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Transnational meanings of La Virgen de Guadalupe: Religiosity, space and culture at Plaza Mexico

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In this paper, we examine Plaza Mexico in Lynwood, California, a magnet for Latino communities from throughout the greater Los Angeles region, to show immigrants’ use of space to produce transnational communities as coherent. One of the key ways that immigrant identity is formed in this space is through cultural religiosity. Despite the fact that Plaza Mexico is a shopping mall, the place gathers participation from Mexican immigrants and Latinos of other national origins at key times of religious expression during the year. Following what Holloway calls 'enchanted space', we analyse the Day of the Dead celebration (2 November) and the Virgen de Guadalupe celebration (during and after 12 December) to discuss the transformation of the mall into a multidimensional place that encompasses secular, religious, cultural and political expressions. We show how Plaza Mexico provides a rich location from which to understand transnational cultural connections and familial transmissions of culture between different generations of immigrants which we term 'affective connectivity'.

Keywords: transnationalism; Plaza Mexico; cultural religiosity; Los Angeles-Latino; Virgen de Guadalupe; Day of the Dead; ethnic identity

Introduction

Transnationalism, as a practice in the world, and as a word embedded in the titles of scholarly books, conference descriptions and papers, is ubiquitous. One route through which the transnationalism has made its appearance through the literature on immigration, which has been interested in connectivity between destinations often in terms of political participation (Guarnizo 2001), questions of assimilation (Guarnizo, Portes, and Haller 2003) and migrants' economic impact in both homeland and hosting nations (employment, social security, etc.). Transnationalism can be analysed through measurable, albeit difficult to track units, such as through remission dollars and their contribution to a nation’s gross national product, voting and participation practices, and other such quantifiable measures. Studies like these give important insights into social networks and the political economy of contemporary post-national societies – the continuities and
patterns that bridge, for instance, Mexico to the United States's Southwest; what in one fell swoop historian David G. Gutierrez, amongst others, calls 'Greater Mexico' (1999).

In this paper, we analyse how transnational connectivity happens beyond the sphere of quantifiable economic and political arenas to describe some of the qualitative cultural manifestations of transnational experiences. In particular, we discuss 'cultural religiosity', or forms of expressive spiritual practices and celebrations that bridge communal ties between nations of origin and destination to create transnational collective experiences. Readily visible, off the 105 freeway, the Plaza Mexico mall boasts one of the largest electronic billboards in Southern California. In the last few years, the Plaza Mexico mall has become an important communal centre of ethnic consumption and socio-cultural and religious production and reproduction.

At various moments throughout the year, the mall is transformed into a place where hundreds, even thousands of people gather to celebrate, pray, worship, watch soccer, party, dance, enact nationalistic practices related to the Mexican nation-state and otherwise participate in the making of a community from various neighbourhood locations from around Los Angeles. That cultural programming for annual religious and cultural events takes place at Plaza Mexico is theoretically and empirically salient in that the site provides an opportunity for the expansion of cultural practices related to the Mexican homeland, despite their location on the northern side of the Mexican border. In the analysis that follows, we show how material registers are important markers of connection, especially through cultural religious expressions, using the term 'affective connectivity' to indicate the ways that people experience homeland outside of the nation. We define affective connectivity as the ongoing and persistent emotional, symbolic and psychic attachments and expressions of a group to a nation, specific regions, or communities across national borders. As we describe, the Virgin of Guadalupe, and the activities that surround her festivities on 12 December, act as symbolic tools of these religious-cultural experiences in expressing both the material and symbolic core of these experiences.

In the setting of economic globalisation, transnationalism does not simply refer to the free flows of goods, things and people, but is also delimited and mutated by the constraints of neoliberal markets and exclusionary nation-states. Waldinger and Fitzgerald (2004, 1178) show how nation-states, in the context of transnationalism, shape how connectivity occurs, including the regulation of exclusion, movement across borders, and the controlling of other cross-border activities. We add to this discussion by exposing how the private sector, through the creation and management of places, can play an equally important role in facilitating or setting the boundaries for the affective and collective dimensions of transnational connections, in this case by promoting cultural religiosity at Plaza Mexico. In other words, forms of connectivity that happen between Mexican communities, clients and constituents are regulated and managed to a significant extent by the investors and managers. Thus, in Plaza
Mexico, cultural expressions do not happen merely in a vacuum, but are shaped by powerful entrepreneurs and a managerial class with economic interests that influence culture. At the same time, Plaza Mexico is transformed by the culture-making practices of its patrons.

We also contribute a new epistemological and methodological approach to analysing transnational spaces within a field of inquiry that has had a difficult task of capturing the heterogeneous ways that people experience homeland in transnational settings. Transnational social experiences often present a quagmire for social scientists, since local-and nation-bound methodologies and approaches make it nearly impossible to approximate transnational cultural experiences. As critical theorist Juan Poblete describes, scholars in the field and in particular in Latino Studies are ‘challenged by an expanded social imagination which has fully incorporated migration and transnationalism within its horizon’, forcing the concomitant need for scholars to expand our critical approaches. As he poignantly summons, ‘new reterritorialising social practices, whatever their origins or structural causes, demand new ways of conceptualising those processes’ (Poblete 2007).

