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Gender(ed) Migrations: Shifting Gender Subjectivities in a Transnational Mexican Community

By Deborah A. Boehm

Guest Scholar, Center for Comparative Immigration Studies and Center for U.S.-
Mexican Studies

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**GENDER(ED) MIGRATIONS:
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IN A TRANSNATIONAL MEXICAN COMMUNITY**

Deborah A. Boehm

On a hot, dusty spring afternoon in a small Mexican rancho, Rosa sat on her living room floor, with her daughter and two of her sons, sorting through beans in preparation for planting. Their hands moved quickly, building a mound of lime green while separating out some shriveled beans and tossing them aside. As she worked, Rosa recounted how her life had changed since her husband had gone to the United States three years earlier. “I take care of the fields, our animals . . . I’m currently painting our house. I have to do all the work my husband used to do. And, I’m still responsible for everything I did before—cooking, cleaning, caring for the children.” She sighed and looked up at me from the growing pile of beans, “It’s a lot of work, no?” I nodded, and we sat in silence as she reflected on her lifestyle. Then she smiled, threw back her head and laughed out loud, “Now I am a man and a woman!”

In this paper, I discuss findings about gender subjectivities and gender relations among transnational Mexicans in San Luis Potosí, Mexico and Albuquerque, New Mexico. Drawing on ethnographic data, I outline the transforming roles of women and men within a community of Mexican “transmigrants” (Glick Schiller, Basch, Blanc-Szanton 1995: 48). I will argue that masculinity is both reconstituted and compromised

by immigration to the United States, which in turn, simultaneously liberates and puts new controls on women, redefining femininity and what it means to be a woman. In a Mexican rancho, men are expected to migrate, and the masculinity of those who do not go north is called into question. Paradoxically, men may have their masculinity stripped from them once they are in the United States, as they leave behind their role as farmers to work in low-wage jobs. Meanwhile, women who stay in Mexico face new burdens alongside increased freedoms: still responsible for domestic chores and child care, women take on tasks that were previously understood as the sphere of men, such as farming and managing finances. The lives of women living in the United States also transform—they are often in wage labor for the first time, and their roles in the family are notably altered. Rosa’s assertion—“*¡Ya soy hombre y mujer!*/Now I am a man *and* a woman!”—underscores how (im)migration is bringing about striking changes in gender identities.

“De Ambos Lados/From Both Sides”: Gender, Family, and Nation Among Transnational Mexicans

This discussion is part of a larger bi-national dissertation research project that studies the intersection of gender, family, and national membership in a transnational Mexican community. My project is explicitly ethnographic and qualitative and has included formal and informal interviews, participant observation, and research in multiple fieldsites. I conducted field research among what Roger Rouse calls a “transnational migrant circuit” (Rouse 1991: 14). I use the term “transnational” to describe this community because it is made up of people living in both the United States and Mexico, and characterized by movement of members between the two countries. Transmigration

is rarely linear and takes multiple forms: seasonal migration, travel between the two countries, trips for rituals or special events, short and extended stays in either country, as well as settling for years in either country. I spent several years working with immigrants in Albuquerque, New Mexico, conducting dissertation field research and teaching U.S. citizenship and ESL classes, and well as a year based in Mexico, completing research in the state of San Luis Potosí, in a small rancho near the border of Zacatecas. Throughout this paper, I use pseudonyms for informants, as well as the rancho where I am conducting research.

A central theme throughout the research is that transnational Mexicans experience contradictory processes: fragmentation and continuity. For example, an argument that weaves throughout my study is that transnational individuals operate both within and outside of nation-states. For (im)migrants, state power can be intensified because they live in more than one nation, often without legal recognition or protections. But transnationals also operate outside of state structures, for example through undocumented migration, undermining the seemingly monolithic power of the nation-state.

Also in my project, I explore the effect of transnational movement on families and family relations, as well as how family ties structure immigration. Families living across an international border experience a profound paradox: even as nation-state borders divide families, families provide important immigrant networks and support transnational movement. In the United States, immigration laws are still, in large part, based on family reunification, although family reunification is often delayed or prevented precisely because of U.S. policies and practices. I analyze discourses in both countries that present the nation as family and the importance of family within the nation, outlining the

difficulties and contradictions that emerge from such constructs, and their implications for national membership in a transnational world.

