

Problems and Opportunities: A Mixtec Women's Embroidery Group

In May of 2006, three women, Carolina Velez, then of Refugee and Immigration Services in Richmond, Virginia, Dulce Lawrence, Service Coordinator of the Latin American and Iberian Studies Department of the University of Richmond, and Jennifer Landis-Santos of the Chaplaincy at the University of Richmond, teamed up to start an embroidery group comprised of Mixtecan women living in the Dutch Village Apartment Complex in south Richmond.¹ These three non-Mixtecan women envisioned the group as a means for the Mixtecan women to preserve their indigenous Mexican culture while at the same time becoming more economically and socially independent of their husbands and acculturating to the Richmond area. Originally consisting of seven women, the group met successfully for four months. However, as the leadership of the group underwent several changes, the group stopped meeting on a regular basis and many of the women dropped out. As of my latest research, the group had not met for two months.

The goal of this project has been to use participant-observation field methods and interviews to investigate how effectively this women's embroidery group addresses the obstacles the Mixtecan women encounter in their acculturation process.² The analysis led me to find that the cultural diversity of this women's embroidery group in Richmond has contributed to its successes

¹ Please see Appendix A for background information on the Mixtec population.

² For the Mixtec women, all of whom are in the US without the proper legal documentation, I assigned a false name so as to protect their identities. All of the names contained in this paper are the false names that I assigned, and nowhere in my records do the Mixtec women's true names appear.

and failures. For the purposes of this study, cultural diversity is defined as the inclusion of the following distinctly different cultures represented by participating women: Mixtecan culture represented by the Mixtecan women, Columbian and Richmond Latino culture represented by Carolina, Cuban and Cuban-American culture represented by Dulce, mainstream US culture mixed with Puerto Rican culture represented by Jennifer, and mainstream US culture represented by the students. While the group's diversity is currently problematic, having such diversity allows for the incorporation of a wide variety of ideas and experiences that, when combined to create new and unique ideas to confront problems faced by the group, should give it a beneficial edge. The group's diversity can be used to benefit all of its members through several revisions in the group's procedures. While these changes will not be easy, the survival of this group is important because it holds the potential to address, define, and ease the Mixtec women's acculturation process, preserve their cultural heritage, and address the larger theme of indigenous Latin American groups migrating to the United States.

While I have conducted this study through the department of American Studies, I recognize that its conception and subject matter lie on the boundaries of the American Studies field. I have envisioned this project as a subset of Latino Studies within American Studies. For many years, Latino Studies has been its own separate department in many universities. However, many scholars view Latino Studies as the study of a culture specific to the United States and, for that reason, consider Latino Studies to be part of American Studies. While indigenous Mesoamerican Studies have traditionally been relegated to anthropology

departments, this study of a Mesoamerican indigenous people should in fact be classified under Latino Studies within the larger context of American Studies because, unlike most previous studies, these Mesoamerican indigenous people are here in the United States, working and living in the Latino spaces of Richmond, Virginia. I therefore contend that no study belongs more in American Studies than one such as this: one that investigates the complex interactions between different types of Latino immigrants, indigenous cultures, and American citizens that happen in our own cities and affect our own culture and living spaces everyday.

Many scholars have debated the correct placement of such transnational studies in the field of American Studies. In 2004, Shelly Fisher Fishkin, president of the American Studies Association, argued for the central placement of transnational studies in the American Studies field in her address to the association.³ However, in her response to the president's address, Mae M. Ngai suggested that "while [transnational studies] may figure centrally in, say, studies of migration, ethnicity, and empire, it need not be at *the* center of American Studies, where it runs the risk of overgeneralization or marginalizing other subjects."⁴ While Ngai makes a legitimate point in that other subjects should not be sacrificed for a new and concentrated look at transnational studies, I would argue that any study within American Studies is almost inherently transnational.

³ Fisher Fishkin, Shelly. Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies - Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004." *American Quarterly*. 57 (March 2005): 17-57 [Online]; Available from *Project Muse* {Online} accessed 1 April 2007.

⁴ Ngai, Mae M. "Transnationalism and the Transformation of the "Other": Response to the Presidential Address." *American Quarterly*. 57 (March 2005): 64 [Online]; Available from *Project Muse* {Online} accessed 1 April 2007.

Whether it be a historical study of colonial tobacco trade or a study of affordable housing in downtown Detroit, the very creation of the United States and the nation's current role in an increasingly globalized world demands that American Studies be in some way a transnational field. This is not to say that every study should focus on transnational issues, but rather that transnational issues should be a uniting component in many American Studies works. Furthermore, American Studies is, for many American Studies scholars, a study of the self, of one's own territory; examining America transnationally can provide us new ways of looking at the US and thinking about our identities, places, and positions. Transnational studies, then, should most certainly be a central and uniting theme of a field that is so diverse in ideas, subject matter, and methodologies. I hope that this study both expands the field to include a new transnational phenomenon happening in the US –that of indigenous Mesoamericans immigrating to various US localities - and highlights transnational studies as an important theme in American Studies.

While I situate this study in the field of American Studies, the design of the project has been anthropological in nature. Even within anthropology, this project is part of a recent movement in scholarship. Only in the late 1980s and 1990s did anthropologists seriously begin studying issues in their own country, in their own cities, and in their own neighborhoods.⁵ Along these lines, this study is in my own city, and it addresses issues that affect the people I have worked for and with. Similarly, this study also engages in diasporic studies, a field that also expanded

⁵ As noted with the publication of books such as Philippe Bourgois' *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* in 1996 and Anthony Jackson's *Anthropology at Home* in 1987.

in the 1990s.⁶ However, this study is new in that it investigates an indigenous Mesoamerican diasporic community in the United States. Thus far in anthropological and American Studies scholarship, scholars have not done many studies on indigenous diasporic communities from Central America in the United States and most certainly have not conducted any in Richmond, Virginia. Furthermore, most diasporic studies have taken place in large cities such as New York and Los Angeles and have focused on topics ranging from non-indigenous Latino communities to Asian communities;⁷ this study, however, focuses on the relatively small Southern city of Richmond, Virginia. Furthermore, most diasporic studies have focused on established and long-term diasporic communities. The community in this study, however, is in its formative stages. Building on other diasporic studies, this work uses the women's group as a lens to investigate the acculturation process of the Mixtec women.

This study also uses self-conscious participant-observation field methods, a movement which came about in the 1990s.⁸ For myself, this self-reflexivity has been very important as a researcher in a position of power over the Mixtec women that is connected to my race, my education level, my socio-economic status, and my citizenship status. In striving to be self-reflexive, I have tried to present my work so that the inequalities inherent in my research are equalized. However, the amount of time that I spent researching and the amount of

⁶ With studies such as Phillippe Bourgois' *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in the Barrio* or Yasuko Minoura's "A Sensitive Period for the Incorporation of a Cultural Meaning System: A Study of Japanese Children Growing up in the United States," published in September 1992, Volume 20, No.3 edition of *Ethos*.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ As described by Phillippe Bourgois in *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*.

interviews that I conducted are not adequate enough to correct such disparities. Additionally, as anthropologist Luke Lassiter notes, despite the movement to “write texts that are responsive and relevant to the public with whom we work,” our works are still consistently written to and for our academic colleagues, not to our informants.⁹ Often times, scholars end up addressing issues that are not important to our informants. This study, unfortunately, does indeed address my academic peers and fails to speak directly to the Mixtecan women with whom I interacted.

