

## **Practices of Place-making: An Ethnography of Nicaraguan Labor Migrant Women in Río Azul, Costa Rica**

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### **Abstract**

This ethnographic study of Nicaraguan labor migrant women in Costa Rica examines the situated meanings constructed around the process of migration and adaptation to a community in the periphery of Costa Rica's capital. This research project contributes to scholarship on place-making theory, countering the prevailing Western discourse saturated with interpretations of migrant women as only victims of their circumstances. Given a definition of place-making as imbuing spaces with new meanings, the everyday practices—discussing telenovelas on the community soccer field or frying empanadas on a skillet—of labor migrant women become important in order to explain how they carve out a physical and discursive space for themselves. Based on data collected between May and August 2019 in Río Azul, La Unión, Costa Rica, this paper analyzes narrative in-depth interviews, conversations from focus groups, and participant observation in communal activities and household life. This project identifies three specific ways in which migrant women imbue spaces with new meanings. Ultimately, Nicaraguan labor migrant women in Río Azul view themselves as agents of a destiny they've chosen from limited options, which counters dominant Western discourse of migrant women as overwhelmingly victimized and reconceptualizes nodes of resistance.

**Keywords:** labor migration, gender, place-making, spatial practices

### **1. Introduction**

This article argues that although dominant Western discourse characterizes migrant women as overwhelmingly victimized, Nicaraguan labor migrant women in Río Azul, Costa Rica view themselves as agents of a destiny they've chosen from limited options. Their everyday practices allow them to carve out physical and discursive spaces that disrupt the patriarchal dichotomy of public and private space.<sup>1</sup> The quotidian activities of labor migrant women as they remake the home, care for family members, and navigate changing relationship dynamics, all while fulfilling the role as "breadwinners" in domestic work allow the women to imbue these public and private spaces with new forms of meaning. A local soccer field, for example, becomes a community meeting place where the women discuss and plan communal projects, voice concerns, and engage in casual conversation about soap operas on television and their own relationships. Moreover, the kitchen becomes a space where the women gather not only to cook for their families, but also to share with each other their mounting awareness of rights violations and their efforts to push back against them. As seventy-nine percent of Nicaraguan migrant women are employed in Costa Rica's domestic sector, the taken-for-granted, mundane activities of their daily lives away from their jobs contribute to contemporary place-making and open up our understanding of space and agency.<sup>2</sup> Despite how Nicaraguan labor migrant women in Costa Rica embody traditionally "feminine" roles as wives and mothers, their practices of place-making challenge a linear narrative of victimhood. Subsequently, their routine actions highlight women migrant workers' symbolic power within their homes, as well as the role of informal networks forged by women in the public sphere of their community. The role

of place-making as a means of agency is demonstrated through women-led initiatives to vocalize the migrant community's rights, as well as the introduction of local organizations' leadership workshops held in migrant women's homes.

This project aimed to examine the meanings Nicaraguan labor migrant women construct around the process of migration and adaptation to Río Azul, a community in the periphery of Costa Rica's capital, San José. The research is theoretically situated within the relationship of time and space to gender and the resistance of dominant cultural paradigms, and specifically draws upon Henri Lefebvre's framework of spatial production. Space and place are then analyzed as they intersect with questions of resistance and agency in the formation of Nicaraguan enclaves in Costa Rica's urban periphery. The methodology outlines the details of transcribing oral histories, conducting semi-structured interviews, and engaging in participant observation throughout a series of structured workshops. Furthermore, the methodology emphasizes the imperative of ethnography to hone in on daily practices that constitute forms of place-making. The remainder of the article examines how labor migrant women from Nicaragua carve out physical and discursive spaces for themselves amidst power relations and structural forces that seek to undermine their autonomy in their everyday lives. In particular, the way in which Nicaraguan labor migrant women expressed their desire to return home, even as they worked to fulfill the goals and justify the sacrifices they made in their choice to migrate, emerged as an important node of resistance. Moreover, the women's growing awareness of rights violations and their efforts to push back against them become forms of overcoming anxieties and fears, demanding an examination of gendered public and private space. In Río Azul, the women's stories—not only as labor migrants, but also as wives and mothers of bi-national families—fit within a broader historical framework of immigration between Nicaragua and Costa Rica. Ultimately, labor migrant women's practices reveal the entanglements of space, place, and agency, which argue against simplified narratives that victimize migrant women amidst complex circumstances.