As Mexicans (im)migrate to the United States, they reflect on national membership in new ways. Not surprisingly, immigrants project many of the doubts, questions, and contradictions about national belonging onto their children, the 1.5 and second generation. In the dissertation, I argue that the negotiations of nation that play out among the next generation are simultaneously discourses of gender. For Mexican (im)migrants, teaching their children what it means to be a Mexican is a complicated and inherently gendered process. For their part, members of the 1.5 and second generation perform new gender subjectivities and redefine femininity and masculinity.

At the heart of my research is the study of transforming gender subjectivities, and that will be the focus of this paper. But before I go into detail about these changes in gender identities, I want to provide a brief review of the anthropological literature about gender and migration as a means to argue for making gendered analysis central to the study of transnational communities.

Gender(ed) Migrations: A Theoretical Framework for the Study of Gender, Transnationalism, and Immigration

There is a relatively small group of researchers committed to gender inquiry in immigration studies (see, for example, Espiritu 1999, 2003; Gabaccia 1992; Georges 1992; Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001; Grasmuck and Pessar 1991; Hirsch 1999, 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, 1999; Ong 1999, 2003; Pessar 1999; Simon and Brettell 1986), and in recent years there have been only a few collections of work devoted to the topic (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003b, Mahler and Pessar 2001). Except for research produced by

these scholars, the anthropological study of transnationalism has not given gender the attention it arguably deserves (e.g., Appadurai 1996; Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994; Kearney 1996). As Michael Kearney has posited, “world-system and other global theories . . . are notably silent on gender issues” (Kearney 1995: 560).

The anthropological study of gender and global movement has been characterized by several stages historically (for a related discussion, see Hondagneu-Sotelo 2003a), although I should note that these research genres are often present in current scholarship as well: First, an absence of literature about women, characterized by the assumption that migrants are male; second, a focus on ‘the immigrant woman’ and later immigrant women, as well as women and men as bounded categories; and third, the move to gender, ushering in the integrated study of women and men—as well as masculinity and femininity—in relation to one another. And while this shift to the study of gender is an important one, I posit that it still does not go far enough. While gender is a crucial category for the study of transnational processes, I would argue that, beyond work that examines gender and migration, there is a critical need to incorporate a gender analysis into principle anthropological and other disciplinary theories of global movement.

Of course, such a focus has much to contribute to gender research by elucidating the workings of gender in a transnational context. However, beyond the benefits to gender studies, I believe that by moving gender research from the margins to the core of migration studies, we will gain a more sophisticated understanding of global migrations. Indeed, research without a fully integrated study of gender provides only an eclipsed view of (im)migration and transnational movement. As Patricia Pessar has argued, there is a need to “engender” (Pessar 1999) transnational studies and theories. Not only will

such research more accurately reflect transnational processes—it will also underscore how gender and family are inextricably tied to transnationalism itself.

I recognize the difficulties inherent to any discussion of gender subjectivities: I understand gender identities to be multiple and flexible, and so generalizations can be problematic. Lynn Stephen argues that “gender is fluid over time [and] . . . within different social situations” (Stephen 1991: 253), and as Matthew Guttman posits, masculinity and femininity “are not original, natural, or embalmed states of being; they are gender categories whose precise meanings constantly shift, transform into each other, and ultimately make themselves into whole new entities” (Guttman 1996: 21). It is precisely because of such flexibility that it is important for scholars to record and theorize the role of gender within transnational communities.

“*Si no vas a los estados unidos, no eres hombre*” – Masculinities and the Shifting Status of Men in a Transnational Community

Immigration and transnational movement are impacting what it means to be a man, what is appropriate masculine behavior, and how men are judged in both sending and receiving communities. Indeed, even men who have never been to the United States are impacted significantly by immigration and the individuals who do go. No longer able to support their families as they have in the past, men go to the United States to fulfill their role as providers, or stay in San Marcos and are reminded of how their work in the *milpas* [fields] cannot financially maintain a household. Increasingly, to be a man, one must migrate. Consider the following ethnographic examples.

