On a spring night in 2008, hundreds of people in the Mexican state of Hidalgo pressed into the base of a canyon ablaze with torches. So palpable was the shared shock and grief, people later said, that neither pastor nor priest was needed. The place was El Alberto, an Otomi community located several hours north of Mexico City, in the region known as the Valle del Mezquital. The event was a memorial service for one of their own who had died in the desert of southern Arizona, shortly after an attempted border passage. Earlier that evening, several young men from this community of about two thousand people had climbed steep, rocky trails to light giant luminaries upon the canyon walls. As families arrived by the carload, the smell of kerosene and the flicker of torch-light cut through the growing darkness. It was nearly dawn by the time the remains of the deceased arrived. The event marked the first time a migrant from El Alberto had died at the U.S.-Mexico border. It was not the first time the torches had been lit.

Since 2004, residents of El Alberto have produced the torch show once a week. They do so as part of the Caminata Nocturna, a U.S.-Mexico border crossing simulation that invites tourists—the majority
of them young professionals from Mexico City—to step into the shoes of an undocumented migrant for a night. The border simulation is the main attraction within Parque EcoAlberto, the ecotourism park that is owned and operated by the members of the community. The majority of the actors in the Caminata are former U.S. migrants who have returned to El Alberto to give a year of unpaid service to their hometown. Since the program’s inception, thousands of Mexican citizens and scores of international reporters have muddied their clothes, bruised their ankles, and at times been moved to tears in this rigorous, four- to five-hour nighttime hike. Contrary to expectations, the border enactment does not end with a simulated arrival to the United States. Rather, the Caminata closes with a display of torches representing those who have died en route, as was done during the outdoor memorial service in 2008. Gathered below this stark reminder of lives lost, tourists join one another in a rousing chorus of the Mexican national anthem.

By staging the Caminata Nocturna each week, residents of El Alberto bring much-needed economic resources to their town. Yet they also seek to spark a shift in national consciousness. After catching tourists’ attention through the rigorous exertion of the border simulation, they urge participants to join them in pursuing the “Mexican Dream.” In contrast to the individualism and consumerism associated with the American Dream, the Mexican Dream is a vision of a sustainable future in which Mexico’s citizens will be no longer be compelled to leave the country in search of work. What tourists do not know is that well over half of El Alberto’s residents—including several key visionaries behind the border simulation—are Pentecostal, and that the religion is deeply intertwined with the daily challenges of migration to the United States. Indeed, the influence of Pentecostalism within the town’s collective imagination is so strong that a survivor of the 2008 border passage accident emerged from a coma to tell of a near-death encounter with God that prompted his born-again salvation experience. While the Caminata Nocturna has been featured by media outlets as wide-reaching as National Geographic and 60 Minutes, this book examines the relationship between religion, migration, and collective organizing in the town behind the headlines.

Moving beyond “push-pull” economic explanations, scholars of migration have called attention to the role of social networks in
shaping people's migration choices. According to social network theory, migrants do not make decisions simply as individual, rationally calculating actors. Rather, the decision to migrate and the success of the journey largely depend upon the social relationships in which a person is embedded. Yet social network approaches alone cannot fully explain how people grapple with the possibility of death while crossing an increasingly militarized U.S.-Mexico border. As Jacqueline Hagan argues, today the risks and uncertainties involved in undocumented U.S. migration are such that even the resources provided by social networks are no longer enough. Rather, people turn increasingly to religion before, during, and after the undocumented journey, seeking the spiritual strength and vision necessary to complete the ordeal when all other resources are exhausted. Building upon Hagan's findings, the starting assumption of this book is that the act of undocumented U.S.-Mexico border passage is far more than a social, economic, or political phenomenon. Crossing the border is also a deeply religious matter. The journey confronts people with hard-hitting questions about life, death, and the limits of human power. Migration challenges those who travel, those who live in receiving countries, and those who remain behind to reexamine the authority upon which earthly governments rest. Religions are especially relevant within the context of migration, for they provide lenses through which people chart out their places in the cosmos and make sense of suffering. They connect physical, flesh-and-blood experiences with collective representations of ultimate reality. Since religions are embedded in everyday, social experience, they are also tied to people's semi-conscious desires and notions of the possible.

As Peggy Levitt rightly claims, “we miss the boat by insisting that religion and culture stop at the nation’s borders.” Likewise, we miss the mark if we neglect to recognize the role of religion in the migration process. Yet this book is more than a story of immigrants turning to religion as they cross the U.S.-Mexico border in pursuit of a better life. The reality is more complex.

This book makes two arguments. First, Pentecostalism in El Alberto is deeply intertwined not only with the challenges of the undocumented journey, but also with the daily fabric of cross-border life. The religion's combined arsenal of faith healing and prosperity theology resonates with the promises and perils of pursuing income in the United
States. At the same time, Pentecostal salvation and spiritual warfare offer a sense of protection to those whose bodies must cross through dangerous physical and spiritual spaces in search of work. Over the past decade, however, the undocumented journey has become more deadly than ever, and so the second argument is that even religion is no longer enough to help potential migrants navigate the complex choices they face. Poised between life-threatening danger at the border, life-sapping marginalization in the United States, and grueling unemployment at home, members of El Alberto’s Pentecostal majority continue to pursue individual salvation. Yet they are also rolling up their sleeves and joining their non-evangelical neighbors in this-worldly, collective efforts to draw attention to the root causes of migration and demand an alternate future. As they participate in the Caminata project and call for the “Mexican Dream,” Pentecostals in El Alberto do not leave their faith behind. Rather, keeping their sights on heaven and earth alike, they draw upon all of the resources at their disposal to expand their range of options on the local and international scene.

