

PIMSA Article Submission

**Title:** Migration and health in “Maya Town”:

A transnational experience of a Yucatec family from Oxkutzcab, Yucatan to San Francisco, California.

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**Abstract:**

Since the early 1990's there has been an increasing amount of migration of Yucatec Mayans from Oxkutzcab to the Mission District of San Francisco. Oxkutzcab's population is 27 thousand and about 81% of the population speaks Yucatec Maya. Once a successful booming agricultural market is now part of the growing trend of transnational, Indigenous towns sending nearly half its population to the Mission District of San Francisco. The city receives over 1 million monthly dollars from migrant remittances. This paper will give a theoretical context of research on Migration before explaining the methods of the research. This study used a bi-national, ethnographic approach to gather interviews from informants and their families. In this paper one family's story will be used to describe one experience of a transnational Yucatec Maya family. After having documented the reasons why people have resorted to migration, the mental health risks and the ways social networks help to overcome the hardships are analyzed. Our intent is to foster collective discussions on issues of health and migration and to give a qualitative evidence of the growing transnational Yucatec Mayan communities.

**Key words:** migration and health; San Francisco, California; Oxkutzcab, Yucatan, Mexico; ethnic group: Yucatec Maya; ethnography;

## **Introduction**

Since the mid 1990's there has been an increasing amount of migration of Yucatec Mayas from Oxkutzcab to the Mission District of San Francisco. Oxkutzcab's population is 27 thousand and about 81% of the population speaks Yucatec Maya. Whereas Oxkutzcab's agriculture once supported a booming local market it has now become part of the growing trend of transnational, Indigenous towns as it sends nearly half its population to the Mission District of San Francisco. Migrants in San Francisco's "Maya Town" send over 1 million monthly dollars in remittances. This paper will give a historical context for Yucatecan Migration to the United States before explaining the methods. This study used a bi-national, ethnographic approach to gather interviews from informants and their families. In this paper one family's story will be used to describe one experience of a transnational Yucatec Maya family. As we researched the reasons why people have resorted to migration, the mental health risks and the ways social networks help to overcome the hardships are analyzed. Our intent was to produce a documentary to foster collective discussions on issues of health and migration. The video documentary would be used to orient prospective youth about the diverse health problems that immigrants and their families confront in San Francisco, California.

We used ethnographic methods based in participant observation and situation analysis. We conducted interviews and acquired first-hand accounts. The story begins in Oxkutzcab, Yucatan. Oxkutzcab has a population of nearly 26,000 and an estimated 12,000 currently in San Francisco (according to the *Asociación Mayab*). We conducted fieldwork in Oxkutzcab over the course of nearly two months and eight months in San Francisco. In

Oxkutzcab, we took advantage of the extensive fieldwork that Dr. Fortuny has done since 2001 during her study on “The Presbyterian Connection: Oxkutzcab, Yucatan/San Francisco, California.” She helped us by orientating us with the region and suggesting the theme of Yucatec migration among young men and gave us specific contacts. Each informant would recommend someone including friends and relatives in San Francisco and eventually our pool of informants grew to over 50 in Oxkutzcab and over 50 in San Francisco.

The focus of this paper will be on the Ramirez family. Their experience tells of the trials and triumphs of a Yucatecan transnational, migrant family. The Ramirez family has three sons: Ramon, Juan and Abraham; and one daughter, Diana. All of them have migrated to and from Oxkutzcab to San Francisco multiple times. Their Father abandoned the family after he migrated to the US. All three sons have been involved in drugs from experimentation to addiction at home and abroad. The daughter had an unplanned teen pregnancy that prompted her to migrate from Oxkutzcab because she wanted her son to be born in the US. The Ramirez family became key informants because they opened their home and were candid. In fact, they were eager to share their Family’s story and migration experience in front of a camera as we filmed interviews. They seemed to feel a sense of empowerment to tell their story through the documentary for others to learn from their experiences.

### **Historical context of Yucatan Maya Migration to the U.S.**

Transnational migration of the people from Oxkutzcab, Yucatan developed as a result of a historical process where migration took different forms and adapted to both internal state and external national and global phenomena. The forms of migration include intermunicipal migration in which migrants remained in their state and this sort of migration occurred as a result of war and as a result of a development in tourism for examples. Another form of

migration is interstate and tends to lend itself to a temporary or seasonal form of migration in which migrants are seen as *jornaleros agrícolas*, searching for seasonal agricultural work in other states of Mexico. Yet another form is international migration that takes the forms of permanent settlement, return migration transnational migration or cyclical migration. An important question to consider is whether internal migration promotes international migration.