## 2. Literature Review: Social and Spatial Implications to Migration & Adaptation

To understand how Nicaraguan migrant women in Río Azul, Costa Rica construct meanings of agency and resistance around their processes of migration and adaptation, the literature review attempts to link social and spatial practices that inform this construction. The first section conceptualizes the intersection of place, space, and gender as an avenue for revealing oppression and agency, and subsequently complicates the notion of resistance. To further contextualize the theoretical implications of place, space, and gender for Nicaraguan migrant women in Costa Rica, the second section reviews the literature on the topography of the Costa Rican urban periphery and its impacts on urban socio-spatial development for Nicaraguan migrants. The research question is thus framed through a different lens as social and spatial practices highlight nuanced perceptions of symbolic power and challenge linear narratives of victimhood.

### 2.1 Place-making, Gender, and Agency

The concerns of time and space, and in particular the relationship of time and space to gender and the resistance of dominant cultural paradigms will first be understood through Henri Lefebvre's formative work on *The Production of Space*. Lefebvre's three dimensions of spatial production—spatial practices, representations of space, and spaces of representation or the "spatial imaginary"—deconstruct spaces not as static entities which are determined as a system already in existence, but rather as spatial practices "theatricalized" by actors who utilize space for their own purposes through lived, daily practices.<sup>3</sup> Lefebvre argues that the observable and measurable "perceived space" describes a society's patterns of "spatial practice" as they are linked, for instance, to capitalism with its quotidian routines. Lefebvre's representations of space, however, describe how spatial discourse, through maps and plans, for example, impose order upon space through the control of signs. Thus, the spaces of representation lie at the intersection of these polar opposites, a space for the destabilization of dominant spatial discourses. In this sense, the concept of place-making becomes useful in demonstrating that "place" does not have to involve physical impacts, but rather can be constructed out of social practice, emotion, and affect. "Place" or "locality" are understood as social constructs where people, mostly unconsciously, become identified with localities via mundane, everyday activities, for example, and the action of memory, emotion, imagination, and sociality.<sup>4</sup>

Lefebvre's "spatial imaginary" offers a site of resistance in migration studies and represents the ways in which migrant women negotiate power across a multitude of public and private spaces.<sup>5</sup> Resistance, however, has often been conceptualized as revolution against a coherent oppressive force located within the state, for instance.<sup>6</sup> Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod has previously built upon Michel Foucault's claims that "resistance is never in a position of

exteriority in relation to power" to argue that resistance does not always embody open opposition or revolution.<sup>7</sup> Theorizing various forms of resistance, as Abu-Lughod demonstrates through Bedouin women in Egypt, demands a small shift in perspective toward daily social and spatial practices and away from open opposition or revolution.<sup>8</sup> A focus on everyday practices as forms of resistance allows for a complex understanding of gendered power, so long as these acts are situated in the specific places where they are enacted, which scholar Richa Nagar draws from her research among South Asian communities in Dar es Salaam.<sup>9</sup> Scholars such as Saba Mahmood and Patricia Ehrkamp have argued for a conceptualization of agency that is not synonymous with resistance to relations of domination, but instead as a capacity for action that specific historical relations of subordination have enabled and created.<sup>10</sup> Agency arises not only in the form of firm opposition, but also through docility or endurance of power assertions.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, it is critical to rupture previous notions of human agency in feminist scholarship, one "that seeks to locate the political and moral autonomy of the subject in the face of power".<sup>12</sup>