Religion, Migration, and the Caminata Nocturna

My interest in religion and migration first emerged in 2001 when I began a position as a full-time volunteer at a migrant women’s shelter in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. By November of that year, the effects of post-9/11 immigration enforcement were clearly visible upon the local landscape. Wait times at the El Paso ports of entry had tripled. Helicopters had become a common presence in the region’s skyline. In 2003, Immigration and Naturalization Services was placed under the authority of the Department of Homeland Security. The transfer was accompanied by a shift in ideology that increasingly associated undocumented immigration with terrorism. I witnessed the effects of this shift first-hand when a nineteen-year-old guest at Annunciation House, our organization’s sister shelter in El Paso, was shot and killed by Border Patrol agents when he was taking out the trash in the shelter parking lot one afternoon. As another volunteer and I drove Juan Patricio’s parents from the Juárez airport to El Paso for the memorial service, his father asked us, “Why did they kill my son?” We had no response.
Juan Patricio’s death was but one of the effects of border militarization that I witnessed in El Paso and Juárez. In El Paso, a sixteen-year-old shelter guest lost her legs while attempting to hop a train headed deeper into the United States. Immigration checkpoints on the highways leading out of town had become so heavily attended that she dared not travel by road. In Juárez, I met women who had traveled not only from southern Mexico but also through the entire migration corridor through Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Some were brought to our door by Mexican immigration officials after failed border crossing attempts. One woman from Honduras had been raped by her coyote, the guide whom she had paid thousands of dollars to lead her across the border. On several occasions I mistakenly assumed that the new arrivals suffered from mental illness, so shaken, hungry, and exhausted they were when they arrived at our door.

While the situation for migrant women in Juárez was dire, I also witnessed multiple ways in which they generated the resilience necessary to go on. In particular, I observed the effectiveness of narrative in helping women to process their experiences. At times women told of their travels throughout Mexico and across the border with the same intensity with which one might recount the birth of a child or the death of a loved one. The migration journey was, for these women, a life crisis. As described in ritual studies theory, a life crisis is a transition in human life, such as birth, death, or coming of age, which stirs such fundamental questions about physical experience and identity into view that people inscribe collective meaning into the event through ritual action. As I listened to scores of women tell their stories, I noticed that religious faith often made the difference between action and paralysis, between hope and despair. A woman who had survived domestic violence at the hands of a prominent member of a drug cartel, for example, drew upon her Catholic faith as she gradually worked out a plan while telling and retelling her story. I also witnessed the psychological benefits of performance as the shelter guests danced, joked, and processed their memories as a community. One afternoon as we sorted piles of donations, the woman who had survived rape at the border donned a pair of mustached Groucho Marx glasses and an oversized T-shirt and galloped around the house, transforming the energy of the horrors she had endured into cathartic laughter. I remember a young boy who had
traveled the length of Mexico with his mother as they sought to escape domestic violence. A natural entertainer, Jesús would chant and sway as he acted out stories invented on the spot.

The women and children I met in Juárez used creative action to transform their individual migration experiences into something that could be collectively shared. Yet the process was relatively ad hoc and spontaneous. If religious narrative and performance were so effective in helping these women to chart out plans of action in the face of severely limited options, I wondered how communities throughout Mexico and Central America might be using religion to respond to migration on a collective level. After leaving Ciudad Juárez, I scanned the literature on religion and immigration to find cases in which people have used collective action to make sense of the border and respond to the migration journey. I learned of the Posada Sin Fronteras, an annual protest ritual in which migrants, activists, and faith workers gather to celebrate mass through the chain-link fence at the Tijuana–San Diego border. I learned of the rich tradition of migration-related retablos, devotional paintings left at Catholic shrines in thanksgiving for miracles performed during the journey and throughout the trials of working in the United States. I learned of makeshift shrines that migrants in transit have constructed in the desert using found materials. And, echoing my experience in Juárez, I learned of the extensive role of faith workers in responding to the needs of people in motion throughout Central America, Mexico, and the United States. Some faith leaders have even taken steps to develop a “theology of migration” that takes migrant experience as the starting point for religious reflection. I was most interested, however, in learning about the steps migrants themselves have taken to reflect upon and make collective sense out of their lived realities. Jacqueline Hagan’s study of Pentecostal Maya migrants from the Totonicapán region of Guatemala became a key inspiration for my research. Hagan finds that potential migrants draw upon fasting, prophecy, and prayer as they make the initial decision to travel to the United States. Relatives and fellow worshippers then pray for migrants in their absence and welcome them after their arrival, thus spinning the fibers of enduring transnational religious bonds.

When I came across a news article about the Caminata Nocturna in the winter of 2007, I was taken aback, almost offended. I pictured
a theme park complete with plastic cacti and oversized sombreros. Rumors circulated that the border simulation served as a training-ground for would-be migrants. After reading further, I soon found that the project is a sincere, grass-roots effort through which the members of a community strained by migration have come together to convey the hardship of border passage to their well-heeled fellow citizens. They have taken the ugliness of the undocumented journey—the dull ache of thirst, the threat of death, the violence and indignity of encounters with Border Patrol agents—and transformed it into something new. The tourist cabin in which I spent my first night at Parque EcoAlberto was the product of such alchemy. Thick stone walls, a sturdy roof of agave leaves, pillowcases embroidered with vivid birds: the cabin was stunning. Its design was the product of two unlikely sources. It drew inspiration from the humble, cactus-walled dwellings that were common in years past when poverty was dire and food sparse. And it also drew inspiration from the early twenty-first century housing boom in the U.S. Southwest. Migrants from El Alberto who have honed their construction skills building houses and hotels in Las Vegas, Phoenix, and Salt Lake City, have learned something of tourism, as well.

My initial research plan was to investigate the Caminata Nocturna alone, interpreting the tourist reenactment in light of ritual and performance theory. Although the Caminata is not overtly religious, it is a form of creative performance that shares much common ground with religious practice. Like religion, the Caminata helps people to establish places of belonging in space and time. It also facilitates passage across physical and temporal borders. Like religious practice, the Caminata Nocturna proposes ways for people to locate themselves in the cosmos and redefine their relationships with one another. The Caminata serves, like ritual, as “a mode of paying attention,” using imagined border space to direct people’s gazes toward new possibilities as the presence of glowing torches evokes the souls of those departed.