Quentin Wodon, Diego Angel-Urdinola et al, point out that southern states have high rates of temporary migrants who search for employment in the agricultural sector away from the home state but within Mexico (2003:6). There are between 2.7 and 3.7 million agricultural migrants in Mexico that consist of 50 percent women, 40 percent children and a large majority are indigenous according to Wodon, Urdinola, et al (SEDESOL 2000). *Jornaleros* can be characterized into three subgroups according to the length of their migration and the distance they cover according to Wodon, Urdinola, et al (SEDESOL 2000). *Jornaleros pendulares* leave their place of origin for periods of four to six months and return, *jornaleros golondrinos* move constantly all year from one place to the next, and *jornaleros locales*, who are employed in relatively close to their place of origin and do not need to migrate for long (2003:6).

The recent literature on intrastate migration in Yucatan has focused on urbanization processes looking at the patterns of economic incorporation and the ways migrants are connected with their place of origin (Lewin Fischer 2003:20) A tremendous development transpired after the 1970s in the state's capital city of Merida in addition to the tourist zones of the coast. Anthropological research has focused on tourism and the changes in cultural landscape (Brown 1999; Rodriguez, Wittlinger, and Manzanero Rodriguez 2003). Alicia Re

Cruz (2003), in *Milpa as an ideological weapon: tourism and maya migration to Cancún*, focuses on social fragmentation as a result of out-migration to Cancún (489). Re Cruz examines the cultural intersection between the rules and modes of production between the Maya community of Chan Kom and of the tourist center in Cancún (2003:491). Re Cruz point out that production systems coincide with ideological systems. Those who leave the village adopt a capitalist-tourist mode of production and therefore integrate into the political and economic power of the town when they return. The ones who stay behind and remain loyal to traditional, *milpa* mode of production use the fact that migrants have abandoned their tradition as a weapon to counteract the new political and economic power in the community to question the migrants' Maya identity (Re Cruz 2003:494). This is an important observation because migrants from Oxkutzcab are branded with a similar stigma when they return from the U.S.

Agriculture and recently tourism have been two pull factors of internal migration in Yucatan. When looking at international migration it is pertinent to consider the associations between internal and international migration to question whether the former promotes the latter especially in areas such as Yucatan who have had an extensive internal migration and a relatively recent international migration. Andrea Rodríguez and Jennifer Wittlinger, et al, studied the migration of people from Tunká to the United States combined with the pull that domestic tourist destinations three hours away have exerted (2003). They looked at how labor contractors made employment in tourist zones attractive during construction phase by bussing Tukaseños to what is known as the tourist belt (Rodriguez and Wittlinger et al 2003:75). Eventually employment opportunities increased in the service sector as tourist facilities opened. They conclude that it was social networks that maintained migration to the

tourist centers in the coast of Yucatan. By the 1980s, Rodriguez and Wittlinger et al, point out that the tourist belt became known throughout the peninsula and indeed the country as a place with abundant work opportunities (Castellanos 2003:128). Internal migration exposes migrants to environments that parallel the international migration experience. Rodriguez and Wittlinger et al, use the term *stepwise* migration to describe how internal migration acts as a “trampoline to the U.S. and supports the hypothesis that migration within Mexico positively affects a person’s propensity to migrate across the border” (77).

The counter reasoning is that internal migration thwarts international migration because why would people leave if they have access to prosperous opportunities close by? The jobs in the tourist belt that are offered are typically in the hotel and restaurant variety of the service sector. Using the a cost, benefit and risk analysis a potential international migrant may prefer those nearby jobs to say a dishwasher or car washer and may opt not to risk the uncertainties of crossing to the U.S. Still, Rodriguez and Wittlinger et al contend that 64 percent of people with migratory experience in both the United States and Mexico first migrated to locations within Mexico (2003:77). Especially when taking the case of Oxnard who sends migrants to work in San Francisco, the tourist belt can be seen as Rodriguez and Wittlinger et al put it, “migration schools” because the niche that migrants have filled has been precisely in the restaurant and hotel service industry. Therefore internal migration can be seen as a precursor of transnational migration.

### **Transnational Migration from Yucatan to the U.S.**

Anthropologists have used the term *transnational migrants* to describe migrants who maintain ties with their place of origin while working abroad and often going back and forth throughout their lives (Adler 2000; Appadurai 1991; Basch 1994; Brettell 2003; Kearney