## 2.2 Formation of Nicaraguan Enclaves in Costa Rica

In order to understand the formation of Nicaraguan enclaves in Costa Rica, particularly in the Central Valley, it is necessary to ground this concept in historical Nicaragua-Costa Rica migration trajectories. As Alberto Cortés Ramos explains, Nicaragua and Costa Rica share a long history of migration that has interwoven their societies and people since around their independence at the dawn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At times, their history reflects a sense of fraternity and solidarity, while at other times, a course of rejection and conflict. Ramos emphasizes that migration should not be studied as an isolated phenomenon, but rather as a process that is intertwined with economic, political, geopolitical, and social transformations on the global, regional, national, and local levels. While the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century establishes a pattern of Nicaraguan migration to Costa Rica, the wave of migration relevant to this study takes place between the 1990s to the present. Thus, the political and economic context that led to migration in this period revolves around Nicaragua's application of Structural Adjustment programs in the 1980s and external debt obligations.<sup>13</sup> As scholars Luis Samandú and Ricardo Pereira analyze, the combination of neoliberal reforms, in tandem with all the social consequences that a post-war period entails, led Nicaragua to economic prostration, to political chaos, and made the living conditions of large sectors of the population unbearable.<sup>14</sup>

A consideration of how Nicaraguan migrants are spatially distributed and where they settle and live within the metropolitan area precedes any analysis of how Nicaraguan migrant women construct meaning. As scholar Hauke Jan Rolf translates from the typology which Axel Borsdorf, Jürgen Bähr and Michael Janoschka formulated, Latin America's urban transformation comprises four steps, from the dense colonial city to the current fragmented urban agglomeration.<sup>15</sup> Costa Rica's urbanized Central Valley exhibits this panorama of the fragmented city. Nonetheless, Rolf theorizes that the collective linkages to a certain place reinforce as much the network's composition as the socialized place that is produced and reproduced.<sup>16</sup> This reproduction occurs through social action as well as the physical and symbolic occupation of a particular group, such as that of the Nicaraguan migrant. In line with Pierre Bourdieu, the conceptualization of physical space as a reproduction of past and present exemplifies the importance of centering an analysis not only on the contemporary structure of urban space, but also on a historical standpoint of urban and socio-spatial development.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, feminist and Marxist geographer Doreen Massey engages the critical concept that "to romanticize places as settled, coherent and unchanging is highly dubious," as seeing "places as bounded can lead to their interconnections being ignored, and thus may result in parochialism."<sup>18</sup> Such formulations of urban socio-spatial development may explain how Nicaraguan labor migrant women assemble their own meanings of migration, space, and place.

An understanding of the space that migrant women occupy necessitates a discussion of the formation of Nicaraguan enclaves in the metropolitan area of San José. With this in mind, Nicaraguan migration to Costa Rica can be characterized as a "durable, circular, pendular, or rather multidirectional" movement that has resulted in bi-national economic, cultural, and familiar interrelations, plural socio-economic relations, and political tensions between the two countries, according to sociologists Abelardo Morales Gamboa and Carlos Castro Valverde.<sup>19</sup> The concept of transnationalism defines this process in which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that connect their societies of origin and settlement. Following this framework, "transmigrants" describe immigrants who develop and maintain multiple relationships that span borders. As migrants develop these transnational familial, economic, social, and religious, organizational, and political relationships, they take actions, make decisions, and ultimately develop subjectivities and identities.<sup>20</sup> Although Nicaraguan migration to Costa Rica is itself not a new

phenomenon, the urban immigration dynamics of Nicaraguans to Costa Rica's metropolitan Central Valley are more recent. Thus, the specific location, spatial distribution, and clustering of Nicaraguan migrants within Costa Rica's metropolitan Central Valley is fundamental to labor migrant women's constructions of meaning around the process of migration and adaptation.

