level: Andrés Bermúdez*

To understand posthumous repatriation at the federal and municipal levels, I interviewed both Andrés Bermúdez and Serafín Bermúdez (on the personal and political trajectory of Andrés Bermúdez, see Quinones 2007; Smith and Bakker 2005, 2008). As migrant elected and/or appointed officials, posthumous repatriation was a priority on the Bermúdez brothers’ policy agendas. At the time of my interviews, the late Andrés Bermúdez was a *diputado migrante* in Mexico’s federal congress representing the second district of the state of Zacatecas, and Serafín occupied Andrés’s former position as mayor of Jerez, Zacatecas. As federal congressman, Andrés Bermúdez lobbied for an additional 12 million pesos on top of the already-existing funds destined for posthumous repatriation in January 2007. When asked what his fellow congressmen made of his proposal to funnel more funds for repatriating the bodies of deceased migrants to Mexico, he replied: “Many of them did not agree with the destination of these funds because, to put it simply, they do not know what it means to be a migrant.” He continued, “They need to know what it is like to be a migrant. What it is like to have your son, your brother or your father’s body arrive so that it can be buried in his *colonia* or *pueblo* along with his other family members,” thus signaling the gap between Mexican rural migrants and the elite political class that governs their country.

As a migrant himself, Andrés knew firsthand what the process of posthumous repatriation was like. In 1992, Andrés and his eldest brother José suffered a car accident in Oregon. José was fatally injured and, before dying, requested to be buried in Jerez, alongside his parents. Andrés described the process of repatriating his brother's body to Jerez as emotionally draining and bureaucratically cumbersome. For this reason, "We made it an issue to facilitate and speed up the process of repatriating a body," he said. "We spoke with Mexican airlines so that they can prioritize the space for transporting cadavers. Having a cadaver in an icebox is an ugly feeling. . . . For a mother to know that her son is dead but not know where he is or if he is frozen somewhere. . . . [T]his is why it is best to speed up the process." At the municipal level, Serafín Bermúdez agreed: "There ought to be three contributing parties for this process—the federal, state and municipal governments. Even if it is a minimal contribution, there ought to be some aid because the families, on that side or here, do not have the resources to transfer their dead."<sup>5</sup>

When asked why migrants wish to return to their land even after their deaths, Andrés responded:

Every migrant, from the moment we depart, from that very instant, we think, "I am going to return. I will return rich, I will return different, I am going to help my colonia, I am going to help my mother." We miss our land so much that when we are in the United States, we ask each other, "hey, if something were to happen to you, where do you want to end up?" "Well, I want to return to my land. I want to be where my parents are; I want to be where my children are. I want to know that I returned to my pueblo. Alive or dead, but I want to return to my pueblo." Some unfortunately return in a casket. But their last wish was to be in their land. And that is exactly what we are trying to help them do.

Like the analysis of lyrics presented earlier, this excerpt captures migrants' nostalgia for their land and describes their dreams of return migration. To connect this to the gender analysis discussed earlier, Bermúdez seems to imagine the deceased repatriates as males and frames his policy work around this issue with emotional appeals to the grieving mothers. In addition, Bermúdez suggests that, in the context of emigration, when a return in life is uncertain, migrants' desire for a posthumous repatriation is commonly expressed in everyday conversations and exchanges.

Bermúdez felt it was important to spread the word about the funds at the Mexican consulates to repatriate bodies home: "I want it to be known that there are funds available at every consulate. The easiest step for people in this situation is to go directly to the consul and to tell them that there is money there to take my loved one back to our land. We have to get the word out otherwise the consulate keeps whatever funds are not used at the end of the year." Bermúdez concluded on the following note: "I am here to represent my people. I always tell [elite politicians] that in order to do away with migration, they need to have been migrants themselves. I am tired of hearing *políticos* talk about migration this, migration that. Know it, live it, in order to do away with it. Nobody can do away with that which they have not felt."

Having discussed the views of institutional actors, it is important to conclude by discussing the views of migrants and their families. The following section

5. Author interview with Mayor Serafín Bermúdez, Jerez, Zacatecas, May 2007.

discusses interviews with family members of deceased repatriates in villages across two migrant-sending municipalities in Zacatecas, one classic sending (Jerez) and one recent sending (Río Grande).