The first time I donned my sneakers to join in the Caminata Nocturna, I had come straight from the clausura, a festival marking the closing of the school year. Hundreds of the town’s residents had gathered to watch their children and their neighbors’ children, dressed in suits and satin gowns, dance in solemn, choreographed rows and sing the Mexican national anthem. The children’s relatives and neighbors clapped modestly at the
teachers’ urging. Weeks later I would stand in a Pentecostal church with many of the same people as they clapped until their hands burned. “Y me quema y me quema y me quema!” (“and it burns me and it burns me and it burns me!”) they sang, invoking the fire of the Holy Spirit as the pastor pounded out music on the electric keyboard. That first night, however, I was unaware of the strong presence of Pentecostalism in El Alberto. I was led past the school basketball court and toward a classroom-turned-banquet hall. I sat at a table crowded with local dignitaries and was served barbecued goat and rich broth with wedges of lime. Outside, the basketball court-turned-stage made a second metamorphosis into a dance floor. Tunes and announcements spiraled out through amplifiers to ricochet off of the surrounding hills.

“This one’s going out to the cute girls sitting at the corner—someone get up and dance with them!”

A few couples braved the floor.

“And here’s a greeting for my compadre Miguel who’s about to go to the Union Americana—buen viaje!” said the DJ, reading off messages. “And ‘hello’ to Lupe, in Las Vegas—that’s from her man, José!”

The festival that night was intimately local yet shot through with transnational elements. The event’s planning committee had worked for months to ensure nothing would be lacking. The day before, a dozen men from the town had butchered half a dozen goats and prepared the underground pits where they would be roasted between agave leaves and over hot stones through the night. Women made tortillas by the hundred. Parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and neighbors joined together to show support for their youth. Yet the DJ’s stream of greetings to and from the United States provided a gripping reminder of those not present, while at the same time suggesting that El Alberto is part of a “transnational social field” that extends well into the United States.

I would soon find that the same sense of separation that was so palpable during the school closing festival also pervades Pentecostal worship. On Saturday nights, when the Caminata Nocturna’s sirens and simulated gunshots sound through the riverbanks and cornfields of El Alberto, they mingle with songs, handclapping, and prayers spilling forth from the windows of the town’s two Pentecostal churches. Many of those prayers are for relatives and loved ones in the United States.
Pentecostalism was present in the Valle del Mezquital by the early 1930s, yet it was not until the 1960s that the religion reached El Alberto. Contrary to popular assumptions about Protestant presence in Latin America, in this case the key agents of religious transmission were not U.S. missionaries but rather a few men from the region who had returned home after working as *braceros*¹⁸ (temporary contract laborers) in the United States.

The emergence of Pentecostalism can be traced to 1901, when a group of seminary students in Topeka, Kansas, began speaking in tongues. While glossolalia was not new to Christianity, the students interpreted the phenomenon in a new light. They saw it as a sign that the spiritual gifts described in the New Testament had been restored to the church and the world was entering the final days before Christ's Second Coming. The movement soon spread to Los Angeles and gave rise to the famous Azusa Street revival. There, participants prayed, spoke in tongues, and conducted divine healings in a fervor that extended from weeks to months to years. The revival was uniquely interracial, drawing energy from the social ferment of a newly expanding American West.¹⁹

Since American Pentecostals hailed mostly from among the working classes, the new religion lacked the resources and institutional structure necessary to sustain centrally organized missionary activity.²⁰ But that did not stop its growth. Pentecostalism spread, as its adherents describe, like “fire” at the grassroots level, transmitted from pastor to pastor and from worker to worker across the American Southwest and into Mexico. The religion's popularity can be explained in part by its emphasis on the immediate, embodied workings of the Holy Spirit. Within Pentecostalism, physical and spiritual states are closely intertwined. Just as bodies can fall ill from spiritual causes, so they can be healed through the presence of the Holy Spirit. This non-dualistic approach to illness and healing resonates with *curanderismo*, or traditional Mexican folk healing. It would not be long before newly formed Mexican Pentecostal organizations began sending missionaries of their own to the United States.²¹ The religion was thus transnational from the start, following the paths of myriad workers from Kansas to Los Angeles, Hidalgo to Texas, and Arizona to Mexico City.

When Pentecostalism reached El Alberto in the 1960s, religious change coincided with a wave of socioeconomic development that
greatly transformed life in the region. As new converts sought spiritual salvation, they also sought salvation from the poverty and social marginalization they had endured for too long. Pentecostals in El Alberto state that the new religion “opened their eyes” and caused them to think of the future. Nevertheless, the community’s material problems were not over. After the initial wave of conversion, El Alberto’s members began traveling out in ever-widening spheres in search of work. U.S. migration eventually led to hardships of its own, thus providing an impetus for continued religious change. Before we turn to that story, however, it is necessary to provide contextual background about the community and the surrounding region.

El Alberto

El Alberto is located several hours north of Mexico City, in the Central Mexican state of Hidalgo. The community belongs to the municipality of Ixmiquilpan, a nearby city of about 34,000 people. Due to high levels of migration to the United States, the exact population of El Alberto is difficult to ascertain. The 2010 Mexican census lists 834 inhabitants, with a higher percentage of women than men, suggesting high levels of emigration. However, this source includes only those who were living in El Alberto at the time the information was gathered and does not account for those who dwell across the border yet are considered full members or “citizens” of the community. Thus, according to town authorities, El Alberto has a population of about 2,000 people, half of whom live in the United States. The majority of the people in the community speak Otomí, an indigenous language with over 230,000 speakers over the age of four in Mexico. Over half of the Otomí speakers in El Alberto are also bilingual in Spanish.

As a comunidad, or legally recognized indigenous community, El Alberto contains a combination of both private and collectively managed lands, and individuals within the town cannot sell land to outsiders. Several thousand of the community’s shared acres form the basis of Parque EcoAlberto. The ecotourism park is divided into two main sites: the “Gran Cañón,” named after the Grand Canyon in the United States, and the balneario, or swimming pool area. The canyon surrounds the Tula River, and the balneario makes use of natural hot
springs. The surrounding Valle del Mezquital spans 2,782 square miles within the Central Mexican Highlands. The region, which falls mostly within the state of Hidalgo, is not a single valley but rather a collection of seven valleys and the mountains that surround them. Known as “Mbonthi” in Otomí, the region’s name refers to the mesquite trees that are a common sight throughout.