### 3. Methodology

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between May 2019 and August 2019 in Río Azul, La Unión, Cartago, a community in the outskirts of Costa Rica's capital, San José. The physical site of Río Azul was selected not only as a result of the location's proximity to where I once lived in the canton of Desamparados, San José, but also as a result of the community's predominantly Nicaraguan migrant demographic and its peripheral location. As an urban periphery and Nicaraguan enclave, this location contributes to the literature on the Central Valley's fragmented urban agglomeration and its implication on migrants' socio-spatial development, as Hauke Jan Rolf outlines in "Urban Meeting Locations of Nicaraguan Migrants in Costa Rica's Metropolitan Area and the Spatial Effects on their Social Support Networks" and Abelardo Morales Gamboa and Carlos Castro Valverde in "Migración, Empleo, y Pobreza".<sup>21</sup> Data gathered from narrative in-depth interviews, conversations from focus groups, and participant observation in communal activities and household life aimed to cultivate a "thick description," as renowned ethnographer Clifford Geertz describes, which entails data collection methods that strive for nuanced and representations of all participants.<sup>22</sup>

Ten life histories were collected from Nicaraguan women, both documented and undocumented. Each conversation took place in Spanish. While I met some migrant women through an internship with Enlaces Nicaragüenses, a civil society organization for Nicaraguan women in Costa Rica, others I met by chance through community meetings or outside corner store *pulperías*. Given the contentious legal status of some participants in this study, I use pseudonyms for all individuals. While a majority of the women worked in the domestic sector, all but a few lived in Río Azul. Nonetheless, the women that lived with their employers spend their time away from work with friends or family in Río Azul, which allowed for our interactions to take place in locations that were familiar and secure to the participant. Conversations were not recorded, as some participants voiced discomfort, so I took detailed written notes and added information on the non-verbal behavior.

Semi-structured interviews typically lasted forty-five minutes to an hour and began with demographic questions which included age, level of education, marital status, and family situation. This portion also included information on the migrant's origins and history in Nicaragua, as well as the amount of time the participant had lived in Costa Rica at the time. The second section examined the migration experience, including the participants' reasons for moving from Nicaragua, reasons for staying in Costa Rica, and accounts of their first impression of Costa Rica. Participants tended to give detailed accounts with regard to their arrival in Costa Rica and the emotions they experienced at the time. The third section deconstructed aspects related employment, in which the women were asked to recount their experiences in Costa Rica. The fourth section approached issues of adaptation and identity transformations in the labor migration process. This involved women's satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their environments, personal and professional relationships in Costa Rica, and the importance they placed on the Nicaraguan community within Costa Rica. The fifth and final section of the interview outlined the migrants' awareness of their rights. The questions in this section further asked participants about their interests in the political, social, and economic topography of both Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

Aside from interviews, a majority of the dialogue and exchange took place in the women's homes, where I'd fold laundry with them, help cook, or distract a child while a participant cooked. In line with Robert S. Weiss' articulation of qualitative methods, the nature of these interviews and conversations allowed for insights into personal experiences that would not have been realized with structured surveys.<sup>23</sup> The semi-structured nature of the interviews, alongside the informal conversations allowed me to probe forms of engagement with the surrounding community and Costa Rican labor institutions, perceptions of agency and resistance situated within public and private spaces, reasons for and sacrifices made in migrating, and the situated meanings attached to the process of adaptation to a peripheral, urban community.