Many anthropologists might claim that in this study I have engaged in feminist anthropology because I, a woman, have investigated a women’s group and participated in activities off-limits to men. While this is true, I admit to being mostly unaware of such actions and implications while I was doing them. In no way did I intend to investigate a women’s group because of a lack of representation in the field. Instead, I chose this topic because how the acculturation process changes through groups like this interests me. Now that I realize the implications of my actions, I am glad that I chose a women’s group. Working in a women’s group within an indigenous Latin American community is particularly important because women’s worlds and activities are typically ignored or underappreciated in such cultures.

I originally intended to study the effects of the group on the participants, evaluate how the group could function better, and study the placement of the women’s material products in the Richmond art scene. However, as many

⁹ Lassiter, Luke Eric, *The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 6.

projects do, this one has evolved to ask the following questions: does the community it seeks to help support this group? Can this community come to feel a sense of ownership over a group that it did not create? How do the different immigrant statuses and classes of the women who work with or are a part of this group affect its operation? What are the factors that affect the success of this group? How does the structure of the group affect its operation? What is the interplay between the outsiders' cultures and the insiders' culture? How can this group function better? Such are the questions that I set out to address when I began attending the women's group meetings in August 2006.

When I first began my research, my original idea was to engage in a cross between activist and participant-observationist anthropology.¹⁰ I hoped to take an active role in the group yet keep that role behind-the-scenes in order to help the women take ownership over the group. The last thing I wanted was for the women to think that I was coming in and taking over, particularly because the group had little experience or contact with white women before I began my research. I aimed to act subservient to the women, working as more of a helper to the group than anything else. I thus set forth to positively impact the group from the sidelines while conducting my research.

However, my role in the group was automatically complicated. The three founders of the group, Carolina Velez, Jennifer Landis-Santos, and Dulce

¹⁰ At this time, I had no conceivable notion of the conflicts involved in anthropological fieldwork. Only after going into the field did I begin to realize the complexities of my actions. While I wanted this work to be as collaborative as possible, the very conception of the project was not in any way collaborative: the community did not mandate or request this project. Instead, I, an outsider, envisioned and created the project without the consultation of any insider. Ironically, the conception of my project and the conception of the group itself are similar on these points.

Lawrence, were open to UR students participating in the group, but they always pushed us toward taking leadership roles. Sarah Frazer, a senior who has experience working with similar women's groups in Central America, took on a self-directed role and found markets and places for the women to sell their products. Rachel McFarland, a second year Spanish major who was participating in order to fulfill a requirement for Dulce's "Spanish in the Community" class, chose not to take on a leadership role and made her major contribution by taking care of the children during the group meetings.

I tried to define my role as that of a researcher, but the outside leaders, particularly Dulce and Carolina, often asked me to do things that would actively alter the course of the group and would thereby withdraw my methods from the participant-observation methodology. Although I consistently tried to avoid such responsibilities, I did perform behind-the-scenes work, such as finding speakers to come to the group on a weekly basis to talk about services their non-profit agency provides or to present information about US laws or US culture and customs. I also engaged in administrative work such as recording which woman got what amount and type of material for embroidery. In this capacity, I spoke to the women formally, with respect, and tried to impart such respect with my physical actions by helping them set up for the meetings or offering my chair to a woman who had just arrived. Nevertheless, no matter how much I tried to put the women in charge of the group or its proceedings, issues like the women needing help or writing forms in English typically complicated the situation by placing me

back in power and highlighting my presence in the group, thus undermining my participant-observation methodology.

As my time with the group progressed, my role became more and more of a blur. If Carolina or Dulce were not going to be present, the students, particularly Sarah and I, were “in charge.” As time passed, I began to get frustrated with the outside organizers of the group. In response, I tried to make my role more of a participant-observer-only role. However, when I began trying to formally define my role and minimize it to participant-observation, the group stopped meeting. Since that time, I have been observing as much as I can: I have watched various efforts to organize and reenergize the group, and I have observed how the group has continued to falter.

While I hope that my presence has been positive in both the day-to-day operation of the group and in supporting long-term goals of both the women and the outside leaders, I question whether or not that is true. I would like to think that I added energy and enthusiasm to the group and helped give the women a sense of pride in their work by talking about it with them, taking interest in it, and complimenting their handicraft. However, I am concerned that, particularly because I came into the group with two other students, our presence was more intimidating than anything else. I also am troubled by the thought that in trying to create relationships with the women, they took me as nosy or forceful instead of curious about their traditions and culture. I also worry that the women simply tried to tell me what they thought I wanted to hear, not what they had to say.

The cultural differences between the women and I made conducting the interviews difficult in many ways. When I conducted the interviews, many of the women were still shy in my presence despite our having known each other for six months at the time of the interviews. Furthermore, even if the women did feel comfortable around me, many were not used to having people ask their opinions on things and therefore found it difficult to make comments on the subjects at hand. The language barrier was particularly difficult in the interviews. If the woman that I was interviewing became nervous, her Spanish got worse, and she found herself without the ability to effectively communicate.¹¹ Furthermore, if I was nervous or was lacking a particular word in Spanish, my ability to communicate depreciated. While the linguistic and cultural differences between the participants of the group and I made the interviews with them somewhat challenging to conduct, I did not have such problems in conducting interviews with the outsiders of the group.

The interviews with the Mixtec women were all conducted in their homes because that was where the group met. I extensively interviewed the three women who remained at the core of the group by the end of December 2006: Nadia, Sandra, and Tina. Madi and Nicole, two other fairly significant members of the group, both moved out of the Dutch Village apartment complex without leaving any forwarding information. I tried a variety of methods to find the two women, but all failed. Not being able to interview these women because they moved demonstrates a key issue in this group: these women are illegal

¹¹ While it could be that in such a situation the woman I was interviewing was trying to create distance from me, I believe that she would have created such distance through incoherent or nonsensical answers, not through faking her ability or lack thereof to speak Spanish.

immigrants and, because of the lack of permanency that comes with being illegal, can therefore move or become unreachable at any moment. For the interviews that I did conduct, at least some of the women's children were present, but there were no other adults. The mood of each interview reflected the personality of each woman: if the woman was shy, the interview was somewhat awkward and tense. If the woman was confident, the interview was more of her telling me what she thought about the group than me asking questions.

Asking questions in the interviews was, at times, difficult. The women often responded as if I had asked a different question.¹² I accept this problem as reflecting my lack of ability to fully understand and communicate with the women. For this reason, I typically tried not to say much and to let the women tell me what they thought was important. While this is a good approach, it did not completely solve the issue because the women often times looked as if they were trying to guess what I wanted to know. The hours that I spent interviewing each woman were perhaps the most meaningful time in my relationships with them; these hours allowed them to express concerns and share things with me not possible in a group setting.

Despite my own stereotypical assumptions that the women would fear technology and especially fear the use of technology in recording or reporting their illegal statuses, the presence of my digital voice recorder seemed to have little to no effect on the women. All of the women willingly agreed to let me record the interviews. Only one woman expressed concern about me using her real

¹² Please see Appendix C for a list of questions that I asked each Mixtecan woman in the interviews followed by my rationale.

name and the resulting implications on her legal status. After I explained to her that I was using false names for all of the women in the group so as to protect their identities, she gladly agreed to continue with the interview. In all of the interviews, it seemed that the women forgot about the presence of the digital voice recorder.

I conducted all of the interviews with the organizers of the group and the students either in their offices or in public places, such as cafes or restaurants. Surprisingly, these interviews felt more formal than those with the women, although it was much easier to communicate with the interviewees because they all spoke English and we were of more similar social and economic backgrounds than the Mixtec women and I were.