In the Mexican national imagination, the Valle del Mezquital was long known as an arid region, home to an impoverished and socially isolated indigenous population. Despite their proximity to the Tula River, residents of El Alberto once struggled to produce food, given the sparse rains and poor soil of the area. Since the introduction of irrigation in the mid-1970s, however, much of the valley’s terrain has been transformed into arable land. At the same time, the benefits of irrigation have not come without a cost, for the region is now irrigated with treated wastewater from Mexico City which has introduced new contaminants to the soil.

The Valle del Mezquital remains a concentrated center of indigenous population. Along with the Sierra Otomí, who occupy the mountainous region at the boundary of the states of Puebla, Hidalgo, and Veracruz, the Otomí of the Valle del Mezquital belong to the larger Otomí language group. Since the term “Otomí” derives from the language of the Nahua-speaking people who conquered Otomí lands during the pre-colonial era, today the endonym “hñähñu” is the preferred term of self-reference within the Valle del Mezquital. In keeping with this preference, the word “hñähñu” rather than “Otomí” will be used throughout this book. The ethnic group rose to power after the fall of the Toltec capital of Tula in the twelfth century CE. Their kingdom was based in Xaltocan, near present-day Mexico City. When Xaltocan fell at the end of the thirteenth century, the Otomí dispersed, giving rise to the regional distinctions that exist today. By some accounts, the hñähñu were already present in the Valle del Mezquital as early as 250 CE. Other accounts estimate their arrival approximately four hundred years later.

Early sources state that the hñähñu of the Valle del Mezquital lived in small, isolated groupings because the natural resources of the region were not amenable to concentrated settlement. After coming under the control of the Aztec Triple Alliance and later Spanish colonizers, the hñähñu retreated to the most remote regions of the Valle del Mezquital
and developed a tradition of resistance that continues to the present day. The residents of El Alberto, like many hñähñu speakers throughout the Valle del Mezquital, continue to identify as survivors deeply committed to maintaining autonomy in the face of external political and economic manipulations. Originally known as “Santa Cruz El Alberto,” the community was largely isolated from the surrounding region until the mid-twentieth century, for it was accessible only by foot and the residents were almost entirely monolingual. Despite their relative isolation, communities within the Valle del Mezquital differed markedly at the time. Some consisted almost entirely of people employed in the region’s mining industry. Others enjoyed a greater economic independence by producing artisan goods and marketing them directly to the public.

Beginning in the 1950s, however, the communities of the region underwent significant change due to the formation of the Patrimonio Indígena del Valle del Mezquital, a government agency that sought to alleviate the region’s poverty through Western-style education and development. By 1970, the organization had begun to bring schools, electricity, roads, and water into communities in the region, including El Alberto. This process of development was closely intertwined with religious change. As communities responded to the organizational demands of development, young, bilingual individuals took on greater leadership roles. In doing so, they challenged the authority of traditional civil-religious hierarchies, in which political influence is reserved for those who have undertaken the costly burdens of Catholic festival sponsorship. Meanwhile, evangelical Protestantism began to gain a hold in the region. The origins of the Pachuca, Hidalgo-based Iglesia Cristiana Independiente Pentecostés (ICIP), the movement from which El Alberto’s two Pentecostal churches derive, lie with Mexican migrants who had witnessed the beginnings of Pentecostalism in the United States and returned in the 1930s to plant churches in Mexico. ICIP churches soon spread from Pachuca and the Valle del Mezquital to other parts of Mexico and, later, to the United States. Today, ICIP has about eight thousand churches worldwide. It was in the early 1960s that the organization made inroads into El Alberto. The town’s first Pentecostal church was founded a decade later, and subsequently divided due to a leadership conflict. El Alberto’s two Pentecostal churches, Bethel and Sinaí, reflect organizational divisions in the ICIP organization as...
a whole. Among these, Bethel has stronger transnational connections, with over 150 churches in the Valle del Mezquital as well as churches in sixteen U.S. states and parts of Central America.

In a recent census, three hundred of the town’s members identified as Catholic. Over five hundred identified as Protestant or as belonging to other biblical religions, and twenty stated that they had no religion. My research revealed that the town contains a small number of Jehovah’s Witnesses and Latter-day Saints, along with a handful of Spiritualists whose worship practice is centered mostly within one extended family. The prominence of Pentecostalism in El Alberto is not representative of the municipality of Ixmiquilpan as a whole, which has a Catholic majority. A frequent refrain among Catholics and Pentecostals in El Alberto is that their community has passed through an era of religious conflict and now enjoys a considerable degree of harmony. Despite their religious differences, the town’s residents are united by their participation in the town’s system of collective labor. That system is grounded in ties of kinship and ethnicity that are in some ways stronger than the bonds of religious affiliation. But El Alberto’s interreligious harmony is not shared by all indigenous communities in the Valle del Mezquital. Some towns remain largely Catholic, some are almost entirely Pentecostal, and others are bitterly divided. Nevertheless, all have been affected on some level by the presence of evangelical Protestantism.