A major component of the fieldwork included participant observation in a series of three structured workshops for migrant women which Costa Rica's Instituto Nacional de la Mujer (INAMU) held in a small, upstairs room in a house in Río Azul on Saturday mornings. The first workshop included seven women in the Nicaraguan migrant community, three of whom I'd interviewed, and provided an introduction to INAMU's services for migrant women and youth in Costa Rica. Twelve women attended the second workshop—six of whom participated in the interviews—which initiated a discussion of the women's goals within their communities which brought attention to prevalent gender roles

and the construction of public and private space. The third and final workshop in the series held ten women and aimed to develop awareness specific migrant rights as well as conceive of a potential plan for community organizing and activism. These discussions enabled a deeper exploration of the migrant women's spatial and social practices and their implications outside of Río Azul. In documenting multiple modes of self-representation, these ethnographic techniques conjured a complex delineation of resistance and agency.

## 4. Nicaraguan Labor Migrant Women in Río Azul, Costa Rica

### 4.1 Endurance as Enactment: A Period of Decided Uncertainty

Nicaraguan women in Río Azul navigate and negotiate their processes of agency through daily practices, through an examination of the autonomous self in a dialectical relationship with the physical and discursive world. Lucía, a domestic worker in her late forties, who migrated to Costa Rica twenty years prior and lived eighteen of those years undocumented, allowed me to interview her in her home. In Río Azul, plywood, tin-roofed houses painted bright yellow and lime green peppered the hillsides. We met one Sunday afternoon in June 2019. The streets below smelled of coffee and car exhaust. There, Lucía expressed how a cousin told her she'd earn a more sustainable wage in Costa Rica compared to Nicaragua. Twenty years ago, Lucía worked in Managua, Nicaragua's capital. As a single mother of a seven-year-old boy, she worked as a secretary, a domestic worker on occasions, and "*un poquito de todo*"—a little bit of everything—to support both of them. It was not as though she chose to leave Nicaragua due to lack of work. In fact, Lucía remembered how Nicaraguans twenty years ago always had work, and how they moved around. She remarked how, twenty years ago, the people in Managua did not stay still, and if they were not out selling one thing in the streets, they would be out selling another. Constant movement and constant work. Nonetheless, Lucía moved to Costa Rica while her son remained in the care of her family. When she arrived in Costa Rica, she became a domestic worker. Where Lucía sought to escape domestic work in Nicaragua, she soon found herself in that role, in a Costa Rican household, in the familiar and foreign at the same time.

Throughout the interview, Lucía asked me to wait for a minute as she entered the kitchen, once to check on black beans in a pot, once to refill our glasses of water, another time to answer a phone call from her husband who still searched for work. I felt as though I took up too much of her time. Toward the end of our conversation, Lucía acknowledged her state of unrest and the uneasiness she felt for herself and for the migrants who arrived in search of work in Costa Rica:

And you know...with the change in culture and everything, you dedicate yourself to work, work, work. And I feel like, in that sense, I've had to live and not think...Migrating to a country, without money and with children, and all of what that implies, and also without a place to live...so I say it's better to stay where you are. They come from over there and don't know the situation they're arriving in, the situation we truly live here, that we, too, are in a moment of crisis.<sup>24</sup>

The uneasiness Lucía conjures the ways in which Talal Asad questions how the idea of agency has been coupled with consciousness and responsibility, a coupling that "serves to historicize social structures by according responsibility for progressive change to conscious actors." Such an understanding, Talal argues, presupposes a particular anthropology of the subject, one that he explores through the function of pain and disempowerment in relation to forms of agency in Muslim and Christian religious history.<sup>25</sup> In a similar sense, Lucía's awareness of her unrest but unwillingness to falter relates to Veena Das' argument for a consideration of women's ability to survive the ongoing presence of pain not as a dramatic transgression and act of defiance.<sup>26</sup> Instead, "doing the little things" demand attention, "little things" which should not be construed as passivity, and instead as active engagement.