An important way to approximate the lived transnational experience and the social imagination of immigrants is through spatial analysis. While models of difference and assimilation were classical guides for how to think about space and the city, approaches since the 1990s emphasise conditions of diaspora and hybridity (Gilroy 1993; Hall 1990), and its transnational dimensions (Smith 2005, 2007; Iraza’bal and Go’mez-Barris 2007). For instance, geographer Veronis (2007) describes how Latin American immigrants in Toronto construct a pan-Latino identity through place. By creating a visible ‘Barrio Latino’ and making a pan-Latino cultural centre, Veronis’ ethnographic analysis demonstrates how Latin American immigrants use place-making strategies to produce a world of their own. Unlike the invisibility Latin American immigrants of diverse backgrounds still face in Toronto, Mexican-and Central American-born populations in metropolitan Los Angeles are very visible, and concentrate in dense urban neighbourhoods of Los Angeles and metropolitan cities like Huntington Park and San Fernando, among many others. The use of public parks, libraries, community centres and shopping corridors is a wider concern of our research on the interactions of ethnic identity and space in Los Angeles, a topic to which many scholars have contributed (Valle and Torres 2000; Villa 2000; Diaz 2005; García’ Bedolla 2005; Davis 2000; Leclerc, Villa, and Dear 1999; Iraza’bal and Farhat 2008). Our focus on Plaza Mexico, a dense research site, where transnational processes play themselves out daily, offers a unique location from which to conceptualise and discuss the dynamics of cross-border cultural activities and cross-border imaginaries in a metropolitan area with an expansive Latino/a population.

Finally, we contribute to a vitalised understanding of cultural religious practices and space in the contemporary period. If spaces of ethnic and cultural identity have often been theorised by focusing on very local places such as the
home, the street and the neighbourhood, then it is because traditionally these are the concrete places where ethnic communities are formed and where cultural identity maintains its strongest ties. For instance, in a recent volume about the ‘barrio’, the variables of space and culture are linked to the locality and social relations of the neighbourhood, a dense site where identification occurs as much through living and being in close proximity to other members of ethnic national origins (in this case Puerto Ricans and other Latinos) as through the history of collective social and labour struggles, and the creation of spatial meaning and memory (Da’vila 2004, 64). In this framework, social institutions, such as the church (and also cultural centres, local hang-outs, street corners, bars, social service organisations, etc.) are important supportive structures that forge the constitution and coherence of el barrio.  

We explore several aspects of space, culture and identity by shifting the research lens from the conventional place-bound notion of community in ‘el barrio’ and its accompanying social institutions like the church, to a commercial site in Los Angeles that has quickly become the centre of many forms of Mexican religious and cultural community life. What happens when a privatised space acts as a ‘public’ and collective space, congregating dispersed Latino/a communities through cultural and religious events? How does, what many would consider a shopping mall act as a supportive structure for the coherence of ethnic identification and transnational communities?

**Religion moves to the mall**

Plaza Mexico, a Korean-owned, Mexican-themed outdoor mall in Lynwood, California, is currently an important epicentre of cultural religious expression for Mexican and Latino/a transnational communities living in the greater Los Angeles region. Its central location as a nexus point for freeways and near a commuter metro line, its attention to architecture, landscape design, public art and services, and its notoriety as a place of ‘authentic’ Mexican culture has made it a popular destination for its mostly Mexican clientele, but also for Latino/as of all origins (Iraza´bal and Go´mez-Barris 2007). Evidence of Plaza Mexico’s growing popularity is the construction of a new multi-tiered parking structure, and the increasing number of participants at Mexican cultural and nationalist events, such as El Grito de Independencia (Mexican Independence Day) from 15 to 16 September, which brings in thousands of people; or for Mexican soccer games, including the 2006 World Cup, where hundreds show up in fan wear to collectively watch and celebrate the events. The Plaza also corrals large crowds on Sundays, when patrons stroll, enjoy regional Mexican cuisine, shop and participate in Plaza programming, including Catholic masses and mariachi or other styles of Mexican music. It serves the needs of immigrants in other ways as well, for instance as the home of the hometown associations of Oaxaca, Puebla and Michoacan, community centres that provide legal, business and cultural services for immigrants of those regions in Mexico, and a location that nearly all
Mexican government officials and actors/actresses visit when in Los Angeles for election campaigning or other business.

In fact, the owners and managers of Plaza Mexico have carefully worked to craft a distinctive role for Plaza Mexico in catering to Los Angeles Latino/as, specifically targeting Mexicana/o immigrants and their multi-fold material and affective needs and desires. As one manager briefly commented, ‘This is not Placita Olvera. Here, the clientele is 100% Latino,’ suggesting Plaza Mexico’s ability to capture the imagination of the local Latino diaspora (Ira’zabal and Go’mez-Barris 2007). As mentioned earlier, a primary strategy that managers of Plaza Mexico have used to create, expand and capture this clientele is through cultural programming during most Mexican national holidays. Plaza Mexico managers have capitalised on the celebration of traditional Mexican religious holidays like the day of the Virgin of Guadalupe (12 December) and the Day of the Dead (2 November). They view these events as opportunities for clientele expansion and community building. In the transnational setting, the annual celebrations of Mexican national holidays illustrate how immigrants bring their traditions with them from their homeland, and transform them into something new in the process of settling into and contending with their daily lives and their work, leisure time, politics and cultural conditions in the USA. But above all, for ‘displaced’ populations like Mexicanas/os living in the USA, these processes show continuity in their cultural practices rather than rupture (Go’mez-Barris 2008). Through the expression of social life registered in cultural and religious rituals, these celebrations provide the backbone for the continuity of ethnic and national identity, bridging geographic zones of identification on both sides of the US/Mexico border. The Day of the Dead persists widely in the Southwest despite attempts by Catholic and Protestant leaders to ‘ban, replace and condemn the traditions’ (Matsovina 2005, 29).