1995; Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc 1995.) Particularly migrants are not seen as uprooting and settling but rather staying for a period of time to work and return (Kearney 2004; Brettel 2003; Basch, Glick Schiller and Blanc 2000 [1994]; Fortuny Loret de Mola 2004). The transcendence of national borders by people, organizations, and/or ideological movements is transnationalism according to Adler (2000:167). According to Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller and Cristina Szanton Blanc, transnationalism reflects the fluidity with which ideas, objects, capital, and people move across borders and boundaries (1994:27). The term transnational developed through a changing paradigm in the corporate world in which companies increasingly moved their productions overseas to look for cheaper labor costs meanwhile the corporate office remained in the sending community. In such cases, companies became structured and thus termed as transnational corporations because their activities spanned across international borders. Parallels have been drawn between the sending community being a corporation and its migrants abroad its subsidiaries (2000: 30). Similarly, the term transnational helps us to understand the multi faceted ways international migrants engage with the sending and receiving communities. Taking it a step beyond, Nina Glick Schiller and Feorges Eugen Fouron, employ the term *transmigrant* because the concept speaks to how immigrants live across borders settling in their new country while sending money, gifts, buying property, building homes, and participating in activities back home (2001:3). Transmigrants are defined as immigrants who develop and maintain multiple relationships that span borders (Basch 1994:7). The glue that keep transmigrants connected is referred to as transnational social space because it refers to the networks of social relationships they maintain that link the homeland with those abroad by way of kinship, friendship, business, religion or politics (Schiller, Nina Glick 2001:4). Schiller and Fouron

contend that by keeping their ties *transmigrants* are defying the widespread assumption of settling in the receiving community (2001:3). Yucatec Maya are similar to Glick Schiller and Fouron's Haitian example in that they have forced the state government to extend their boundaries and as a result it has stretched the terms by which someone is considered a state citizen. Transnational social spaces are important because it takes into account the ways people abroad affect the lives of those who remain at home. It also helps to explain the ways people are engaging in a form of transnational citizenship and therefore creating an extended or satellite of the home community abroad. Ethnographic data strongly suggests that the activities of transmigrants in the form of remittances have dramatically changed the landscape of their home communities. The extent to which transnational migration is reproduced implies that the activity is social not just familial according to Adler (2000: 30).

## **Methods**

This ethnographic field study was based on participant observation. The approach had several methodological dimensions. It was hermeneutical in that it was important to understand the meaning and purpose of a social phenomenon as participants expressed and explained those understandings and meanings. As a result, it was necessary to interact with and/or observe informants in order to comment on their lived experience. Qualitative data was collected in the field first-hand from informants and used to interpret those meanings. By exploring the ethnographic information we can begin to understand how migrants create meaning of the social phenomenon they are participating in and of the world-view from which it originates. Participant observation is a hallmark technique used by anthropologists to gather in-depth understanding of human behavior (Boas 1966; Malinowski 1922; Mead

1928). Furthermore when we ask why and how people make decisions the ethnographic data offers a holistic viewpoint of the social and cultural experience.

The other dimension to the methodology was its bi-national scope. A bi-national design provides a holistic understanding of contemporary migration. It requires research to be conducted in the sending and receiving communities. In the sending community, Oxxkutzcab, we interviewed about sixty people in the course of two visits for under two months. The first visit in February 2005, for nearly 20 days and the second visit later that year in June for two weeks. We began with an initial contact that owned and operated a hotdog stand in front of the central market on the busiest street in Oxxkutzcab. That initial contact recommended prospective informants in the municipal government offices, teachers, medical staff, agricultural workers, tricycle taxi drivers, business owners, sacred-sites caretakers, return migrants and non-migrants. In San Francisco, we interviewed nearly seventy people from December 2004, to July 2005. Similarly, informants included health service workers, as well as officials at the Mexican Consulate, owners of restaurants where migrants were employed and (of course) migrants employed in various capacities. In most cases, interviews were an hour long. Often interviews took place either in informants' homes or work place. We had informants agree to be recorded with audio and video equipment. They signed human subjects[i] forms and only in rare exceptions refused to be filmed.

An ethnographic, video documentary accompanied the final report. Informants were told that the video was to be used to orient prospective migrants. It would be used as an educational tool by crystallizing informants' migration experiences. In addition it would act as a catalyst to foment discussion about topics such as HIV/AIDS and mental health. After

production showings were organized at informants' homes to collect feedback to further edit the final production.

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[i] UC Santa Cruz IRB #999

## **Research Findings**

Yucatecan migrants are of relatively recent origin and include Maya speakers. Once migrants arrive in San Francisco, they usually rely on their social networks to find housing, jobs, and adjust to the changes they experience. The majority settles in the Mission District and their niche work is in the service sector in restaurants or bars. Migration itself jeopardizes migrants' health. Those who migrated in the early 1990s or before crossed through Tijuana; some used underground sewers that exposed them to considerable contaminants. Those who began migrating after the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border (in 1994) usually entered the United States through the Arizona desert, which is a very dangerous place to cross because it exposes migrants to the extremes in temperature. Migrants who use this method are at risk for dehydration and exposure. The border in general is a hostile environment. Women are often raped and for Yucatec Maya it is common to get discriminated and be victims to hate violence by Mexican authorities and *coyotes* or border gangs.