Ana Julia, a young domestic worker in her mid-twenties who had lived in Costa Rica for four years, voiced somewhat of a similar opinion. As we folded *queso blanco*, a firm cheese used in Nicaragua for frying, into empanada dough, Ana Julia expressed how, as far as she could remember, not everyone in Nicaragua had the same luck of finding work. She'd asked me to meet her in her friend's apartment in Río Azul. At the time, she lived with the Costa Rican family that employed her as a domestic worker in a gated suburb of San José. The empanadas sizzled in a skillet, and we discussed the similarities between Nicaraguan food and the Costa Rican food I had grown up with. Ana Julia soon said, however, that sometimes she wanted to leave Costa Rica. While Lucía's feelings echoed this uncertainty, Ana Julia claimed she would not return to Nicaragua, that she would force herself not to even if she truly wanted to. She said she was tired, rubbed her eyes, and showed me the fallen eyelashes on her fingertips. The last job she held before

her sister convinced her to come to Costa Rica left her with only "*el olor de la plata en las manos*," with only the smell of money on her hands. There, she had worked every day of the week, more than eight hours on her feet, sometimes without seeing the sun. Ana Julia told me she had not wanted to follow her sister's advice as her daughter was only a year-and-a-half at the time. Now, she claimed to find herself in a position of more stability, albeit one that still required six days a week of work for a family, with Sundays off for church.

The accounts of Lucía and Ana Julia represent the uncertainty the Nicaraguan labor migrant women in Río Azul face, an uncertainty they have decided to live with and battle, not complacent, but rather asserting their agency in a specific place through the capacity to "endure, suffer, and persist".<sup>27</sup> To recognize this is not to undervalue the critical project of reforming oppressive social conditions. Rather, as Mahmood emphasizes, "analyzing people's actions in terms of realized or frustrated attempts at social transformation is to necessarily reduce the heterogeneity of life to the rather flat narrative of succumbing to or resisting relations of domination."<sup>28</sup> Thus, the ways in which the women in Río Azul have constructed a life for themselves through common everyday practices at home and at work—despite structural forces that act in opposition—demonstrates a process of meaning-making around migration and adaptation inextricably linked to resistance. Resistance does not take the shape of romanticized insurgency, but rather, embodies the struggle to inhabit spaces that discursively and materially place limits on the womens' lives through social inequalities.

## 4.2 Acute Awareness of Rights and Agency

With a construction of agency that does not flatten the narrative to a submission-resistance paradigm, the accounts of Nicaraguan labor migrant women in Río Azul speak to how the migrant's tale is one of agency and not just misery.<sup>29</sup> None of the women view themselves as victims of a destiny they have not chosen, out of a limited number of options, to shape their livelihoods. In many cases, the participants expressed that the awareness of violations of their rights rallied a desire to reconstruct a life free of these anxieties and fears. Idania, one of the Nicaraguan migrant women I met at a community meeting on Río Azul's soccer field, spoke with another participant, Maria José, and me over coffee in Maria José's home. Idania and Maria José saw each other often, as Maria José had helped Idania settle into Río Azul when she arrived only a year ago. Idania had worked as a domestic worker in Nicaragua but now worked in the home as a mother of three small children. They spoke of their neighbors as we played card games, and Idania held her youngest child, a four-month old boy who clung to her shirt. Maria José kept the wooden shutters open, windows which overlooked potato fields to the right and a shanty town of corrugated tin houses to the left. From our place at the kitchen table, I could hear how the young men who sat on sidewalks along Río Azul's steep, narrow roads laughed and shouted to each other. Maria José asked Idania if she wanted to continue having children, if her husband wanted that. Idania then recounts how the doctors in Costa Rica's *seguro*—the Costa Rican system of public health care—had taken the decision to sterilize one of her neighbors, also a Nicaraguan migrant woman. After the woman had birthed her fifth child, the doctors had performed a tubal ligation without her consent, taking the matter into their own hands, according to Idania.

