

# Beyond 'transnationalism': Mexican hometown politics at an American labour union

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## Abstract

The controversial notion of “transnationalism” has generated new insights into international migrants’ on-going ties with their communities of origin, but its problematic conceptualization and vague usage in empirical studies needlessly inhibit the transnational perspective’s utility. Understanding the political and economic incorporation of migrants in both their communities of origin and destination is facilitated by disaggregating the types of political borders, types of nationalism, and levels of identification that have been conflated in the framework of “transnationalism”. I demonstrate the analytic value of these distinctions by using them to interpret evidence from a six-month ethnographic case study of an immigrant labour union in Southern California. A theoretically coherent typology applicable to both the case study and other migration settings provides a framework for explaining how institutions assimilate migrants into U.S. and local politics while simultaneously promoting cross-border ties.

**Keywords:** Transnationalism; nationalism; migration; labour; assimilation.

Definitions of migrant ‘transnationalism’ have proliferated over the last decade to include phenomena as diverse as nostalgia for the home country and political parties spanning two countries. Despite recurring pleas for greater clarity (Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt 1999; Vertovec 1999; Faist 2000; Kivisto 2001; Morawska 2001), the waters of transnationalism remain as murky as ever. Extending efforts to better specify and explain ‘transnationalism’, I argue the term as it is generally used in migration research should be retired. Disaggregating ‘transnationalism’ into more carefully specified components offers a way to build on existing understandings of the cross-border connectivity of international

migrants and their native co-ethnics. I illustrate the utility of these distinctions through an ethnographic study of a Southern California union local whose members are active in U.S. and Mexican politics on the national and local levels.

In addition to offering a set of taxonomic distinctions, this study extends the range of institutions studied in the transnationalism literature and explanations for cross-border activities. Earlier work has examined migrant hometown associations (Smith 1998), sending country political parties (Graham 1997), ethnic organizations (Rivera Salgado 1999), sending country governments (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 1994), and ethnic lobbies (Sheffer 1986). Studying a labour union as a site of cross-border migrant politics demonstrates how institutional characteristics promote assimilation, cross-border connectivity, and particular levels of political organizing.

### Unpacking 'transnationalism'

The transnational perspective in migration studies has been a welcome corrective to the 'methodological nationalist' tendency to view international migration through the lens of discrete nation-state societies (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). A transnational perspective also challenges the crude assimilationist ideology that immigrants do and *should* irrevocably sever ties with their places of origin. While the literature has suggested promising avenues of inquiry, current conceptualizations remain problematic on three critical counts.

First, the relationship between 'immigrants' political transnationalism' (Itzigsohn 2000) and 'nationalism' is not specified clearly. Recent work acknowledging that 'transnationalism' sometimes implies nationalism (e.g. Faist 2000; Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001; Guarnizo 2001) continues to use 'transnationalism' in ways that are not only distinct, but contradictory. 'Transnationalism' is also used to signify universalist or *anti-nationalist* processes and ideologies like the supersession of nationalism in legitimating universal rights of citizenship (cf. Bauböck 1994) or the 'transnationalism from above' of corporations evading economic nationalist constraints on the flow of capital (cf. Smith and Guarnizo 1998). During the last great migration to the United States 100 years ago, workers fought over whether their organizations should be transnationalist, supporting the 'workers of the world', or long-distance nationalist, supporting homeland wars of national liberation (Bodnar 1985). True transnationalists and long-distance nationalists are often directly *at odds* with each other.

The transnationalism literature conflates the crossing or transcendence of distinct borders of state, nation, culture, and geography (Basch *et al.* 1994, p. 7). While the modern state is a political organization with sharply defined territorial borders, nation is a more ambiguous concept

referring to an imagined ethnic community and/or a political unit of the citizens of the state (Akzin 1966). In contexts of mass emigration, 'the nation' is said to exist in a global 'diaspora' without borders. State actors deploy the language of nationalism precisely because migrants are outside state territorial borders but within the boundaries of the imagined nation. The analytic formulation of *transnational* is inconsistent with empirical evidence in works (e.g. Basch *et al.*) demonstrating the promotion of particularistic *nationalisms* across *state* borders (Verdery 1994).