In the case of Plaza Mexico, though, it is important to acknowledge that these forms of cultural connection are structurally facilitated by the management of the place, fulfilling the malls economic and market imperative. We insist, however, that to analyse what takes place at Plaza Mexico solely in economic terms misses much of the richness and significance of the cultural life there. In the current period of economic globalisation, forms of transnational persistence and syncretistic reinvention of religious and cultural celebrations like that of Day of the Dead and the Virgin of Guadalupe may be seen as a contemporary phenomenon, where fetishised expressions of religion spread like neoliberal capitalism. However, religious practice, even in late capitalism, offers many forms of social engagement. As sociologists Manuel A. Va’squez and Marie Friedmann Marquardt point out, Durkheim viewed religion ‘as the source of “collective representations,” foundational categories that order our perceptions, structure our actions upon the world, and cement social relations’ (2003, 5). Following such an appreciation, Va’squez and Marquardt (2003) argue that religion ‘has always provided complex strategies for conceptualising self, time and space’, and must be taken seriously as an ‘independent variable in the present
episode of globalisation’ (ibid). They go on to describe how, in the Americas, religion is as much a ‘major interpretative horizon’ as it is about ‘shifting identities’ and ‘hybrid cultures’. Thus, merely analysing the religious programming at Plaza Mexico from the perspective of the market logic (i.e. a desire to expand consumptive clientele) would be a reductionist move. Further, this line of thinking does not allow for a variegated understanding of how commercial spaces can be made into culturally and religiously meaningful sites through a complex interplay between the actions and reactions of the managers and their patrons. Our specific aim here is to understand the social relations that are attenuated by cultural religiosity, thereby revealing important, yet understudied dimensions of transnational experience.

A fruitful way into understanding the social dynamics at Plaza Mexico is by looking at the use of space. Julian Holloway offers a vitalised understanding of spiritual and religious practices, one that accounts for the importance of enchanted space (Holloway 2006). Holloway offers that such an understanding of religion simultaneously includes its secular and religious dimensions, whereby people make meaning of space in polyphonic ways. During the festivities and gatherings that occur during Day of the Dead and other occasions at Plaza Mexico, the location is truly transformed into an enchanted space, where the vital affective dimensions of social life, including worshiping, prayer, collective effervescence, dance and other forms of ritual and affective engagements become the predominant form of social being in these gatherings. For instance, during the Day of the Dead celebrations, one particularly colourful, tall and beautifully organised altar in Plaza Mexico was from the state of Nayarit. Hundreds of small clay figurines lined the more than nine story altar that had been built by local artists and Nazarit indigenous immigrants. In front of the altar was 93-year-old shaman, Don Pepe, who for a small tokenistic fee and through the use of sacralised incense and bird feathers performed indigenous healing rituals and life predictions for those who approached him. As Don Pepe recounted, he learned his craft at the age of twelve and had since had the capacity to speak with all forms of non-material beings, including the devil. For one of us, he predicted a strong spiritual life, with many blessings, as he blew smoke into our faces, and spat onto the feathers. This enchanted experience, together with the many altars constructed around the Plaza, recreated the space from one of market consumption, to a living, vibrant location of cultural and spiritual practice.

Scholar Karin Aguilar-San Juan has argued that for Vietnamese immigrants in the USA, identities persist because of places that are ‘often seen primarily as business districts or “ethnic enclaves”’. Such locations also work to anchor identity, facilitate social networks, support community cohesion and recreate cultural traits (Aguilar-San Juan 2005, 37). From two years of fieldwork, including structured and semi-structured interviews with managers, clientele, workers, politicians and storekeepers, and ethnographic work and participant observation of multiple festivities, we have observed that despite Plaza Mexico’s primary intent as a marketplace, the place is indeed transformed into an enchanted location for
individual, familial, regional and religious expressions; in short, a place supportive of community cohesion as Aguilar-San Juan describes. The next section incorporates observations, insights and interviews to illuminate the workings of space, identity and cultural religiosity, in the process illustrating what we mean by the transformation of a consumer location into an enchanted space.

As a figure of cultural and religious veneration that seems ‘to enshrine the major hopes and aspirations of an entire society’ (Wolf 1958, 34), the Virgin of Guadalupe is an emblematic icon that symbolically and materially offers links between space, culture and identity at Plaza Mexico in surprising ways. We take the reader to the field site of Plaza Mexico to understand the significance of the Virgen de Guadalupe, the figure religion scholar Timothy Matovina describes as the centre of Mexican Catholic symbolic resistance (Matovina 2005, 27). The omnipresent image and celebration of La Virgen in the Southwestern part of the United States, and more specifically in Los Angeles, the site of our research, is a poignant collective public expression of the enormous Mexican presence in these regions, and a persistence in Mexican identity, despite the multiple forms of economic, political and social erasure and displacement that these communities have historically confronted.