#### THE VIEWS OF MIGRANTS AND THEIR FAMILIES

##### *Jerez*

As a region with a long history of emigration to the United States, the migrant-sending villages in the *municipio* of Jerez have developed strong transnational social networks over time. These migrant networks prove to be an important mechanism in facilitating cross-border activities, ranging from sending remittances to repatriating a deceased migrant. In the absence of such robust networks, an institutionally complex process like repatriating a body can become even more cumbersome for the relatives involved. This point emerged in my fieldwork in the migrant-sending rancho of Los Haro, a community that has witnessed multiple posthumous repatriations over time (for a history of this community and its migrant network in the United States, see Nichols 2006). The following group interview with the family members of a deceased repatriate illustrates the central role of migrant social networks:

RESPONDENT 1: Several migrants from Los Haro who have died over there [in the United States] have been buried there. I think this is due to the fact that previously the migrants who were over there did not know how to proceed in these circumstances. There was nobody to guide us on how to complete the paperwork. We were helpless. It was like the world was crashing down on us. Today there is a lot of *raza* [migrants]—

RESPONDENT 2: [*interjecting*] Who offer a helping hand—

RESPONDENT 1: They are young migrants who were born here [in Los Haro] but they speak English well and they guide us.

AF: Were there others who helped you guys with the repatriation process?

RESPONDENT 2: Yes, they are migrants who have lived through similar situations, and they already know what action to take, they have some experience and they all come together to help and guide us on how to proceed.

Migrant social networks can provide information and also resources necessary for repatriation. A woman in Los Haro who lost her youngest son in an automobile accident while on his way to work in Napa, California, gratefully acknowledged this point: “The people over there helped us. . . . [T]hey helped us with money. A lot of folks donated money, including my son’s boss, my nephews and all of our people who reside over there. They all raised money and helped out so that we could bring my son back. May God bless them. Without their help, it would have been very difficult to bring my son back.”

The solidarity characteristic of migrant networks manifests itself in multiple ways when a migrant dies in the United States and is subsequently repatriated to the community of origin.<sup>6</sup> Because they have established communities on both

6. This is not to suggest that migrant networks are internally consistent. For a discussion of strained internal dynamics and problems of collective action within transnational communities in the Mexican context and beyond, see Nichols 2006; Bakker 2007; Guarnizo and Diaz 1999.

sides of the border, it was not uncommon for Jerez migrants to hold two vigils when a migrant died: one before repatriation and one following when the body arrived to the community of origin. Another interviewee in Los Haro, whose son died in the United States from health problems, described the U.S. vigil as follows: "A lot of people showed up over there. The service was held in a big chapel. It was full of people—his friends, acquaintances, and others all closely united. The woman who was saying the prayers said 'this young man was a good person, a good friend. It shows from all the people who are present.'"

The solidarity around a migrant's death in the United States was also expressed transnationally, as it was also common for folks in the United States to accompany the body back to Mexico. Such was the case described by another man in Los Haro whose son was murdered at his workplace in Colorado, who said that one of his son's coworkers traveled to attend the burial. "As well as another one of my sons who was over there," he explained.

This issue was further discussed in my interviews in the neighboring ranching village of El Durazno. When discussing the comparative costs of repatriation versus burial in the United States, one interviewee whose twenty-one-year old brother died in Los Angeles of health complications, suggested that, although the cost of a funeral and burial in the United States is greater, you have to account for the collective expenditures of the people who make the trip to Mexico for the burial of the body: "It's not just the cost of repatriating the body, you have to account for the costs of the family members who come." When asked who followed the body from the United States to Mexico, he recounted, "Within the family it was my mother, my father, plus four of my brothers, that is six, plus a brother-in-law, seven total." In my interviews in the village of El Cargadero, this pattern was particularly striking. With entire nuclear and extended families relocated in the United States, there were often considerable numbers of people who made the trip for the repatriation and burial of deceased migrants.<sup>7</sup> One interviewee recalled that when his son's father-in-law perished in the United States, all of his children came. "It must have been fifteen or twenty people," he recalled. He added, "but two months ago, one of my sons died over there and fifty-two people came. Ten of my children who reside in the U.S. came and all of their children and grandchildren. . . . [T]he entire airplane was full."