Alicia and Gabriel married when they were twenty-years-old, and went to live in the home of Gabriel’s family. Alicia was soon pregnant, and the young couple prepared

to become parents. Meanwhile, Gabriel's father, Luis, became increasingly concerned about Gabriel's ability to support his wife and baby. Luis took Gabriel aside, and told him that the time had come for him to migrate to the United States to work and earn money for his new family. Luis told Gabriel sternly: "*Si no vas a los estados unidos, no eres hombre* [If you don't go to the United States, you are not a man]." Gabriel shared his plans with Alicia, but she protested—she did not want him to go, especially with their first child arriving in just a few months. That same day, despite the fact that Alicia was absolutely opposed to him going, Gabriel left for the United States. Apparently his father's wishes and social pressures to "be a man" by going to the other side were more powerful than his wife's desire for him to stay.

More than 100 people were packed in the small chapel of San Marcos for the long-awaited wedding of Martín and María. Martín had been in the United States for the past four years, sending money to María so they could build the home they would live in together. On this morning, after many years apart, the home was built and the young couple would be married. During the ceremony, the priest talked about how Martín was a "good man." He was a hard worker who knew how to make sacrifices. In fact, explained the priest, he had already spent years in the United States earning money. He had shown that he could provide for his wife, and that he would make an honorable husband.

These cases exemplify how the creation of masculinity is undeniably tied to migration. Paradoxically, in this community migration simultaneously is equated with masculinity and calls it into question: If going to the United States is the path to manhood, what are the implications for men who stay?

Male identity in San Marcos—which has been defined traditionally through working one’s land and providing for one’s family—is changing significantly. For men who do not (im)migrate, masculinities are often expressed through exaggerated performances of manliness. If “real men” migrate, men who do not go to the states must prove themselves through hyper-presentations of male identity. Men put on exaggerated displays of masculinity—including bouts of drinking, domestic violence, “jokes” about control over women, fights, and even shootings—in large part because their manhood is threatened.

Violence as a presentation of masculinity takes multiple forms in San Marcos, against women and against other men. In hushed voices, women have told me of beatings from fathers and husbands. For many men, drinking can intensify violence: drinking stints are frequent, and often continue for several consecutive days. For example, each September, San Marcos celebrates a local fiesta that coincides with Mexico’s national holiday. As I mentioned, this is a time when immigrants return to the rancho to visit with family and friends. Last year’s fiesta culminated with a fist fight between an uncle and his nephew—the rodeo ended with a drunk and angry man waving a gun while community members ran to their homes for cover.

In addition to these overt displays of masculinity, men often joke about their power over women. For example, one night my husband and I were walking through the rancho. There was a group of men drinking in front of a corner market—they called my husband over and invited him to have a beer with them. He said that he couldn’t, that he was going to accompany me to a neighboring town. They laughed at his acquiescence, and someone yelled out, “*Tu mujer a la casa, tú te quedas* [Your wife—literally, your

‘woman’—should go home, you should stay],” followed by another round of laughter. And although my husband felt pressured into staying for a beer, these men thought it was ridiculous that he did not assert himself as he should have.

Exaggerated displays of manliness are not new in San Marcos, but I would argue that in the face of threatened masculinity, they have taken on renewed importance. In my opinion, transnational migration is one of the primary reasons for hyper-performances of masculinity. One woman’s sarcastic comment to me—“Here, men work only eight days a year!”—underscores men’s decreasing status in the rancho. Such changes in men’s position are, of course, underway in the United States as well.

When men from the rancho go north, they often find employment in the service sector—typically bussing tables, preparing food, or washing dishes at restaurants, and occasionally working in construction. This is a significant shift for men coming from San Marcos, where they essentially work for themselves, managing their farm. Such changes result in a kind of erosion of masculinity as it is defined in men’s home communities, where male identity is often equated with their identity as farmers. As men go from being farmers who work for themselves, to laborers who work for others, they are stripped of their masculinity, and arguably, feminized.

Consider the case of Javier. Javier first came to the United States in the early 1980s. He would come seasonally, working in agriculture in Texas and Washington state. Since he was undocumented, each crossing into Texas was uncertain, and yet he did so numerous times. Eventually, he was able to establish U.S. residency through IRCA, the Immigration Reform and Control Act. But despite his legal status, Javier has chosen not to settle in the United States. Although he could begin the process of

applying for residency for his family, his wife and three children still live in their home on the rancho. Javier often makes the trip north to New Mexico to work at odd jobs, but he frequently returns to San Marcos. He ensures that he is in Mexico several times a year—to meet with PROCAMPO (*Programa de Apoyos Directos al Campo*, a program through the Mexican federal government that provides subsidies to rural farmers) representatives each spring, to plant beans in the summer, and to harvest them in the fall.