A second problem in the transnationalism literature is that two separate forms of nationalism are conflated – (1) the trans-state *long-distance nationalism* of identification with a 'nation' despite physical absence from the homeland and (2) the *dual nationalism* of political identification with two distinct 'nations'. Migrants or sending state actors invoking the wholeness of *one* 'nation' despite intervening state borders are engaged in discourses and practices of trans-state long-distance nationalism (see Brubaker 1996, pp. 107–47; Anderson 1998, pp. 58–74). Dual nationalists claim to belong to *two distinct* sending and receiving 'nations'. The legal concept of 'dual nationality' expresses a legal status, while 'dual nationalism' describes a discourse and political programme of dual affiliations. Michel Laguerre (1998) has called the sense of membership in more than one polity and an attachment to a distant homeland an instance of 'diasporic citizenship' that 'induces openness and prevents narrow nationalism because it elicits attachment to both the homeland and the country of residence' (p. 18). The degree to which migrants are attached to *both* homeland and country of residence is variable, however. Migrants may consider themselves dual nationals and engage in cross-border nationalist practices, but dual and long-distance nationalist projects are analytically distinct. Dual nationalism does *not* characterize the stance of the many diasporic émigré and sojourner migrants who are long-distance nationalists that have not assimilated to the receiving country.

The conflation of long-distance nationalism and dual nationalism has contributed to the misleading opposition in the literature between transnationalism and assimilation (e.g. Basch *et al.* 1994; Guarnizo and Portes 2001). Kivisto (2001) and Levitt (2001a) rightly suggest some types of assimilation and transnational practices are compatible. Dual nationalism necessarily implies assimilation into the receiving society as well as long-distance ties, while long-distance nationalism does not inherently imply assimilation. Distinguishing dual and long-distance nationalisms provides a tool to explain how institutions promote specific forms of assimilation while simultaneously reinforcing cross-border ties. I will argue a pluralist model of assimilation is particularly compatible with dual nationalism (see Gordon 1964).

A third conceptual problem in the transnationalism literature is the

conflation of multiple *levels* of identity that may be local, regional, or national. Long periods of residence might stimulate identification with *local* receiving communities without the transference of those attachments to a *national* community. Migrants' strongest cross-border links are often highly *localistic* ties between particular sending areas and their satellites in the receiving country (Smith 1998; Levitt 2001a). Transborder local connections are embedded in macro structures, but the specifically 'national' element cannot be assumed. Localism often inhibits organizing at the national level.

### Research site and design

Local 123<sup>1</sup> of a construction labourers' union affiliated with the AFL-CIO is a strategic site to explore the interaction between politics 'here' and 'there' at the levels of locality, state, and nation. The Local is politically influential in South City, California, and is active in the U.S. labour movement's efforts to organize Latino immigrants. At the same time, leaders of Local 123 campaign in members' Mexican hometowns during internal union elections. I chose Local 123 not because its cross-border practices are 'representative' of unions in any statistical sense, but because the case is theoretically significant as a site to refine the concept of 'transnationalism' (cf. Burawoy 1991, p. 281).

### *A union of immigrants*

The California construction sector has been rapidly transformed by Mexican immigration into an ethnic occupational niche (Portes 1995; Lee 1997). In 1996, 49 per cent of California labourers were foreign-born Latinos and 9 per cent were native-born Latinos (Lopez and Feliciano 2000, p. 34). Typical of these demographic trends, the majority of Local 123's active members were born in Mexico. The second largest group is Chicano (U.S.-born of Mexican descent). Anglos comprise less than 5 per cent of the membership. All the staff, officers, and politically active members at Local 123 are of Mexican origin. Most formerly undocumented members legalized their status through family sponsorships or the 1986 amnesty, in which the union provided crucial documentation of members' U.S. work history. Local 123 leaders support the AFL-CIO's position adopted in 2000 supporting a new amnesty, but the Local is not engaged in a concerted effort to organize undocumented immigrants like unions in other sectors. As union density in the United States has fallen by half in the last forty years (Milkman 2000), Local 123 has suffered. Active membership declined by over 3,000 in the last twenty years to a total of 3,500 in 2001.

Mexican hometown networks dominate Local 123. About 500 of the Local's 3,500 active members are from Guadalupe in the state of

Michoacán. The adjacent village of San Juan is the source of roughly 200 members. Smaller networks are linked to diverse communities throughout Mexico. Guadalupanos have the largest and most influential hometown network. As the political captain put it, 'The strength of the union is in that town [Guadalupe]'. During the 1960s and 70s, five 'pioneer' Guadalupanos at the Local provided fellow villagers with lodging and an introduction to the Local. In 1999, the mayor of Guadalupe and his deputy were both Local 123 members who alternated migrating to South City to work in construction while the other stayed behind. Each had children and a house in South City and Guadalupe. About fifty Guadalupano families still live within walking distance of the union hall. On weekday mornings, a score of Guadalupano retirees wearing the straw hats common to rural Mexico gather at the hiring hall to play cards and dominos. Guadalupanos, like other members, rent the hall for private parties to celebrate weddings and baptisms. '*El hall*' is the social centre of the Guadalupano community.