**Encountering la Virgen**

In four locations throughout the main complex of Plaza Mexico, the Virgin of Guadalupe made her appearance. Perched high above hundreds of Mexican immigrant worshippers and next to the China Express fast food restaurant sign, stood a towering electric figure of the Virgin in full neon technicolour. The date was 12 December 2007, the key night of celebrations that last for 7 days including the Posadas that took place prior to this official date. For many gathered in the Plaza, alongside traditional drinks like Mexican hot chocolate and champurado, the Virgin’s figure warded off the chill of the unusually cold December night, casting a glow that could be seen even at the back parking lot a quarter of a mile away.

Nearby, at ground level, La Virgen de Guadalupe made a more formal public appearance, as she was carefully placed on a table at the side of a 20-foot stage where she was the centre of collective festivities. For many hours during the afternoon and later evening on 11 December, the Virgin was surrounded by dozens of her most devoted fans. Framed in thick mahogany, a muted sepia-tone portrait of the Virgin hung in the middle of a crowd. The image was a faithful reproduction of one of the original portraits of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the familiar brown, indigenous Virgin who first appeared to Juan Diego on the mountaintop of Tepeyac, Mexico City, in 1531. Unlike the seasonal presence of the neon figure, the official image of the Virgin was given a permanent home at a dedicated chapel in the mall, behind the carousel. As manager Christina Aguilar told it, ‘La Virgen was put in her rightful place on 12 December 2002, after an exhaustive study and approval by Mexican Church officials’ and a blessing ceremony by Father Jesus Soto Alvarado, the head of the Mexico City Basilica.
For the two-day celebration of 11 and 12 December 2006, the annual days of festivities for the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Virgin was removed by workers of Plaza Mexico from her more private setting at the chapel, and instead put into the public limelight to officiate at the helm of a parade. Throughout performances that included Afro-Peruvian music, Danza Azteca and Mariachi playing, La Virgen was at the side of the stage, surrounded by flowers, candles and the prayers of devotees. Later, she was held by two women at the front of a parade that culminated in a midnight mass. All of the speakers gave gratitude to the Virgin for her works and her blessings upon the Mexican people.

The third appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe at Plaza Mexico is less grand and hardly visible. The Virgin sits above an altar at the edge of the marketplace where affordable vegetables, fruits and imported goods from China are sold in a series of stalls. Just twelve inches high, as they told us, the Guadalupe figurine provides comfort and a sense of economic security for the local shopkeepers, and the men and women patronising the marketplace. ‘La Virgen provides a form of protection to us’, said one of the female shopkeepers, or as a man in his 70s who daily patrons the shops said to us, ‘I like to see her there. It’s comforting.’ Sometimes, there are votive candles lit on the altar, and small food and flower offerings.

The fourth appearance of the Virgin is even more discrete, perhaps slightly subversive in its placement behind the thick green foliage of a potted plant. This time the Virgin was on the shirt of a rock musician, who was given homage as a five-foot bronze sculpture in front of the Mexican chainstore Café´ Canela. It is perhaps fitting that she was found on a shirt of a rockero in front of the Mexican-owned coffee chain Café´ Canela. Although Starbuck’s had sought a spot within Plaza Mexico two years prior, the chain was rejected by the Plaza management in favour of a more ‘authentic’ Mexican coffee shop. Why would we want Starbuck’s when we have Café´ Canela?” asked one patron. In this fourth location, we can disentangle how the Virgen has a wide-ranging, hybrid global and postmodern posture, but also expresses a cultural nationalist position. While these four locations were the more or less permanent – or at least seasonal – displays of the Virgin de Guadalupe at Plaza Mexico, the image also adorns many goods sold in the mall, from key chains to posters. In addition, on the night of 12 December, La Virgen de Guadalupe was expressively evoked by hundreds of worshippers, emblazoned as face paint, and on the clothes of those came with their children, parents, spouses, lovers, friends, and homies. At one point late in the evening, dozens of Plaza Mexico posters with the Virgin of Guadalupe’s image were given to the crowd. By the end of the night, t-shirts, sweatshirts, flags, and other goods that boasted the image of the Virgin had been sold.

While the majority of Plaza visitors were originally from Mexico, the celebration on 12 December also drew a broad range of Latino/a and Latin American patrons. For instance, we met with a group of five young Central American and Mexican men who identified themselves as gang affiliated, two of whom had just been released from prison for gang-related crimes. Two of the five young men were Salvadoran, one had Nicaraguan parents, one had
a parent each from El Salvador and Mexico and the fifth was 'puro Mexicano' as he described himself. One of the Salvadoran young men and the 'puro Mexicano' wore Virgin of Guadalupe pendants around their necks, saying that she was 'their lady' and provided a form of protection. The young men talked about how they were there to show 'their love' for La Virgen, an important figure in their lives as someone they regularly prayed to and who they felt offered them all forms of protection within their troubled burrios. When asked why they attended the evening's festivities, they all claimed that this was the place to be – a way to honour La Virgin, a response that was echoed by almost all of the attendees we spoke to that evening. In talking further with these young men, they suggested that they travelled from the Pico Union area to Plaza Mexico as a way to stay off the streets. As one young boy who had just got out of a juvenile detention centre after a six-month stay stated, 'all there is to do en la calle (the street) is to get in trouble. Here it is clean and we do not have to worry about being safe'. For Manolo (a 17-year-old), 'being safe' was synonymous with taking a break from gang territories by coming into 'neutral' spaces like Plaza Mexico, which resided outside of the traditional gang circuits, a place that provided temporary relief from gangs and the police in equal measure. The celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe allowed these young men to feel freer to come together with their fellow ethnics and co-nationals to celebrate their identity as Latinos, Mexicanos and what they referred to as halfies.