My methodology, while guided and shaped by other studies and methodologies, has been mostly of my own invention. I do not believe it to be fully immersed in participant-observationist methods, but it is also not fully immersed in activist anthropology. Furthermore, my inability to spend the majority of my time with the women has diminished my capability to fully represent the group, its proceedings, and its participants with complete accuracy. However, the time that I did spend with the women and the group was meaningful time dedicated to an organization that should and needs to continue for the benefit of all those involved.

The Group

Carolina Velez says that she has had the idea of the Mixtecan women's embroidery group since she began working in the Mixtecan community, about three to five years ago. However, it was not until March of 2006 when Jennifer Landis-Santos, a personal friend of Carolina's as well as an employee of the Chaplaincy at the University of Richmond, learned of a grant opportunity through the Office of International Education at the University that had the potential to support the formation of the women's group. These two women then teamed up with Dulce Lawrence, who, as the outreach coordinator and a professor in the University's Spanish department, had the potential to involve students in the project through several classes in which community work is required of the students, to write the grant proposal. In May of 2006, the Office of International Education awarded a grant to these women in the amount of \$2,500. The conditions of the grant were that the women's group contribute to campus internationalization, which the group did through involving students in their weekly meetings and visiting campus. Carolina, Jennifer, and Dulce allocated the funds to buy the embroidery supplies since most of the Mixtecan women did not have the extra income to pay for such materials. The outside leaders decided that the funds could also be used to bring speakers to present to the group. Carolina and Nadia, a Mixtecan woman from the Dutch Village Apartment Complex with whom Carolina had a close relationship and who was interested in forming the group, went door to door in the apartment complex asking other Mixtec women if they would like to join the group. From there, the outside leaders

had a base of ten women to participate in the group. Three women decided not to join, and the group began weekly meetings in June with seven women.

The initial purpose of the group depends on who one asks. Carolina envisioned the group with two goals, the first of which was to “help [the women] through the acculturation process through things they were doing in their home country, and that was the embroidery.”¹³ Her second goal was to turn the women into leaders in the Mixtecan community by making them more independent. She wanted them to be proud of their culture and know how to navigate life in the US, thereby setting examples for the rest of the Mixtecan community. Dulce had been working with the Mixtec population through other community programs in which she was involved and had gotten to know some of the women before the group formed. As her reasons for starting this group, she cited a desire to increase the women’s self-confidence and independence and to reciprocate or provide the type of help she received when first coming to this country from Cuba.¹⁴ Jennifer Landis-Santos’ initial involvement in the group came out of her friendship with Carolina. Jennifer learned of the grant opportunity at the University of Richmond and thought of Carolina and the group of which she hoped to create. As her motives for creating the group, Jennifer identified an intent to make the women more independent both emotionally and economically from their husbands and the goal of establishing a sense of the women’s cultural importance and significance.

¹³ Carolina Velez, interview by author, digital recording, Richmond, VA, 19 February 2007.

¹⁴ Dulce Lawrence, interview by author, digital recording, Richmond, VA, 20 February 2007.

The Mixtec women cited a different reason for joining the group: making money. While Nadia acknowledged that one goal of the group was to help the women achieve greater independence, the main reason that she gave for joining the group was to make money off of the embroidery.¹⁵ Sandra said that the goal of the group was to “organizar el grupo y hacer las cosas y vender.” [organize the women and make the embroidery and sell it]¹⁶ Tina said that she did not know the goal of the group.¹⁷ However, she said that she participated in order to make money from selling the embroidery. Thus, the insiders’ primary goal in the group is significantly different from the goals set forth by the outside organizers of the group.

The University of Richmond students who participated in the group all had varying ideas of the goals of the group as well. I originally thought that the goal of the group was to help the women acculturate to the US and to aid them in becoming more independent and confident through preserving and valuing their cultural traditions. Sarah Frazer said that she thought the goal of the group was “to help them start up a cooperative business so that they could be embroidering on a regular business and selling on a regular business whether that be to regular customers like friends and family or at markets.”¹⁸ In participating in the group, Sarah hoped to help the women in their decision-making and market-building processes. Rachel McFarland said that the goals of the group were “to show the women that they can bring in money and [show them] who they are and

¹⁵ Nadia, interview by author, digital recording, Richmond, VA, 16 February 2007.

¹⁶ Sandra, interview by author, digital recording, Richmond, VA, 19 February 2007.

¹⁷ Tina, interview by author, digital recording, Richmond, VA, 19 February 2007.

¹⁸ Sarah Frazer, interview by author, digital recording, Richmond, VA, 8 February 2007.

to have some confidence and realize that they're not just there to take care of the kids and entirely dependent on their husbands and that they can do something too."¹⁹ Rachel said that in the beginning, because she was required to participate as part of Dulce's class "Spanish in the Community," she did not really have a goal but that she was there to "just do what I could to help and improve my own Spanish."²⁰

Whether or not there was a plan for the group when it started is also debatable. Carolina cited a contract that she made in the beginning with guidelines and rules. However, I have not seen the contract, and, while the women tell me that they remember something about it, no one remembers details or has a copy. Dulce did not acknowledge the existence of a written plan, but she cited the need for one now. Jennifer said that the outside leaders of the group set rules in one of the first meetings with the women but that no one followed them. Either way, if rules were set in the beginning, neither the outside leaders nor the Mixtec women remember exactly what they were and therefore do not follow them.²¹

In mid-September, shortly after I began my research with the group, Hispanic Heritage month began and many festivals, markets, fairs, and other opportunities for the women to sell their work arose. However, each event created rifts between the insiders (the Mixtec women) and the outsiders (any non-Mixtec women involved) of the group. At first, when the outsiders asked if the women wanted to go to an event, the women always said yes. However,

¹⁹ Rachel McFarland, interview by author, digital recording, Richmond, VA, 9 February 2007.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Based on my experience in the group and conversations with the group members.

when the day of the event came, many of the women backed out and found a variety of excuses not to go. Representation at the events was then limited to either one or two women or, as in the case of the Elegba Art Society, a mere display of the women's work. The last-minute cancellation by the members frustrated the outsiders of the group because they had gone to such trouble to find and schedule these events. The experiences were also frustrating because, even when women did go, they did not sell anything.

In mid-October, Carolina left the group to start a new job with a different organization that did not allow her to continue working with the group. Many of the women saw Carolina as the founder and leader of the group, and when she left, many of the women stopped coming. The group shrank from about seven women to a core group of three. Nadia explained that when Carolina left “de alli se cambio todo. Ya estoy solo. Todos se fueron.”²² [from there everything changed. I am all alone now. Everyone else left]. Dulce was the outsider in charge after Carolina left. Nadia also began to take on more of a leadership role. Many of the women saw the leadership of the group as being split between Nadia and Dulce, although each of these women said in their interviews that the group is now hers and hers alone.²³ Both Dulce and Nadia recognized that the other woman had a leadership role in the group, but each expressed her own role as the most important. Both women also spoke of each other as if threatened by her presence and role in the group. Because of the lack of clarity about who was in charge, the day-to-day operation of the group became more

²² Nadia, interview by author.

²³ Dulce Lawrence, Nadia, Sandra, and Tina, interviews by author.

confusing. It was not clear if Dulce was to call a meeting or if Nadia was the one to call a meeting. In many cases, the result was no meeting. Since Carolina's departure, the group has not returned to regularly scheduled meetings with more than three women present at a time.