### *Methods*

I conducted fieldwork using participant-observation and informal interviews at the Local from January to June 2001. The 'ethnographic present' in this article refers to that time period. I spent several hours each week at the union, mostly in the hiring hall or parking lot where 50–100 members gather on weekday mornings to wait for work assignments and play cards. It is a sociable environment conducive to snowball sampling. Once I established relationships with members in different networks, I could engage in long private conversations, participate in group discussions, and observe interactions. I also spent time with union officers and staff as an observer during closed meetings, in numerous conversations lasting as long as an hour each, and formal, private interviews with the four highest officers.

There are over 4,000 members of the Local including retirees. In selecting members for interviews and repeated conversations, I purposefully selected for variation by members' country of birth, hometown, and affiliation with the factions in internal Local politics (cf. Charmaz 2001). I attended membership meetings, orientation and training classes, and a hometown fund-raising dance at the hall. I also attended a Guadalupano union election campaign party at a private home, two political rallies in South City, and a labour organizing action at a job site.

## Levels of political identity and practice

### *Nationalisms*

The class basis of union politics has a special affinity to a transnational ideology, that as the prefix 'trans' suggests, supersedes or transcends particular nationalisms. The organization of the 'workers of the world' against global capital is a long-recognized form of transnationalism (van der Linden 1999). Union politics involving cross-border activities are not necessarily transnational, however, as the case of Local 123 illustrates. Labour *transnationalism* must be distinguished from the promotion of American or Mexican *nationalisms*.

On paper, Local 123 is part of an 'International Union' and a labour movement that transcends national borders. In practice, the member locals are exclusively U.S. and Canadian. Organizing by U.S. building trade unions is effectively limited to North America by economic nationalist sensibilities and the fact that construction jobs cannot be moved offshore to cheaper competitors. The Local only buys American union-made products. American flags and stickers with slogans reading 'Buy American. The job you save may be your own' are displayed all over the building. Before every general meeting, members stand and face the U.S. flag, most raise their right arms over their hearts, and about half appear to say the 'pledge of allegiance'. A collective American nationalist ritual of even the most banal sort (Billig 1995) is significant in light of the absence of transnational labour organizing and discourse and the presence of expressions of Mexican nationalism.

Like union leaders organizing Mexican immigrants elsewhere (Milkman 2000), the current leadership deploys Mexican symbols. For example, the business manager, who holds the most powerful position in the Local, distributed t-shirts featuring her name and an image of Mexican revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata during the last internal election. The business manager is a naturalized U.S. citizen who cannot vote in Mexican elections, but in December 2000, she brought a television into the hiring hall so members could watch Mexican President Vicente Fox's inauguration. She sent Fox a letter on behalf of the union referring to a shared Mexican nationality as well as regional Mexican and partisan identities.

I want you to know that we are at the disposition of you and your cabinet to offer you our total support in whatever way possible. Our union membership is predominantly Mexican compatriots from the states of Michoacán, Jalisco, Zacatecas and Guanajuato. Also, the majority of them are Panistas like you and me. (translation of Spanish letter dated 12/1/00)

A second letter in March 2001 used more explicitly nationalist language:

By this instrument, on behalf of our Laborers Union 123, located in the city of South City, California, I want to congratulate you for all the hard work that you have been able to do in *our Mexican nation* and in other countries in such a short time, and at the same time we feel very honored by your visit today in *our city of South City*. (translation of Spanish letter, emphases added)

The letters to Fox express identification on two different levels – the *locality* of ‘our city of South City’ and the transborder community of ‘our Mexican *nation*’. Combined with the deployment of U.S. national symbols and rituals at the Local, the letters illustrate the union leadership’s construction of dual nationalism. The second-generation Chicano political captain explicitly appealed to dual yet complementary nationalisms during an interview.

My daughters and I are fierce nationalists. We belong to two cultures. Some people say it’s hard to walk that line. It’s not hard. We speak English and Spanish. I know both histories.

Official rhetoric of dual nationalism is significant because it publicly defines the Local’s corporate identity in relationships with other institutions. Everyday expressions of American and Mexican *nationalisms* are manifest while discourses of labour *transnationalism* are absent. While the union is engaged in activities crossing the *state* border, as I will show in the following section, the union’s activities reinforce rather than transcend the *national*.