Besides the notion of Plaza Mexico as a kind of sanctuary during religious festivities, during our field work at Plaza Mexico many young people described how they went there to have fun, eat, hang out, 'cruise girls/boys' and to shop. When asked if they had been there before, repeatedly we found that young people had frequented Plaza Mexico for key celebrations, like Mexican Independence Day (El Grito de la Independencia, 16 September), Day of the Dead (Día de los Muertos, 2 November) and the day dedicated to the Virgin of Guadalupe (El Día de la Virgen de Guadalupe, 12 December). In follow-up responses, it was clear that this particular group of young men saw the Virgin as a central icon of their cultural heritage and as an anchor for their ongoing ethnic identity in a transnational setting that presented to them many new challenges. As 18-year-old Joel summed up, 'She's part of us, man, and no matter if you be Mexicano or Salvatrucha, you gotta be cool with La Virgen. She takes care of nuestra gente (our people), man. Es muy buena con nosotros (She's good to us)'. Encapsulated in Joel's statement is a thoughtful analysis of the interrelationship between culture, religion and identity that shows up at Plaza Mexico. In these young people's eyes, the Virgin sees beyond national origins and territories to be inscribed as a protector of Central Americans as well as Mexicans across borders, a particularly nurturing presence for a population that face challenges to their identity and sense of belonging in the process of becoming 'Latinos' in the USA (Da'vila 2004). Thus, the Virgin becomes a symbolic, catalytic transformer of a more encompassing pan-Latino identity that is celebrated in the space of Plaza Mexico.
The multifold image and appearances of the Virgen de Guadalupe at the Plaza is consistent with the mall’s ‘authentic’ Mexican representation, sedimented through its integrative design of icons, landscape and architecture. Returning to the question of cultural practices and the objective by Plaza Mexico’s owners and managers to reproduce an authentic sense of homeland, the use of the Virgin of Guadalupe’s image raises an important question: Has the traditional image become a hegemonic Mexican national and religious symbol to be incorporated into the repertoire of other Christmas icons to appeal to the growing Mexican immigrant and Latina/o clientelle? During the Christmas holiday season, in the middle of the Plaza patrons could take their picture with a white Santa Claus, a setting completed by a Christmas tree, presents, and little green elves. At many of the stores around the plaza, posters, handbags, sweaters, t-shirts, and officially sanctioned imagery of the Virgin, were sold alongside the Santa Claus merchandise. The figure of the Virgin has a prominent role during the Christmas season, underlying the ethno-Catholic nature of the holiday for most Plaza patrons, and the fact that it shares space – both physically and symbolically – with more Anglo-expressions of the holiday, such as Santa Claus. Yet, the Virgin is a permanent feature in the mall, transcending fads and seasonal rhythms, providing anchoring in an otherwise impermanent flow of goods, fashions and of people.

What kind of identities does Plaza Mexico promote? In one sense, the forms of identity that Plaza Mexico makes available could be labelled essentialist, where either a Mexicana/o identity is made legible through nationalist symbols and celebrations, or a pan-Latino identity is constructed through the marketplace and held relatively stable by other relational identities. However, what surprised us most in our interviews was that despite the obvious architectural efforts to recreate Mexican-ness at the mall, resulting in a clearly pastiche and post-modern place, almost all of the patrons asserted to us that Plaza Mexico indeed felt like the homeland. A term that consistently came up in our fieldwork was its ‘authenticity’: Plaza Mexico seemed authentically Mexican to its clientele, in its food, its plaza design, and especially during the celebrations of events such as Day of the Dead and the Virgin of Guadalupe.

‘Authentic’ cultural spaces in Los Angeles

At Plaza Mexico, the most obvious way that ‘authenticity’ registers (besides the mall’s name) is through architectural design or what its designers would refer to as a ‘classical’ Mexican style in its architectural facades and decorations with bright colours, Spanish tiles and two-storied buildings (or faux facades) organised around a central plaza and kiosk space, rather than the more subdued early Californian style prevalent in other themed commercial environments in the region. The owners and managers of Plaza Mexico have in fact gone to painstaking lengths to produce stylistic elements and architecture of authentic Mexican origins. For instance, a replica of the iconic Angel of Independence in Mexico City sits at the main entrance to the Plaza, iron benches depicting
patriotic or pastoral Mexican scenes were brought from Jalisco, and the main feature on the side of the main plaza is a replica of the Palace of Jalisco.