The Oxnard community in San Francisco is most concerned about hard drug use and alcoholism, mainly by men. Some male immigrant workers we interviewed said employers provided them alcohol while they were working which increases the risk of occupational injuries as well as making them more vulnerable to alcoholism. In addition many recent

immigrants live in high-density apartments, often four to eight sharing a one-bedroom. In these conditions men feel pressure to consume dangerous amounts of alcohol and experiment with hard drugs (cocaine, methamphetamines and crack).

Informants shared that the depression they experienced resulted from exploitative working conditions coupled with feelings of loneliness. In contrast, we found that migrant men who belong to a church group and were active in it tended to forego consumption of alcohol and drugs. Active religious involvement replaced the emotional support in San Francisco that was provided by family and community in Oxnard. Also those involved in baseball and soccer teams as well as in other social or recreational outlets helped to ameliorate their depression. We found that men's depression and the lack of participation in recreation activities leads to increased substance abuse and alcoholism.

In cases where young migrants experienced drugs and alcohol addiction in Oxnard, we found that after migrating to San Francisco, their addictions were exacerbated by factors such as the lack of social pressure, community support to stay sober, the ability to make a higher wage which enables them to purchase larger quantities and more expensive drugs, loneliness, and peer pressure. Drug addiction leads to other potentially fatal situations. As one contact explained, alcoholism is directly related to other problems that arise when someone is drunk, such as unsafe sexual activity, domestic violence and drug overdoses. In 2004, for example, there were 17 deaths of people from Oxnard in San Francisco. In January 2005, there were 5 deaths alone in San Francisco: 4 murders (2 drug-related) and 1 assault and all were between 18-25 years old. Increasingly younger males have emigrated and specifically males from the outlying communities like Xul, Xiahuyam, Junto Chak, and Cooperativa to

name a few, that speak very little Spanish and have had absolutely no previous access to health education.

In addition, we found high indications of potential risk for obesity, diabetes and tuberculosis. The United States has the highest rate of diabetes in the world and Latinos are twice as likely as whites to have type II (adult onset) diabetes.<sup>1</sup> The research on migrant farm workers finds that the longer migrants stay in the United States the more likely they are to become obese.<sup>2</sup> These findings, along with observations by our interviewees, lead us to believe that Mayan migrants are at risk for obesity and diabetes. Many of the migrant men we interviewed work double shifts and are often exhausted after work. Our sense is that their diets are high in fat and carbohydrates. Unless they participate in a soccer club or similar physical activity, migrants are unlikely to get much exercise. The high alcohol consumption exacerbates the problems with their poor diets and lack of exercise.

Mexico has the second highest rate of diabetes. More troubling, the state of Yucatan has one of the highest rates of diabetes within Mexico (roughly 21 percent).<sup>3</sup> The traditional Yucatecan diet is high in fat and sugar. In Mexico, Yucatan has one of the highest rates of consumption of beer and soda (especially Coca-Cola). Those who have abandoned agricultural work, which is one of the factors that push men into the migrant streams, have more sedentary lifestyles that lead to increased obesity. In addition the weather in Yucatan is hot and humid for ten months of the year, which is not conducive to regular exercise. In Oxkutzcab, a town of 25,000, there are more than a dozen bars and one small-scale exercise room in the cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Luchsinger, José Alejandro. "Diabetes." In *Health Issues in the Latino Community*, edited by Marilyn Aguirre-Molina, Carlos W. Molina and Ruth Enid Zambrana, 277-300. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Don Villarejo, David Lighthall, Daniel Williams, Ann Souter, Richard Mines, Bonnie Bade, Steve Sarnules, and Stephan A. McCurdy. "Suffering in Silence: A Report on the Health of California's Agricultural Workers." Davis, CA: California Institute for Rural Studies, 2000; Suárez-Orozco, Marcelo M., ed. *Crossings: Mexican Immigration in Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> [http://100cia.com/divulgacion/el\\_trio\\_mortal\\_diabetes\\_hipertension\\_y\\_obesidad\\_505.html](http://100cia.com/divulgacion/el_trio_mortal_diabetes_hipertension_y_obesidad_505.html) (retrieved on June 10, 2005); [http://www.nosotros.cl/salud/detalle\\_noticia.php?cont=320](http://www.nosotros.cl/salud/detalle_noticia.php?cont=320) (retrieved on June 10, 2005).

center and one large-scale gym. Needless to say the bars are more occupied than the exercise rooms. When migrants leave Oxkutzcab they are leaving a country with the second highest rate of diabetes only to enter a country (the US) that has similarly if not higher rates of diabetes.