Javier's identity as a man is strikingly distinct when he is in Mexico and when he is in the states, and his experience illustrates the dramatically different positions of men in Mexico and the United States. Javier told me that he is unwilling to bring his family to the states because he does not approve of many American ideals, and he does not want his children raised here. And while this is a genuine concern, and one shared by many transnational Mexicans, I have also wondered if perhaps Javier recognizes his tenuous masculinity in the United States. And whether it is his intention or not, by maintaining his life in Mexico, he is protecting his power within the family, his status within the community, and ultimately, his identity as a Mexican man.

While Javier uses his legal status to protect his masculinity within Mexico, men from San Marcos also use their documented status to redefine and reassert masculinity in the United States. As I explained earlier, within this transnational community, masculinity is often equated with migration, and one result is that male identity intersects with legal status within the United States. In other words, men with U.S. citizenship or residency are more powerful—and therefore seen as more masculine—than their counterparts who are undocumented.

Enrique exemplifies these emergent formations of masculinity linked to U.S. legal status among transnationals. Although he has four brothers, Enrique was the first to naturalize as a U.S. citizen, and so he is the *de facto* patriarch of his transnational family. Since several of his siblings are undocumented, Enrique is responsible for many of the duties that other male family members are unable to carry out because of their insecure position within the United States. Enrique is currently petitioning for family members to acquire residency, including his mother and several siblings. He works in a higher paying job than many others from the rancho, and he was recently promoted to an assistant manager position at the restaurant where he is employed. He is able to travel back and forth between Mexico and the United States easily—and for less money since he does not have to hire a *coyote*—and so it is Enrique who travels to Mexico when there is an ill relative or help needed on the family farm. In the United States, Enrique frequently meets family and friends at the border and facilitates their crossing. He houses family and community members, and helps them find employment. He is well respected within the community as a successful migrant, and as a good man.

This is a new form of masculinity that is being ushered in with transnational movement: paradoxically, a man is better able to provide for his family in Mexico when he has U.S. residency or citizenship. A man with documents—unlike men who are undocumented—clearly has increased privilege within the United States. Of course, there are also women who gain legal status in the United States, but I would argue that the resulting power associated with gender identity is much more prevalent among men, and therefore more closely linked to masculinity. One contributing factor is that IRCA included provisions for agricultural workers—and so in San Marcos it is primarily men

who have been in a position to legalize their status first within the family. Additionally, when women have legal status in the United States, the privilege they gain is essentially transferred to their husbands. Such power is redistributed according to an already well-established gender hierarchy and system of normative heterosexuality, one in which male power is strong and pervasive.

“*Ya soy hombre y mujer*” – Women’s Changing Roles in the Face of Immigration

The reassertion of male power does not mean, however, that significant changes are not occurring among women—indeed, the place of women in San Marcos is undergoing significant change because of (im)migration. As Rosa’s story illustrates, with large numbers of men away in the United States, women—who were once responsible for exclusively domestic work—are increasingly taking on roles that were previously performed by men, such as attending school meetings, managing household finances, supervising labor in the family farm, and overseeing home construction and renovation projects.

A growing number of female-headed households in the rancho are resulting in emergent femininities. As men immigrate to the United States, they must relinquish some of their power within the family—although as I discuss, men do not easily let go of control over their wives and children. New forms of gender relations and subjectivities surface, and ultimately challenge previous ideals of what it means to be a woman.

Consider, as an example, the case of Celia, a woman in her late twenties with two young sons. Celia’s husband, Miguel, has been in the United States for over three years. Celia’s day-to-day life is vastly different than women of the previous generation, or even

that of her neighbors whose husbands have not migrated. She has notable independence: she owns a truck that she drives to neighboring towns for family visits or to Zacatecas in order to withdraw money that Miguel sends for the family. She manages the family finances and oversees her sons' schooling. For several years, she supervised the building of her family's home—selecting and purchasing supplies, as well as locating, directing, and paying laborers. Miguel and Celia speak by telephone often, and although Celia does consult with her husband about important family decisions, she recognizes her increased independence. As she explained, “My life changes when Miguel is *here*.” Celia told me that when her husband is in the rancho he expects her to work constantly: she has to wake up early to clean the house and prepare elaborate meals. Celia said that when she is alone she lightens up on domestic chores—for example, she prepares simple food for her sons and if she doesn't feel like making the bed, she won't.