### *Transborder Mexican politics*

Local 123’s large Mexican membership and the critical importance of Mexican hometown networks in the union’s internal political geography propel union leaders to engage the Mexican government. For example, when the business manager learnt that Fox planned to visit South City, she invited him to a luncheon at the union. The Mexican consul replied that Fox was unavailable, but the ten top union officers and staff attended Fox’s public appearance in South City. Fox’s speech linked U.S.-Mexico trade with the role of migrants as Mexico’s ‘dear beloved heroic *paisanos* [compatriots]’. The president emphasized the centrality of migrants’ economic power in his formulation of transborder Mexican nationhood. ‘Mexico’s gross product, together with the gross product of Mexicans generated in the United States, makes us the eighth largest economy in the world,’ he said. Fox invoked an inclusive idea of the

Mexican nation clothed in the language of long-distance nationalism because migrants are outside Mexico's territorial borders and their economic resources cannot be captured directly by standard state mechanisms.

The officers did not have a chance to speak with Fox as they had hoped, but before his appearance, the captain said privately that his first goal was to lobby Fox for an amnesty for undocumented migrants. In other words, an American union official hoped to lobby the Mexican president to effect a change in U.S. policy. The captain's second goal of ensuring that retired members living in Mexico could collect their full U.S. social security benefits and use their U.S. medical insurance was driven by the same logic though the location of the policy goal's implementation was in Mexico. The captain sought the extension of social rights of U.S. citizenship to members residing abroad. The dichotomy of domestic and international relations does not provide a framework to understand these interventions across state borders by the Mexican president and American union officials. They are a case of transborder 'intermestic' politics played on multiple levels of two states and two civil societies (see Manning 1977).

Union leaders engage in transborder, intermestic politics in part because displaying concern for Mexican politics might improve the Local administration's standing among the '*paisanos*' in the membership. In a meeting with other officers, the captain characterized the invitation to Fox as part of their effort to establish ties with members' families in Mexico and to fight for immigrant rights. Privately, he said, 'We wanted [Fox] to come over to give us a little P.R.'

The union also has regular contacts with the Mexican consulate.<sup>2</sup> The Local's social services director distributes consular pamphlets, and the consul periodically attends membership meetings to advertise consular services for migrants returning to Mexico and discuss civil rights abuses of Mexican nationals. The Mexican policies that most interest members, like the regulation of importing cars, relate to crossing the U.S.-Mexican border. Migrants care about Mexican government policies not in spite of their residence across a state border, but because of it. As an institution with primarily local political interests but a large membership with ties to Mexico, Local 123 is a site for both Mexican and American governmental and civil actors to engage and promote cross-border politics.

### *American citizenship and South City politics*

Historically, American unions have been a vehicle for the political assimilation of immigrants by promoting naturalization, voting, and participation in political campaigns (Lane 1987). The mode of politics has ethnic overtones when the labour sectors represented by the union are part of an ethnic occupational niche. Local 123 leaders promote the political

assimilation of their primarily Mexican immigrant membership, but they assimilate into a pluralist mode of Latino American politics while maintaining ties to Mexico.

Local 123 became deeply involved in citizenship issues following a 1988 incident in which Republicans hired armed guards to stand outside the polls in Latino areas of South City warning that voting as a non-citizen is a felony. Of the five Latino citizens who subsequently sued the Republican Party for intimidating Latino voters, three were members of the Local. They established the Hispanic Political Council that won a \$400,000 settlement. Part of the settlement was spent on citizenship classes taught by the current business manager. More members naturalized as a reaction against the anti-immigrant policies promoted by Governor Pete Wilson's 1994 re-election campaign and Proposition 187 (see Jones-Correa 2001). The business manager estimates 40 per cent of immigrant members naturalized in the last ten years.<sup>3</sup>

The three top Local leaders view cross-border politics and dual nationalist commitments as complementary to their political project in the United States. One of the plaintiffs in the poll guards case, the current secretary-treasurer, said the incident motivated him to become involved in both U.S. and Mexican politics.

“What happened here with the Republicans charged me up. They made me mad because of their bigotry and racism. I wanted to organize people to tell them: In the numbers, we have the power,” he said.

I asked him to explain how he thought his involvement in Mexican politics would help fight racism here.

“Because my people are so timid of government, that by getting involved to see what we can do in Mexico, they will become citizens and get involved in politics here too,” he responded.

Mexicans historically have had among the lowest naturalization rates of any immigrant group (Jones-Correa 2001). One of the barriers to members' naturalization is their fear that becoming a U.S. citizen requires a ritualistic rejection of Mexican nationality that includes stomping and spitting on the Mexican flag. Union officials held a citizenship programme informing members the rumour was false and that becoming an American does not mean denigrating one's Mexicanness.