As Plaza manager Christina Aguilar explained, ‘we have tried to create in this place a sense of Mexican regional and national identity, right down to the iron benches crafted by local artisans in Mexico’. According to Aguilar, there are five elements which make Plaza Mexico ‘really Mexican’: (1) the Aztec Calendar (Sun Dial), (2) the Mexican Flag, (3) the Mexican Independence Bell, (4) the image of La Virgen de Guadalupe and (5) the market place. Aguilar’s view of Mexican identity bounds place, symbols and traditions, placing visible and widely accepted elements of national culture at the centre of her definition of what it means to be Mexicano/a. Aguilar seems to suggest that such arrangements at the Plaza present seamless transition from living in Mexico to migrating to and residing within the USA, in that Mexicans in the States will continue to identify with these historically-sanctioned indicators of collective Mexican identity.

The plaza space itself resembles and is conceptually modelled after thousands of cities across Latin America imprinted by Spanish colonial urban planning, where plazas form the heart of community life. Besides, attempting a kind of Mexican ‘authenticity’, it could be argued that Plaza Mexico is not that different from many other themed malls across America, which combine shopping, leisure, dining and the ability to engage in other activities with plentiful parking in order to provide a ‘one-stop’ leisure experience for consumers. Even in Los Angeles, the creation of themed environments in recent outdoor shopping malls, a strategy followed in Plaza Mexico, is also adopted in other entertainment-retail centres, such as The Grove or Hollywood and Highland. Such design trends enable a simulation of other places, other countries and other time periods that have proven commercially profitable (Iraza’bal and Chakravarty 2007). Plaza Mexico occupies a different space within the imaginary of Mexican and Latino immigrant clientele, one that provides a unique parallel and counter-point experience to other Latino/a cultural spaces in Los Angeles. The celebrations that take place there are integral displays of culture, community life, faith and national belonging in the context of transnational migration.

Whether or not, one is critical of Plaza Mexico as a place that capitalises on nostalgia and a desire to belong in the hosting nation vis-a'-vis structural conditions of national exclusion, the mall does fulfil an important gap in Latino cultural life in the city. With the reduction and privatisation of public spaces that has occurred throughout the city in the last 20 years, places like The Grove and Hollywood and Highland shopping malls have become the hearts of leisure activities in the urban metropolis. In the case of Plaza Mexico, its rise as a popular destination among an almost exclusively Latino clientele is due to the marketing of cultural authenticity, producing the place as linked to traditional Mexican cultural heritage. The place appeals to mass consumer ethnic tastes and political orientations. Interestingly, the fact that the clientele is primarily immigrant lends itself to a pro-immigrant stance in some contexts. For instance, during the Student Walkouts protesting against anti-immigrant legislation in 2006, students
congregated for rallies at the Plaza. And there have been numerous instances of anti-Minute Men rallies or informational sections for immigrant rights. Unlike The Grove or Hollywood and Highland, the cultural politics that emerge at the site are tied to immigrants’ inherently politically marginalised status. Thus, the Day of the Dead celebration has elements of artistic and political expression that challenge easy notions of Mexicanidad, and some of the displays incorporate critiques of the US government, its imperial politics and the racism immigrants experience there. One example of this is the anti-Bush pins and bumper stickers in both languages that show up in the corners of some of the displays.

Although its explicit focus is not to be a politically progressive space, Plaza Mexico does fulfil a community and cultural function that is somewhat absent from the Los Angeles landscape. Latino/a cultural spaces, or ‘third spaces’, have indeed increasingly diminished in the region. In part, it is difficult for relatively small community centres to face the onslaught of retail and real estate speculation that has seen a soaring increase in rental costs. The 2007 closing of Tia Chucha’s cultural centre, which then went through the process of raising funds for a new space since its old space was converted into a laundromat centre, serves as an important reminder of the difficulties for cultural spaces to exist under brutal real estate market pressures. Like the Eastside Café, these independent or politically Leftist cultural spaces continue to be an important backbone of the progressive Latino/a community in the region, sustaining a vision of culture and politics that are independent and critical of large-scale economic interests. But in a restructured economy focused on global competition, where expensive corporate venues (e.g. Disney Concert Hall) are favoured by the market and the cultural and political establishment, independent cultural centres have become increasingly difficult to sustain. Dispersed and under funded, they experience a revolving door of member participation, both in terms of their leadership and their constituencies.

In Los Angeles, the challenges of distance, scale, transportation and uneven political and economic conditions of the urban landscape make these spaces less accessible for the immigrant population. Usually those involved in such places are also integrated into other political and social struggles, which is also the case for some participants at Plaza Mexico (especially in light of the immigrant rights movement of the last two years), but clearly there is a more mainstream immigrant audience that Plaza Mexico attracts vis-a-vis the other community centres. While there are many Latino/a cultural centres that have been at the heart of social and political movements, few have the mass appeal and ability to tap into new Latino/a immigrant markets that Plaza Mexico has had in a relatively short amount of time. As such, the Plaza provides an important place for the on-going reproduction and enactment of ethno-cultural and religious identity.