We found confirmed cases of migrants who have contracted HIV/AIDS and STIs. We discovered a great deal of social stigma related to sexually transmitted infections (STI). The shame associated with the stigma prevents people from getting tests as expressed by numerous informants. Men who are HIV-positive are embarrassed to be interviewed. The exact amount of HIV-positive (or full blown AIDS) migrants from Oxkutzcab in San Francisco is difficult to pinpoint for several reasons: agencies do not carry data on specific ethnic immigrant groups that would allow us to identify HIV-positive people from Oxkutzcab,<sup>4</sup> migrants are undergoing cyclical migration between sending and receiving communities and finally migrants fear deportation so they do not seek the free health screenings offered in the San Francisco community health facilities. Cesar Monroy from Grupo Luna Sol in the Mission Neighborhood Health Center, an outreach program for gay, transsexual and HIV-positive Latinos, informed us that he knew several Yucatecos that were HIV-positive. He predicted the stigma is so great that no one would be willing to talk to us out of fear of community disparagement. Of the Yucatecans we interviewed in San Francisco, four of them anecdotally mentioned they knew specific people who were HIV-positive. One example was a man who while in San Francisco, became HIV positive, returned to Oxkutzcab, and then infected his wife. The lack of services and the stigma forced them to come back to San Francisco to seek treatment in Clinica Esperanza, in the Mission Neighborhood Health Center.

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<sup>4</sup> Juan Ruiz, State Office of AIDS, July 13, 2005.

In Oxkutzcab we interviewed a doctor, Valentine Castro of el Instituto Médico de Seguro Social (IMSS), a state operated general hospital, and he indicated that since 1998 there have been eight cases of HIV: four in Oxkutzcab and four in nearby Hunto Chak (two are women). Since then, Dr. Castro has worked in *Vigilancia Preventiva*, which administers HIV tests and promotes HIV/AIDS prevention education to the nearby schools. In addition we learned about migrants from nearby, marginal communities that primarily speak Maya and have never heard of HIV/AIDS or received information about preventing sexual transmitted infections.

We have very little information in the literature and in our own ethnographic study about women from Yucatan in San Francisco and those who remain in Oxkutzcab that experience problems related to the disintegration of families as a result of immigration. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there is an increase in domestic violence and mental health problems such as depression and anxiety among women in Oxkutzcab whose partners emigrate. Another increasing phenomenon is the openness in which people are seen with other partners that aren't their respective wives or husbands. When a husband emigrates, particularly for extended periods of time, it allows for discrete promiscuity while abroad but also for the partner who remains. One informant, *El Chupes*, suggested we edit a video like "Cheaters" where a camera crew and an investigator stalk and catch unfaithful couples and confront them on the spot. He tried to convince us that it would be a viable approach because of how frequently he saw the phenomena play out in San Francisco and when he returned to Oxkutzcab.

It is common to hear non-migrants express that return migrants bring problems from the US to Oxkutzcab. However, crime, gang violence, prostitution, drug addiction and alcoholism

occurred in Oxnard before the waves of migration of the 1990s. Crystal meth and cocaine are the substances that migrant youth are consuming on both sides of the border. Marijuana, although it is officially considered a drug and is consumed by migrants on both sides has not shown to cause any health nor social problems like the previously mentioned drugs. In fact many Oxnardians are happy that medical marijuana cards are available for 100 dollars in San Francisco. This card gives them permission to buy and consume marijuana at dispensaries. There is a growing culture of acceptance that has caused the sprouting of thousands of cannabis clubs all over the state including San Francisco. Moreover many migrant workers use marijuana as a relaxant. In direct contrast, crystal meth is a stimulant that is commonly consumed by workers to endure multiple shifts. It is interesting to note that some of the marijuana smokers whom we met in Oxnard were elder-aged men, subsistence farmers who maintained family plots. But as “el Chupes” explained that marijuana is used quite commonly among older and young men alike for the purpose of relaxing after a long, hard day of labor. Younger men, he continued also added, like to party by drinking alcohol and sniffing cocaine more often than the elder men especially more often than those who maintain agricultural plots.

### **A family’s survival through the transnational experience**

Margarita did not look surprised as we knocked on her door asking if her son Abraham was there. She lived in a two-story house of cement. The wall that surrounds the property is a combination of pile-up stones that make up a wall. The house displays the somber gray color of cement; it has not been painted yet. Her garden has various colorful fruit trees and flowers, along with plastic and food debris in the washing area. The chickens, dogs and cats share the walled space with Margarita, her daughter Diana and her baby boy she carried in her arms while we sat down to record the interview.