Increasing the number of U.S. citizens at the union increases its influence in local politics. Local 123 members participate in public protests for a variety of progressive causes. Officers routinely meet with city council members as well as with state and federal legislators. During elections, the union contributes financially and operates a phone bank to support primarily Democratic candidates. Staff and members campaign

door-to-door in South City and travel around Southern California in a 25-member 'strike force' to walk precincts in critical battlegrounds. All unions engage in politics, but unions relying on government contracts to build schools and roads have a particularly strong incentive to be politically active. Thus, the Local encourages immigrant incorporation into ethnic and class politics in the United States even as it reinforces cross-border ties.

### **Hometown localism**

The primary cross-border ties at the union are not on the national level, but on the local level of South City and members' hometowns in Mexico. Long-distance *localism* does not inherently imply long-distance *nationalism*. A major barrier to transborder collective action on the national level is the salience of subnational hometown identities and the material rewards offered through hometown networks.

Hometown club leaders from San Juan said that they hoped to emulate the Zacatecan model of a state federation of hometown associations with institutionalized relations with the Mexican government (see Goldring 2002). Yet Juaneños have not even coordinated their activities with Guadalupanos, whose village is a mile from San Juan. Members from another ranch next to Guadalupe with a dozen union members also have an entirely separate club and events. Organizations based on such narrow interests are unlikely to achieve the sort of celebrated impact of the Zacatecan Federation. Everyone at the union I spoke to said they had a circle of friends which goes beyond hometown networks, and members from all over Mexico frequently chat with each other at the hall. Still, there is an underlying sense of competition among members based on differential access to resources allocated through hometown networks.

The bilocality of members' lives motivates union leaders to adopt a bilocal strategy for controlling the union and directing its relationships with other institutions. Union officers draw on members' hometown and family networks in union organizing, citizenship drives, and election campaigns. The current business manager, Refugio, adopted a multi-faceted strategy for winning her election and solidifying her base that illustrates multiple forms of hometown network politics.

In the 2000 election for business manager, winning candidate Refugio estimated she won 90 per cent of her votes from Guadalupanos. A field split by three candidates and a high rate of abstention among non-Guadalupanos allowed a concentration of Guadalupano support to win the election. Although Refugio is from the state of Jalisco, her son married a Guadalupana he met in South City. Refugio has visited Guadalupe four times. During one visit several months before her election she campaigned among members' families. She is building a

house in Guadalupe and said she enjoys taking her holiday among friends in the peaceful countryside.

Refugio's campaign manager offered a more instrumental explanation of her interest in Guadalupe. Refugio was dispatcher for four years. 'When you're in dispatch, you get to know everyone', he said. The post is 'a magnet for votes'. He said Refugio harboured political aspirations, so she visited Guadalupe five or six years ago to make personal contacts and develop the residents' trust. After the election, a family emergency prevented her from travelling to Guadalupe for the annual fiesta, when the population multiplies overnight as Guadalupe migrants return. The campaign manager explained in an interview why Refugio sent him and another staff member to represent her at the fiesta.

Most members have family who reside in Guadalupe. They depend on their income from the members – to fix their houses or to buy food. [Guadalupeños] have to be choosy about who becomes business manager . . . If Refugio calls grandfathers or wives in Guadalupe and asks them to please call their provider here and ask him to vote for her, they will do it . . . When I went, we made a big hit over there. . . . Now I can make a call over there and say, "I want you to push your brother or cousin to get 10 guys to vote for us".

Demonstrations of personal ties with the distant locality and its residents are a valuable political resource. Outsiders can also tap into receiving locality nodes of hometown networks without ever crossing the border. Union officers solicit donations from members to pay for the costs of shipping deceased members to Mexico for burial. The Guadalupe club, like half-a-dozen hometown clubs at the union, holds two or three dances a year to raise money for village projects like church and infrastructure improvement. The union donates the use of the hall, which would cost \$2,000 to rent. Officers give advice to club leaders about how to register their clubs as non-profit corporations. As the political captain explained, 'People love Refugio. They call her "the Queen of Guadalupe". She donates to the church in Guadalupe and sets up fund-raisers. It's all politics'. Previous business managers have gained support from Guadalupeños using the same strategy of supporting hometown fund-raisers. Similarly, the U.S.-born secretary-treasurer is a member of the Zacatecan Federation of hometown associations who uses the union as a venue for holding hometown fund-raisers, recruiting Zacatecan members to the federation, and even campaigning for the successful Zacatecan gubernatorial candidate in 1998 who sought support from U.S.-based Zacatecos (see Goldring 2002).