The religious change that El Alberto has witnessed is part of a larger wave of Protestant conversion that is transforming the religious landscape of Latin America today. Over 15 percent of Latin America’s population is evangelical Protestant, and the numbers are growing. The percentage in Mexico is somewhat lower than in other parts of Latin America. Nevertheless, Mexico experienced a concentrated period of Protestant growth between 1970 and 1990, and the numbers have continued to climb. By 2010, there were over eight million Protestants in Mexico, representing over 7 percent of the country’s total population. During the period of intensive growth, the Protestant population of Hidalgo rose at a rate slightly higher than the national average. Conversion has been higher in areas with large indigenous populations, partly because the radical shift in identity involved in evangelical conversion helps to redefine social categories that have long relegated indigenous people to an inferior status within Mexico.
Members of the Mexican public tend to recognize much less denominational difference within Protestantism than do their North American counterparts. Given the prominent historical presence of Roman Catholicism within the society, Mexicans often simply distinguish between *católicos*, on the one hand, and *cristianos* or *evangélicos* on the other, thus gathering Pentecostals, other evangelical Protestants, and mainline Protestants under a single *cristiano* umbrella. While the country has a small presence of mainline Protestants, evangelicals are by far the largest Protestant presence in the country, constituting seven and a half million of the country’s roughly eight million Protestants. In turn, about three-quarters of Mexican evangelicals are Pentecostal. For the purpose of simplicity, and to more accurately reflect the ways in which Pentecostals in El Alberto self-identify, I use the words “Pentecostal,” “evangelical,” and *cristiano* interchangeably throughout the book.

Although residents of El Alberto began converting to Pentecostalism in large numbers in the 1960s and 1970s, they did not begin to migrate to the United States until the 1980s. U.S. migration was well established by the mid-1990s. While the earliest migrants from El Alberto found work in Texas, they later gravitated toward the Southwest cities of Phoenix, Las Vegas, and Salt Lake City. El Alberto’s migration patterns reflect a growing trend of indigenous migration to the United States, as well as changing migration patterns among Mexicans as a whole.

As the town’s residents traveled to the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, they took part in a “new geography of Mexican immigration” that arose in the aftermath of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act. Until the mid-1980s, most Mexican migrants to the United States traveled to states such as California, Texas, and Arizona. By the mid-1990s, the growing militarization of the border, combined with an increasingly nativist political climate in California, had driven immigrants to seek opportunities in other parts of the country. In just a few years, Mexico-U.S. migration transformed from a regional to a nationwide phenomenon. Not only did Mexican immigrants settle in new states such as Nevada, Florida, and North Carolina, but they also gravitated toward new urban centers, including El Alberto’s prime destinations of Las Vegas and Phoenix.

As Mexico-U.S. migration became more geographically diverse in the 1980s and 1990s, it also began to involve a broader portion of
the country’s indigenous population. For years, the Mexican government looked upon the rural poor as a surplus population that would best serve the national economy by leaving the countryside. In the mid-1990s, policy-makers actually predicted that the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), combined with cuts to agricultural subsidies, would cause the rural poor to move to cities for industrial jobs, thus reducing the country’s rural population by about half in a few short decades. While the prediction did not entirely come true, NAFTA did contribute toward the migration of large numbers of people from rural communities, including El Alberto, to the United States. Indigenous migration had largely been an internal, regional phenomenon until the 1980s, but by the 1990s, increasing numbers of indigenous people began crossing the U.S.-Mexico border in search of work. By the year 2000, the state of Hidalgo had the second highest emigration growth rate in the country. Whereas migrants from El Alberto gravitated toward the U.S. Southwest, other hñähñu-speaking migrants from Hidalgo have traveled to Florida, North Carolina, and Georgia. Migrants from the city of Ixmiquilpan, for example, have settled overwhelmingly in the tourist town of Clearwater, Florida.

Often treated as second-class citizens in Mexico, indigenous migrants face unique challenges but also draw upon unique cultural resources once they arrive in the United States. In some cases mobility and dislocation serve to strengthen ethnic identity as they come to see themselves as belonging to social units that extend beyond their towns of origin. Indigenous migrants in the United States have developed a wide range of transnational political and civic self-help organizations, some of them pan-ethnic and pan-regional in nature. Hñähñu migrants in Florida, for example, have established the Consejo Mexicano de la Bahía de Tampa, or Mexican Council of Tampa Bay, a transnational organization that was initially created to provide financial and logistical support to hñähñu speakers in Mexico who were seeking to transport home the bodies of relatives who had died in the United States.

Research across Borders

The material gathered in this book is drawn from a combination of qualitative, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and
extensive participant observation in El Alberto as well as in Phoenix, Arizona. I first visited El Alberto for five weeks during the summer of 2007, and have visited the town at least once a year ever since. My longest stay in the town was for period of approximately nine weeks in the summer of 2009. Since accepting a position at Arizona State University in 2010, I have had the opportunity to form close friendships with several families from El Alberto who live in Phoenix. By attending services at Bethel’s Phoenix congregation, I have gained valuable insight on the transnational dimensions of Pentecostal practice, as well as the daily challenges facing congregation members in the United States.

As noted above, I originally traveled to El Alberto intending to conduct a short-term investigation of the Caminata project. I sought to better understand the effects of U.S.-Mexico border militarization upon the members of this community by exploring which aspects of the migration journey they have chosen to reproduce for tourists, and why. I also sought to understand how tourists, in turn, perceive the Caminata’s reinvented border space. While formulating my questions, I drew upon the literature of U.S.-Mexico border militarization. I also drew upon ritual and performance theory to examine the Caminata as a form of entertainment that crosses into the realm of efficacious performance for actors and participants alike. I would later learn of the parallel efforts of Tamara Underiner, who examines the Caminata Nocturna in light of other indigenous performances throughout Mexico. Insights from the anthropology of tourism as well as comparative approaches to tourism and pilgrimage also influenced the formative stages of the project.

During my first summer in El Alberto, I participated in the Caminata five times, both with tourists and from the perspective of the Border Patrol actors. I carried a voice recorder to note the sequence of action, and gathered tourists’ reactions through semi-structured, recorded interviews each day following. I observed the Caminata again in the summers of 2009 and 2011. These additional observations allowed me to note how the event had shifted to incorporate new dangers, such as the heightened presence of drug-related violence in the border zone. On one occasion, the costumed Border Patrol agents invited me to join their ranks by speaking on a megaphone to the tourist “migrants” hiding in the bushes. Participants later concluded that my American accent
was realistic, but I “should have made my voice meaner”—I sounded much too nice.