Nicaraguan women's reproductive health in Costa Rica and sterilization has been studied in depth before. Kate R. Goldade's ethnography, for instance, focuses on the reproductive health and motherhood of Nicaraguan labor migrant women who work in Costa Rica's coffee agro-business, where she witnessed a nurse scold a participant for not undergoing a tubal ligation after her third child.<sup>30</sup> As Amrita Pande observed for South Asian and African migrant domestic workers in the rigid Lebanese *kafāla* sponsorship system, the Lebanese Ministry of Interior and Directorate of General Security forbids migrant workers from marriage or reproduction. Although the migratory experience of domestic workers in Lebanon under the *kafāla* system differs from the experience of Nicaraguan migrant women in Costa Rica, the obstruction of bodily autonomy, of intrusion upon a woman's sexual and reproductive health pervades migrant domestic workers' livelihoods. Nonetheless, Pande underscores how migrant domestic workers in Lebanon do not accept these exclusions and strategically carve out "counter-spaces"—such as cafés or ethnic churches—which reflect a "visible and public appropriation of spaces in the city center".<sup>31</sup>

With this in mind, it is imperative to see migrant women as what they are, people with experiences prior to and beyond migration, with desires, choices, and fears, and with agency of their own. In late July, Costa Rica's INAMU held a series of workshops on leadership for Nicaraguan migrants. The facilitator from INAMU, a Costa Rican woman, brought coffee and small cakes, and we sat in plastic chairs in a semicircle. When more women arrived with their children, and a couple with their male partners, some of us sat on the wooden floorboards. Most of the women knew each other already, and the first hour of the workshop—the second in the series—consisted of friendly banter, a period of time that fleshed out the dynamics of the women in the room and established a comfortable atmosphere. The second

workshop led into a discussion of gendered spaces, and how, in the restrictive gender binary framework, women belong in private spaces while the men in public. This conjures analyses of public space defined through spatial practices that serve to control women's use of public space and often exclude women from public space altogether.<sup>32</sup> This workshop set a precedent for the women to analyze their own subjectivities as women, as migrants, as mothers, and as "breadwinners," as well as evaluate their own sense of leadership. They spoke of their roles as workers, primarily domestic workers. At one point, however, a younger participant with her daughter on her lap interrupted to claim that she is "poor, but [she] fight[s]" and that none of them in the room have migrated "only to work and send money" because "that's not life," and signaled to the fact that her home—a private space, a space traditionally gendered as female—isn't always where she feels oppressed or "unable to express [herself]." Similarly, scholars have cited the nuances to such spatialities of gendered everyday lives, where home emerges as a site of resistance.<sup>33</sup> In this sense, the womens' daily, informal practices allow for room to maneuver forms of power that work positively, producing shared systems of knowledge and spaces for discourse, in the midst of power that works negatively, sometimes restricting bodily autonomy.

### 4.3 Bi-National Families: Marriage, Mothering, and Othering

Like Lucía and Ana Julia, many of the other Nicaraguan migrant women I met had families spread across borders, pieces that linked them back to Nicaragua yet grounded them in Costa Rica. The labor migrant's social and spatial dislocation transport them into a temporal and spatial limbo of sorts, and the larger historical context of Nicaragua-Costa Rica immigration becomes amplified with a layer as mothers and wives of bi-national families. Maria José, a woman in her early fifties, who had already spent twenty-five years as a domestic worker in Costa Rica, said she had established a family in Nicaragua prior to migration. She spoke of the two sons she had had and the subsequent death of her husband. Like Lucía, Maria José's children remained in Nicaragua with family and Maria José sent remittances to support her children from afar. She recounted the romantic relationship that formed with her current husband and the birth of their daughter. These formative milestones, however, did not simply come undisturbed. Some of the migrant women described arriving in Costa Rica for a short period of time at first. In Maria José's case, she first stayed in Costa Rica for forty days, a process of scoping out the future area she would inhabit. Maria José stressed the necessity of gaining recognition as bi-national families, that Nicaraguan migrant women have the right for both the Nicaraguan and Costa Rican states to grant their families protection.