In early January, rumors began circulating that Nadia was to return to Mexico. Because Nadia had taken on such a leadership role in the group, many women, including the outsiders, assumed that the group would dissolve. Jennifer began planning a goodbye/end-of-the-group party. For almost a month, no one knew when Nadia was to leave. Most of the women involved in the group, both insiders and outsiders, thought that Nadia's departure was eminent, and they assumed the immediate end of the group. However, upon investigation, many group members and outsiders learned that Nadia does not plan to leave until June, when her children get out of school. The goodbye party that Jennifer was planning was postponed until April, and Dulce began trying to organize a meeting of the group to see how it could continue without Nadia. Unfortunately, the organizers and members of the group are not hopeful about the future of the group.²⁴

Analysis of the Group

The effectiveness of the women's group thus far has been difficult to measure. On the one hand, the women have gotten together on a weekly basis, they have embroidered several pieces, some of the women have sold minor items such as hand towels, and their work has been displayed at the Elgba Art

²⁴ Dulce Lawrence, Jennifer Landis-Santos, Nadia, Sandra, and Tina, interviews by author.

Society, at Que Pasa, at AlterNatives, at the City of Richmond's Hispanic Liaison Office, and at the University of Richmond. The women also seemed to exude at least a small amount of pride in their work that they did not have before.

Furthermore, Nadia has, according to all involved in the group, become a leader in the group, gained more self-confidence, and seems to have acculturated some through participating in the group. While these successes can be attributed to varying members of the group without whom they would not have been able to find all of these venues, these successes have not made significant impacts on the women's acculturation.

On the other hand, when I stopped researching, the group had not met for two months. Many of the women were feeling discouraged because they had only sold items at or through the University of Richmond. Several of the group members were still just as shy as when the group started, and they did not seem to demonstrate pride in their work or culture.

While the cultural diversity of the group can be beneficial in many ways, it also prevents the group from functioning well. The multi-cultural composition of the group creates power divisions in which either the outsiders or the insiders hold more power than the other at any given moment, whether or not they know it. The unequal distribution of power arises from the participants' legal status, the gender expectations in the group, the socio-economic statuses of those involved, the leadership of the group, and the language barrier between the insiders and outsiders. Collectively, these factors prevent the group from addressing key issues such as their goals and purpose, the pricing of the women's embroidery

pieces, the group's outings to galleries and markets, and the cultural importance of embroidery for the women. While diversity currently inhibits the group's functioning well, it can also allow members to have greater successes. Having so many different cultures represented will allow the group to effectively confront many of the obstacles that the women will face in their acculturation process. It will also allow the women and the group access to wider audiences and markets, thus increasing the potential economic gain of the group.

The Mixtecan women's illegal status means that the insiders often hold less power than the outsiders. All of the outsiders of the group are legal citizens or residents of the United States. As such, they have access to all accompanying benefits, such as a valid drivers' licence, social services, a voice in the government, and they can go about their daily lives without fear of being evicted from their homes and deported. Furthermore, being in the US legally typically means that one has more and better access to jobs and therefore often has a base level of economic stability and comfort. The Mixtecan women, on the other hand, have no such luxuries. They could technically be deported or move at any moment; their access to jobs and therefore to a stable and basic level of economic comfort is limited; they cannot have valid drivers' licensees; they have no access to social services, and they have no representation and therefore no input into the government. As such, the Mixtecans recognize the potential that legal citizens and residents have to help them with transportation needs, finding jobs, understanding the social services system so that they can get benefits for their American citizen children, and influencing governmental policy and action

on the local, state, and national level. The possible aid that the outsiders could give to the Mixtecos translates into actions that will help them survive, thus putting the outsiders in a position to shape the basic living standards of the Mixtecan women.

The potential economic power that the outsiders bring to the group through their legal status is well demonstrated by the complications in making a formal business out of the women's group. Part of Dulce's original plan for the group was to form a business through which the women could gain and continue their economic independence. However, someone with a legal status needs to apply for the business license. Since none of the insiders are legal citizens, they would need an outsider to be that representative. If one of the outsiders were to be that representative, the position would mandate her paying illegal employees, thus putting her at risk of breaking the law. However, making the group into a business has the potential to bring the women a lot of money. The outsiders are thus placed in a position of power over the insiders because the outside leaders of the group hold that economic potential.

The differing gender expectations of the group are also preventing the group from functioning well. The outsiders of the group are all women acculturated to US culture who believe that the role of a woman is not restricted to the home, raising children, cooking, and housekeeping. The insiders, however, come from a culture in which women marry early, quickly begin having children, and stay home to take care of the children. In Mixtecan culture, women rely on their husbands to make the important decisions, do not make much if any money

on their own, and are, for the most part, completely dependent on their husbands. However, the outside women bring their own gender norms to bear on the group. They expect all of the Mixtecos to adapt to making decisions about the group, going out in public without their husbands, and making some of their own money through the group. The insiders, however, have a difficult time taking on such responsibilities and adapting to these standards. While the outsiders are aware that the insiders come from a conservative culture, there has not been any communication about what the exact expectations are, and the outsiders have not offered any help as to how to aid the women in becoming more comfortable in changing their roles should they want to. The outsiders did not even ask the Mixtec women if they wanted to become more independent. These different gender expectations mean that the outsiders easily become frustrated with the insiders and, when the insiders see this frustration, they often become discouraged, leaving both parties feeling pessimistic about the group.

The different socio-economic statuses of those involved in the group also contribute to the unequal power dynamics in the group. Most of the Mixtec women live below the poverty line and have very limited resources. The outsiders, however, live fairly comfortable lives. The Mixtec women also come from a culture in which those with more money are treated with more respect and have more power than those who do not. Furthermore, the insiders know that the outsiders, because of their socio-economic status, have the potential to bring them periodic gifts of food or perhaps offer them rides to a place they need to go. This potential aid could make a difference in how the insiders live.

The leadership structure of the group is also contributing to the unequal power relationships in the group. Before Carolina left, the outsiders were solely in charge of the group. When they posed questions to the women or asked for their opinions, all of the implications of the differing socio-economic levels and legal statuses between the outsiders and insiders interfered with the decision-making process. When Carolina left and the leadership split between Dulce and Nadia, some of these inequalities began to disappear, but Dulce, particularly because she treats the insiders as needing her help and not capable of making decisions themselves, often did not listen to Nadia's suggestions.²⁵ Furthermore, many of the insiders began to see Nadia as slightly estranged from them and as a woman acculturating to the US while the rest of the women were not, thereby giving her more power and a higher status over the rest of the insiders. The leadership is thus contributing to the unequal power divisions in the group because the outside leaders did not listen or because the insiders were not comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions.

The language barriers in the group are also contributing to the unequal distribution of power. For all of the Mixtecan women, Mixtec is their first language, and, while some of them speak Spanish fluently, many still struggle to do so. Their inability to speak Spanish often limits how much they can understand and communicate to the outsiders of the group, thus marginalizing their voices. Furthermore, none of the outsiders speak Mixtec, but the insiders

²⁵ For example, Dulce often takes the entire responsibility of the group upon herself, saying that she is the one that needs to call meetings because the women cannot do it themselves or that she has to make contacts in the community for the women because they are too shy to call anyone. These observations are based both on my interview with her and on my fieldwork in the group.

often switch their conversations into Mixtec during meetings without translating for the outsiders. The Mixtec women are thus in a position of power because they can discuss and say whatever they want without the outsiders knowing exactly what happened. However, the outsiders of the group find them in a similar situation if they switch into English, but they intentionally do not do that very often. Unlike most of the other issues preventing communication within the group, the language barrier often gives the insiders more power than the outsiders, but it still limits the communication within the group.