The Ramirez family is an example of the ups and downs a family goes through when broken apart by migration. Through its analysis we have an emic perspective of the emerging Yucatec Mayan, transnational experience between Oxkutzcab and San Francisco, California. Despite abandonment, family ruptures, fatalities related to drug addiction and border crossing, child labor and pregnant adolescent migration, the members of the Ramirez family consider themselves successful because they feel they overcame the worse and have their relative health intact in addition they completed their modern house.

It was a cool Thursday evening in February 2005, as we talked about migration and health issues in the Ramirez family house. Pedro Chale, one of Patricia's assistants, had introduced us a few days earlier to Margarita and her daughter. When we got there, it seemed as if Margarita was prepared to tell her story again, but this time not to a university student from Merida doing research about the Presbyterian connection with San Francisco, but to Mexican migrants who were also living in California and were interested in the use of drugs and the health and family problems they bring. She also seemed very happy that we had a video camera and were recording our conversation for the future documentary, instead of being shy she was excited to tell her story. We were really there because we were looking for Abraham, her son, who after much drug abuse, turned to the Presbyterian Church and he is now known being a living testimony of a positive change via religion. While we waited she seemed content to explain how her faith in God had helped her endure the hardships that migration had brought to her family, and how it brought change to her town.

Oxkutzcab as many other 500-year-old cities has a deep and complex history that gets more complex and documented as the later centuries developed. However, the constant inequality and the stark social stratification are seen currently. Most of our informants were

from poor economic backgrounds. Most of them come from households where Maya is the mother tongue. The Spanish they have learned has been mainly in school for those who attended. The long and complex history that this city of Oxkutzcab has developed can help us understand the high degree of submission and cultural resistance that the Mayan populations have faced and the continued lived experience of the peoples until today. Regardless of its rich natural environment and its historical roots that attract thousands of tourists every year, it's estimated that more than half of Oxkutzcab's population is living in California and a few thousand in Oregon. Ramon, Abraham, Juan and Diana are among those who grew up speaking Maya with their mother and Spanish in the small amount of schooling they acquired. All of them had to work as kids to help support the family, and for both economic and personal reasons, took to emigrating north.

Margarita is in her fifties and her story is similar to many other women of Oxkutzcab who have lost members of their families to migration to California and have witnessed the decadence of the agricultural economy, while her community becomes a breeding ground for migration to the U.S. In the early 1990's her husband left to work in San Francisco, never to return. He had left her alone with three young sons and one daughter. At the time, her home was a classic Maya rural house made of wood, clay, stones and palm leaves. Her children did not finish elementary school because they had to work to sustain the family. Margarita recalls that she only heard about her husband through another migrant who called home. The news was that Mr. Ramirez had gotten involved with another woman and started another family in California. She never heard from him again, apart from a short visit five years after his departure. Even though he returned to live in the family house, he remained distant for the few

months he was there, before unexpectedly leaving Oxkutzcab to reside permanently in the U.S. with his mistress.

After being abandoned for more than ten years by her husband, Margarita now looks with pride at the sacrifice that one of her sons has made in order to build the house in which she now resides. Nonetheless, she recounts how difficult it has been, and the price that she has had to pay: one son's life lost to drug addiction, another recovering from drug addiction, and a third in San Francisco for the last six years unable to visit home. Her eldest son has been one of the casualties of the migration experience. Margarita explains that Ramon, her eldest son, was greatly affected when his father abandoned them. She explained that he was very aware of his mother's suffering. Because he was the oldest, he had to work with an uncle in the construction business in order to sustain the family. Margarita spoke to her children in Yucatec Maya, and they learned Spanish during their few years at primary school. Even now she mainly speaks Yucatec Maya, and it is clear that she can express herself more fluently and comfortably while speaking to Diana than in the Spanish she uses to recount her story in front of the camera.

The tears came to her eyes as she retold the story of her eldest son, Ramon. He was seventeen years old and was deeply affected when his father left for the second time. He was angry and shocked, and even expressed a desire to go to California to find and kill him. But when he voiced his desire to venture north, Ramon claimed it was to build a house for his family. And such a reason was quite believable. Margarita pointed at her house and explained that it was not always like this; it used to be a long, one story, traditional house with a thatched roof, but had been neglected by her husband who had never done anything to maintain it. Ramon talked his father into helping him go to San Francisco to work and help build a better family house. Ramon's father was not aware of his son's feelings at this point,

and gladly paid his son's way to San Francisco. Once in San Francisco, Ramon accompanied his father to Eugene, Oregon, to work in the service sector. It was there that Ramon, wielding a knife in his hand, expressed his feelings of rage and despair to his father. Ramon's father fainted and the angry son found he could not kill his father, and ran from the house in despair. We were not told what happened next.