Within the restricted space of consumption, Plaza Mexico provides a setting of expanded possibilities, including a Mexican-themed environment that creates an inspiring background for cultural and religious rituals related to the homeland. In addition, the entrepreneurial approach to running the mall has attracted
ethno-cultural groups that, despite their communal orientation, have opted to use this location for their cultural events. Such is the case of a bi-national annual festival of Jarocho music, which used to be held at Placita Olvera. An organiser of the event revealed to us that, in previous occasions, dealings with the city for the planning of the event had been difficult, including unreliable and unpredictable representatives, complicated bureaucratic procedures, and difficulties related to place management, maintenance and safety. In their experience, all those challenges practically disappeared or were addressed more effectively by the managers at Plaza Mexico, which allowed both the organisers and participants of the event to focus on the artistic aspects of their encounter. This is also the condition of other cultural events celebrated at Plaza Mexico, including the religious ones discussed here. There seems to be a growing trend of displacing these events from the public realm and replacing them in private venues. Not only does this reorient these events to one more conducive to capitalist consumption, effectively making the events part of the commodities offered, but it also streamlines their production, in line with the common entrepreneurial approach of the managerial agents in the private sector. While many urban scholars find this global trend where the urban public realm shrinks while the private one expands worrisome (Low and Smith 2006; Harvey 1998; Mitchell 2003), the fact of the matter remains that the definition and management of city public spaces (by urban designers, planners, developers, policymakers and city managers) need to be carried out in a manner that is more sensitive to community needs and facilitates their cultural efforts, while minimising bureaucratic barriers. In Los Angeles, this is a challenge that Plaza Mexico makes particularly evident through its popular appropriations of Mexican celebrations that traditionally have taken place in the public spaces of the city.

Religious frames and transmissions

Over the last few years, Plaza Mexico has been transformed into one of the epicentres of Mexican religious and cultural community life in Los Angeles, even though it is a privatised space. Why has it come to occupy such a critical role in reconstituting cultural and religious community in the Mexican immigrant megalopolis? Donald Miller et al. state that,

> The assimilation or incorporation function is still a major role of religion in the United States. But since the mid-1960s the churches, temples, mosques and synagogues have expanded their roles as they mediate between the country of origin and the country of residence for many immigrants and their offspring, serving as one of the most important points of reference as individuals create bicultural identification. Indeed, the immigrant congregation is unrivalled as the place where homeland values are maintained, celebrated and passed on to the next generation. And in performing this function is permanently changing the face of religion in Southern California. (2007, 25)

On the religious front, locations such as Plaza Mexico may provide a welcome alternative to more traditional congregational spaces that in urban
locations may 'face daunting challenges if they decide to remain in urban areas despite population expansion to the suburbs' (Kinney and Winter 2006). Since there is a strong correlation between the density of immigrant populations and the concentration of poverty, as social and community indicators suggest, it is relatively difficult to maintain stable centres that attract community participation. As Kinney and Winter state, '[h]igh poverty neighbourhoods also struggle to maintain the various social systems that contribute to community strength and cohesion' (Putnam 1995; Warren, Thompson, and Saegert 2001, quoted in Kinney and Winter 2006, 335). Plaza Mexico may to some extent replace such traditional forms of cohesion such as barrios and churches. Unlike in a traditional church setting, participation at religious events, services and programmes varies at Plaza Mexico. Indeed, the strength of identity-making practices does not depend on the cohesiveness of a congregation, but instead upon a wider range of affective cultural attachments to homeland through ethno-religious expressions that are resonant for a large population, even the non-faithful.

In this section, we offer examples from Day of the Dead celebrations at Plaza Mexico to show how the construction of ethnic and cultural identities matters in this context. As the following field notes indicate, the Day of the Dead celebration takes a different tone and meaning in the USA, and yet Plaza Mexico constitutes an important location for its celebration, which expands yearly. These are notes from the field:

I first met Jorge during El Grito (Mexican Independence Day). Jorge felt it did not seem as if Día de Los Muertos in the US was recognised as strongly or celebrated in the same way [as in Mexico]. When I asked in what ways he saw it as different, he responded that there are many regional differences in Mexico and that the cemeteries do not close at dusk but remain open all night. He also shared his opinion on how he also felt that things were changing in the US with respect to what he has seen in Plaza Mexico over the past 3 years. He felt that Mexican culture and Plaza Mexico have grown simultaneously and exponentially [in the LA region] and that this year would also be big. He also mentioned that he was going to erect an altar as well. In fact, he brought a special figurine all the way from Teotihuacán for just the occasion: La Santa Muerte figurine, holding the earth on its left palm. (Jorge Ortega Ortega of Artesani as ‘Sol y Luna’)

While upon first glance it may seem that there is not much to report from this conversation, in actuality the fact that the informant has a strong connection to homeland as a cultural memory in his discussion is a significant finding for us. What Plaza Mexico events offers and facilitates is a bridge of continuity between Mexican cultural identification and Mexican identity in the USA, one that Jorge seems satisfied to see expanding. Jorge seems to suggest that one pivotal difference between celebrations in Mexico and those at Plaza Mexico, a difference that ultimately matters in terms of people’s identities, is that in Mexico the Day of the Dead celebrations are more regional in character with each distinct region having a slightly different twist to its festivities, material expressions and rituals. However, unlike in Mexico, in the USA the Day of the Dead is not
celebrated all night near the local cemetery, but rather at places like Plaza Mexico, which collide many Mexican regional expressions into a single space in the USA. This variegated cultural display allows Plaza Mexico to operate as a pedagogical museum that redefines Mexican-ness in a trasnational context (Iraza’bal and Go’mez-Barris 2007).