Some women on the rancho are experiencing more independence than ever before. Left alone when their husbands go to the United States, women are now responsible for a wide range of roles. Femininities are in flux: today in San Marcos, there are multiple ways to be a woman. However, as I will discuss, new expressions of femininity are often contested, and women face challenges as they create new gender subjectivities.

Rosa's announcement that now she was a man and a woman must be contextualized within the previously rigid gender roles in her community and significant power imbalances between the sexes, many of which—despite rapid change—persist today. I posit that the shifting position of women in San Marcos is a complex negotiation involving both the erosion and reconstitution of male power.

According to some feminist theories, women's expanding roles lead to new freedoms (for a discussion of this debate, see Pessar 1999). Certainly, growing responsibility within the family is changing the place of females vis-à-vis males and within the community as a whole. But how liberated are women as a result of immigration? As women gain independence, they are also facing new struggles and newly configured male power. The 'double day' takes on new meaning in San Marcos as women are responsible for a range of both male and female roles. As one woman told me, it is very difficult to be "a woman alone" in the rancho. In addition to the stress of increased responsibilities, women face further challenges: newly constituted male dominance and gendered power inequalities, domestic violence, and in many cases, abandonment by their husbands.

One night I spoke with Cristina, one of the rancho's elementary school teachers, about changes she has seen in families because of migration. Cristina explained that men still control, or attempt to control, their wives from thousands of miles away. Husbands maintain a type of long-distance or transnational male dominance through male family members, phone calls, threats, and "gossip." Cristina said that men often "manden desde allá [control from afar]"—they may ask a son or brother to step in as a surrogate head-of-household, or husbands may telephone incessantly and question wives about their whereabouts. Men also solicit the assistance of other men in town to keep an eye on their partners and to report to them about what female family members have been doing. Finally, men exert control by not sending money for family support or by threatening to abandon their wives for another woman—a threat that is actualized in many partnerships.

But women do not passively submit to new forms of male control and exaggerated performances of masculinity. Instead, they repeatedly challenge such demonstrations of power, especially through well-articulated critiques of men. For example, one evening while I was talking with Ana, her brother-in-law Santiago walked in. He was extremely drunk: he smelled like alcohol, his eyes were glazy, and he was slurring his words. Santiago said he would not be coming to the English classes I taught each week. He explained that he had never attended school and did not know how to read or write, although, he assured us repeatedly, “I am very intelligent.” As he spoke, Ana and her mother looked at one another and then at me, rolling their eyes. Finally, Ana, clearly irritated, responded: “In my opinion, it is not intelligent to be drunk every day.” Santiago pretended to ignore her comment, and quickly left the room

Women living in the United States are also subjected to emergent formations of male control, and often they, too, do not find themselves “liberated” in the ways that some theorists might speculate. Once women have come north, they continue to live under the daily control of a male head-of-household—increasingly more often than those women who are living in Mexico. Additionally, like women in Mexico, women in the United States take on growing workloads—now in the sphere of wage labor as well as in the home. Rather than freeing women, work outside the home is likely to be an increased burden, particularly because men are not compensating by taking on more of what has traditionally been “women’s work.”

When women (im)migrate to the United States, they often find themselves dependent on men in ways they were not in Mexico. The majority of the time, women migrate with males to the United States, and once here, they live with boyfriends or

husbands, or perhaps brothers and other male relatives, such as uncles and cousins. It is very rare for women to go alone, and even more uncommon for women to live on their own once they have arrived. These men obviously have significant control over women's actions. If men with legal status in the United States embody emergent masculinities and new forms of male power, women who are undocumented are perhaps the most vulnerable.