Hometown and kinship networks figure prominently in the selection of union electoral candidates. The selection of delegates for the 2001 convention of the union's International illustrates the machinery of

internal union politics. Three of the seventeen candidates on Refugio's slate were Guadalupanos and a fourth was married to a Guadalupana. During a campaign party at a member's home before the election, she introduced her delegates to the crowd, describing one of them as a representative of labourers at a South City company and of 'Guadalupe and the surrounding area'. Eighty per cent of the approximately 180 members at the party were Guadalupanos.

Union leaders allocate staff jobs based on a member's ability to attract votes for the slate or as a reward for past support. In half-a-dozen conversations with staff in which I asked why they were selected, they never mentioned personal qualifications. The eight business agents, dispatcher, and janitors are all political appointees. One janitor is Guadalupano and the other is from the second largest sending community of San Juan. Tomás, the janitor from Guadalupe, is a power broker in the union known as one of the four 'generals' along with the business manager, dispatcher, and political captain. In return for delivering 150 Guadalupano votes, a third of the winner's total, the business manager gave him a job. Even janitorial positions are exchanged in the 'market-place' of the union in return for their hometown network votes.

All of the business agents, who earn \$50,000 to \$75,000 a year, are former labourers whose selection is based on their ability to deliver votes. When I asked a 28-year old agent why he was hired, he gave a typical answer: 'Because I have about 60 family members at the union. Uncles, cousins, relatives. I can bring in 60 votes, and if each one of them has 1 or 2 friends, that's over 100 votes'. His family members are from two towns in Michoacán and his wife is Guadalupana. He did not frame his selection in terms of hometown networks, but his appointment clearly derives from his position in both family and hometown networks.

Samuel, born in the Mexican state of Guerrero to Guadalupano parents, said he twice received jobs from a dispatcher because he is Guadalupano. According to the formal work dispatch system, members are assigned jobs based on the amount of time they have been unemployed and their skill level, or their ability to independently find an employer willing to hire them on a union contract. In practice, the dispatch process is not transparent and the dispatcher has some discretion in allocating job referrals.<sup>4</sup> Even though Samuel claimed the current business manager favoured members from Guadalupe, he said he wanted to elect a new manager who is actually a Guadalupano.

"If we were united, we could do whatever we wanted. We would have someone to help us".

I asked how someone "on the inside" could help them. He looked at me as if I had asked a stupid question.

“All this”, he said, sweeping his arm around the hiring hall packed with unemployed members. “If you’re from the rancho, I’m going to give you a job. Yes or no?” he asked.

“I don’t know”, I said.

“Yes! If you’re living with your cousins, you’re going to give them a job”.

Union officials promote hometown ties and the collective practices that reinforce them because hometown networks are an efficient way to channel votes in exchange for jobs. What are the effects of such localistic practices on national identification and organizing? On the one hand, hometown ties *may* reinforce cross-border nationalism when members from different Mexican communities share similar concerns as those articulated in the visits of Fox and the Mexican consul. On the other hand, members from all over Mexico do not have equal access to the resources afforded by hometown ties, so hometown localism inhibits collective organization *qua* Mexicans.

### **Chicanismo and Mexicanidad**

Recent conceptualizations of ‘assimilation’ have rehabilitated the analytical concept from its normative overtones in ways that provide an opening to bridge the opposition between crude understandings of ‘transnationalism’ and ‘assimilation’ (see Kivisto 2001; Levitt 2001b). Building on the work of Milton Gordon, current perspectives emphasize the diversity of assimilations that include 1) adaptation to the target group (Anglo-conformity), 2) mutual adaptation between reference and target groups (the melting pot), and 3) ‘the preservation of the communal life and significant portions of the culture of . . . immigrant groups within the context of American citizenship and political and economic integration into American society’ (cultural pluralism) (Gordon 1964, p. 85). Assimilation describes processes by which a target group or individual becomes similar to a reference group along specific dimensions like language or large-scale entrance into the institutions of the host society (structural assimilation) (see Alba and Nee 1997; Brubaker 2001).

The internal political dynamics of Local 123 illustrate the way that hometown networks are a vehicle for structural assimilation into an American institution at the same time as they reinforce cross-border ties. Hometown networks are also deeply implicated in union struggles between Chicanos and Mexicans over political power and material resources. Normative conflicts about pluralist and Anglo-conformist forms of assimilation overlap internal union divisions.