This section illustrates the important role of migrant social and family networks in providing support, both material and moral, for posthumous repatriations. It is important to note, however, that no matter how robust these networks, certain migrants are barred from returning as a result of financial and legal constraints. In my group interview in Los Haro, respondents said that, although it was typical that people return along with the deceased repatriate, it is usually those "who have the means to go back," alluding to legal reentry into the United States. When asked whether there was anybody who wanted to travel to Mexico but was unable to, my respondent in El Durazno stated, "Yes, of course, there

7. For an account of the migration history between El Cargadero and California, see Arellano's (2008) semiautobiographical *Orange County: A Personal History*.

were. One of them was my brother's wife, who could not leave the U.S. for legal reasons, and others who were in the process of regularizing their immigration status but had not yet attained legal permanent residence. And also there were some nephews who could not come because of the costs."

Another man in El Durazno whose son died in a vehicular accident in Van Nuys, California, in the early 1980s responded to the same question with a clear recollection, "Nobody came. My in-laws could not come because some of them didn't have papers and others because their jobs did not permit it. Back then there was a lot of work. . . . [T]hat is why nobody came."

### *Río Grande*

The municipality of Río Grande is comparable to Jerez in population size and migration intensity, but the families there had a qualitatively different experience with posthumous repatriations. Where Jerez is a historic migrant-sending region, Río Grande is a much more recent source of international migration to the United States. Among the more recent Río Grande migrants, particularly those who were undocumented, the process of repatriating a body proved considerably more difficult institutionally and financially. When a migrant circuit is in formation or nonexistent, migrants have little or no established social network to rely on for support. The bureaucratic and financial hardship of repatriating a body in such low-information contexts was expressed in my interviews in the Río Grande villages. One respondent in Las Esperanzas described the process of repatriating an extended relative as fraught with "countless sacrifices," on top of the personal grief. The surviving children of the deceased repatriate had gone into debt to finance the repatriation and were still paying off the costs at the time of the interview. Likewise, in Las Piedras, one respondent stated, "Two of three of my family members who have perished in the U.S. were brought back. Sadly, my father stayed over there because we did not have the resources to bring him back," alluding to the financial and institutional capacity needed for repatriation. A second respondent in Las Piedras whose son was murdered in Houston relied on his sister, who has a visa and happened to be visiting her daughters in Texas at the time of the homicide, for assistance with the repatriation from the U.S. side. One interviewee in El Fuerte put it thusly: "*los mojadados* [the undocumented] have no assistance whatsoever except for that offered by all the other *mojadados* who reside over there."

Even with less-established migrant networks, the Río Grande respondents relied on strategies of self-help for processing and financing the repatriations of their loved ones. Aid for repatriation often came from relationships that had been established in the United States with other individuals from their hometowns and beyond. One woman in El Fuerte who lost two of her sons from smoke inhalation when a fire consumed their living quarters said it was their friends in the United States who helped repatriate them to their village. "Their friends took care of everything" she said. "[My sons] had many friends, they were very friendly." In addition to coordinating the repatriation from the U.S. side, two friends accompa-

nied the bodies for their funeral in El Fuerte. In the nearby village of La Almoloya, a woman whose son was murdered in Texas was grateful to the persons who assisted with his repatriation. When I asked her if the aid came from individuals from La Almoloya who reside in the United States she replied, "People from all over the place helped us, may God bless them."

Although Río Grande as a whole is an emerging site of mass migration to the United States, I did encounter a smaller subset of long-term and established migrants in my interviews in the village of La Almoloya. Among the more established migrants who had attained legal permanent resident status in the United States, there was a qualitative difference in the process of repatriating a deceased migrant whereby the bureaucratic and financial burdens were considerably reduced. One woman in La Almoloya recounted the repatriations of several migrants in her immediate and extended family. About her brother-in-law's migration experiences, she said, "He left for the other side from a very young age. Initially he would migrate undocumented but he later managed to legalize his status as part of the amnesty." Widowed at an early age with no children, he lived with some of his nephews in Texas, where he worked until retiring at the age of sixty-five. He visited La Almoloya one to two times a year for a few weeks at a time. According to my interviewee, "When he was on his deathbed he asked that they not leave him over there [in the United States]. He wanted to return even though he had lived in the U.S. and had a mobile home there." After all, she concluded, "His wife, his parents, his two children are all buried here," thus suggesting that family and kinship ties also factor into migrants' desires to return. Upon his death, several of his nephews coordinated the repatriation. Once it was arranged, "seven of his nephews along with their families" accompanied the body for burial in La Almoloya.