Perhaps the most important effect of the expressions of cultural religiosity at Plaza Mexico, not necessarily distinct from the many celebrations that occur around the USA but certainly facilitated by the large-scale production of the programming at the mall, is its means of cultural transmission. As Plaza visitor Ana Guzma’n said in front of the Oaxacan altar, ‘we come here and put bread, flowers and treats for our dead to show our young children what it means to be from Oaxaca’. Guzma’n’s comment indicates that one of the most salient aspects of how Plaza Mexico facilitates the making of cultural and religious identity is through intergenerational education – that is, when an older generation (whether it be parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles or older siblings) uses cultural opportunities such as cultural religious celebrations as a strategy for the maintenance of national and regional identities. Many female participants communicated that the Day of the Dead celebration at Plaza Mexico was important because of its cultural content and the ability it facilitated to transmit important cultural and generational knowledge about how ‘things were done back home’. Showing the copal (Mexican incense), comal, traditional breads and other foods within the altar was as much about honouring the dead as having the opportunity to signify cultural regional and national cultural practices. Of course, in this signification there is an important affective dimension where education to other generations can be a way to transmit nostalgia, loss of homeland, the sense of belonging to nation and region of origin, and exclusion or incorporation into the host nation.

**Conclusion**

Historically, as Ricardo C. Ainslie points out, researchers have approached acculturation as if it were a linear construct and process, where immigrants’ ties with the nation of origin are ‘gradually relinquished ...as they became increasingly assimilated’. As Ainslie argues, scholars assumed that immigrants live in an ‘in-between’ state between a host nation towards which they gradually lose their cultural attachment and a new host country where they are not yet fully integrated. This produces, these scholars argued, a culture of alienation and stress for immigrants (ibid 291). To analyse the effects of how well immigrants respond to these social and psychodynamic changes, researchers have used variables such as situational context, communication within domestic space, values and cultural awareness (ibid). In this discussion, commercial and public spaces, and especially the hybrid that Plaza Mexico represents in contemporary immigrant life have been absent even while such spaces represent an important mediating spatial venue for immigrant life.
We adjust the question of assimilation to rethink what happens in locations such as Los Angeles wherein entire communities continue to have strong cultural, economic and social links with Mexico, facilitated by places such as Plaza Mexico. The notion that a site of consumption can actually forge deeper and lasting links between communities is a paradoxical one given the presumption that late consumer capitalism is often a fragmenting social force. On the other hand, Ne’stor Garcia Canclini explains that the market can actually produce heterogeneous outcomes that help shape social identities and identifications, even in a positive direction (2000). We found that the confluent factors of increased groups of migrants living and socialising together, combined with the ability of the market to provide places, products and cultural gatherings that feel like home, produce bonds between immigrants that augment rather than diminish homeland identity. They also facilitate a ‘segmented assimilation’ to their host nation, whereby the immigrants selectively preserve traits from their regional and national cultures while also adopting more mainstream American ones as they deem appropriate (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes and Zhou 1993). Our point is that celebrations such as Day of the Dead at locations such as Olvera Street and Plaza Mexico become important expressions of cultural identification that help immigrants enact agency at managing and negotiating their social, political and even cultural religious identities in ways that delivers sense of well-being, nurtures strong and bonded collective cultural identities, and works against the homogenising tides of globalisation.

It is important to note the differences between the Day of the Dead and the La Virgen de Guadalupe celebrations, since the latter is much more clearly delineated as a space and format for religious expression. La Virgen’s presence, while available and accessible in the mall year round, is transformed into the foreground of immigrant expression on the night of 12 December, a form of maintaining ‘authentic’ forms of identity in the space of the transnational. The importance of programming in places like this effectively reconstitutes community in a transnational setting. Objectively, however, the management of sense of community (as attained through rituals, holiday celebrations, masses, festivals, and so on) occurs through the marketing of cultural authenticity, by literally assigning meaning to the place as signifier of that which is authentically Mexican.

Finally, the term ‘affective connectivity’ allows us to highlight the multiple ways cultural religiosity and public space provide transnational collective experiences of ethnic identification and renewal for younger generations. Through the material practices of place-making, these affective connections manifest, however briefly, the emotional, symbolic and psychic ties produced through an(other) reimagined and recreated homeland. In the case of Plaza Mexico, the multiple celebrations offers a predominantly Latino/a immigrant clientele the opportunity to also become a pan-Latino/a community, and express belonging across multiple borders. Affective connectivity allows for a closer
examination of the emotional work involved within the cultural productions and transformations of public space.

Notes
1. Email: cei2108@columbia.edu
2. In fact, in highly religious immigrant communities like those of Latino/a population, congregations and congregational spaces, whether it is conventional Catholic churches, storefront spaces or Evangelical spaces converted from movie theatres have conventionally formed the backbone of a community (Espinosa, Elizondo, and Mirando 2005; Miller, Jon, and Dyrness 2001, 2002).
3. Here and subsequently, all names of informants have been given pseudonyms, except for the Plaza managers who were too easily identifiable because of their position, to ensure the privacy of responses. In the case of the Plaza managers, we obtained permission to cite their responses.
5. Jarocho is a kind of regional Mexican music and dance. In recent years, there has been a revival of this type of music and dance on both sides of the US/Mexico border, including these bi-national festivals where bands from both countries get together for an intensive cultural exchange.

References