The next son, Juan Ramirez, lived in a tenement-style apartment complex near downtown San Francisco. Like millions of migrants in the United States, he is a significant contributor to the Mexican economy because he sends money back on a monthly basis. He works as a bar back in a busy San Francisco bar. Five months after his elder brother made the long journey northwards, Juan, then fifteen, decided to follow in his footsteps in order to contribute financially to the household. In San Francisco, Juan has been working and sending money back to his family. His mother was able to finish constructing house for his entire family to live in. Juan speaks Spanish fluently. He is proficient in Yucatec Maya , and proficient in English. He is back in San Francisco for his third time since 1996. At this point he has already learned to navigate San Francisco's streets and understands its culture. He also has established good networks for work. This third time has so far been his longest trip going on the better part of six years. He admits that being Yucatecan in San Francisco, he has to be open to the diversity of cultures and, as he phrased, the "craziness" of the city. He said that back in Mexico, many people think that immigrants in San Francisco are having a good time, but that it is not true. He underlined how easy it is for youth to get involved in gangs and drugs. In addition to the financial risk of being homeless not being able to find work. Having good networks help migrants adjust and mitigate the loneliness. Examples include the Asociación MAYAB or the Presbyterian Church of San Francisco. Juan has managed in San

Francisco by himself, taking care of his two drug-addicted brothers and supporting his family back in Yucatan by sending remittances. He is not a member of a church or community group, nor does he seek help from anyone other than his immediate friends. His energy is focused instead on ensuring his mother has money back home and his house is constructed. He stressed the importance for prospective immigrants to learn English while also maintaining a strong identity because as he put it, “One must not feel inferior to anyone just because they are white or wealthy”. Juan proudly showed pictures of his mother’s house in Oxkutzcab while he spoke sitting in the single room he rents in a two-bedroom apartment. “The house is done. It just needs some details,” he said, pointing to some pictures hanging on the wall in his room. He had plans of returning to Oxkutzcab in the coming months.

Back in Oxkutzcab, as the daylight began to fade, while we were interviewing Diana and Margarita in the patio of the house, a motorcycle engine roared out in the street; Abraham was arriving from visiting his girlfriend. As he entered he politely greeted us and sat down to talk. The mother and sister got up, but stayed around to listen intently Abraham tell his story of endurance and perseverance.

Wearing a baseball cap, a football T-shirt and shorts, Abram began talking openly and friendly with us about his drug use. He first got into drugs during his teens, and, as he grew up, he increasingly fell into the most destructive aspects of the *cholo* life-style, becoming a gang member, drinking heavily and using principally cocaine and marijuana. But it was *la piedra* or crystal methamphetamine, which engendered his violent behavior. He explains that it was not because he migrated that he got into drugs. Rather it was due to the people he hung out with in both his native Oxkutzcab and in the Mission District. As he spoke it was clear that drug dealers and users have also created a transnational community.

Abraham began using drugs at the age of thirteen while hanging out with older friends. His first experimented with alcohol and marijuana yet he emphasized how this plant has been used by Oxkutzcabeños for longer than he can remember. Nobody sees it as a problem. In fact, he pointed out, most of the people he knows who smoke marijuana are men aged 50 and over, and that the problems of drug-use are clearly related mainly to crystal-meth, cocaine, and heroin, drugs used almost exclusively by the younger generation.

Abraham Ramirez credits his mother for her patience and the Presbyterian Church with proving him spiritual guidance during his problem days. He now believes his worst days are behind him. He has a sense of overcoming a life-threatening obstacle. He wants to return to San Francisco to work near his brother, Juan. Currently, he works for his uncle's construction company in Oxkutzcab. He says he is more determined than ever. He admits that many young people migrate hoping to experience adventure and the freedom to experiment with drugs and alcohol, or as he also pointed out, to party in San Francisco. The differentiation in wages versus those in Oxkutzcab as well as the ease of accessibility of drugs allows migrants to buy larger amounts, a variety, and higher grades of drugs. Diana, his sister, corroborated his point by underlining the sense of liberty she referred to as "*libertinaje*". The word refers to the role of community as a social barometer for generally accepted behavior. She used it to emphasize that while abroad people feel like they can do virtually anything they want.