After the first visit to El Alberto, I soon realized that the Caminata Nocturna had to do with much more than the act of crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. The simulation also posed larger questions about work, consumption, and desire, about what it means to live well with others, and about what counts as a good and satisfying life. I expanded my research in order to better understand the origins of migration in El Alberto, as well as the evolving vision of the Mexican Dream that underlies the simulation. As the local people began to tell me about the period of religious conversion that had so deeply affected the collective life of their community, I also broadened my focus to explore that wave of conversion and to examine the role of Pentecostalism within today’s migration practices.

Early on in my research, I considered giving equal weight to Pentecostal and Catholic perspectives on migration, and spending an equal amount of time in both the Bethel and Sinaí churches. However, I found it virtually impossible to divide my time equally among El Alberto’s three churches. I first accompanied the members of my host family to services at Templo Bethel during my stay in El Alberto in the summer of 2007. The conventions of religious participation in the town were such that I then found it difficult to gain an equally welcome footing in the other congregations. The pastor of Sinaí put it quite clearly: while I was free to attend services at his church, I would be best advised to choose one congregation and stay there.

When residents of El Alberto asked about my own religious background, I explained that I was raised in a liberal Protestant tradition that shares some common ground with but also differs considerably from Pentecostalism. I also explained that I have strong ecumenical convictions and thus do not look upon Catholic practices as mistaken or idolatrous. In practice, however, my identity as a non-Catholic from the United States, coupled with the popular tendency to use the terms cristiano and evangélico interchangeably, often resulted in my being categorized as evangelical. I found that although this classification closed some doors to me, it also opened others. On the one hand, Catholic perspectives are underrepresented at this book, since I was not always able to achieve the same level of rapport among Catholic informants as
was the case among Pentecostals. However, consistent participation at a single congregation allowed me to obtain a greater level of trust among Pentecostal worshippers than would have otherwise been possible. One key evangelical informant who had declined being interviewed by a Catholic researcher actually introduced himself to me and offered an interview without my asking.

I also had specific scholarly reasons for focusing on Pentecostalism. Not only is Pentecostalism the most widely practiced religion in the town, but its entry into the region helped lay the groundwork for U.S. migration. Highlighting the stories of Pentecostal migrants allows me to challenge popular North American assumptions that Mexico is a monolithically Catholic nation. It also allows me to bring a new layer of complexity to the immigration debate by presenting readers with the reality of undocumented evangelicals who embrace the proverbial “Protestant origins” of the very country that denies them access. Finally, whereas the presence of evangelical Protestantism in Latin America is often associated with apolitical, otherworldly orientations, the case of El Alberto challenges us to understand evangelicals as multidimensional religious actors who engage in civic and religious life in complex and overlapping ways. Focusing on Templo Bethel rather than on both Pentecostal churches has allowed me to obtain valuable insight on transnational processes, as the church has strong denominational ties to congregations in the United States. The pastor himself is a transnational figure who regularly travels across the border, connecting geographically dispersed worshippers through his greetings, sermons, and prayers.

Throughout the course of my research I attended approximately thirty worship events at Templo Bethel, including regular evening services, special services held at congregation members’ homes, group fasts, and two large retreats attended by U.S. missionaries. I also had the opportunity to attend the Bethel’s annual festival, which is held in late December and attracts hundreds of people from Mexico and the United States. In addition, I attended several worship services and a youth Bible class at Templo Sinaí, along with Sinaí’s annual fiesta. I found it interesting that members of all three churches—Catholics and Protestants alike—attend these anniversary celebrations. Despite denominational differences, the fiestas provide opportunities for relatives and neighbors to convivir, or to spend close time together. I attended two
masses and one evening prayer session at the Catholic church, as well as a meeting of the Catholic youth group. The academic calendar prevented me from attending the Catholic patron saint festival, the fiesta of San Alberto, which is held annually in November. However, I was able to attend a similar festival in the neighboring community of El Dadho, and observed planning sessions for the anniversary of the Caminata Nocturna, a large-scale celebration attracting thousands of attendants and national media presence.

During my first trip to El Alberto, I sought interviews primarily among tourists who had participated in the Caminata, former U.S. migrants in El Alberto who were serving as actors in the simulation, and town leaders who had been instrumental in bringing about the project. As I broadened my focus, I sought interviews with a diverse range of individuals who could comment on their use of religion in the migration process. I also sought key informants who, due their status in the community or to their close association with leading figures in the past, could offer insight on the process of social and religious change that occurred as evangelical Christianity first made an entrance in the community. Altogether, I conducted thirty-seven semi-structured interviews with residents of El Alberto. The majority of the interviews were recorded. I also interviewed two priests based in Ixmiquilpan, a Catholic religious worker who had been active in El Alberto in the past, and a Pentecostal pastor from the United States who was visiting El Alberto as part of a mission trip in 2009. Finally, I conducted recorded, semi-structured interviews with approximately thirty tourists. With several exceptions, most of the names used within the text are pseudonyms. A few people requested that I use their actual names; I thus have provided notes within the text to indicate which names remain unchanged.

While the majority of this book focuses on observations gathered within El Alberto, my time in Phoenix has opened my eyes to the crucial role of religion in people’s lives across the border. This time has also challenged and humbled me in my role as a researcher and friend. When I arrived in Phoenix in July of 2010, the political climate in the state was as intense as the triple-digit heat. Earlier that spring, Governor Jan Brewer had signed into law S.B. 1070, which greatly expanded the role of local law enforcement agents in matters of immigration. The most controversial portion of the bill required local police to inquire
about the immigration status of those whom they suspected of being
in the country without documents. By the time the law took effect, the
damage had been done: undocumented immigrants had received a clear
message that they were not wanted. Meanwhile, heightened collabora-
tion between state and federal officials resulted in increased detentions
and deportations. As the pastor of Bethel’s affiliated church in Phoe-
nix preached of an imminent end of days when the righteous would be
taken and the unrepentant left to perish, his words mirrored an earthly
reality that was nearly as apocalyptic. One day, a fellow worshipper
would be at one’s side in a service. The next day, he or she might be in
the county jail, in a detention facility, or across the border in Nogales.
Family separation was painfully frequent.