I have argued that union leaders work through hometown networks to transform members arriving in California with a diverse set of experiences and identities into a more politically powerful aggregate that frames politics in ethnic and class terms. Through a process of structural assimilation to a predominantly Latino union, rank-and-file members develop a situational sense of common ethnicity that unites Chicanos and Mexicans as '*la raza*' in the face of shared job discrimination from Anglos. Yet there is a tension between the construction of *la raza* on the one hand and the exclusive nature of competing networks based on Mexican hometown and U.S. nativity on the other. Depending on the composition of the union leadership at a given moment, being a 'Chicano' or a member of a specific hometown network offers advantage in the struggle with other union members for scarce resources. In 2001, the union's patronage system prompted members to appeal to identities based on a foreign hometown as a way to achieve economic and political advantage in the United States.

Non-Guadalupanos at Local 123, particularly if they are Chicanos, say they are excluded from equal access to good jobs. Several of the members who actively oppose the administration are self-defined Chicanos who express this complaint most forcefully. Robert, a 26-year union veteran, said it is hard to get work because Guadalupanos only give work to other people from Guadalupe.

"They've got uncles, cousins, brothers, fathers – YOU'RE not gonna get a job". He said that on several occasions, he was the first worker dismissed from a job site where the foreman and other workers were Guadalupanos. The people from Guadalupe "have a real animosity towards us Chicanos". Robert later said the current business manager got most of her votes from Guadalupe. "You don't vote for her; you don't have a job", he said. "We [Chicanos] don't have any representation."

The Chicano dissidents' resentment of Guadalupano political power is often accompanied by resentment towards the Mexican-born membership in general. Three Chicano members approached me separately to discuss a struggle between Chicanos and Mexicans for jobs and 'representation'. Like other Chicano opponents of the administration, Eddie acknowledged a common ancestral origin in Mexico but distinguished himself in cultural terms.

I'm not against no immigrants coming over, but there has to be a quota. They're overwhelming us . . . I don't have anything against the Mexican-born, but they have different customs . . . There's a lot of corruption in Mexico. They're bringing that with them. My grandfather was from Mexico, but I was born here, and my father was born

here . . . I was brought up to play by the rules, but all of these new people don't know the rules.

Three Chicano members of the opposition told me separately they believe that immigrants degrade the quality of existing jobs. According to this argument, the Mexican-born are not fully committed to the union's struggles because of their unassimilated Mexican frame of reference that includes corruption and low expectations of labour rights. The on-going connectivity of Mexicans in the United States with Mexico also threatens the dissidents' economic nationalist sensibilities. For instance, Robert and Eddie lamented that Mexicans send \$8 billion a year to Mexico in remittances, thus weakening the U.S. economy and the union. Most importantly, the Chicano dissidents believe their material interests are threatened by exclusion from Mexican hometown and family networks.

The Chicano opposition faction's emphasis on the distinction between Americans and Mexicans draws derogatory counter-claims that members of that faction have assimilated to the Anglo-American majority (though 'Chicano' itself suggests ethnic American pluralism). Two self-described Chicano officers accused the administration's other Chicano opponents of 'hating Mexicans' and giving Chicanos preferential access to jobs when the opposition Chicanos held power. The officers made these charges in separate, private interviews and to a visiting Chicano attorney. Tony accused three Chicano opponents<sup>5</sup> of being racist:

One has lighter skin than most Mexicans and thinks he is superior. When they were in charge, the first 400 people on the dispatch list were from Guadalupe, but they were only being sent out for two or three-day jobs. They were giving all the good long-term contracts to their *pochos* [gringoized Mexican] friends. He said the second agent was a "Tío Taco". I asked what a *Tío Taco* was, and he said a *Tío Taco* was someone whose parents came from Mexico, but doesn't want to speak Spanish or won't speak slang Spanish. "They don't care about Cinco de Mayo or the Virgin of Guadalupe's birthday. They try to assimilate to this country, and the ultimate sign of that is to become a Republican".

It would be a mistake to describe the internal divisions of the union as a simple fissure between Chicanos and Mexicans. Both Mexican and U.S.-born members are on the same slates and serve in the same administrations. The cleavage between those claiming to be Chicanos with a sense of Mexicanness (pluralists) and their putatively Anglo-conformist '*pochos*' enemies falls closely along the division between 1) Chicanos closely allied with the Guadalupano network and 2) Chicanos excluded from that network. Many of the members who say they are 'from

Guadalupe' are U.S.-born. Guadalupano affiliation (by birth, descent, or as a channel of patronage with outsiders) cross-cuts the division of natives and foreigners.

Hometown club leaders attempt to reinforce a distinction between U.S. and Mexican cultures, however, to 'protect' their children from putative pathologies. Mexican members frequently tell stories about Mexicans importing an American culture of drugs and gangs to Mexico. 'When people come to the United States, they lose their culture,' said an organizer of the San Juan club. He said the club holds their dances to encourage an alternative to youth hanging out on the streets and painting graffiti. While members of the Chicano opposition see Mexicans as insufficiently assimilated to U.S. standards, members of the Chicano administration and hometown clubs see the opposition and even their own children as *too* assimilated. The hometown network is a vehicle for structural assimilation into an American labour institution as well as the reaffirmation of Mexican hometown ties to avoid cultural assimilation.