Abraham believes he has now escaped his destructive cycle of life and he wants to go to San Francisco to see his brother Juan. The first time Abraham went north it went well. He found his brothers and was able to work for a couple of years to sustain his drug addiction and *cholo* life style. He returned to Oxkutzcab with dollars to spend and really no concern for

investing in the construction of the family house. However, the second time that Abraham went north he had a horrific experience. He said that he did not have to walk in the desert. He was in San Luis Rio Colorado with his cousin when a gang of locals tried to beat them up and rob them. "They put a knife to my cousin's neck," gestured Moises, as he explained how lucky they were because the thieves only wanted money to purchase beer and allowed them to continue on their journey. He said that, luckily, they spent less than twenty minutes crossing the desert. After crossing the border, and while walking through a cemetery in the U.S., some local people began shouting at them that they were on private property. It was not dark yet, but the sun was setting, so they ran, diving through some bushes and down a hill that opened abruptly into a busy street. Abraham's cousin was unable to dodge an oncoming car and instantly became another statistic in the list of border-related deaths. Abraham could see that his cousin was in the middle of the street and not moving. Hoping that he was still alive, Abraham was barely able to get him out of the road before a truck ran him over. Abraham left his cousin dead and made his way to San Francisco.

Abraham and Juan agreed that the most dangerous border space was the Mexican side of the geopolitical boundary, particularly the Mexican officials, especially soldiers and federal police, representing a significant source of threat. But not only do Mexican officials rob, harass and physically attack prospective border crossers. Taxi drivers, gangs, hotel owners and transport agents also participate in this pattern of abuse in their own way. They all try to take advantage of the northbound traveler. There seems to be no responsibility assigned to the Mexican authorities. The media of both countries focus mainly on the dangerous terrain that the Mexicans are forced to cross, placing more responsibility for the deaths on U.S. migration policies rather than on the Mexican governments' contribution to

the conditions that push people from their families and communities. The Ramirez family's story is just one of millions; just as many are able to overcome these difficult challenges, many become lost in a transnational dynamic of drugs, crime and prostitution.

Migrants confront a hostile border environment. In addition to the natural hazards of the border topography and climate, these migrants also face the best-funded security infrastructure on any border in the world in addition to an unmonitored underground market. Despite these disadvantages migrants cross anyway to the U.S. territory while trying to evade geographic and legal power structures. In this way he or she develops family and community structures that weave into daily life and its survival strategies in the Yucatecan family life.

Nevertheless, the border is more than the international boundary and the regions adjacent to it. If we think of the cultural implications of this region on both sides of the border we come to understand the existence of distinctive roles in the human trafficking market of the border of Mexico with the United States. Therefore, the border is not only defined in geographical and political terms but also by a market designed to traffic humans across it. Therefore, metaphorically speaking, the border stretches directly from Oxkutzcab, Yucatan to a receiving community in the U.S. For example, if someone wanted to migrate to the US from Oxkutzcab, Yucatan, they would start with contacting a *pollero* right there in Oxkutzcab. Even though Oxkutzcab is known for the border-crossing guides (*polleros* and *coyotes*), both Juan and Abraham took the independent migration option, traveling without guides. This is interesting because most youngsters are proud of telling their story of adventure. Many middle-aged women and men, as well as children have used the thriving *pollero* business that starts in Oxkutzcab and leads groups to the border.

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## **Conclusion**

Despite US efforts to curb border crossings with tightened immigration policies and crackdowns such as Operation Gate Keeper, migration has not diminished. Tightened security and policy has strengthened social ties as a reaction to the increased difficulties of crossing and settling. The collaboration and the social networks created through these transnational communities have facilitated communication between these two distant areas and, interestingly enough, it has been during the launch of Operation Gate Keeper that Oxnard has seen the largest wave in the history of migration to the US.

Joseph Nevins has researched the history and the increased activities of border patrol and the deployment of Operation Gatekeeper, a U.S. policy implemented in October 1994 to respond to the practical tensions emanating from transboundary metropolitan areas such as Tijuana and San Diego, and to reduce the thousands of unauthorized migrant crossings from Mexico to the U.S. (Nevins 2002:2). He explains that the militarization of the border by the U.S. not only embodies “war on undocumented workers” but it is also a death sentence to aspiring working families who are forced to ever more treacherous strategies to enter the U.S. if they are to evade border patrol. His research on the reinforcement of the U.S.-Mexico border demonstrates how the process of nation building is problematically defining “we” and “them” and is directly related to “friend” and “enemy”. Hence the creation of a national sentiment is constructed in opposition to the context that defines “the other” (Nevins 2002:74).

In this paper we have given an historical perspective on Yucatecans' migration to the US in order to contextualize the ethnographic study of migrants from Oxkutzcab to San Francisco. We use the term transnational migrants to describe someone who migrates while still maintaining ties with their place of origin. Cyclical migration can also be thought of as often going back and forth. After a brief historical and theoretical framework, we give a summary of our research results explaining the main health issues that these communities deal with through their migration experience. Finally, we use the Ramirez family experience to underline the serious mental health, drugs, and family disintegration that are often dismissed in immigration discourse. Ethnographic methods allow researchers to go beyond statistical analysis in an effort to represent the point of view of the indigenous migrant and their lived experience.

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