A good example of how the language barrier interferes with the communication in the group is a physical fight in which one woman attacked another and several other women got involved in the fight while trying to break it up. The fight occurred between some of the Mixtec women in August during a weekly meeting. The Mixtec women spoke only in Mixtec during the fight, so the outsiders did not understand what was happening. When I asked the insiders about the fight, they said that “uno se llevo mas material que otra y que uno estaba hablando mal de otra persona” (one woman took more material than another and that one was talking bad about another woman), but that previously “Carolina hablo y dijo que no le gusta que uno lleva mas material que otro” (Carolina said that she did not want one woman taking more material than another).²⁶ The Mixtec women were thus trying to follow what they thought were the rules of the group. However, when I asked the outsiders what happened, they said that the women were fighting over something that did not have to do with the group but probably something to do with a man. The outsiders’ stereotypes of the

²⁶ Sandra, interview by author.

Mixtec women thus led them to believe that the Mixtec women could not debate or follow the group rules. Because of their assumptions, the outsiders did not pursue ways to work out the problem during the group meeting because they assumed that the Mixtec women were not capable of fighting over a serious issue including the group. Furthermore, many of the outsiders believe that jealousy problems between the Mixtec women continue today and that many of the women have a difficult time working together. However, when I asked the insiders if they have problems with any of the other women, they said that they do not.²⁷ If the outsiders had communicated with the women and asked exactly what the fight was about, such misconceptions about how the women work together might not exist. The implications of such miscommunications between the Mixtec women and the outsiders are a result of the outsiders stereotyping the culture of the insiders. This stereotyping includes assuming that the women's thoughts focus mostly on the domestic world and are not focused on thinking about business matters, which in turn has led some of the outsiders, particularly Dulce, to believe that the insiders are not capable of responsibly managing the group themselves.

The cultural diversity of the group has meant that power is not equally distributed, thereby affecting the organization's success, including the goals and purpose of the group. As mentioned earlier, the insiders and outsiders have very different ideas about the goals and purpose of the group.²⁸ The outsiders first point to making the women more independent and confident both in themselves

²⁷ I recognize that there is the possibility that the women simply told me that so as to avoid embarrassment or because they did not feel comfortable sharing such details.

²⁸ Please see pages 13–15.

and in their culture as the purpose of the group. Such an idea is very much part of the outsiders' culture, a culture in which women are expected to be independent and confident. However, the insiders say that the purpose of the group is to make money, an idea that spans both Mixtec and US culture. Making money through the group includes Mixtec ideology because it focuses on how to survive from day to day, but it also includes US ideology because it does not matter to the group participants that they are women trying to earn the money. Obviously, the two ideas are fundamentally different because of the distinctive cultural backgrounds of the insiders and the outsiders. The problem is that, because the insiders and outsiders are not communicating, they are not working towards the same goals.

The cultural diversity of the group and resulting power inequalities has also meant that those involved have not been communicating about the pricing of the women's embroidery pieces, which has adversely impacted the economic success or lack thereof of the group. The Mixtecan women have been pricing their products fairly high. For instance, a hand towel as seen in Appendix D is typically priced around \$10. Hot pads have ranged from \$5 to \$15 depending on how much embroidery is on the cloth. Larger pieces, such as tablecloths, have ranged from \$50 to \$100 and beyond. How the women developed the pricing is not clear, but they have had several people comment on the pricing, some art dealers saying that it is too low but most saying that it is too high.²⁹

²⁹ How the Mixtec women developed the prices is unclear. I have heard rumors that in the beginning of the group, an art dealer gave the women base prices to work from and that these are the prices they maintain. I have also heard that the women keep the prices as high as they do so that they can still make money after markets and galleries take their seller's fee. However, from an interview with Nadia, I am led to believe

The outside leaders of the group have generally agreed that the women's pricing is too high, but none of them have said anything to the insiders about cutting the pricing because the outsiders do not want to devalue the women's work in any way, especially since the goal of the group is to give the women more self-confidence in their work. However, the high prices of the women's work are preventing them from selling their materials and making a profit, which is another goal of the group. The outsiders are thus caught in a conundrum. However, the women have said in their interviews that they have not gained much confidence because they have not sold anything, not because the outsiders are not encouraging and supportive of their work. If the outsiders and insiders would communicate more effectively, they might be able to resolve the pricing issue and have some success both economically and in building confidence in their work.

The cultural diversity of the group and resulting power dynamic have also affected the group's communication about outings to galleries, markets, and other places for the women to sell their work. For example, the Mixtec women backed out of going to the Elegba Art Society's exhibition of their work during the First Friday's Artwalk at the last moment.³⁰ The evening had been planned for at least three weeks prior to the actual event, and the outsiders had worked hard to provide adequate transportation for the women to get to the gallery with their children. However, the day came, and many of the women suddenly could not

that the Mixtec women have simply converted what she referred to as "Mexican dollars" to "American dollars" without the proper conversion rate so that they are charging \$75 for a piece that would be 75 Mexican *pesos*.

³⁰ First Friday's Artwalk is designated to showing local artists' work in galleries along Broad Street. The Elegba Art Society is a participating gallery.

go. Some cited the rain that day while others said that they had an appointment. In the confidentiality of her interview, Nadia said that some of the women were not comfortable going to a gallery where most people speak English and not Spanish.³¹ However, the women all gave different answers to the outsiders as to why they could not go. The women felt that the outsiders would not understand why they did not want to go to the art gallery and therefore did not tell them. Several other events, such as the Que Pasa festival, the Imagine Festival, AlterNatives, etc., had similar turnouts and excuses. The cultural differences between the outsiders and the insiders thus prevented them from effectively communicating about group outings to display and sell the women's work.

When I concluded my research, many of the women still did not express pride in their embroidery work. In the interviews I conducted with them, many said that they had never thought of their embroidery work as a means of income or economic support before Carolina suggested the group, especially since none of them sold their embroidery for money in Mexico. Furthermore, Nadia and many of the women alluded to weaving being more complicated and therefore more valued in their culture than embroidery.³² In many indigenous Latin American cultures, weaving is the traditional form for producing region-specific textiles. As such, woven products are often what women sell in their spare time.

Embroidery, on the other hand, is not common to every indigenous Latin American culture and is often seen as easier and less complicated than weaving. That being said, none of the Mixtec women in Richmond know how to weave.

³¹ Nadia, interview by author.

³² Ibid.

Nadia said that her mother and grandmother know how to weave and that she learned a little but that it is too involved and time-consuming for her to do it here.³³ When I asked the outside leaders of the group about the women's traditional embroidery, they treated embroidery as if it were the only form of textile production that is part of Mixtec culture. It is possible that the outside leaders of the group do not know that Mixtecs in Mexico weave and that weaving is often considered more valuable than embroidery. The outside leaders have, however, placed a large emphasis on the importance of the women continuing their embroidery as a means of cultural preservation and pride. Such emphasis is potentially creating a sense of pride and importance in the women's embroidery that is not a part of the Mixtec women's culture. Perhaps the reason that the women do not feel that their embroidery is important is because, for them, weaving, not embroidering, is important. The question then, is whether or not the re-appropriation of the meaning and significance of the women's embroidery is in line with the goals of the group. One of the outsiders' goals of the group is for the women to have pride in their traditional cultural products, but if the outside leaders incorrectly assumed what the important traditional products of the Mixtec women are, they will in effect change the women's culture.