In addition, her son had two repatriations in his immediate family: both his wife and his son died in the United States and were repatriated to La Almoloya. A long-term migrant to the United States, her son married a woman from his native La Almoloya and had three children. Initially, his family lived in La Almoloya, while he migrated to the United States seasonally. Once he regularized his status, he was able to sponsor his wife and young children for legal residence. Thereafter, the family moved to the state of Washington, where the father worked on a ranch. Tragically, the twenty-year-old son perished in a car accident in 2003 and was repatriated to La Almoloya, as was agreed on by both parents. When his mother developed cancer thereafter, she expressed her wish to die in La Almoloya, so she could be buried close to her son. As her condition worsened, she became confined to a hospital and was not allowed to travel to Mexico for medical reasons. "She said that if all she had left was a few days to live, she wanted to return to Mexico, but she was not allowed to return." There was no other choice but to await her death in the United States and repatriate her posthumously. If this had been an undocumented family or one with less robust migrant networks to turn to for aid, the repatriations may have been considerably more straining financially and emotionally. Last, it is also important to note that the main impetus for this repatriate was a desire to be close to her son, which suggests that



ties to kinship and place may play out differently depending on the gender of the migrant.

#### CONCLUSION: TRANSNATIONAL AFTERLIFE

This article has discussed the sustained and increasingly institutionalized transnational practice of sending the bodies of deceased Mexican migrants from the United States to their hometowns in Mexico, from the perspectives of state actors and migrants and their families. Far from being an apolitical trans-state activity, posthumous repatriation has profound political implications for both Mexico and the United States. In contrast to Waldinger's argument that the assimilatory pressures exerted by U.S. society and government eventually lead to migrant settlement, this article suggests that such political forces and constraints have not contained the Mexican diasporic imagination or the attendant transnational practice of repatriating the remains of deceased migrants to be inhumed in their communities of origin. At least for a considerable minority of migrants, who very well may have been settled in the United States for decades, cross-border loyalties live on and often materialize after death. When the institutions of migrant incorporation are perceived as discriminatory and punitive in the receiving context, it is no surprise that cross-border identities, loyalties, and orientations persist even among migrants who have become settled and politically engaged in the United States (see Félix 2008, 2010).

With regard to the Mexican state, posthumous repatriation simultaneously represents a crisis and an opportunity. On the one hand, it constitutes a potential crisis, because posthumous repatriation is a public reminder of the Mexican state's failure to provide livelihood for its migrant citizens who return deceased. Or, capitalizing on its recent "heroic migrant narrative" (Smith and Bakker 2008), posthumous repatriation can present an opportunity for the Mexican state to canonize its deceased repatriates like fallen soldiers into its "ghostly national imaginings" (Anderson 2006, 9). As Claudio Lomnitz (2005, 20–21) states, the political "deployment of death and the dead" and the "nationalization of an ironic intimacy with death is a singularly Mexican strategy." If, as Giorgio Agamben notes, "the inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the original—if concealed—nucleus of sovereign power" (qtd. in De Genova 2010, 38), the Mexican state analogously exerts its sovereignty over its deceased emigrants by institutionalizing their postmortem repatriation.

For the scholars of transnational life who suggest that transnationalism may die with the first generation of migrants, this article suggests that the cross-border movement of the dead, or transnational afterlife, is an important corollary. Like other forms of cross-border activities, posthumous repatriation can perpetuate transnational ties among surviving members of the deceased repatriates in the United States and may in turn increase their interest in the public life of their communities of origin, possibly converting an act of sociocultural transnationalism into a pathway to subsequent political transnationalism. To put it in the words of Octavio Paz (1997), perhaps Mexicans' cult in death is at once a cult in life.

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