While religious and civic activities seem to exert equal influence
upon people’s lives within El Alberto, in the United States the church
becomes central, for churches offer an alternate arena in which people
are able to recreate the close-knit sense of community they have left
behind. Especially for those who are undocumented, the church offers
a space of belonging amidst an external social and political climate that
is often quite hostile. Doing “fieldwork” within my own city of resi-
dence has also led to new challenges and revealed new insights about
the ethnographic process. When I travel from Phoenix to El Alberto, I
no longer travel as a lone researcher. Rather, I travel laden with letters
and packages, sometimes carrying the clothing and belongings of recent
deportees. Then, when I return to Phoenix, I carry gifts, food, and greet-
ings from those in Mexico to their relatives in the United States. Liv-
ing in Phoenix has also caused me to stop using the term “the field” in
my work. Unless we are studying prairie dogs or meadow grasses, there
is no “field” to speak of, only the places that human beings call home.
Since I began living in Phoenix, I have also become aware of racial and
linguistic segregation in the United States as never before. The greater
Phoenix metropolitan area is a strange phenomenon. A desert realm
that attracts retirees and upper middle-class transplants seeking to
escape the snow and cold, it has neighborhood names like “Sun City,”
“Paradise Valley,” and “Carefree,” and yet the bulk of the construction,
gardening, and housecleaning work in these neighborhoods is done by
immigrants, including those from El Alberto.
After my first year in Phoenix, I found that I could not sustain the same level of participation observation with Bethel’s affiliated Pentecostal church as I had with the church in El Alberto. The pressures of attendance in Phoenix were so strong that it was nearly impossible to maintain the perspective of a detached observer on a long-term basis. Nevertheless, I have now had the opportunity to experience first-hand the strength with which residents of El Alberto maintain ties and social solidarities across religious divides. Research relationships are a two-way street, and during the past few years people from El Alberto living in Phoenix have accompanied me through challenges of my own. In November of 2011, as I was preparing this book for publication, my father suffered a severe rock climbing accident outside of Monterrey, Mexico. He fell twenty feet after accidentally rappelling off the end of his rope, and suffered temporary but distressing frontal lobe damage. As I boarded the flight from Phoenix to Monterrey, I sent a text message to a friend at the Pentecostal church in Phoenix. Despite my agnostic qualms, I knew that he and the other hermanos at Bethel would pray for my father, and I was grateful.

When I arrived at the understaffed hospital in Monterrey, I found my father disoriented and broken. As my family and I accompanied him through the acute stages of injury and recovery, we saw how he struggled for sanity on the brink of chaos, struggled for a sense of self and wholeness in the face of a close scrape with death. My father’s accident was preventable—the result of a miscalculation during the practice of a high-risk sport. And yet many people face the boundary between life and death as rote necessity, as they cross the U.S.-Mexico border in search of work. Some state that at times there is a thrill to the journey. It is fraught with adrenaline, a high-risk game—a dimension that the Caminata Nocturna seizes upon and transforms. After sitting with my father as his mind struggled to piece itself together anew, I gained greater insight onto the experiences of those who have come face to face with death after finding themselves with little choice but to participate in border passage. And I am more vividly aware of the ways government policies help create and sustain unnecessary suffering. More than a political line, the southern boundary of the United States is a barrier that thousands of people each year call upon the power of God.
to transcend even as it pushes them to the brink of death and, sometimes, beyond.

Overview of the Book

The book is divided into three parts. The first takes a step into El Alber
to’s past to chart the intertwining processes of social, religious, and material change that laid the groundwork for current migration patterns; the second explores the relationship between Pentecostalism and U.S. migration today; and the final part examines the Caminata Nocturna project and the Mexican Dream that drives it. Several themes are interlaced throughout all parts of the book. One centers on the enduring influence of indigenous religiosity within Pentecostalism. I find that Pentecostalism in many ways entails a continuation of rather than a radical break with indigenous cosmologies. Pentecostalism’s non-dualistic approach to the body resonates with traditional hñähñu conceptions of illness and healing, just as indigenous notions of personhood and agency continue to play out within Pentecostal spiritual warfare. A second, overlapping theme concerns the connections among embodiment, performance, and lived religion. I examine how Pentecostal practices are intertwined with the physical dimensions of the migration experience, and I explore how the Caminata Nocturna, in turn, recreates the embodied experiences that migrants encounter within the border space.

While the book as a whole follows these related threads, chapter 1 sets the stage by outlining the arrival of Pentecostalism to El Alberto. There, I argue that early conversion, which began in the 1960s, coincided with a process of socioeconomic development that drastically altered the material circumstances of people’s day-to-day lives. As material changes fueled religious transformation, Pentecostalism in turn introduced a narrative of progress that instilled the socioeconomic development process with a sense of higher purpose. The changing conceptions of work, self, and community that emerged continue to inform today’s migration dynamics. In contrast to this chapter’s focus on development and religious change as seen through Pentecostal eyes, chapter 2 looks at Catholic perspectives. Unlike evangelicals, Catholics do not
attribute their town’s material progress to spiritual causes. For Catholics, the period of intensive evangelical conversion in El Alberto was a time of trial, as the loss of congregation members threatened to dissolve the fabric of the traditional *fiesta* system. Yet the solidarity-building function of the traditional festivals was not lost. Rather, that function was transferred to the secular realm, as the town’s system of collective labor came to provide an infrastructure for community projects like the Caminata Nocturna. Today, Catholics and Pentecostals alike agree that despite their religious differences, El Alberto is “*un pueblo unido,*” a united town.

Despite evangelical claims, the wave of religious and socioeconomic change that swept El Alberto in the 1960s and 1970s was not enough to lift people out of poverty. Thus, chapter 3 outlines the ensuing rise of migration to the United States. Beginning with internal migration in the 1960s and continuing with U.S. migration in the late 1980s, residents of El Alberto left home in growing numbers in search of work. Chapter 3 tells the stories of women who left home as children to work as domestic servants within Mexico, and men who left home as teenagers to work in Mexico City, Texas, and beyond. At first, religion receded into the background of these early migration narratives. It would not be long, however, before the hardships of migration would inspire religious responses of their own.