While the change is arguably not that significant and has potential economic benefits for the women, which is a large incentive for the Mixtecs to go along with it, such a change also reflects the power relationships and lack of communication in the group. If this re-appropriation of culture is in fact happening, then the outsiders now hold the power to change the women's culture

³³ Ibid.

and define the process of acculturation, which ultimately empowers the outsiders of the group, not the insiders. The group thus arrives at the ultimate irony: an organization that set out to empower the insiders ultimately marginalizes them in their new surroundings and allows the outsiders to redefine their culture.

Lessons Learned

While conceived with the best of intentions and operated with some success, the Mixtecan women's embroidery group faces several problems.³⁴ The problems of the group are intricately intertwined with the cultural diversity of the group and resulting lack of communication. The solutions to these problems are not by any means simple or straight paths, but instead will require a great deal of hard work and dedication. I recognize that the time it will take to make the group work is not an easy task for either the outsiders working with the group or for the women themselves to find. The demands on both those involved in the group through non-profit organizations and those involved through the University are such that each person takes on workload enough for at least two people. For the women, the demands of raising children and making a below-the-poverty-line income leaves little time for any project lacking immediate results. However, from my own experience with the group, the cost of making it work is well worth it. For both the insiders and the outsiders, the chance to change lives to allow these women to live decently, which I believe this group has the potential to do, is motivation enough to continue. Participating in the group also has the potential to culturally educate and enrich the lives of the outsiders. Despite the obstacles

³⁴ All of the interviewees did say that the group had had at least some success.

facing the group, I am hopeful for its future. Other groups across the US and in Central America have managed to succeed; there is no reason why this group cannot.³⁵

The cultural diversity of the group is currently working against it, but this cultural diversity can and should be working for it. The first step to addressing the issue is for everyone, both insiders and outsiders, to openly recognize and discuss the differences. There are several actions that both the insiders and outsiders of the group can take together.

Increasing the frequency of communication between everyone involved will help the group because meeting one a week is not enough time to foster communication. The group should meet at least two times a week – more if possible - for a month and then, if the group is ready, cut the meetings back to once weekly. Such constant and frequent communication will allow both the insiders and the outsiders to communicate among themselves and with each other. Furthermore, investing such a large amount of time in the group will help the insiders and the outsiders invest in the outcome of the group.

In order to address the communication issues in the group, all of the women involved need to dedicate more time to the group, be comfortable sharing opinions, be encouraging to the other women trying to share their opinions, and be open-minded. These goals will require a conscious effort on the part of all of those involved. Both the inside and outside leaders of the group should consider holding a meeting with everyone present in which they directly and purposefully address the issue of communication, making sure to state that the group is a safe

³⁵ For example, the Central American Solar Energy Project.

place and that everyone's voice and opinion is valued and will be heard. The leaders should ask each member to commit to open and honest communication. The leaders could consider using get-to-know-you games to break the tension between the women present. Such games, whether they be from the US or from Mexico, would not only allow everyone to get to know each other better, but they could also incorporate ways to generate ideas for improving the group.

Creating a contract for the group will be a strong step towards improving the group. While the idea of a written contract is a very American concept and not as much a part of Mixtecan culture, such a written contract will ensure that all of the women are clear about the role and commitment of each person involved in the group. In order to create this contract, the leaders should call a meeting to create a contract in which all women who are going to participate in the group on a regular basis, be them an insider or an outsider, must be present. The ideas of the Mixtec women need to come first in this meeting and form the basis for the contract.

After the initial meeting, the leaders of the group should type up the contract in both Spanish and Mixtec with the help of Nadia or another group member and, in the next meeting, have every member, both insiders and outsiders, review and comment on the proposed contract.³⁶ The group should then make the necessary changes until every woman who wants to be in the group is willing to sign the contract. The leaders should then make copies of the signed contract and give a copy to each woman to keep. That way, if there is

³⁶ The contract should be both in Spanish and in Mixtec so that the women have the best chance possible to understand it, especially women whose Spanish is not very strong.

ever a question as to the group's goals, the role of each woman, etc, each woman will be able to look it up herself. The contract should specifically address how the group will function economically, marking how the women will use the remaining grant money, who will go to what markets, how the profits will be split, etc. Such a contract should help the Mixtecan women have more confidence in the group.³⁷

All of the outside leaders of the group cited their lack of time to devote to the group as a reason for its failure. Jennifer even said, “[the Mixtec women] got shafted between the busy schedules we had.”³⁸ All of the leaders commented that having a person who could fully devote herself to the group would be one of the most helpful things. However, while I believe the problem and solution to be true, I also believe that time commitment is something to be addressed in the contract through specific clauses designating how much time each person, both insiders and outsiders, is to devote to the group.³⁹

Another important step to improving the group is finding more women to participate. At this point, there are no more than four or five women who might actually come to a meeting, all of who have been key figures in the group since the beginning. However, the group is lagging in momentum. Perhaps bringing in new people to boost the numbers of the group will also bring new enthusiasm and energy to the group. Furthermore, new women will bring new ideas,

³⁷ After the grant runs out, the group can look for funding through other community-based grants or from local non-profit agencies. Ultimately, the income of the group should be enough to support itself.

³⁸ Jennifer Landis-Santos, interview by author.

³⁹ While making such a commitment may not be appealing to all outsiders, the commitment should come from their desire to see these women succeed. Furthermore, helping these women now will mean less work for the outsiders down the road, particularly since most of the outsiders were working with the women in various social service capacities before the group began. Such a commitment will also ensure that those involved in the group truly are invested in its success.

directions, contacts, and experiences. Exactly how many women the group should have needs to be addressed in the contract.

Finding a regular meeting place or making and distributing a meeting place schedule is also an important step for improving the group. As it is, the women are never sure exactly in whose apartment the meeting is going to take place. There is also usually a debate about whose apartment it should be in the next week. A lot of the women are reluctant to have the meetings in their apartments, thereby forcing one or two women to host all of the meetings. However, the women that do host the meetings are resentful of those who do not thus detracting from the cooperation among the groups' members. The women should outline the formula for who is going to host what meeting in the contract. Following such a formula, the women should then make a schedule for each month, detailing who is going to host which meeting. The sheet should also include the phone numbers for each host. The leaders should copy and distribute the schedule each month so that no one is confused about the meeting place and so that everyone's responsibilities are clear.⁴⁰

Working towards better transportation for the group would also be beneficial. In the past, the issue has been that the children, at least the youngest who are not in school, have had to come with the women wherever we have gone. The problem is that each woman has one to three children who all need

⁴⁰ Because more and more of the women are leaving the Dutch Village apartment complex, finding and holding regular meeting places may become more difficult with the women scattered. However, many of the women are moving to Southwood, the largest apartment complex in Richmond. Southwood has community facilities that the women might be able to use as their regular meeting space. Otherwise, the women can continue meeting in their own homes. The largest issue facing the women will then be transportation to and from the meeting site.

car seats, and very few of the women have cars. The predicament resulted in solutions like Jennifer going in a University of Richmond van to pick up the women and children, or Dulce, Carolina, or myself going in our cars to get the women. The problem with the outsiders driving the women is that there is not enough room in one car for all of the children, and it means a lot of extra mileage and gas for the driver who has to make multiple trips. Transportation plans were also always made last minute, and many of the women would say things like “I can’t get there, so I can’t go.” Such statements often resulted in very low representation of the group at fairs and galleries. Addressing the transportation issue would not only increase representation at events but could also increase the women’s sales as well.