The experiences of Lupe illustrate this point. Lupe lived in San Marcos for several years while her husband, Antonio, was working and living in Albuquerque. When it became clear that Antonio—who is undocumented—would not be returning to the rancho anytime soon, he arranged for a *coyota* to bring Lupe and their three youngest children to New Mexico. In San Marcos, I met Lupe when she was living without her husband. Lupe was known as an opinionated, somewhat feisty, woman who did not acquiesce to others. When I visited Lupe in Albuquerque, however, I was struck by the dramatic change in her demeanor and way-of-life. She was living in what was previously an all-male apartment, and where she was now expected to cook and clean for not only her husband, but also for her brother-in-law and two other men from San Marcos. She told me that she felt very lonely, that she hardly ever left the house, and that she very much missed Mexico. Like Lupe's husband, men often bring women to care for them and perform domestic duties, and as a result, more traditional masculinities are reasserted. In fact, one of the motivations for men to reunite their families in the United States is that men are able to reestablish themselves as head-of-household, and take advantage of the privilege that comes with the position.

Again, I want to emphasize that women do not accept such assertions of male privilege without contestation, and there are many displays of female power in response to male dominance. For example, consider the actions of Perla, a young woman who lived a short time in Albuquerque. Her husband, Valentino, was notorious for drinking and womanizing, and community members speculated that he was physically abusing her. She decided to take action. After living in the United States without documents, Perla and her infant son, a U.S. citizen, boarded a bus headed for Mexico. Because Valentino was also undocumented, she knew it would be nearly impossible for him to take any legal action to gain custody of his son from within the United States. She also knew that it would be difficult for him to follow her to Mexico, since return back to the United States would be costly and dangerous. Perla took steps to counter her husband's control over her, and by returning to Mexico, she freed herself—at least to some extent—from male control.

Without question, women in the United States exercise flexible and diverse roles, and are redefining femininity and what it means to be a woman. Teresa, for example, has a life that is quite distinct from her previous life in Mexico. In Mexico, she tells me that she was constantly in her home doing domestic chores, and that her family struggled because they had so little money. Today, Teresa works full-time for a clothing manufacturer, and she is responsible for many public interactions—with her children's teachers and doctors, the family's immigration attorney, bank tellers, and her realtor, among others. But while Teresa finds herself in spheres that are entirely new for her, and in charge of important family business, she still is the one who must do everything in the home. Her teenage daughters help with the load, but her husband and son do not. Teresa

tells me that she is exhausted. She says that she has even purchased a daily planner—something she thought was ridiculous when she first saw a co-worker using one. But now, she explains, her life is so hectic that she is lucky to just get by. Although she knows it is unlikely, and still vividly recalls the difficulties she faced as a woman before coming to the United States, she often dreams of returning to Mexico.

Conclusion

For women living in both Mexico and the United States, it is difficult to argue that increased flexibility in women's roles directly leads to liberation. Cristina, who criticized men in the rancho for working only eight days a year, told me that men see agricultural work as important, while diminishing the value of work done by women. Cristina explained that today women do both women's work and men's work, and so she asked, "Why can't men help with cleaning and caring for the children?" Such changes to male lifestyles are very slowly coming about in the rancho, and perhaps only slightly more so in the United States. For example, when men live in all-male apartments in Albuquerque, they will take turns cooking for one another, although they essentially never cook when they return to Mexico or if their wives join them in the United States. As Gail Mummert has argued, "Changes do not flow in a unilinear fashion, as in an elegant model, from female subservience to emancipation" (Mummert 1994: 207). Undoubtedly, as gender dynamics change with transnational movement, women will increasingly call on men to do their part, but how rapidly and to what degree such changes actually take place remains to be seen. The creation and reconstitution of

femininities is a complex and uneven process characterized by control, contention, acceptance, contestation, and ultimately, negotiation.

As I have discussed, because of transnational migration, notions of appropriate gender roles are rapidly shifting. Transnational movement and globalization is resulting in a range of new gendered subjectivities: emergent forms of male control and creative strategies through which women assert themselves, as well as newly defined masculinities and femininities. I have argued that gender is created through contradictory processes: masculinity is both reasserted and compromised because of migration between Mexico and the United States, which in turn, simultaneously liberates and puts new controls on women. Never static, gender subjectivities are constantly evolving and shifting through what transnational feminists have called the “interminable project of production and reproduction” (Alarcón, Kaplan, and Moallem 1999: 8). Like transnational movement itself, gender identities are characterized by fluidity, movement, and transformation. Within transnational communities living throughout Mexico and the United States, masculinities and femininities will continue to change with (im)migration as women and men participate in the ongoing and complex negotiation of gender subjectivities.

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