While the first part of the book provides a historical context for today’s migration, the following part examines the relationship between migration and Pentecostalism in the present day. In chapter 4, I focus on the religious practices of those who remain in El Alberto—the relatives of emigrants who endure uncertainty as they wait for news of loved ones en route and deal with income fluctuations by supplementing migrant remittances with piecemeal work. Drawing upon aspects of prosperity theology, Pentecostals seamlessly combine daily efforts to make ends meet with fasts and prayers aimed at supporting the physical, spiritual, and financial wellbeing of relatives in the United States. After this discussion of “health-and-wealth” doctrine within U.S. migration, chapter 5 examines another dimension of Pentecostalism: spiritual warfare. Pentecostals describe Satan as a divisive force who mobilizes multiple demonic agents to attack individuals and destroy family unity.
Using spiritual warfare, Pentecostals seek to control the dangerous effects of mobility and globalization upon the bodies of the faithful and, especially, the youth. As they do so, they draw upon understandings of spiritual agency that resonate with traditional hñähñu religion.

While chapters 4 and 5 examine the broader migration context, chapter 6 centers upon Pentecostal interpretations of the undocumented journey itself. There, I argue that changes in U.S. border enforcement over the last few decades have led to an increasingly dangerous border situation that is sparking new theological reflection and even, in some cases, religious conversion. The chapter examines practices through which Pentecostals prepare migrants for departure, as well as evangelical reflections on how the act of migration has impacted their faith. The chapter closes with an analysis of the narratives and practices surrounding one man’s near-death accident at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Even as Pentecostalism has become deeply intertwined with all facets of the migration journey, the rise in border danger over the last decade has also prompted residents of El Alberto to seek solutions outside of the religious sphere. In the final section of the book, I turn the reader’s gaze to the Caminata Nocturna and the underlying Mexican Dream it seeks to promote. Chapter 7 provides an in-depth description of the border simulation along with the vision and planning process behind it. I argue that the project does not simply protest the trend of U.S. border militarization that has rendered undocumented passage increasingly difficult. Rather, the simulation also unlocks the creative potential of the undocumented journey and channels it toward new ends. Coyotes become tricksters, Border Patrol actors become catalysts of suspense, and death becomes a symbol of sacrifice as the Caminata calls not only for an end to migrant deaths at the U.S.-Mexico border, but also for a transformation in the international migration system as a whole. Then, chapter 8 looks behind the scenes of the Caminata Nocturna to examine the collective vision that drives it, showing how residents of El Alberto are finding within their ethnic heritage a tradition of endurance and collective survival that bridges religious divides and offers an antidote to the individualism and materialism of American life. Through the Caminata Nocturna, residents of El Alberto call upon one another to set their sights on their Mexican Dream of a future free of dependence on international migration. They critique the cycle of
migration and consumption that is damaging their bodies and eroding their collective wellbeing, and they call for new solutions.

Week after week, year after year, residents of El Alberto carry out the Caminata Nocturna project in an effort to slow the tide of emigration from their town. Yet they recognize that the Mexican Dream is far on the horizon. In the meantime, the Pentecostal churches continue to brim with cries of the faithful as they accept the redeeming power of the Holy Spirit in anticipation of the fast-approaching end of days. The conclusion analyzes the relationship between the Caminata Nocturna and the religious beliefs of the many evangelicals who are striving to help make it a reality. I argue that, on the one hand, there are contradictions between Pentecostal doctrine and the vision of social change embodied in the Caminata Nocturna. While the Mexican Dream calls for collective, this-worldly action, Pentecostals highlight the importance of individual salvation above all earthly pursuits. Nevertheless, for some of the key architects of the Caminata Nocturna, it is the very promise of individual salvation that inspires them to give their time and efforts so that the generations who follow might have a better life. I argue that Pentecostalism and the Mexican Dream represent two interrelated calls for action in the face of migration’s many challenges, and I offer some concluding observations on how the case of El Alberto can challenge us to rethink the metaphors we employ while examining the role of religion in the migration process.

Further Thoughts

After moving to Phoenix, I became friends with a woman from El Alberto whose parents had brought her to the United States as a teen. She and her husband, who is also from Mexico, once remarked on how surprised they had been when they met me. The husband explained that he had never imagined that he would one day meet a white, English-speaking American who could speak Spanish fluently and who would relate to him as an equal. I find it deeply troubling that the immigration climate in the United States is such that an undocumented person is surprised to receive from a U.S. citizen the same level of respect that all people deserve, and I write in the hope that one day no person in the United States should feel compelled to thank another person for basic human treatment.
As anthropologist Jonathan Xavier Inda tells us, current U.S. border policy is predicated on the assumption that some human lives are more worthy of protection than others.\textsuperscript{60} This is the logic of biopower at work: in the name of preserving American life, the lives of outsiders are diminished, dismissed, and denied. For many U.S. citizens, mention of “illegal immigration” brings to mind images of drug cartels, human smugglers, and foreigners whose sheer numbers threaten to destroy the “American way of life.” Seen in this light, immigrant deaths at the southern boundary of the United States are merely an unfortunate consequence of the necessary task of ensuring the safety and wellbeing of the nation. For undocumented migrants and their loved ones, meanwhile, the border has far different connotations. While this book is a scholarly investigation of the role of religion and collective action in the migration process, at its core it is an expression of something much more basic. Woven throughout these pages is the simple assertion that life, all life, is precious. Within El Alberto, the act of religious conversion, the rise of U.S. migration, and the development of the Caminata Nocturna all embody a fierce assertion of worth in the face of the pervasive societal message that the lives of migrants and indigenous people do not matter. Religious conversion and collective organizing alike represent efforts by members of this town to survive and flourish amidst the myriad forces that would restrict their mobility and devalue their existence.