In order to address the transportation issue, the women need to make a commitment to fixing it. While I am not sure that there is a permanent solution such as each woman getting a car and learning to drive, they can make some sort of arrangement so that they have the resources they need.⁴¹ Such arrangements could involve asking the University of Richmond if they would be willing to supply a van and a driver to take them to different events, especially since the University supported the group with the grant. The women could offer to take students with them to such events as a learning experience in exchange for the transportation. The group could also ask local non-profits for ideas and resources.

⁴¹ Lack of money to buy a second car for each household prevents the women from getting their own cars. Furthermore, many of the women are too timid to learn to drive. Their illegal status also prevents them from getting drivers licences.

Addressing the illegal status of the women, something that seriously affects the daily operation of the group, is quite difficult. I cannot make any recommendation that will directly and quickly benefit the group in any way. One of the few things that could help the women with this particular problem is a change in US laws. One of the few ways for the women to help change those laws is to partake in the political process as much as they can. They should participate in rallies, write to politicians, and let people know that they have opinions about how the laws of this country should be changed.⁴² However, there is obviously no guaranteed or direct benefit to the women for doing this.

While these suggestions are practical and not ideological, their aim is to highlight small steps that can affect the current the negative effects of the group's diversity. Giving the women more of a say in the group will allow them the power to move the group in a direction that they see fit. Making a contract will empower the women to hold everyone, both insiders and outsiders, responsible to what they agreed to. A larger time commitment from everyone involved will allow the women to put more energy into the group. Making a regular meeting time and place will give the women a sense of regularity and control over the meeting schedule and therefore over their own schedules. Finding better transportation for the women will most certainly give them more power by allowing them the mobility they need to get out in the community, sell their work, and spread knowledge of their culture. Beginning to address the women's legal status will at least help them feel like they are taking control of their own lives. Addressing the

⁴² The women should write to politicians despite the fact that they can only write in Spanish or Mixtec. Perhaps writing to politicians in Spanish or Mixtec would have even more of an effect by indicating the need to serve bi- and tri-lingual communities.

group's issues in these ways will help empower the women and make the group their own, thereby increasing their investment in the success of the group.

Working with this group has been at once incredibly frustrating and rewarding. Its flaws have discouraged me, but its successes have delighted me. Having the opportunity to get to know the women has truly been an enlightening and meaningful experience. I find the group not only interesting but also important in today's world. The increased immigration trend from Latin America over the past 20 years has affected all of the US, including the "capital of the Confederacy," Richmond, Virginia. Not only have Latino immigrants come to the area in the past ten years, but now indigenous immigrants, such as this group of Mixtecos, are arriving in the area as well. These new immigrants face many different issues than the other Latino immigrants. It is of the utmost importance not only to recognize these differences, but act according to them. In many immigrant cases, unique cultural identities are ignored to the point where they disappear. However, because this group was created when the women were all recent immigrants, it has the potential to both help the women acculturate and help them preserve their cultural heritage at the same time. Such an opportunity must not be overlooked.

Those involved with or connected to the Mixtec community in Richmond need to be more aware of the Mixtec's background and their lives here. Stereotyping and assumptions can, as seen in this case, be harmful to well-intentioned projects. Honest and open communication between all parties will help not only this group, but it will help address the underlying assumptions and

stereotypes between the different cultures in the group. Only by addressing marginalization through the structural issues of assumptions, stereotypes, and socio-economic differences can local organizations begin to make change. Not only will such change be local and directly beneficial to people in our own communities, but eventually that change will affect other areas and encourage new national ideologies and national policy. Such structural changes are the only way to truly address the issues facing this group of Mixtecan women, the Mixtec immigrant community, and the larger Latino community.

As a means to the end of structural change, it is important that this women's embroidery group continue. It has the potential to address structural, but it also has the potential to define and ease the Mixtec women's transition to Richmond. The diversity found within the group only improves its chances and ability to effectively create ideas and take actions to accomplish such goals.

Not only does this group have the potential to address structural issues, but it is also an ideal place for the exchange of cultural information and ideas. Throughout my work, it has become obvious that the participants in this group know little about each other's culture. However, an intimate setting such as this one is the ideal place for these women – both Mixtec and non-Mixtec – to share their backgrounds, their experiences, their ideas, and their concerns. Such collaborative learning is the best way to accurately learn about one another's culture, information that will not only help those in the group to understand each other but information that will hopefully correctly disseminate to larger audiences, including the rest of the Mixtec community in Richmond, the larger Latino

community, and the mainstream Richmond community. The diffusion of such knowledge will hopefully lead to wider understanding and acceptance of other cultures within any of these three groups. While these goals are daunting and seemingly far from the everyday operation of groups like the Mixtec women's embroidery group, it is the existence and operation of such groups that plants the seeds for the long-term change needed to reach the acceptance of new and different cultures. The Mixtec women's group, then, has the potential to alter the lives not only of the women participating but also the lives of other Mixtecs in the area, the lives of the non-Mixtec women participating in the group, and the lives of those in the greater Richmond community, both Latino and mainstream, through the reciprocal dissemination of accurate cultural information.

Appendix A: Background

The women in the group belong to an indigenous Mexican population known as Mixtecs. While not much is known about early Mixtec existence, the earliest records indicate their presence around 6,000 B.C. By 700 B.C., Mixtecs had their own distinct society, and within the next few hundred years they had established complex political, economic, and social systems.⁴³

The Mixtec population to which the women of the group belong come from the municipality of Metlatónoc, located in the state of Guerrero, Mexico (see Maps 1 and 2). The area is in the eastern part of the state, thus making it close to Oaxaca where many other Mixtec-speaking peoples live. Located in a mountainous region with poor means of travel and communication due to the lack of paved roads, Metlatonoc boasts approximately 46,648 individuals as of 2000.⁴⁴ Fourteen thousand of those individuals are monolingual, speaking only Mixtec, Metlatónoc, also known as Mixteco de San Rafael.⁴⁵ The language is part of the Oto-Manguean language family, and is spoken by a total of 60,000 to 65,000 people in the region.⁴⁶

⁴³ "Mixtecos." Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas. 2004. [Online] available from <http://www.mexicantextiles.com/grouppages/groups/mixtecabaja/cdiinfo.html>; accessed 13 December 2006; Internet.

⁴⁴ Gordon, Raymond G., Jr. (ed.), *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, Fifteenth edition **Dallas, Tex.:** SIL International [Online] available from <http://www.ethnologue.com>; accessed 15 December 2006; Internet.