One morning at a community meeting on Río Azul's soccer field, Maria José and I sat together on concrete bleachers with a couple of her neighbors—a Costa Rican woman and her young daughter and two Nicaraguan women in their late twenties—long after the meeting ended. We spoke of *novelas*, the typically Mexican or Colombian soap operas on TV, of the actress Thalia and her *novelas* in the 90s, which I had flipped through at my *abuela's* house in Zarcero, Costa Rica as a child. My basic knowledge of Latin American soap operas made for comfortable conversation that did not focus solely on Maria José's origins in Nicaragua or a generalized "migrant experience." In this space, Maria José brought up the problematic nature of *novelas* and their influences on her:

Like I said, I came for forty days... two months... I wanted my [future] husband to know what it was like to live a pregnancy, for him, as a man, to live fatherhood since pregnancy...it's something necessary that women need to instill. In *novelas*, the man is madly in love with her, he impregnates her, and when the child is two years old, the love disappears... This is terrible information. I think that fatherhood and motherhood are a responsibility of both, just as sexuality is.<sup>34</sup>

Maria José's insistence on the role of men in the entanglement of family and migration delineates how women negotiate old and new ideas and practices in a multitude of places, often challenging well-established norms and routines. Although placed in the context of Eastern European women migrants in Greece, Anastasia Christou and Domna Michail describe how the womens' narratives tended to reflect resistance to patriarchal values and cultural norms. Established in Greece, they held a more critical sentiment toward gendered family roles.<sup>35</sup> For young Turkish migrant women in Germany, the conscious decision to confront gender norms—whether through pursuing an education or becoming breadwinners—represents an act of resistance. Ehrkamp theorizes resistance as an act that does not necessarily manifest simultaneously with exertions of power. In fact, for these Turkish migrant women in Germany, the home became an important site for liberation.<sup>36</sup> In this sense, child-raising practices must also be negotiated within changed spatial and social contexts.<sup>37</sup> The contextualization of any human action in time and space is thus central to agency, as context demarcates and shapes the boundaries of social action and place-making. Maria José had migrated for a short period of time, first in search of work. When she returned to Costa Rica, she returned

not only for work but also as an extension of her firm beliefs in the transformation of gender roles, of establishing agency, and of unraveling the interstices of her identity as a woman, migrant, wife, mother, and worker.

## 5. Conclusion

The spaces of Nicaraguan labor migrant women's daily lives are intrinsically intertwined with complex notions of power, conformity, and resistance as labor migrant women both challenge and remain within the confines of patriarchal practices and structural economic and political factors. The workings of power within space and place are not easily defined through simple dichotomies of docility versus open action against oppression, and bridge across the socially constructed divides of gender and public and private space.<sup>38</sup>

With these concepts of space, place, and resistance in mind, labor migration means growth, means struggle, means agency, just as adaptation means sacrifice, means re-imagination. For the Nicaraguan labor migrant woman in Río Azul, there occurs both an exertion of migrant identity at the forefront and a form of giving it less importance. These women accepted me into their homes in Río Azul, post-pilgrimage sanctuaries where the women became more than labor migrants. In this sense, the women's constructions of meaning around the process of migration and adaptation to Costa Rica became just that: a yearning for their livelihoods as women and as migrants to exist in the world without spectacle. This allows the process of migration to be unpacked as an intimate and embodied experience beyond economic determinism and push and pull discussions of migration. The women's acts of constructing identities beyond "migrant" and beyond "laborer," and of framing their livelihoods beyond economic migration and notions of simple assimilation yields a bandwidth of possibilities, and in particular reference to Saba Mahmood, a "capacity for action."<sup>39</sup> From daily practices of cooking, child rearing, and survival in the domestic sphere, to subtle subversions of traditionally gendered public space, to cultivating collective systems of knowledge and resource bases within the community, this capacity for action will continue to transform in tandem with the need to navigate between the morphing barriers to building a sense of place.

## 6. Acknowledgements

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