## Conclusions

The conceptualization of migrant 'transnationalism' can be refined by distinguishing the type of border crossed, type of nationalism, and level of identification. The borders crossed in the processes described here are *state* borders. There is no evidence that transnationalism in the strict sense of transcending nationalism in a 'workers of the world' discourse, for example, was relevant to the actors in this case. On the contrary, the administration of Local 123 departs from an American nationalist labour movement to incorporate Mexican immigrants (but not workers in Mexico) as dual nationalists. Of course, transnationalism properly speaking has been an important part of labour ideology and organization at earlier periods in American history and in other settings (Bodnar 1985; van der Linden 1999). Given the significance of transnationalism as an ideology and movement, it would seem prudent to reserve the term for a more specific, careful usage than the catch-all used in the migration literature.

*Transborder nationalism* is illustrated by the discourse of 'heroic *paisanos* abroad' promoted by Mexican president Vicente Fox in his visit to South City. Some union members described themselves as Mexicans but not Americans, part of the Mexican nation extending beyond Mexico's state boundaries, but nothing more. Others, like the political captain, described themselves as *dual nationalists* – members of two *distinct* American and Mexican cultural and political communities. While the 'container' version of distinct national cultures may not be sociologically accurate (Faist 2000, pp. 214–17), that is the self-understanding of participants. Dual and transborder nationalisms may sometimes be combined empirically, but they are analytically distinct and have

different implications for defining legitimate political communities and places of practice. For instance, in the U.S. context, dual nationalists include co-nationals like Anglos and African-Americans in their political community, unlike transborder Mexican nationalists. In the Mexican context, transborder nationalists may contest the legitimacy of dual nationalism as a betrayal of the homeland (Fitzgerald 2000).

This study supports the contention that the opposition between ‘assimilation’ and ‘transnationalism’ has been overdrawn (Kivisto 2001; Levitt 2001b). To the extent members assimilate, their cross-border political practices at the national level are *dual* nationalist rather than simply long-distance nationalist. Some of the distinct modes of assimilation and the specific target groups towards which immigrants assimilate even reinforce cross-border connectivity. Cultural pluralism seems especially compatible with dual nationalism given the former’s emphasis on legitimate diversity and U.S. citizenship. ‘Structural assimilation’ (Gordon 1964) includes becoming part of host society institutions dominated by immigrants and co-ethnic allies that encourage cross-border ties and excoriate putative Anglo-conformists.

The distinction between the local and national has theoretical and practical implications for political organization. Identification with a distant, cross-border *hometown* is often more situationally relevant to members than identification with the *homeland*. Consequently, hometown localism inhibits organization at the regional or national level in federations of hometown clubs (cf. Bodnar, pp. 118–19). The local/national distinction is significant for political incorporation of immigrants into U.S. politics as well. The union encourages immigrant members to become involved in city politics to gain government contracts, higher wages, and workplace protections. The long-term consequence may be incorporation into national U.S. politics since effective participation in city politics requires speaking English and American citizenship.

Hometown divisions inhibit the project of long-distance nationalists seeking political influence in Mexico. Divisions between Mexicans and Chicanos impede the construction of a single political community for members on both sides of the border or a pan-Mexican political coalition within the United States. The point here is not to promote a teleological construction of any particular form of politics, but to disaggregate levels of practice and identification that are analytically and experientially distinct. Distinguishing between state and national borders, long-distance and dual nationalisms, and national and local levels of identification provides a means to better understand complex processes of immigrant incorporation and cross-border politics.

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## Notes

1. Names of the union local, places, and persons have been fictionalized. When capitalized, 'Local' refers to Local 123, while 'local' retains its common sense meaning.
2. During the early twentieth century, Mexican consulates were deeply involved in organizing Mexican labour unions in the United States because Mexicans were often excluded from American unions (González 1999).
3. Holding U.S. citizenship allows members to participate fully in union politics, because only citizens are eligible for officer positions. In March 2001 the International began to allow non-citizens to serve as delegates to the International's convention.
4. The current administration claims to adhere to the formal rules, while administration opponents openly charge it with showing favouritism to its allies. The Local has been under a series of investigations into racketeering, election fraud, and misappropriation of funds over the last twenty years.
5. These three opponents were not the same Chicanos who approached me to discuss Mexican-Chicano tensions.

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