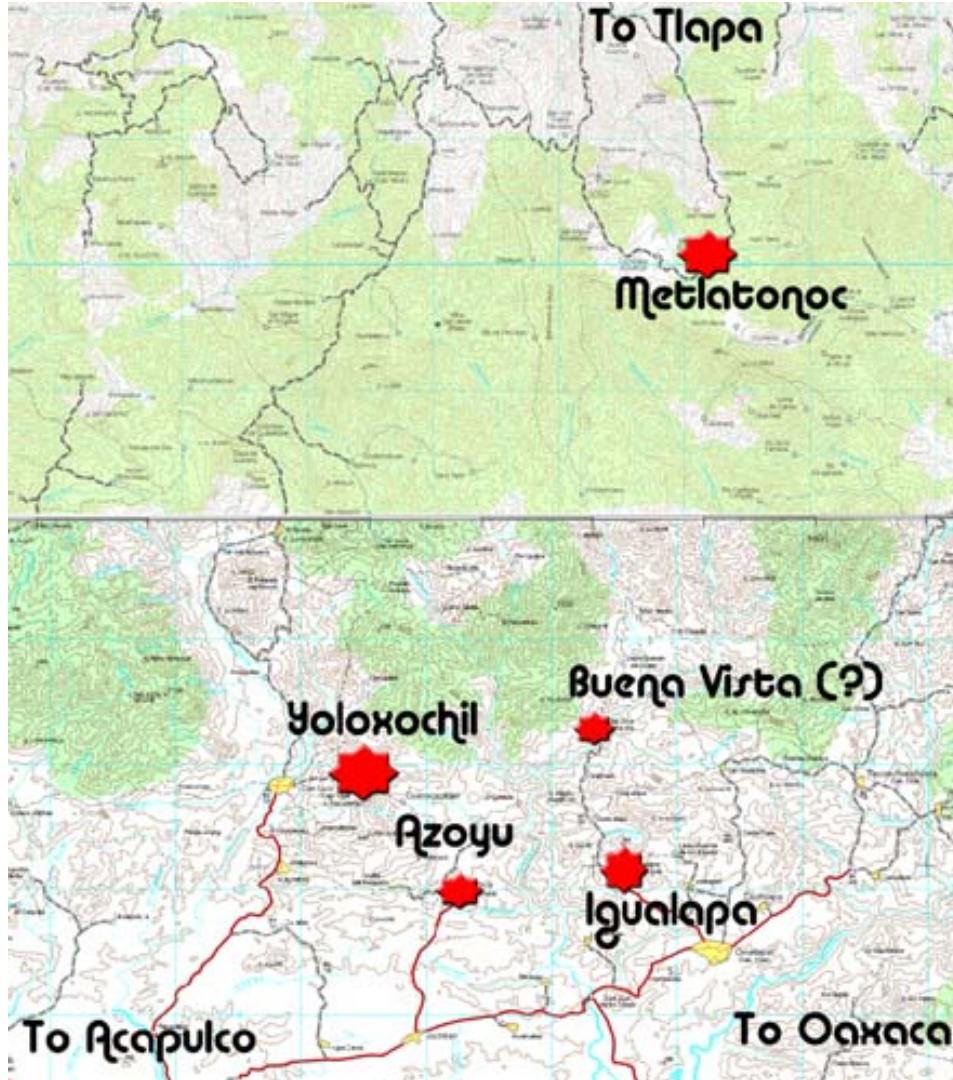
⁴⁵ "The Linguist List." Eastern Michigan University and Wayne State University January 2007. [Online] available from <http://linguistlist.org/forms/langs/LLDescription.cfm?code=mxv>; accessed 15 January 2007; Internet.

⁴⁶ "Mixteco: Metlatonoc." World Scriptures. 2007. [Online] available from <http://www.worldscriptures.org/pages/mixtecometlatonoc.html>; accessed 17 January 2007; Internet.

Map 1: The State of Guerrero, Mexico, #25



Map 2: The Municipality of Metlatonoc, Guerrero



Metlatónoc is historically a poor region, with 46 percent of homes having potable water, 0.7 percent having drainage, and 33.6 percent having electricity.⁴⁷

Sewage systems are a rarity in the region.⁴⁸ In 1990, 10,154 residents were

⁴⁷ “Metlatonoc.” Enciclopedia de los Municipios de México. Gobierno del Estado de Guerrero. 2001. [Online] available from <http://www.guerrero.gob.mx/?P=metlatonoc>; accessed 13 December 2006; Internet.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

illiterate, with only 2,412 residents literate.⁴⁹ *La Cronica de Hoy*, a Latin American newspaper, reports that in 2005 the United Nations declared “el municipio más pobre de los dos mil 426 de México y que su nivel de vida sólo es comparable en el mundo a los del África subsahariana” (the municipality the poorest of the 2,426 in Mexico and that the standard of living is only comparable to that of the sub-Saharan African desert).⁵⁰

With an area of 1,367.8 km², the region relies on agriculture for 75 percent of its income.⁵¹ The main crops are corn, beans, various fruits, and coffee. The primary livestock is cattle, and the primary industries in the area include making palm hats, guipiles (regional shirts), and overcoats, although distribution and sale is carried out only at a regional level. The climate is sub-tropical, with a rainy season from June to October, winter rains in January and February, and winds most of the year.⁵²

Appendix B: The Group Timeline

- 2002 or 2003: Carolina Velez of Refugee and Immigration Services begins working in the Mixtec community in the Dutch Village apartment complex
- 2003-2006: Carolina forms basic idea of women’s embroidery group

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

- March 2006: Jennifer and Dulce, in consultation with Carolina, submit grant application to UR's Office of International Education for a C. Weinstein Summer Study and Projects Abroad Grant
- April 2006: Jennifer, Dulce, and Carolina awarded \$2,500 grant to start group; funds to be used for embroidery supplies and speakers and administered by the outside leaders of the group
- May 2006: Carolina and Dulce go door-to-door with Nadia in the Dutch Village apartment complex looking for members of the group
- May 2006: first meeting of the group; meetings continued on a weekly basis
- Late August 2006: UR students attend group meeting for the first time, one as part of a class, one on her own free will, and myself to start research
- September 16, 2006: Nadia takes her work to the Que Pasa Festival, the largest Latino festival in the Central Virginia area; she did not sell anything; the other women refused to go
- September 23, 2006: Nadia and one other woman display their work at the Imagine Festival
- October-November 2006: women's work goes on display in Elegba Art Society, the Valentine History Museum, at the First Friday's Art walk, and at the University of Richmond; many women refuse to attend all but the UR event; only Nadia, Sandra, and Tina attended the UR event; only at the UR event did the women sell anything

- Mid-October 2006: Carolina changes jobs and therefore left the group; many women stop attending group meetings; the core members now consist of Nadia, Sandra, Tina, and sometimes Nicole
- December 2006: Nadia, Sandra, and Tina return to UR; not as economically successful as before
- December 2006: last known meeting of the group
- January 2007: Nadia announces that she will return to Mexico; many women and the outsiders give up on the group

Appendix C: Questions Asked in Interviews

A. With Mixtec women

How and when did this group first come about?

Whose group is this?

Do you think it matters that non-Mixtecos started this group? Why or why not?

What were/are the main goals of the group?

Why do you think this group was created?

What benefit have you seen from it so far?

Have there been any negative aspects so far?

Would you consider your participation worthwhile? Why or why not?

What things do you think need to be improved?

What things have worked well? What has not worked well?

Do you think having the University of Richmond back this group has been beneficial? Why or why not?

Have there been leadership changes recently? If so, how has the leadership changed?

Do you like the leadership changes that have been happening?

Has working in this group changed the items that you embroider? If so, how?

Has being in this group changed your experience in Richmond?

Do you want to continue with this group? Why or why not?

What would you like to see in the future for this group?

B. Questions for non-Mixtecos

How and when did this group first come about?

Whose group is this?

Do you think it matters that non-Mixtecos started this group? Why or why not?

Do you think the women feel that this group is their own? Why or why not?

What were/are the main goals of the group?

Why do you think this group was created?

What do you think the women need most out of this group?

Why do you think the women are involved in this group?

Have there been any negative aspects so far?

Would you consider your participation worthwhile? Why or why not?

I asked the preceding questions in hopes of getting the interviewee's honest opinions of the group. I tried to design the questions as openly as possible and not guide their answers by the questions that I was asking. Often times, I rephrased a question in an interview in an attempt to make it more open-ended. I also intended most of these questions to lead to other issues that the interviewee thought were important. My goal was to design these questions so that what each individual thought was important would come out in her interview.

Appendix D: Photo of Embroidered Hand Towel

